

Black Boy Joy: Healing the Heart of Black Masculinity

A Thesis

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by

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Figure 01: Palacio III, Heriberto, *You're safe now bruh*, Digital Illustration, 44 x 56 in, 2019.

DEDICATION

This MFA thesis is wholeheartedly dedicated to all of my brothers of the N.A.S.T.Y. Eta Xi Chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia at Tennessee State University. Their brotherly love opened my eyes to the need for platonic intimacy between Black men and their acceptance healed my traumas inflicted by toxic masculinity.

To my loving friends that supported me throughout my journey and continued to pour into me when I needed a hug, to vent, cry, laugh, and scream.

To my mother, Nadine S. M. Butler and my father, Heriberto Palacio Jr. who raised me from nothing, yet made sure I had everything.

And lastly, to my biological father who I have not had a chance to meet yet. It's all love. I forgive you. I hope you read this one day.

It is with this project that I am healed.

Thank you for everything.

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Artist Statement

Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III (B. 1994) is a multidisciplinary Artist that explores human relations and awareness through research that investigates masculinity, gender studies, emotional intelligence, and African American studies. He investigates his studio interests through research on how relationships amongst individuals or a group influence emotional competency and expression. Palacio’s exploratory studio work consists of various mediums that prioritize the audience's interpretation of context over the aesthetic of medium specificity. He investigates how to relate to American society through the use of pop culture motifs and how that affects the delivery of his work to his audience. Palacio’s goal is to foster positive change in a non-goal-directed atmosphere of compromising love, honest confrontation, and unconditional support.

Palacio has taken specific interest in platonic relationships between African American males. He is exploring and exposing the boundary of the “Black bromance” and its controversy within the Black community and larger social climate of American culture. A bromance, an urban term, is an intimate, non-sexual relationship between two or more men. It is a tight, affectionate, homosocial male bonding relationship exceeding that of usual friendship, and is distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intimacy. It is not a common phenomenon in the Black community that, when it does occur, is rarely discussed. Palacio is questioning the boundaries of people’s understanding of this in the context of Black men and their projected, stereotyped capacity of affection to only be sexual, lustful, or violent. His work challenges how people receive these images, making them to ponder within themselves, and amongst others, what is platonic, homosexual, too intimate, passable, suspect, etc.



Figure 02: Palacio III, Heriberto, Graceful Evasion, Digital Illustration, 44 x 56 in, 2020.

Playing it Cool: Black Masculinity Performance

Introduction

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, entertaining (Majors and Billson 2).

Black men are famous for our award-winning performances from powerful acting by Lakeith Stanfield, comedic star specials from Kevin Hart, to the powerfully uplifting lyrics of Chance The Rapper. Black men famously demonstrate our ability to perform, “show our stuff,” and solidify ourselves in the fame of American society. On a smaller, 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 our own theatre drama: Lights! Camera! Action! 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 a Black man in America is a full-time job with ill-compensated overtime. It requires a complex skill set of social cues, various attitudes, patterns of speech, facial expressions, etc. Black masculinity’s central policy is to mask and protect Black men from the harsh social environment of American cultural systems. However, this protection is also a prison. This masked defense continually reinforces 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). Black masculinity polices the social status, representation, and daily interactions of African American men in America. African American men have struggled to overcome the conditions of the Black masculinity performance and it is bringing harm to ourselves and those around us. A new form of Black masculinity must be considered to aid in healing the damage of this suicidal performance.

Before we can discuss viable pathways for the future iterations of Black masculinity, we must first analyze the historical birth of African American manliness and the conditions that have brought it to the stage of today. 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 American standards that have been constructed to refer to a person of color in America as Black. It must be clarified what makes Black masculinity different from the patriarchal masculinity represented by white men. We then can translate this information to identify values within Black masculinity that are harmful and archaic mechanisms destroying the African American male and challenge the current state of this social construct to formulate healthy iterations: "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). It is important to investigate this subject, but also investigate the fragmented pieces within it. Black masculinity contains elements of racial oppressions that stifle our progress in American society. By properly examining the fragments of these oppressions, we (American society) put ourselves in an ideal position to make change.

American history leads us to believe that Black masculinity is a toxic social construct that was forcibly birthed when the first Africans were disgustingly harvested from the Motherland continent of Africa and brought to the Americas via the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Lewis). This is inaccurate, as African explorers were among the first to land in the indigenous Americas and expand their geographical knowledge. These explorers encountered indigenous peoples on their explorations—encountered "other" people who were very different from them and *did not* immediately seek to attack or dominate them: "The fact that they did not seek to dominate and/or destroy the indigenous native people who were living on these shores reveals that their sense of masculinity was not defined by the will to dominate and colonize folks who were not like them" (hooks 2). The indication of this trait goes in complete opposition to the European perception of patriarchal masculinity: rooted in domination and violence. Taking this into consideration, the masculinity of the African American man was socially (de)constructed by the colonial

European example of patriarchal masculinity and reformed under those standards. Centuries under this regime reveals how modern Black masculinity in America is an adaptation of survival and learned behavioral values that are a direct reaction to white supremacy.

There is a cultural shift that is attempting to gain traction in American culture, specifically in the Black community, that is pushing for Black men to challenge the crystalized condition of Black masculinity and pave ways to an iteration that is no longer a hardened defense mechanism, but a fruitful social development experience. There is a formidable resistance to this shift for many reasons that seem impossible to explain. This is due to the lack of fair discussion on the currently problematic “cool pose” of the African American male in the post-colonial era: “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 themselves visible within American society and provide a sense of control to a population that is desperately clinging to social (and 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). It is important to discuss the cool pose because it is a key factor in Black masculinity’s inability to adapt and develop with the times. 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). This hardened persona of cool has stunted the social and emotional development of African American men because it has trapped us in a defensive state that makes us feel empowered and in control (when we’re clearly not) of an impossible situation that we face in American society.

Black masculinity is a subject that has not received proper attention by American culture: “To date we know little about the cultural context within which black males learn and act out masculinity, male roles, and values” (Majors and Billson 110). The discussions have to become more critical and vulnerable to reach the heart of the issue. 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. This conversation has been avoided in the Black community overall, but there are people that have begun to spark this conversation. Academics such as bell hooks, Richard, Majors, Janet Mancini Billson, James Baldwin, Toni Morison, and Kobena Mercer to name a few. They’ve written their own takes and grievances on the dilemma of black masculinity respectively. This essay will join this discussion and take this subject to task as well. This conversation needs to be continually invested into and nurtured through future generations in order to begin healing African American men. We need to aid Black masculinity as it attempts to form healthier iterations of its current state to exponentially move us forward in American society.

How to be a Black Man: The Origins of Black Masculinity

The history behind American slavery is stained by the brutality of a people who were oppressed, enslaved, abused, and murdered for merely existing. 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. 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 Black masculinity was (and currently is) 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 of white Americans to Black Americans.

Black masculinity has very limited momentum in the Eurocentric American value system. The traditional value system of Africans emphasizes "humanity's oneness with nature, spirituality, and collectivism" (Majors and Billson 111). These values were completely obliterated when the first Africans were abducted from Africa and forced into slavery in North America becoming (Lewis):" By emphasizing individualism and materialism, Eurocentric values fit neither African history nor the black experience in America " (Majors and Billson 111). This Eurocentric 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 better known as cool pose (Majors and Billson).

It would be presumptuous to say that patriarchal masculinity (represented by white men) had essentially erased and replaced African values with its own. Racial inequality did not (and still doesn't) allow Black men to live up to the values championed in patriarchal masculinity. African American men are forced into the competition of earning manhood through white masculine values and are held to the same standards of "breadwinner, provider, procreator, protector", all while being treated like second-class citizens (Majors and Billson 1). Black men did not (and still do not) have consistent access to these roles

to even begin to fulfil these ill-inscribed standards of masculinity. Unlike our white counterparts, Black men in America are put on the same playing field, with more systemic setbacks for us that put us at a complete disadvantage in the patriarchal masculinity system. Examples of some systematic racial oppressions are: poverty, underemployment, educational problems, alcohol and drug abuse, homicide, suicide, incarceration, poor health, low life-expectancy, and high mortality (Majors and Billson 24). 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 (white) masculinity has evolved to its own self-defined status and grapples with a different set of issues.

Black Masculinity and White Masculinity: It's not the same!

Masculinity for white men is a complete contrast from Black masculinity because the focus and tools utilized by each social construct are different. Black masculinity is constantly defending the Black male from the harsh ridicule of the world while grasping desperately to be noticed. It is a reactive defense mechanism instilled by generational survival. White masculine values are preoccupied with surpassing limits and staying above the rest—the other. It is an active offense. Its primary concern is how to maintain the status quo of white male domination of everything that is other. Dr. Aaron R. Kipnis is a psychologist and white male that speaks to the obstacles faced by (white) men. Eurocentric values teach young white boys “that the only way to be a man was to continually push beyond his limits” (Kipnis 27). This again reveals the narcissistic value placed on individuals in American society and the constant reformation of (white) masculinity to keep itself on the top of the hierarchy: “Men frequently destroy their health through obsessive overwork, attempting to provide for their families” (Kipnis 32). The same cannot be said for Black men who face underemployment and subordination daily: “The value placed on men’s lives as compared with women’s is greatly depreciated in our culture” (Kipnis 29). The same cannot be said for the thousands of Black men murdered and incarcerated by a criminal prison system daily. White men are socialized to be “success objects” while women are socialized to be “sex objects” (Kipnis 31). Black men are socialized to believe that they’re meant to fail from birth, and nothing but failure is expected from them.

Overrepresented in statistics on homicide and suicide, misrepresented in the media as the personification of drugs, disease and crime, such invisible men, like their all-too-visible counterparts [white men], suggest 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).

These different strains of masculinity (Black and white) have different goals for their respective groups. Black masculinity is built on mental and physical survival in a hostile environment that is constantly waiting for it to fail. White masculinity is built on the championing of itself and actively seeking ways to maintain itself as the dominant power. Black masculinity has to adapt to its hostile environment and develop new methods of expression to survive complete erasure. White masculinity is (overall) the social construct that shapes the environment of American society and maintains itself through active adaptation of social subscripts of power to maintain its status as above the “other.”

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 racial discrepancies of masculinity constantly are reshaping this social construct to maintain the status quo of white supremacy. Black masculinity is a contradiction to itself as we “subjectively internalize and incorporate aspects of the dominant definitions of masculinity in order to contest the conditions of dependency and powerlessness which racism and racial oppression enforce” (Mercer 143). Following Mercer’s prior notion, it can be said that Black masculinity makes itself visible by enhancing harmfully imposed stereotypes and myths. Decades after being subjected to an opposing value system, physical abduction, slavery, war, and ongoing racism, it can be inferred that Black masculinity has formed in defense of the Black men, but is a double-edged sword. In this dire situation (American society), as a Black man, we defend ourselves and play it cool.

Chillout: Black men and Cool Behaviors

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. The racial pressures of being Black in America has cornered Black masculinity into not resisting the stereotypes, slurs, and set-backs, but to accept them and own them as a means to take back power from the oppressor: “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 reward. The show of this double-edged cool pose sword is the cause of great generational pain in regard to a Black male’s social and emotional development. This performance has become so subconsciously conditioned by the performer that they believe their own performance to be true Black masculinity and not the defense of a deep pain linked to racial oppression. Even though it turns on with ease, it never turns off in risk of estranged vulnerability and a complete mental collapse. This is not done purposefully as “most black males cannot confront the collapse, so they focus on the performing, on doing rather than being, hiding their deep-seated feelings of hopelessness” (hooks 91). Black men in America are focused on our masculine performance as a means of survival in a society that continues to neglect and attempt to eliminate us.

Black men have spent generations honing and passing down cool behaviors as survival skills that are now considered to be part of traditional manhood matriculation in the Black community. Just as religion, morals, and values are passed along, so is the inevitable exposure to the necessity for the cool pose. It has been the defense Black men have used to reduce exploitation by white supremacy. In some cases it is a choice to take this line of action; other times it is a subconscious and automatic facade that

manifests itself without self-activation: “In either case, being cool helps maintain a balance between the black male’s inner life and his social environment” (Majors and Billson 9). There is a balance for Black men, but certainly not a favorable one.

Cool pose in itself is a reflection of 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). As stated this only gives a “sense” of these traits and is not the reality. Recontextualizing cool pose to fit the reality faced by Black men in American society, Cool “coping” clutters the African American male mind with a false sense of control, a facade of inner strength, ill-perceived balance, fragile stability, harmful arrogance, and faulty security. Cool pose is identified 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” (Majors and Billson 116). In a Black man’s mind, the only way to defend ourselves is to perform Black masculinity to the point of “fooling the (white) man” and psyching ourselves out: “Their minds have been their primary line of defense” (Majors and Billson 116). The mind of the Black man is the only place left for us to hold our ground. 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: “As long as black males see no alternatives to patriarchal manhood, they will nurture the beast within; they will be poised to strike” (hooks 63). Between adopting cool behaviors or accepting societal (and literal) annihilation, we’ve continually been shown through American society that we have no other choice, but to play it cool.

New pathways for Black Masculinity

Black men are now in a time where the conversations around what it means to be a man are starting to be brought to the spotlight. During this time, Black men are seeking healthier iterations of masculinity. We are “beginning to seek new images of 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). Once again, the importance of oneness with nature and community is inferred as a form 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 values, African American men can develop the responsibility to seek economic self-sufficiency without the goal of materialism and domination imposed by patriarchal masculinity.

Attempting to forge healthy iterations of Black masculinity in the current climate (which currently ranges from microaggressions to blatant racism) of 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 have to start opening up about these 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. American society does not support African American male emotional and social development. If Black men did allow ourselves to be vulnerable in the current social climate, we wouldn’t survive.

Black masculinity is on the verge of its most recent reformation, so there is speculation as to what that may look like. Educator and healer bell hooks visualizes that “Black men who stand against sexism, who choose to be feminist in their thinking and action model a healing masculinity for all black men” (hooks 158). The thinking that hooks inferred upon is that Black men must turn from the patriarchal notions of coolness and begin to embrace feminist values: “Black boys should (and have to be) taught to

be expressive and nurturers in the same ways that women are" (Wallace 19). This is not to dictate that all Black men must begin to idolize and condition themselves to be more effeminate. This notion is meant to dispel the dichotomy of masculine as dominant (better, stronger) and feminine as subordinate (worse, weaker): "Progressive black masculinity is fluid, feminist, and resists the restrictions of traditional patriarchy by reimagining gender roles and scripts" (Boylorn 148). Black men must value emotions as much as physical accomplishments to equalize the skewed playing field of masculinity versus femininity to the more inclusive ideology of masculinity AND femininity.

Black masculinity is a performance that has put the Black community in a situation in which we may not even believe there is a condition to be addressed. We, as a community, continually reaffirm this performance. We condition young black boys to match themselves to the values of Eurocentric manhood at birth. Nicknames such as Little Man, Big Guy, Man of the House, etc: "Black boys are regarded as adult men from young ages and therefore are expected not to participate in behaviors associated with girls or childhood" (Wallace 15). Black boys are conditioned to believe any behavior that is unbecoming of a man (behaviors identified as feminine) will diminish manhood by American society's standards. This fable floats through the streets in the Black community, and "Like any fable, or just-so story, the identification of an origin or ultimate cause gives a narrative shape and structure to incoherent facts, thus helping to assuage unmanageable feelings of fear" (Mercer 156). Lack of information and acknowledgement of alternative forms of masculinity have led to fears of masculinity being solely a negative construct that men must adhere to or be seen as feminine, as weaker men.

Black masculinity performance, like any performance, is constructed for the audience rather than the performer: "These performances are always necessarily public and require other black men as witnesses" (Boylorn 153). Like the tree that falls in the distant forest, this performance needs to be affirmed by witnesses to validate and acknowledge the invisible Black man of America. It is not used by Black men when alone, as we lower our guard, we reveal our ordinariness that is seldom believed or accepted in American society. Boylorn's article includes a film analysis of *Fruitvale Station* that addresses the ways Black masculinity is cultivated, sustained, and negotiated in hip-hop cinema. Michael

B. Jordan as Oscar Grant performs Black masculinity in this fictional biopic of the last day in the life of Oscar Grant, whose life was taken by racial profiling and abusive policing: “The film gives us the mundanity and ordinariness of black men’s lives when it is stripped bare and he is left alone. It is in those moments when Oscar is by himself that we understand masculinity as a performance for others not necessarily oneself” (Boylorn 151). Jordan in his role as Oscar is a modern example of how Black masculinity, unlike patriarchal (white) masculinity, is a direct reaction and defense rather than a calculated and preemptive behavior. Black men are not performing Black masculinity for ourselves; it is a condition we find ourselves oppressed under and we utilize all necessary tactics to defend our well-being.

Conclusion: Don't stop talking about it!

It is still possible to salvage some parts of the Black masculinity performance. Although formed long ago as a defense mechanism, cool pose is a creative and expressive form of masculinity that needs to be redirected. Instead of using it to hide ourselves, we should use 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, but also the larger American society: “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). As previously stated in the introduction, one of the major hurdles facing Black masculinity is the lack of investment, research, and social contribution to this subject. We need more than just role models of a progressive Black masculinity, “we need additional research in areas that address black masculinity and the impact of socioeconomic class on their [black men's] lives” (Ibid).

One-way Black masculinity could forge newer pathways is by using the aid of music (ironically) to help Black men heal from societal traumas. Hip-hop culture has influenced Black masculinity to the iteration it is now, but in an era when the blues and jazz were around, Black men had reached a pivotal point of growth in identifying manhood: “Just as today's gangster rap invites black males to adopt a cool pose, to front and fake it to mask true feelings, the blues was an invitation to black men to be vulnerable, to express true feelings, to open their hearts and expose them” (hooks 148-9). Black men utilized music not only to cope but also to work through emotional turmoil and racial aggressions faced in daily life. If this positive stream of consciousness can be once again considered (in whatever music genre or form necessary), African American men could begin to find a pathway towards a more progressive Black

masculinity that allows expression of inner feelings and encourages refusal to become a victim of American society.

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. We have not found a way to end this harmful masquerade, but if spectators stop watching and start helping black men get off the stage, we can begin the work of healing the toxic wounds of the Black masculinity performance:

It is necessary to do away with these preconceived conceptualizations of gender and redefine masculinity and femininity in ways that will aid the repair of familial and love relationships as well as be beneficial to the forward movement of the Black community [...] we may have to begin to form new ways of thinking about gender that incorporate the culture, history, and experiences that have made Black people who we are today, but do not perpetuate the current undesirable aspects of our day to day interactions (Wallace 20).

This research is important for the larger American society because the effects go beyond the African American male experience. The conditions faced by Black men affect all aspects of life for us and our engagement in society. There is not enough discussion about this subject matter and few are taking it seriously even though we entertain an absurd amount of performances by Black men daily: “My belief is that positive change is more likely in a non-goal-directed atmosphere of compromising love, honest confrontation, and unconditional support” (Kipnis 3). American society must continue to confront itself and its implication in Black masculinity construction. Not speaking about the problem perpetuates the problem. Writing and art have the power to continue the investigation of Black masculinity and foster generational healing and societal recognition among African American men.



Figure 03: Palacio III, Heriberto, Minding my Masculinity, Digital Illustration, 44 x 44 in, 2020.

That Sensitive Fat Nigga: A Collection of Masculinity Narratives

Origin: The Gentle Giant Who Behaved Gayly

“That’s me! You can just call me Eddie!”

I found myself (and still often do) saying this to people every time they struggle irritably over my name. My name is Heriberto Palacio III. I was born and raised in the Bronx, so I am a city boy at heart. My mother, Nadine Simone Maria Butler, is a native of Jamaica and immigrated to the U.S. when she was very young. My biological parent, Luis Bello, has kept his distance since I was 3 years old when he found out he was biologically responsible for my life. I am open to a relationship with him, but he has yet to want that for us. He is my biological parent, but my Dad is a man who was there for me since birth, and I even bear his name. The man who named me, my Dad, Heriberto Palacio Jr. and his Dad who named him, Heriberto Palacio Sr. was the patriarch lineage I became acquainted with.

I never met Palacio Sr. I honestly don’t even have any clue about him. The only thing I do know is that Palacio Sr. went by Eddie, my Dad goes by Eddie, and as the third heir to the name, I accepted that “Eddie” was my intangible-patriarch heirloom. I don’t have a middle name, so I like to think of “Eddie” as a substitute for one. My name is Spanish in origin, so you pronounce it in Española. Being soft spoken when I was younger, I never attempted to correct or help people pronounce it correctly. I let them butcher it how they pleased. Maturity has taught me the difference between ignorance and stupidity, and now I help people pronounce it all the time. Here’s a phonics tip to assist if you need some help, too:

Heriberto (air-e-bear-toe) **roll your “r’s” if you can*

Palacio (puh-la-see-oh)

“You too damn big to be that soft, man up and stop being a wuss.” That’s what people said to me as a little boy—a little Black boy who spoke softly, flinched, and never fought back. “You’re a girl,” they would point and laugh in elementary school at my long brown hair dappled with flecks of gold that fell down to my back. I cut it off at ten years old so that I could look more like a “boy”. “You’re a fuckin’ faggot.” They teased me in middle school when I drew the powerpuff girls, played with the “girl” toys, and enjoyed hopscotch with the girls during recess. “You’re a fatass, so you can have my lunch.” They would shove their leftover plates of chicken fingers and mac & cheese in my face during lunch in high school. I cried softly and ate it all because I believed them. “You really need to do something about those gross bumps on your face,” they interrupted mid-conversation in my freshman college math class. I struggle to smile, laugh it off, and thank them for their advice, cloaking my sadness.

Growing up being teased about my sensitive emotions, my polite manners, my disposition to associate with things that were “girly,” my weight, and my hyper-active skin, I struggled to find my place within Black masculinity. I never quite fit the picture of the heavysset Black boy. I could’ve passed as a “gentle giant” if I actually pursued the traits of being a big boy who was Black. I avoided contact sports because I would flinch easily. Athletes always injured each other somehow, and I didn’t want to hurt anyone. My Mother would always chant, “We could be living in a mansion by now if you played football and went off to the NFL.” Instead, I took a liking to Marching Band. Adding on the title of “band geek” was fine, but what made things even worse was my attraction to what was stereotyped as “girl” instruments, and I took up the Clarinet. I loved the ebony look. It stood out and was one of the most versatile instruments for beginners. It had a low and beautiful bellow sound in the chalumeau register, but it could also sing like a bird in the glistening altissimo register.

I didn’t like playing with friends outside because I would sweat profusely, my asthma would flair up, and I would prove everyone’s point that I was a fatass who can’t even jog a block. So, I stayed inside and played video games, watched cartoons, and would make drawings all the time. I made some unique choices in music. I didn’t listen to Hip-Hop often. I always listened to video game music, rock songs, R&B love songs, and classical music. When it came to toys, I didn’t seek out action figures or cars; I

always picked up the colorful Bratz dolls and dollhouses. I would dress them, braid their hair, and have them “cook” dinner in their dollhouse kitchen for the imaginary family in my head. Black masculinity was NOT having me. Not at all. I was a social pariah in that aspect. I was the bottom of the food chain, and everyone knew it. I was an easy target for bullying, and, of course, I played the role and accepted that I was less than other Black boys around me. I wasn’t Black enough. I wasn’t man enough. I was a failure of Black masculinity, and I accepted that.

“Why?” Is something I always asked of anyone or anything I wanted to understand and learn more about. That would mean I am curious and smart right? Wrong. As a Black boy growing up in America, asking why, was a challenge to the system, whether it be the school system or the authority of my mother. It was interpreted as a threat when it was actually a thirst. “You need to stop eating so much,” people chanted to me. “Why?” I questioned. They became defensive and responded in disbelief “Why? look at you. You’re so fat. You’re going to be fat forever if you don’t stop. You can’t even fit normal clothes.” I flinched, but I desired to understand and asked, “Why do I have to fit normal clothes? Why are my clothes not normal?” Fed up, they threw their hands up, walked away, and left me with my 2 double cheeseburgers, large fries, 10 pc. Nugget w/ sweet and sour sauce, 3 chocolate chip cookies, and large Pepsi (light on the ice). “Why do girls get the nice stuff?” I pleaded to people that shoved the black, brown, and/or grey apparel in front of me. “Why can’t I have more colors?” I asked, wishing my belongings were pink, cyan, yellow, and orange. “You can have colors. Just make sure that it’s a boy color.” A boy color: Blues, blacks, reds, greens, greys, whites. “Why? Girls get to use ALL the colors! That’s not fair,” I pouted. “You’re a boy,” they scolded me. “You don’t wear girly colors unless you’re a girl or a faggot--you a faggot?”

“Do I like boys?” Is something I always questioned since I was 7 years old. I remember daydreaming about being with boys in ways that were considered “gay,” and I didn’t even know. I remember wanting to hold a boy’s hand more than a girl’s hand. Feeling their warmth and sweat gave me a tingle. It always would excite me to wrestle with my friends. I even remember craving the musk scent from sweaty boys. I remember admiring muscles in ways that made me feel fuzzy inside. I didn’t

understand why, but the strange thing was I never questioned it . . . until the world around me told me I was wrong. Again, I was wrong. I am being a boy “wrong” again. I am being black “wrong,” AGAIN! Boys like to hold hands with girls. Boys like to play tag with girls and play on the swings with girls. Boys monitor the growth of girls' bodies and label them, which even at a young age I thought was absurd and rude. “Why? Why am I not a real boy? Why am I wrong? Why can't I still be a real BLACK boy?” I struggled to understand this as the only answer was “Because, that's biology, and it's in the bible so you're supposed to be like a boy because you're a boy. Anything else is incorrect and is sin” (the naivest thing I EVER heard in my life).

“I'm wrong. I'm wrong, and I don't know how to fix it.” That's how I spent my teenage years. Crucifying myself and punishing my own existence and trying to “fix” me. I did what society told me to attempt to stay the course. I would deny my boy-crush feelings and chase after pretty girls whose personalities were just...really bad. I had an attraction to girls, too, but peer influence made me feel only a certain type of girl would be acceptable. I fought all of my instincts for the betterment of my social status, which in hindsight was slim to none. My masculinity was in question constantly. I was always too happy, too excited, and too open. Men around me always wanted to invalidate me to establish that I was less masculine than them, less of a man than they were. Society made me feel that no matter the success I achieve that the type of person I was made me less of a man. I was doomed and ready to accept this as punishment for being wrong, and this is what my life would be.

One day in the Summer of 2014, following the completion of my sophomore year in college, I began the summer break coping with extreme family dynamic dramas. I spent the summer at my frat brother's girlfriend's house. Yes, not with my frat brother, but his girlfriend and her family. I was in a desolate situation. Her family was kind and willing to take me in without question. The trust my brother, his girlfriend, and her family offered made me feel warm inside, and I finally felt that people saw me for who I was and not who society made me out to be. During this summer, I came to terms with myself and determined that I was pansexual. I have always known this, but I did not know how to articulate it, nor did I want to admit it. The identification of this is less for me than it is to help guide those attempting to

wrap their brain around my sexual orientation. Basically put, it means that I am attracted to people. That's all. How they look, what they are--it doesn't concern me. What piques my interest is the emotional and spiritual connection to someone. That's what gets me hot! That's what makes me lust! That's the core of my attraction.

Now that I finally stepped into the light, a weight was lifted. My heart began to beat again. I felt free. No one's words, actions, or thoughts controlled how I felt anymore. My network of people were supportive. Some less than others. Interestingly enough, those who were most interested in the details of my coming out were the straight people I've known from various stages in my life. Questions such as "Were you after me this whole time?" or "Wow, you spent the night at my house in high school, how could you try me like that?" were launched at me with intent to burden my emotional well-being.

But when you come out of the closet, there is a swagger, an energy that emerges. Your masculinity takes a new form! One unphased by these invasive and hurtful presumptions. The confidence to love yourself takes over and not only protects you but also is the weapon in which you forge your own path through manhood. It is the most powerful feeling in the world to me. To hear "You're a faggot" and you giggle because it's true (minus the derogatory feelings behind the origin of the word), and that's MORE than okay! It did not invalidate my masculinity, in fact, it enhanced it. I assert myself and my feelings when necessary with no remorse. I support and build my communities (LGBT, Black, Art, etc.) with no reservations or underlying motives. I wholeheartedly love myself and am able to love others even if they think they hate me.

In Their Defense: The Ones Who Still Stand by Me

In defense of those who were disgruntled, not all of my friends and associates demonized me. Most of them were accepting and even encouraging. My best friend from childhood, Anibal Hidalgo and I grew up in the Bronx. We would run the streets together, but not in the way society has stereotyped. We didn't commit violent crimes, mug strangers, or sell drugs. We ran the streets like any other kid would by playing in the park, riding our bikes to the shore of Throggs Neck, buying \$5 pizzas from Domino's, soliciting the local video game store (with permission of course), and taking public transit to our favorite places around New York. When I regained solid contact with him after almost a decade of friendship, I was concerned about his view of me as a nonheterosexual black man and he said "I don't care about that shit bro. You're my brother, and I love you, and I love who you love. Real shit. You're still Eddie. You still my nigga." We still keep in touch.

When my mother relocated us to Atlanta, Georgia, when I was around 12 years old, my life was completely altered. Southern culture was strange to a city boy like myself. I had a difficult time making friends, and people thought I was "better" than them because I was from the North when I never thought that; it was projected onto me. I eventually found my circle in high school and formed a close bond with Benjamin Reives, a guy who (for the most part) grew up in Georgia and was my anchor as I adjusted to life as a Southern transplant. He seemed to understand me on a deeper level (and vice versa) than most people despite our multiple differences. I remember asking if he felt differently about associating with me now that I am openly Pansexual, and I remember he laughed and said, "Nigga what? I don't care about that shit. You live your life and be happy man. You haven't changed at all, and who you love doesn't change the fact you ma nigga. And when people ask about it, I got your back. I don't let people shit talk about you to me. I respect you bruh." I can still call him for anything and everything.

Life circumstances landed me at Tennessee State University in Nashville for my undergraduate studies. Once again, a southern transplant, I found myself in a new (yet now familiar) environment of southern hospitality and charm. As an Art major, I remember being a freshman in my Drawing I class and

sitting next to a dark-skinned guy who was sketching some amazing work. I leaned over and gave him some props on what he was working on and the rest was history. Derrick Brown Jr. was my first friend outside of my marching band activities at TSU. A native of Memphis, Tennessee, Derrick introduced me to a side of the south that was similar to Georgia but also extremely different. Aside from accents and geographic locations, Memphians have a unique pride about their city and have a way of projecting that in a way that is rough, but genuine and charismatic. When I approached Derrick about my sexuality, he had no direct quarrel with it, but we soon discovered we did have philosophical differences on how sexuality comes to fruition. "It's a choice." he said flatly. "You choose what you like. Biology attracts the opposite sexes to each other to reproduce. That's why we like the opposite sex and anything outside of that is a choice." I clearly disagree, as sexuality is an elastic concept that society continues to grapple and reform with time and experience. "I still think it's a choice, but that doesn't change who you are to me. You're still Eddie to me. Same shit, new day." Even though we had conflicting beliefs, we still were--and still are--the best of friends.

During my undergraduate studies, I became a member of the Eta Xi Chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity of America. I had such impactful experiences with that group of men that established the confidence to be myself despite what society said. My line brothers were supportive of me through this process. I share a unique bond of brotherhood with that group of men that is nearly indescribable. While pledging, we spent absurd amounts of time together and forged deep bonds. We also weren't afraid to hug each other and express love for each other. The bond with these men taught me what love and affection was like when it wasn't twisted and embedded in sexual promiscuity. We shared a time of bromance and bliss that is unforgeable. Even though we're far apart now, becoming great and successful, we still share that love and affection.

Daddy: Love That Escaped the System

My Dad was a handyman. He loved to build, fix, replace, and construct. He became interested in this line of work with the idea of, “Why pay more money for someone else to do it, when you can do it yourself for cheaper and exactly how you want it.” He definitely had a wealth of knowledge that he was eager to share--so eager that I spent a summer on site with him working construction. It was the most awful activity I have ever experienced. I hated the smell of plaster, and the stupid sheet rock always got all over my clothes. There was nowhere to sit because the whole place was a hazard. The sun was beaming down and all I wanted to do was eat ice cream and play. My Dad and I bumped heads the entire time: “Stop being lazy. I am trying to teach you something!” I stand sobbing as he makes me plaster the wall. I do a terrible job. Frustrated, he pushes me away and does it himself. That only lasted a week or so until he gave up and I happily went back to my video games and cartoons. In hindsight, I truly appreciate the fact that my Dad attempted to pass along important knowledge to me and spend quality time with me, even though I clearly was not interested. I felt like the whole situation was a ploy to manipulate me into no longer being “soft” and I guess soft won, because I sure enough got out of doing that mundane work I despised. I am not above hard labor; I am a hard worker to the core. I subconsciously felt the masculinity subscript being engraved on my forehead, and I wanted to run.

My Dad had an interesting track record with women. He always would comment on women’s bodies in front of me, bringing attention to their butts, chest, and faces. I found it uncomfortable not only because of my confliction with sexuality, but I also genuinely found it uncomfortable to visually consume someone's body (regardless of gender) in such a lustful manner. He even would walk up to these women and begin to flirt excessively. I somehow saw through this activity and did not register this as a noble trait of my masculinity. His relationship with my Mother was over before it even began. By the time I was of age to understand, remember, and form thoughts, their relationships were well worn on the rocks. He and my Mother would always have major conflicts that instilled fear into me. I wanted them to love one another so we could work through life as a unit. I wanted to see what having a family was like. I was tired

of seeing it on TV and seeing my classmates or even strangers in public with their nice little family. I wanted it badly, but I never said anything. I hoped and waited through the storms that it would happen one day.

My Dad also is a convicted felon. It feels strange to flat out admit this, but life deals us each our own path, and he was on the losing side for a while. He would write me long and heartfelt letters that were hard for me to understand. I missed him, but my young mind didn't have a concept of time at that point, so it felt like he was on a super long vacation. He would also let me know to do the right thing, so I don't end up in jail. Respect the law and stay on the path. I took these words to heart and instinctively understood as a child "learn from his example. He is warning you. Don't fail him or yourself." I remember traveling with my Mom to Rikers Island, the notorious jail complex of New York, to visit him while he was incarcerated. I did not comprehend the value of those visits. Too young to understand, I always had no idea how to feel. I wasn't sad, I wasn't mad, and I wasn't happy. I think I was numb. One memory I recall is when I would see him walk out in that orange jumpsuit, a sign of inmate status, but to me, it made me happy. It was bright. My Dad always smiled, kissed me on my cheek, and squeezed me tight. I have never told anyone, but that's why orange is my favorite color (next to pink, of course). It reminds me of how bright the light of my Father was despite his circumstances. Every time I saw that orange jumpsuit, I identified with the joy of seeing my Dad and the radiant love he openly expressed to me: "I don't care how old you get, you will always be my boo boo." He still says this and with time, I am less apprehensive about it and accept that declaration of unconditional love.

I can't emphasize enough that I truly am grateful for what my Dad did (and tried to do) for me. Most Black boys my age barely saw a male figure who had genuine interest in their development on any level. Despite conflicting masculine values, parental conflict, prison, and socially prescribed circumstances, my Dad always found his way to me. The love I feel from him has subconsciously taught me how to love others as well as return his love tenfold, to love unconditionally no matter the circumstances.

Mommy: A Memo of Love

My Mother was a firecracker. A spectacle to admire and awe at, but also pretty dangerous if you were too close when she would fire off into the air. Nadine Simone Maria Butler is the strongest and most powerful woman I have ever met in my life. Even though my Dad did his best, the revolving door of the correctional system continued to burden his ability to parent me. My Mother did most of the heavy lifting herself. Schooling, clothes, food, a bed, and other luxuries (when we could afford it) . . . she did all of that on her own. My Mother tried to teach me how to defend myself from mean-spirited bullies at school. She even went as far as to say, “If they hit you, you have permission to hit back, but ONLY if they hit you first.” I found this to be a strange concept at a young age. I believed that deep down, answering violence with a mirror would not keep the bullies away, but instead, create more bullies.

When it came to food, I had a greedy appetite. I would eat tons of food for no reason. When I try to think back as to why, I only remember feeling alone and ashamed of myself. Eating made me feel good, and I wanted to keep that feeling because it would disappear following the last bite. I could not articulate this; I thought food was my medicine, and everything would be okay one day. I feel like my Mom sensed my pleasure for eating even though it went against her own judgement to allow my overeating habits to have their way. “Do you want 1 or 2?” is a question I got when my food was plated, ordered, or provided. “Uhhh 2!” Of course! Why would I not take more happy feelings? Give me as much as you want! My Mother would always serve me with the same announcement: “You’re eating too much, Eddie. That’s why you’re getting fat. You need to slow down and chew your food and stop eating 2 of everything.” I had become numb to this memo and would ignore her words and listen to my gut, which said food equals good feelings. I realize that I put my Mother in a difficult situation to be strict and ration my food, risking my mental collapse and emotional eruption, or continue to feed my habit to keep me smiling and happy. I won’t say which course of action is better because the truth is whatever my Mother did was the best choice. She supported me as best she knew how, and I do not criticize or undermine that.

As I got bigger (age and size wise), my Mother began to advocate for me to play sports. Football made sense because I was so big, and (if I put some effort into it) I could mow down people with ease. My Mom didn't force this stereotype on me, but she did not hold back her thoughts on the matter: "You could go to the NFL, and we could be in a Mansion by the time you finish high school." This was another memo that I became numb to. I had no desire for such activity. My Mother would struggle with overdue bills and little income, so I could see why she pushed me towards money making avenues. Despite our struggle, she conquered those financial deficits. It was another reason that proves why this woman was formidable.

My Mother also was not shy to point out that I was figuring out my sexuality: "If you're gay, you could tell me." There goes another one of her household memos that would float around the house like a noxious gas. At the time, I perceived this as more of an accusation rather than a welcoming door out of the closet. I felt that my Mother's welcoming party was a death sentence. It would only confirm what I was trying to desperately escape at the time. I felt this was an attack on my masculinity, as I already was well under the influence of Black masculinity's toxic tendency of identifying queer folks as less black, less than a man. Even though I was not fond of her method, I recognize and appreciate that my Mother was providing me with a safe space to be myself, and I had a difficult time understanding that. She let me figure it out on my own and come to my own conclusions about myself. I took her hands-off "the door is always open" approach as passive when actually it was allowing me to explore within myself if I should walk through. A Mother's intuition is a complicated and precise vessel of knowledge, and I am thankful to my Mom for utilizing it to the best of her ability.

Growth: The Fierce Fighter Who Paved the Way

“You too damn big to be that soft, man up and stop being a wuss.” Just because I am a heavyset-BLACK man who is polite and respectful doesn’t make me less of a man. “You’re a girl.” I identify myself as a black male, a boy. Being called a girl is not an insult nor is it less than being called a boy. I just assert that I prefer and identify with being a boy, a man, a male. “You’re a fuckin’ faggot.” I guess I am. I won’t let the hateful way in which people use that statement change how I feel about myself. I am proud to be a knight of the rainbow. “You’re a fatass, so you can have my lunch.” No, thanks, I am not worried about your leftovers. I am brave enough to forge ahead into the unknown with uncertainty, yet courageous enough to pave a new way for myself. “You really need to do something about those gross bumps on your face.” I really don’t think hormone and chemical imbalances in my skin are a choice that I make on my own. I will not be upset and sad over a natural bodily action that somehow doesn’t “fit” the standard of society.

Throughout my trials of navigating Black masculinity and my journey out of the closet and into manhood, I have faced ridicule, support, conflict, resolution, and self-preservation. I think coming out as pansexual is the most courageous, most “masculine” achievement of my life. To assert my beliefs and feelings into a society ready to reject them, I bravely face it and smile gayly. I do not fit into the prescribed stereotype of a big-Black nigga from the Bronx. I don’t need to “fit” anywhere into that formula. Being polite and having long hair doesn’t make me less of a man. My love of classical music and anime doesn’t make me less black. Enjoying reading and learning doesn’t make me a traitor to my race. I am a Sensitive Fat Nigga who is more than proud of my Black masculinity as it continues to be the shield in which I lean and the sword in which I strike.



Figure 04: Palacio III, Heriberto, Sentimentally Sagging, Digital Illustration, 44 x 44 in, 2020.

A Letter to my Mutha Fuckin' Emotions

To my Mutha Fuckin' Emotions,

No Nigga. Just no. Go away. Disappear. Vanish. Implode. Get lost. GTFOH! I need to be cool. I don't need yo ass. I get myself high, yo ass bring me down. I try to make myself strong, yo ass make me weak. I keep up my guard, yo ass make me vulnerable. I be ready to fight, yo ass be ready to pray. Get gone before I have to hurt you bruh.

Yo ass keep trying to appear.

When I wake up in the morning and try to get this bread, yo ass screamin'. When I go out and say "wassup" to my people, you show yo ass. When I walk down the street past them "yt people", yo ass scared. When I am frownin', yo ass try to smile. When I am pissed the fuck off, yo ass cry. When "yt people" frown at me, yo ass start runnin'. When my homeboy tries to hug me and I decked him in his shit for tryin' me, yo ass starts bitchin'. When my girl asks me what's wrong, I say "nothing", yo ass say "something". When I tell my son to "Shut the fuck up and stop crying like a bitch", yo ass calls me a "bitch".

Like bruh, get the fuck on. Stop showin' yo ass bro. This is my show nigga. I'm the fuckin' star and I gotta let these niggas know that I'm cool . . . I'm cool.

From,
A Black man that needs you.

Aye, no homo (Hug me Bruh)

Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
I need to be told shit will be okay.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
My Daddy don't want my ass.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
No one thinks I care.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
My moms told me I am just like my dad.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
I keep hiding my pain.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
I need someone to know that I am in pain.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
I can't keep up this pace.
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
Why can't I be loved?
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
When will this end?
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
It makes me feel better
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
Can I just sit here for a little while longer?
Aye, no homo
Hug me bruh
Just, hug me bruh

He made me feel like a man

He made me feel like a man.

The way he would glance at me and smile, I felt giddy and full of life.

He made me feel like a man.

His chocolate arms wrapped around me while we lazily watched movies on the couch. He kisses my forehead and snuggles into my neck.

He made me feel like a man.

I made his lunch. A tuna fish sandwich with pepper jack cheese, his favorite of course. "Thank you babe" his voice rings through my body as he floats out to work.

He made me feel like a man.

He would send little gifts to my place of work. Flowers, chocolates, and little love notes.

He made me feel like a man.

One day He took me for a walk on a sunny afternoon to talk. "I think we should see other people." He says handing me back every gift I ever gave him.

He made me feel like a man.

I sob and beg him not to go. He leaves me distraught with tears in his wake.

He made me feel like a man.

I was alone now, and it was scary. Why would He leave me here?

He made me feel like a man.

Walls rise up, emotions run cold, and I stand tall and hardened.

He made me feel like a man.

I walk alone now, as it should be. No one will ever feel my love again because

He made me feel like a man.

As I Am Nigga

I am a pretty nigga.

I like my skin care routine, grooming myself and bubble baths, cuz that shit is self-care. I like smelling like coconuts and mangos bruh. My skin glows and my scalp feels fresh as fuck. I like to feel pretty. I can like dat shit and still be a man.

I am a beautiful nigga.

My hair is long as fuck and my curls stay poppin bruh. My haircare routine is important to me. I stand in the mirror for hours doing it up! I use fruity flavored chapsticks because I like the smell of it on my lips. I keep my nails trimmed and groomed. I like to feel beautiful. I can like dat shit and still be a man.

I am a happy nigga.

I enjoy life bruh. I am always cheesing at some shit. I like to make people smile cuz life is too hard to be actin' hard too! I find joy in simple shit. I am a happy ass black boy, and no one can take that shit from me. Yeah, life out here is hard for me, but I like to feel happy. I can like dat shit and still be a man.

I am a dorky nigga.

I like to read shit and learn shit. I enjoy school and getting smarter. I read manga. I watch anime and play video games. I get excited over superhero comics and card games. I cosplay as my favorite characters and rock that shit with pride. I enjoy learning new languages. I like being dorky. I can like dat shit and still be a man.

I am a proud nigga.

I am not afraid to be myself. I am breaking out of the roles assigned to me by society. I am proud of my people and all of their "flaws". I will always be myself, pave my own path, and become something in my own right. But I will never abandon my blackness nor my people. Being myself does not water down my black magic, it enhances it. I'm nigga? I'm taking that word back bruh. I am proud to be a nigga. I can like all'a dat shit and still be a man.

Black men can't...

Black men can't cry
Black men can't sigh
Black men can't show emotions
Black men can't skip
Black men can't be passionate
Black men can't be vulnerable
Black men can't be friendly
Black men can't smile
Black men can't sit too close to each other
Black men can't hug each other
Black men can't kiss each other
Black men can't look at each other
Black men can't comfort each other
Black men can't buy each other flowers
Black men can't buy each other chocolates
Black men can't spend quality time together
Black men can't value each other
Black men can't love each other
Black men can't cherish each other
Black men can't be a "bitch"
Black men can't be a "wuss"
Black men can't be "soft"
Black men can't have close friends
Black men can't be nice
Black men can't be kind
Black men can't have a skincare regimen
Black men can't wear makeup
Black men can't wear bonnets
Black men can't wear pink
Black men can't love flowers
Black men can't enjoy life
Black men can't play dress-up
Black men can't breathe
Black men can't take baths
Black men can't love nature
Black men can't swim

Black men can't be caring
Black men can't enjoy school
Black men can't enjoy reading
Black men can't enjoy writing
Black men can't go camping
Black men can't go skydiving
Black men can't visit museums
Black men can't cuddle each other
Black men can't sleep next to each other
Black men can't touch each other
Black men can't like each other
Black men can't think about each other
Black men can't pick each other up
Black men can't be joyful
Black men can't do white people shit
Black men can't feel each other's hair
Black men can't giggle
Black men can't apologize
Black men can't enjoy Anime
Black men can't listen to classical music
Black men can't go to the salon
Black men can't paint their nails
Black men can't file their nails
Black men can't own hair products

Black men can...

Black men can be poor
Black men can be unemployed
Black men can be deadbeat dads
Black men can have multiple baby mamas
Black men can be ghetto
Black men can gangbang
Black men can be rappers
Black men can be basketball players
Black men can die
Black men can be murdered
Black men can be lynched
Black men can have big dicks
Black men can be thugs
Black men can rob people
Black men can make people feel unsafe
Black men can be football players
Black men can do porn
Black men can kill each other
Black men can be uneducated
Black men can do hard labor
Black men can go to prison
Black men can be beasts
Black men can commit crimes
Black men can be sexual predators
Black men can fail classes
Black men can lose a job
Black men can be lazy
Black men can be selfish
Black men can be niggers
Black men can be insulted
Black men can be disrespected
Black men can be made fun of
Black men can be losers
Black men can be worthless
Black men can shoot people
Black men can hurt people
Black men can make you miserable
Black men can be barbers
Black men can be trash

Black men can skip school
Black men can do drugs
Black men can make you uncomfortable
Black men can be suspects
Black men can be ignorant
Black men can be angry
Black men can be unstable
Black men can be toxic
Black men can sell drugs
Black men can be guilty
Black men can be promiscuous
Black men can be violent
Black men can be lustful
Black men can be sexy
Black men can be strippers
Black men can be players
Black men can be alcoholics
Black men can be homeless
Black men can be drug-addicts
Black men can be animals
Black men can be hostile
Black men can be inappropriate
Black men can be unprofessional

To: African American Male

To: African American Male,

We would like to welcome you to your first day as a Black man of these United States of America. We are deeply honored to have you join the American dream and further make America great again. Congratulations on making it this far without being incarcerated, getting a female pregnant, or murdered in gang and drug affiliated violence. **You have the right to remain silent.**

You will no longer need to dress in any business, professional, or dignified attire in your new position here in the United States. **Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.**

It is time to understand your place in the American Dream. You are the base, the foundation in which we stand, and as a base you need only do as you are told and remain diligent to the instructions given to you from this point forward. Please be sure to adorn the accessories of your African American heritage such as, but not limited to: snapbacks, expensive name brands, jewelry, flashy vehicles, grills, and tattoos. This will aid you in properly taking your place in the United States as a Black man. **You have the right to an attorney.**

You are ready to begin your field work as a Black man of the United States. Please be sure to permanently remove your code-switching vernacular, since you will no longer need to properly communicate outside of your race nor have a sense of professionalism.

There are wide array of suitable job opportunities for you such as, but not limited to, garbage disposal service, barber, basketball star, football celebrity, drug plug, welfare collector, gang banger, rap icon, bootleg DVD salesman, baby daddy, rolling stone, body bag warmer, the OG, the HNIC, that nigga, the hardest and toughest in the streets, always strapped, out here hustling, ready to pop a cap in someone's ass if they talking stupid to you. All dat shit.

Don't deviate from these prescribed and inevitable pathways and you will be spared. If none of these options or similar are suitable, you may also join your "homeboys" in prison or in death to better suit your violent-beastly nature.

You are a base so staying at the bottom where you are needed and belong to a community is essential to the commerce of our country. There is no hope for a promotion, as all positions, once filled, are permanent and cannot be changed or altered due to natural selection and preference. You are where you belong. **If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you.**

Again, Congratulations! And welcome to the American dream. We thank you for doing your part as a Black man for the people of the red, white, and blue. We thank you in advance for your compliance.

From: The United States of AmeriKKKa





Figure 05: Palacio III, Heriberto, *Real men feel pink*, Digital Illustration, 56 x 44 in, 2019.

“Black men can be emotionally vulnerable with one another. We should show our emotions to other black men, and we will be seen as brave for doing so.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

The Art of Black Masculinity: Black Boys in the Studio

Introduction

The African American male has been a long-standing pillar in my studio practice that has withstood my complete and utter denial. In the beginning of my MFA program matriculation, I avoided the subject of my race, gender, and sexuality in my art practice in fear of being stereotyped, labeled, and categorized. However, I stood as at the center of my artistic practice, and I have withstood my own disgrace and betrayal. I, instead, focused on only the “art” and invested myself in medium specificity and abstraction. The stigma of being a Black male who was queer and grappling with manhood instilled a fear in me that made me believe if I openly expressed these concepts, I would be taken advantage of and left open to be attacked and demolished by my professors, colleagues, and American society at large. Watkins College of Art in Nashville, Tennessee, was far from a community that made you feel that way. It was an environment that not only was thirsting for knowledge but also for understanding and empathy. It took a semester or two for me to break out of that mindset and address something I always felt was deeply submerged within my studio practice: Black masculinity.



Figure 06: Palacio III, Heriberto, *It's all love dawg*, Digital Illustration, 36 x 24 in, 2019.

“We must let others (especially those closest to us) experience or witness our deeper emotions. We can– MUST–allow ourselves to cry, especially with other black men who are not our fathers, sons, uncles, cousins, etc.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

The Journey: From Social Experiment to Studio Practice

I began my investigation by researching emotions and came upon the social science concept of Emotional Intelligence, which can be defined as “the ability to engage in sophisticated information processing about one’s own and others emotions and the ability to use this information as a guide to thinking and behavior” (Green). I was always known to be strongly connected to my emotions and respected the genuine expression of them. I dug deeper into my investigation by analyzing the relationship African Americans had with this concept and found that it was not taken seriously by this group and the larger American society. This indifference towards the subject grew exponentially when I found that African Americans were the most out of touch when it came to Emotional Intelligence. This disconnect pushed my studio interests and led me to consider the relationships I (as a Black man) had formed and the emotional vulnerability I had within those relationships.

With Emotional Intelligence as a touchstone, my studio investigations started with analyzing and cultivating personal relationships with Black male figures in my own life. I began by tapping into various bonds I made at Tennessee State University (TSU). The epicenter of these relationships was produced by my involvement in the Tennessee State University Aristocrat of Bands (AOB) and becoming a member of the N.A.S.T.Y. Eta Xi chapter of Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia Fraternity of America (PMA). These institutions and organizations were critical to my emotional and social development of emotional intimacy (especially with other Black boys). I had strong emotional bonds to some of my band members and fraternity brothers that I felt was the framework for the hope I had for Black men in the future (without us being stereotyped and scrutinized by American society of course). At the time, I was solely interested in the dynamics of these personal relationships and how it challenged masculine norms. Little did I know, I was embarking on a journey that would lead me to address Blackness and masculinity as the same guise.



Figure 07: Palacio III, Heriberto, Aw nigga, preciate it!, Digital Illustration, 56 x 44 in, 2019.

“We can love other black men. If we do, we’re not assumed to be homosexual or seem to desire sexual contact with them. We can be physically or verbally affectionate, and we will not be seen as promiscuous and less masculine.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

The sowing of my studio investigations began with a simple prompt. Riffing off my attempts to shackle myself to Abstract Expressionism (a dated topic from undergraduate career), I came to this prompt through this mindset and material of paint with some intuitive perspective. I provided the space and supplies and invited my frat brothers, band members, and close friends to paint with me in my studio. I provided some guidelines to encourage and assist in framing a deeper level of interaction between us:

- Sharing the same paint surface simultaneously
- Only use our hands to paint
- Blindfold ourselves while we paint
- Be creative and have fun

These guidelines cultivated an opportunity for a different level of communication that we (for the most part) never experienced. I made sure my partners in the studio truly enjoyed the experience and not view the vulnerability as a traumatizing experience, which as Black men in America, was a societal norm that we faced daily. The goal of these guidelines was to cultivate a safe, yet simultaneously, vulnerable environment to allow my studio partners and I to let down our guards and express deeper emotions.

Besides these lightly imposed guidelines, I gave complete autonomy of the sessions to my studio partners, which allowed us to explore our inner curiosity that was previously buried by America's expectations of Black masculinity. The sessions allowed us the opportunity to be creative and--as some of them put it--childishly vulnerable. We cultivated, within my studio, an environment that welcomed those behaviors and affirmed those feelings of pure joy and expression.



(Top Left) Figure 08: Photo of Artist Heriberto Palacio III (right) and Zachary Horn (left), 2019.

(Top Right) Figure 09: Photo of Artist Heriberto Palacio III (left) and Marcus R. Andrews (right), 2019.

(Bottom left) Figure 10: Photo of Artist Heriberto Palacio III (right) and Marcus Cooper (left), 2019.

(Bottom Right) Figure 11: Photo of Artist Heriberto Palacio III (left) and Daveon Carr (right), 2019.

“I feel like people don’t really want to hear what I have to say. . . “

– Zachary Horn

“This is messy, but it’s fun, and there is a product. The product isn’t that important, though. It’s about the journey and experience shared. “

– Marcus R. Andrews

“This is pretty cool. Can we keep the blindfolds on and keep going? “

– Marcus Cooper

“I don’t even want to take the blindfold off. Its fun imagining what it looks like and the journey we’re taking together. “

– Daveon Carr

At the time of these investigations, I was solely focused on the relationships and interactions I shared with my studio partners. Collectively, my studio partners and I were able to share experiences that were either unprecedented or buried by our matriculation from Black boys to Black men. Ironically, these investigations cracked open a door I sealed away in the beginning of my MFA program to avoid the vulnerable feelings I had towards the subject matter. These shared experiences and feelings led me to further investigate and seek understanding on how/why these relationships were so foreign in the African American community. Thus, began my journey to explore a pervasive masculinity myth: Bromance.



Figure 12: Palacio III, Heriberto, Love ya bruh, Digital Illustration, 56 x 44 in, 2019.

“Black men have emotions. Black men are strong and hug each other. Black men can care deeply for one another.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

Brotherly Love: Black Boy Bromance

A bromance is an intimate, non-sexual relationship between two or more men. It is a tight, affectionate, homosocial male bonding relationship exceeding that of usual friendship, and is distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intimacy. ("Bromance")

As I continued to focus more concretely in my studio investigations, I became particularly intrigued with the term Bromance and began to transition my artmaking and research towards this relationship dynamic in the African American community. Bromance is a compound term that is a cultural fusion of brother and romance. The term brother was utilized to express affection and acceptance of close relationships or members of your “family”. The term romance is an inflated term in American society but is utilized in the term “bromance” as the exaggeration or passion for something or someone. Romance tends to play dangerously close to the line of sexual desire but is only pushed across by misuse and misinterpretation by American culture. I found myself intrigued by that boundary. Inspired by my angst and passion for visually telling the intimacy of Black bromances, I ended up revisiting a medium that I was once fond of during my undergraduate career: digital illustration, more specifically, vector art.

Vector artwork is a term that describes any art made with vector illustration software like Adobe Illustrator. Vector artwork is built from vector graphics, which are images created with mathematical formulas (Todd).



Figure 13: Palacio III, Heriberto, *I'm here for you bruh*, Digital Illustration, 56 x 44 in, 2019.

“The racial pressures of being Black in America has spurred Black masculinity to not resist the stereotypes, slurs, and set-backs, but accept them and own them as a means to take back power from the oppressor.”

- Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

One of the interesting traits of this digital medium for my practice is its versatility. Unlike pixelated images, vector images can be variously scaled without pixel distortion. Vector work could be projected onto the side of a building, printed on business cards, apparel, posters, etc. This method of artmaking for me was subconsciously driven by an image I saw very early in my youth when President Barack Obama embarked on his campaign for President of the United States. The famous “HOPE” poster by Shepard Fairey was an image that burned into my mind. In that moment I felt a sense of pride and excitement for African American men because the image and design was vibrant and elegant. How the image itself did not take away from Obama or his blackness, but it empowered his image. It was a positive advertisement of an African American male. The “cut out” shapes of the image to me were beautifully crafted puzzle pieces that form his unique being. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this was the blueprint of my interest in vector artmaking.



Figure 14: Fairey, Shepard, Barack Obama HOPE Poster, Paper and Acrylic Paint, 2008.

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”

- 44th President of The United States, Barack Obama

How this medium was utilized and received by the public played a huge factor into why I utilize this methodology explicitly for representing an underrepresented niche of Black masculinity dynamics (Black Bromances). Besides an appealing design aesthetic, the most recognized use of the medium was advertisement (ad) and branding. The graphic nature of this work acts as ad placement and brand projection. The image of the Black male in America has been stereotyped and projected through ads (media) to be violent, criminal, hyper-sexual, and fetish fulfillment. Ads continue to push these (and many other) stereotypes into the public view and offer no alternatives to consumers that learn about African American men through these sources. Images such as Fairey's "HOPE" poster challenged the societal norm of male African American representation in the media. Inspired by the prior example, I felt that taking this same source and fighting those stereotyped images with positive branding and empathetic representations of Black men could have the same effect and offer a more realistic and humanistic view of us in the larger context of media. The African American community has a history of appropriating oppressive sources and reinstating them to assume power over the source and utilize it as a source of empowerment or "sticking it to the man." It is a coping mechanism that the Black community has utilized as a means of mental survival, and I felt this was the best method to advocate for the need of these kinds of visual affirmations through direct media ad representation and branding.



Figure 15: Images from “Black Bromance.” Black Bromance, blackbromance.tumblr.com/, Accessed 2019.

“The African American bromance can be falsely considered a myth because of its lack of acknowledgment and genuine discussion in our social climate as well as its overall rejection through the upholding of the stereotyped guidelines of black masculinity and white supremacy.”

- Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

The Process: Production of Black Bromance Advertisement

The program I use to create my digital vector art pieces is Adobe Illustrator. I begin by establishing a source image for my vector work. The source image is an image that I have taken myself or have found and then use as a base to begin tracing the image. I then isolate the source image onto a separate layer and create another layer on top of the “source image” layer. I usually name the layer on top of the source image layer the “vector” layer. After locking the source image layer (this means the layer is now “locked” in place and cannot be manipulated for practical purposes), I then use the pen tool to begin tracing the image from the source image layer onto the vector layer. Depending on the complexity of the work, I add additional layers as necessary. The goal of using layers is for efficiency, practicality, and organization. Even though this may seem tedious, keeping multiple layers allows for versatility in the art making, agility within the program, and easy editing later in the process.

Upon tracing the outlines of the image (such as the boundary of the artwork and large objects), I then begin to “cut out” or trace the various shapes of the image. This process isolates varying values of color as accurately as possible to create distinct shapes. When these shapes are compiled, they form the vector image. I am painfully detailed when doing this and zoom in to the point of pixelization of the source image to account for as much detail and value changes as possible. The artistic license and methodology becomes prevalent during this portion of the process. The goal of this detailed tracing is to build in as much image distinction as possible to bring out details within the source image to the vector work. I use my artistic knowledge to make decisions such as mildly edifying smaller shapes of the image to suit the desired aesthetic or completely omitting entire portions of the source image.

Some pieces utilize multiple source images. Sometimes taking or finding the right picture doesn't garner the aesthetic ideals I have for the piece and the representation in the piece.

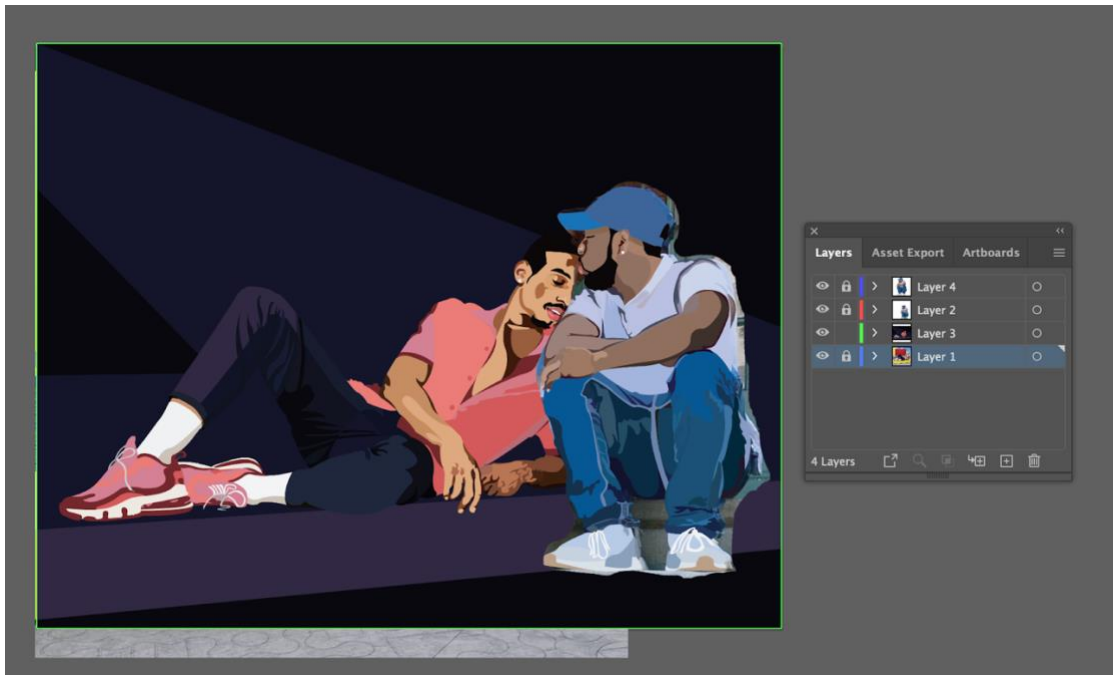
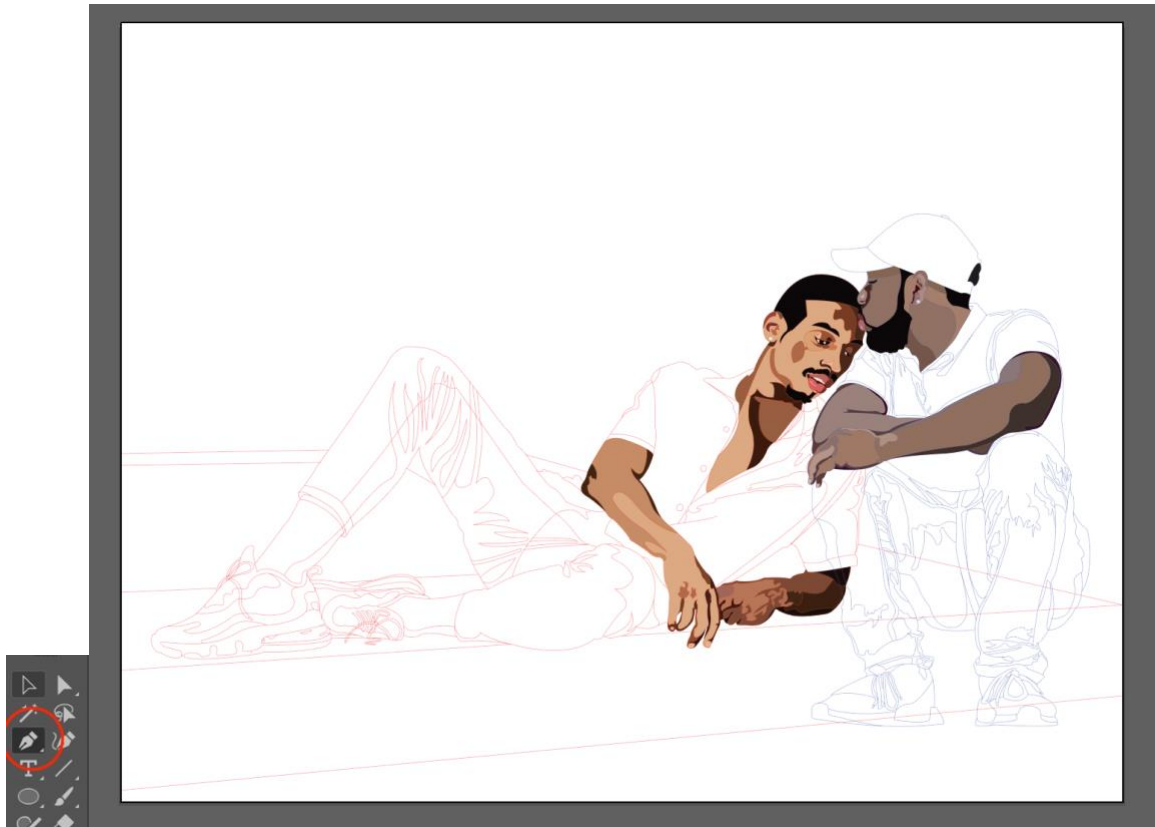


Figure 16.1: Palacio III, Heriberto, “Love ya Bruh” Screenshots, 2020.

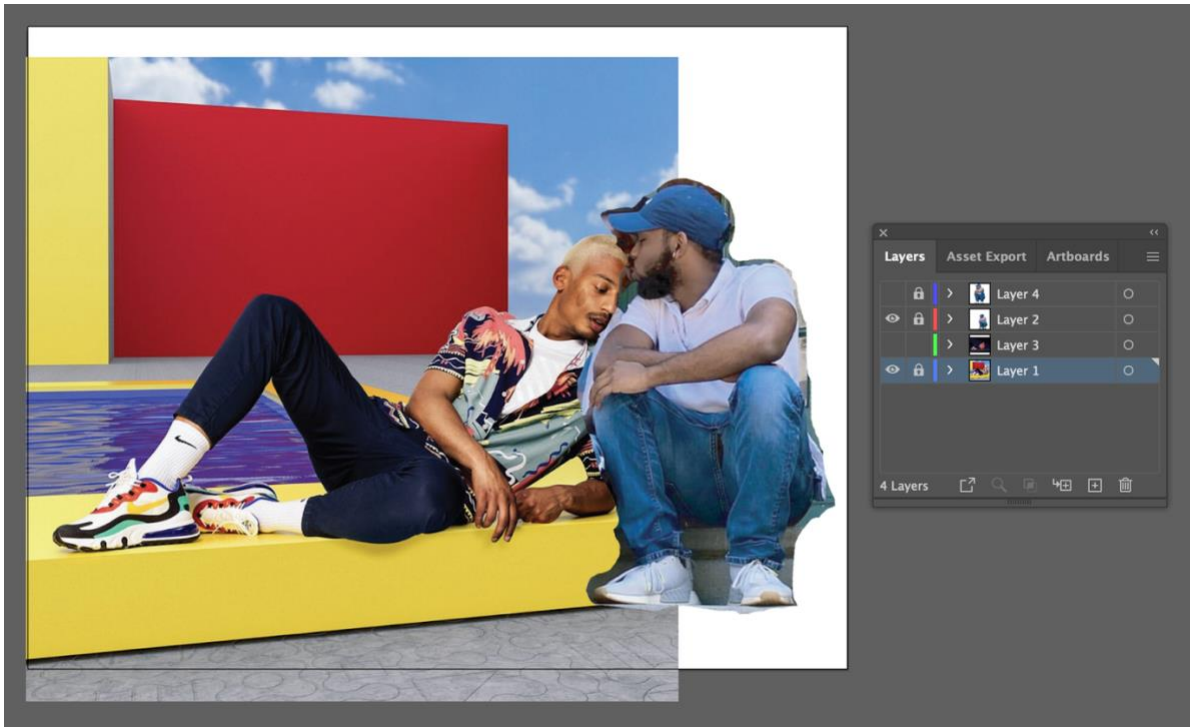
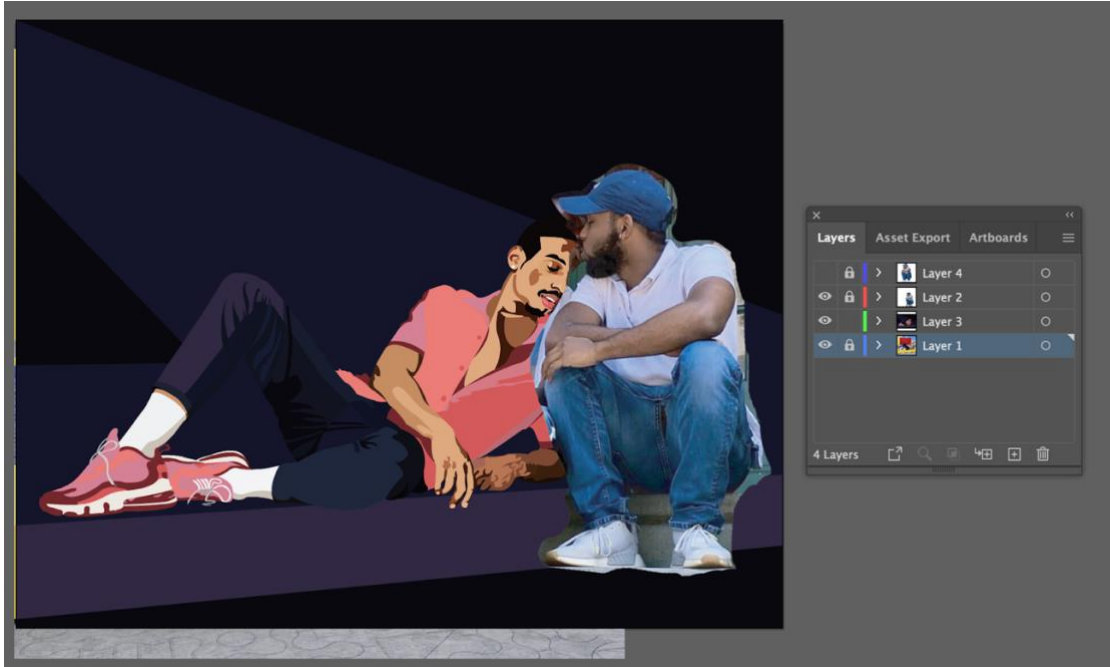


Figure 16.2: Palacio III, Heriberto, “Love ya Bruh” Screenshots, 2020.

This is when I strongly implement my artistic license to design the image that I feel strikes the desired representation for the artwork's purpose. Much like advertisements in media, I would add and/or subtract cultural signifiers in my imagery to craft the desired representation of these "bromance ads." Examples include adding/subtracting facial fair, hairstyles, clothing, etc. Once I trace out all of the shapes of my image as desired, I begin the next step of the process: painting.

In order to begin painting digitally I first activate all of the traced shapes on the vector layer by making it a "live paint" image. I activate live paint by simply selecting the entire vector line art and selecting "Make Live Paint" to then allow each cut out shape to become its own shape that can be painted and manipulated individually. Then, using the paint tool, I can use the endless assortment of swatches to paint my image. For my work, it is important to highlight the various skin tones of brown skin. To ensure the accuracy of skin tones, I use a tool called the "eyedropper" tool, which allows me to select any pixel in the source image and it then converts this into a usable paint swatch. I determine which swatch color best fits each shape based on a variety of factors, but there are two that I adhere to often.

One factor to consider is color selection. If the shape's color is too close in color to the shapes surrounding it, I make them distinct within reason (such as a dark chocolate brown right next to a lighter milk chocolate brown). This is important to keep in mind because if two shapes directly in contact are colored identically, these shapes will blend together to form one larger shape and continually flatten the already flat image. The second main factor I consider is the light source placement in the image, which would call for me to consider placement of lighter and darker values when painting. Without attention to my light source while painting, light and dark values may appear scattered throughout the piece. This would be problematic for the intended aesthetic. Additional factors include mood, color aesthetic, artistic license of style, and etc. Each piece can have a multiple assortment of these factors or none, but each piece has been considered under the aforementioned two main factors.

After painting the entire vector image, I then remove the source image underneath and spot check to be sure that all areas have been painted. The last step is removing the stroke (the outline of the vector shapes) and making them transparent. This merges all of the cut-out shapes to blend together to reveal the

final vector image. I remove the stroke because doing so softens the harsh lines within the work while still maintaining a graphic essence. This is not the case in every piece but is the trend throughout the majority of my work. Depending on the piece, I may have an additional layer called the “background” layer. This is where I can choose to input dynamic lines or shapes that emphasize the mood of the image itself or I use a solid color as it relates to the imagery. This places the piece into an environment, grounding it from the “floating” essence of graphic works such as logos. Once completed, I export the work to multiple media platforms for distribution and critique. The main method of representation for this work is printing it out and hanging them, but the work (as stated earlier) is dynamic in representation. It can act as phone wallpapers, put on business cards, printed on a giant billboard, small stickers, and etc.

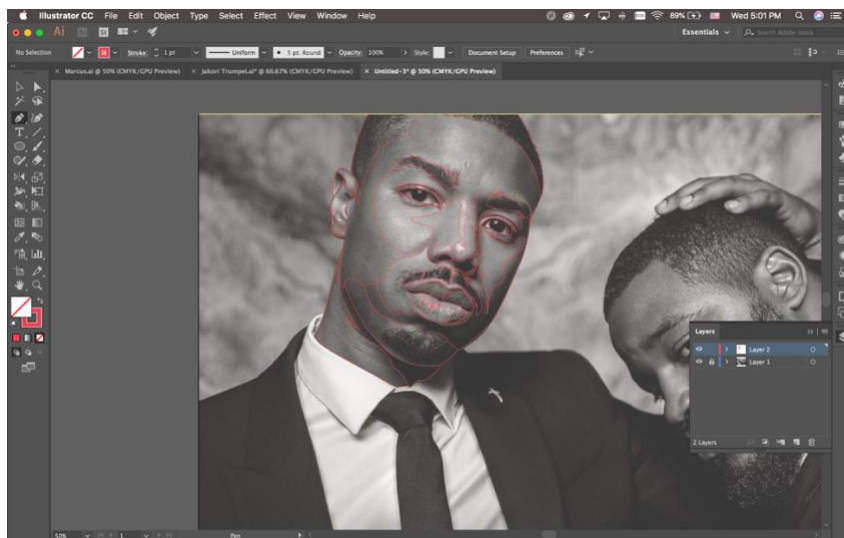
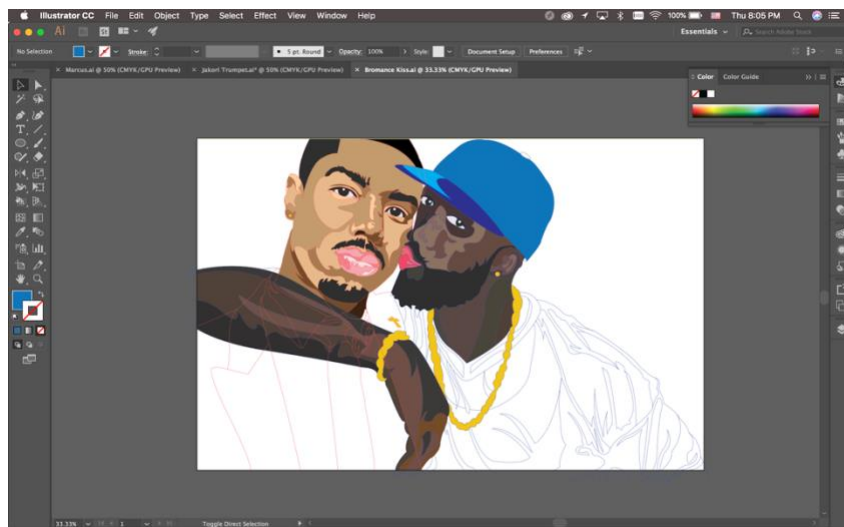
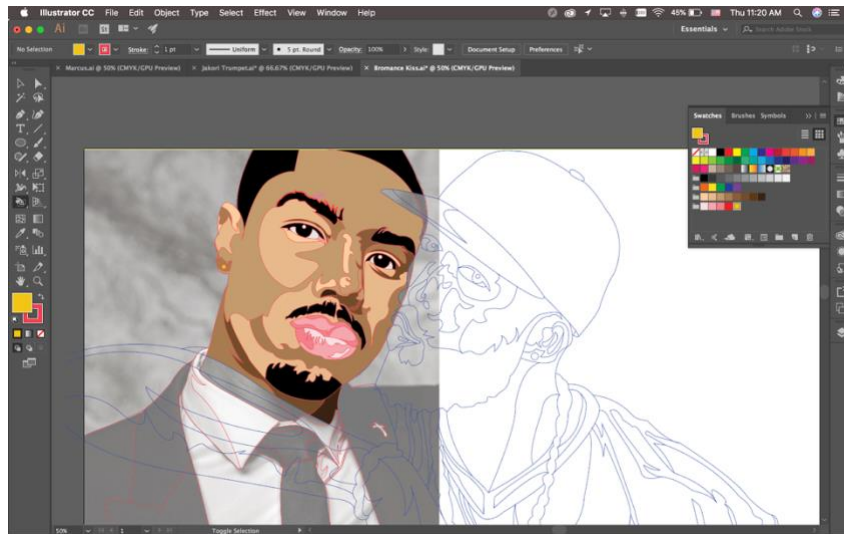


Figure 17.1: Palacio III, Heriberto, "It's all love dawg" Screenshots, 2020, Screenshot.

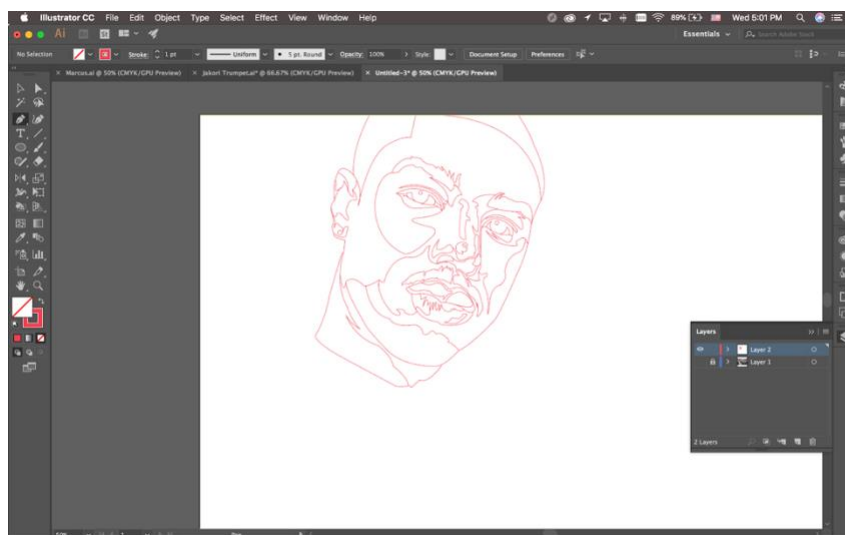
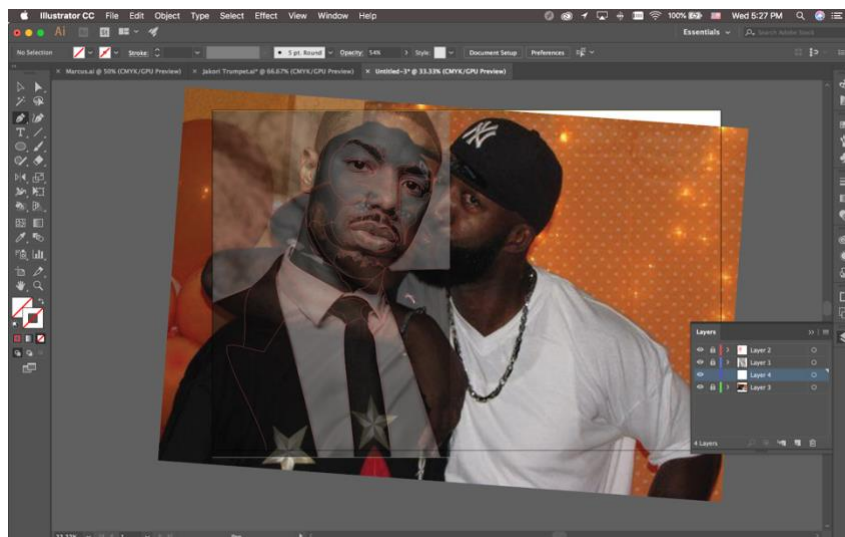
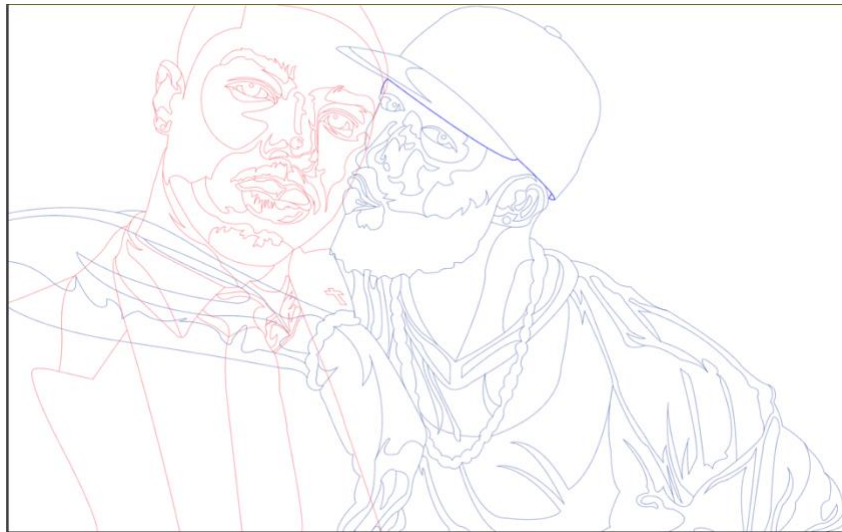


Figure 17.2: Palacio III, Heriberto, "It's all love dawg" Screenshots, 2020, Screenshot.

The Audience: Mixed feedback

When I began to share this work outside of my studio it received mixed reviews. Some viewers found my work to be “beautiful” and “gentle” imagery that aesthetically was attractive and well designed. I found that these responses came from white women who were colleagues and peers with whom I first shared my work. Even though the response was similar, my white male audience did identify within the work some challenges to patriarchal masculinity ideals. If not for my divulging of concepts, (overall) they would’ve seen my work as just a simple and beautiful piece of design without identifying the racial and social constructs being challenged and presented before them. People of color (specifically African Americans) found my work to be either a sexualization and feminization of African American men, or a challenge to the projected conditioning of African American men and exposing the need for these kinds of discussions and healing. Most of the hateful responses came from African American males, specifically. Ironically, this was the specific audience I was hoping to reach and provide an outlet of insight and healing. These rejective responses only proved my point that Black men have been conditioned to see themselves as un-emotional beings that thrive on the “front” and “playing it cool.” Some would be willing to lend an ear and gain new perspectives, while others labeled the work as “gay agenda” propaganda that is leading us to the complete emasculation of Black men in America.



Figure 18: Palacio III, Heriberto, *It's okay bruh*, Digital Illustration, 44 x 56 in, 2019.

“Black men don’t need to “man-up” and not be “soft.” Black men should be allowed to participate in platonic intimacy with peers and others.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

From my perspective, these mixed reviews made the “bromance ads” successful. The work had evoked disruption of social conditions and sparked engaging discussions while simultaneously speaking to artistic elements of art and design. The hateful comments empowered the work the most. Even though I am someone who thrives in the face of adversity, I did not receive hateful feedback as a fuel to continue to prove them “wrong.” I don’t think hateful responses mean that they’re wrong or invalid. More so, I identified hate commentary as a subconscious cry for help. “This shit is gay as fuck. No straight man does this. You are just a faggot” is what they would say, yet I hear their subconscious soul screaming at me: “I don’t know anything else about being a man and society told me that this is not manly, so this is feminine, which is gay.” It was easy for me to read between the lines, and I could see the internalized damage in their hateful words. This made me want to work harder towards community healing. This type of feedback affirmed the necessity and purpose of this imagery. Perspectives can be shifted one ad (or art piece) at a time.



Figure 19: Palacio III, Heriberto, Danny Boi, Digital Illustration, 44 x 44 in, 2020.

“I love you, Eddie.”

– Daniel Brown

Looking at Me: Facing my own bias

The process of gathering source images to create my work is a crucial part of my process, not because I seek the “perfect” source image, but the search for this kind of imagery is, in itself, an investigative process that adds an additional layer of context to the studio process. I consider it the research (source image) prior to the research essay (the artmaking). The lack of images of Black men interacting in an intimate AND platonic way is rarely documented outside of the staged model(s) or photographer with a vision. I had to make compromises with some imagery that most likely was not cultivated for the purpose in which I as an artist utilized them. Some photos were of queer Black couples posing with clear indications of wedding bands and romantic intimacy. I first thought these images were useless because the subjects were clearly intimate in a way that was (from my conditioned perspective) beyond platonic. But this made me sit back and honestly confront my own projections of sexuality into the concept of Black bromances and my own work. Queer Black men can (and should) have platonic intimacy with anyone, whether it is a lover or a friend. Platonic intimacy doesn’t boil down to sexuality. The searching and archiving of these images was an act of un-conditioning of my own perspectives and bias. As a pansexual Black man, I found it fascinating that seeking imagery of platonic intimacy between Black men challenged my own bias and subconscious condition of sexualizing queer Black men.



Figure 20: Palacio III, Heriberto, Masculinity Mugshot 1: “Pain in a Pretty Pink Mugshot”, Digital Illustration, 44 X 56 in, 2020.

“Growing up being teased about my sensitive emotions, my polite manners, my disposition to associate with things that were ‘girly’, my weight, and my hyper-active skin; I struggled to find my place within Black masculinity.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

While continuing to work through my preoccupation with Black bromances I entered my final spring semester of away research and artmaking and found that my concepts began to shift focus back onto me personally. I began to turn all of my research and findings onto myself and dissect the root of these interests to my own masculinity. I started off in the program avoiding my race, gender, and sexuality. Now armed with thorough research and experiences, it made complete sense to address my personal implication in my studio practice alongside my research. I was not completely comfortable inputting myself (both figuratively and literally) into my own artwork. It made me feel self-conscious and vulnerable. I felt that my own image projected bias. In hindsight, it was more so my subconscious stereotyping of my own image and projecting bias onto myself. I thought I was too happy looking, queer looking, overweight, and not masculine enough to exude the topic in which I wished to discuss: my personal relationship with Black masculinity.



Figure 21: Palacio III, Heriberto, Masculinity Mugshot 3: “Passive in a Pretty Pink Mugshot”, Digital Illustration, 44 X 56 in, 2020.

“Growing up being teased about my sensitive emotions, my polite manners, my disposition to associate with things that were ‘girly’, my weight, and my hyper-active skin; I struggled to find my place within Black masculinity.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

In theory, it seemed simple to just insert my own image into the guise of Black masculinity, but there was more to unpack than I first thought. I was facing my own bias and stereotypes within myself that I avoided in fear of the very ridicule I wished to free African American men from. I felt that my ideologies and behaviors ostracized me from other Black boys. I always have felt “less” Black than my peers. I also felt that I was not masculine enough to implicate myself in a discussion of masculinity because my stance was “flawed.”

I began the process of inputting myself into my vector work by doing some self-portrait photoshoots. I then took those source images and began my vector artmaking process to produce portraits of myself in various expressions. The portraits started to behave as a catalog of my masculinity: Pain, Pouting, Passive, and Precious. These were only a few of the different aspects of my masculine identity that demonstrated the complexities of Black masculinity and set forth imagery that represented the depth of black manliness. The goal of making this smaller body of work was to continue to push against the projected stereotypes of the one-dimensional Black man that is violent and unfeeling, while adding personal depth and experience into the studio practice.

I spent the majority of my last away semester in my MFA program unpacking and dealing with my own internal damages related to my blackness and masculinity. It was very frustrating to find myself conflicted with the very content I projected in my studio practice. I felt like a fraud, but simultaneously, I felt that this confrontation and revelation was genuine and happened in the time that it needed to. The work that I have invested in since embarking on this journey in summer 2018 was not simply honing artistic skill and research. It also was a journey that led me to confront myself within my own studio practice.



Figure 22: Palacio III, Heriberto, Masculinity Mugshot 4: “Pouting in a Pretty Pink Mugshot”, Digital Illustration, 44 X 56 in, 2020.

“Black masculinity was NOT having me. Not at all. I was a social pariah in that aspect. I was the bottom of the food chain and everyone knew it. I was an easy target for bullying and of course I played the role and accepted that I was less than other Black boys around me. I wasn’t Black enough. I wasn’t man enough. I was a failure of Black masculinity and I just accepted that.”

– Heriberto “Eddie” Palacio III

Conclusion

My studio practice is a tangible representation of my need to bond with positive Black male figures in my life and the internalized feelings buried by social constructs of what it means to be Black and be a man in American society. I had inconsistent and distant father figures in my life since birth. They were all Black men who (in their own way) did their best with the cards they were dealt in life to be there for me. I started my studio investigations by attempting to advocate for other African American men's emotional intimacy not because I was secure in my relation to Black male relationships, but it was my lack of community and affirmation that made me subconsciously seek my "tribe."

My work acts as a beacon to fellow Black boys who are yearning to bond with other males in a platonic way that won't be unfairly labeled as sexual, violent, or lustful. My artmaking started as a social experiment of personal interest. My studio practice (in tandem with my research practice) pointed itself toward how Black men (how I) relate to environments and how we internalize these relations. The advertising and branding of Black bromance and Black masculinity imagery acts as a call for others to come forward and say, "me too." The investment I have in Black masculinity in my studio practice is going to be a lifelong dedication that I am now readily prepared to continue to grow and champion. Something I would always ask myself is: "Why is it so damn hard for Black men to open up to each other?" My MFA studio investigations made me realize that before I could truly understand the answer to that question, I needed to confront my own bias towards myself and open up my own perspectives of the self-imposed limitations of my blackness and masculinity. My studio work provides necessary representation of African American men, along with myself, by presenting sentimental propaganda and advertisement of underrepresented variants of Black masculinity in American society. All Black men deserve to be cared for, loved, hugged, and cherished without feeling less Black and/or less of a man. And you know what? I deserve that too.



Figure 23: Palacio III, Heriberto, *Masculinity Mugshot 2: "Precious in a Pretty Pink Mugshot"*, Digital Illustration, 44 X 56 in, 2020.

"I think coming out as Pansexual is the most courageous, most "masculine" thing I've ever done in my life. To assert my beliefs and feelings into a society ready to eject them, I bravely face it and smile gaily. I do not fit into the prescribed stereotype of a big-Black nigga from the Bronx. I don't need to "fit" anywhere into that formula. Being polite and having long hair doesn't make me less of a man. My love of classical music and anime doesn't make me less black. Enjoying reading and learning doesn't make me a traitor to my race. I am a Sensitive Fat Nigga who is more than proud of my Black masculinity as it continues to be the shield in which I lean and the sword in which I strike."

– Heriberto "Eddie" Palacio III

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