

Performance and Detachment: Explorations of Race and Sexuality in Brontez Purnell's *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (2017)

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EN Abstract: This article argues that Brontez Purnell's *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (2017) challenges 'homonormative' perspectives of race, class, gender and sexuality by presenting the experiences of a gay, working-class African American from Alabama. It argues that the text establishes the importance of intersectional queer literature, and foregrounds two distinct methods by which Purnell addresses homonormativity, detachment and performance. Detachment is defined as a form of relief in dealing with a "homophobic world" (Price, 2015) and is a method of processing trauma. This article argues that the protagonist DeShawn engages in detachment to deal with repression he faces along the characteristics of race, sexuality and class, in addition to his experiences with loss and grief. Furthermore, as well as practicing detachment, I argue that DeShawn also engages with aspects of performance and performativity in relation to his sexuality, entangling liberation and repression as part of his queer experience. Drawing from the theoretical material of Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan, this article argues that Purnell utilises the Lacanian *objet a* as a device by which DeShawn embodies and performs to. As a fetishized other, DeShawn is simultaneously sexually desired and repressed by others, mainly white men, on grounds of his race, sexuality and class. As both detachment and performance operate concurrently in DeShawn, I conclude that Purnell presents an inherently unique experience of a queer, African American identity in contemporary USA and one that explores complex and entangled intersections of race, class and sexuality. As DeShawn's engagement with detachment and performance serve to both liberate and repress him, Purnell presents a story of survival preservation in a hetero- and homonormative world.

Keywords: queer; race; gender; sexuality; African-American; performance; detachment.

ES Performance y distanciamiento: exploraciones de raza y sexualidad en *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (2017), de Brontez Purnell

ES Resumen: Este artículo sostiene que *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (2017), de Brontez Purnell, cuestiona las perspectivas 'homonormativas' sobre raza, clase, género y sexualidad al presentar las experiencias de un hombre afroamericano gay de clase trabajadora procedente de Alabama. Se argumenta que el texto establece la importancia de una literatura queer interseccional y pone de relieve dos métodos distintos mediante los cuales Purnell aborda la homonormatividad, el distanciamiento y la performance. El distanciamiento se define como una forma de alivio frente a un "mundo homofóbico" (Price, 2015) y como un método de procesamiento del trauma. Asimismo, se sostiene que el protagonista, DeShawn, recurre al distanciamiento para enfrentar la represión que experimenta en función de su raza, sexualidad y clase, además de sus vivencias de pérdida y duelo. Además de practicar el distanciamiento, se argumenta que DeShawn también se involucra en aspectos de performance y performatividad en relación con su sexualidad, entrelazando liberación y represión como parte de su experiencia queer. A partir del marco teórico de Judith Butler y Jacques Lacan, se sostiene que Purnell utiliza el *objet petit a* lacaniano como un dispositivo que DeShawn encarna y hacia el cual orienta su performance. Como otro fetichizado, DeShawn es simultáneamente deseado sexualmente y reprimido por otros hombres —principalmente blancos— en razón de su raza, sexualidad y clase. Dado que tanto el distanciamiento como la performance operan de manera concurrente en DeShawn, se concluye que Purnell presenta una experiencia inherentemente singular de una identidad queer afroamericana en los Estados Unidos contemporáneos, que explora intersecciones complejas y entrelazadas de raza, clase y sexualidad. En la medida en que el involucramiento de DeShawn con el distanciamiento y la performance sirve tanto para liberarlo como para reprimirlo, Purnell ofrece un relato de supervivencia y preservación en un mundo hetero- y homonormativo.

Palabras clave: queer; raza; género; sexualidad; afroamericano; performance; distanciamiento

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Theoretical Context. 3. Methodology. 4. Detachment. 5. Performance. 6. Discussions and conclusion. 7. References.

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1. Introduction

By reading contemporary LGBTQ+ literature, those who have existential questions of their own identity and sexuality may further educate and discover themselves. But what does LGBTQ+¹ stand for in a contemporary context? For many, LGBTQ+ “stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. It is an umbrella term that refers to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community and may also refer to heterosexual allies of the group” (“Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender,” 2008, pp. 847-848). Developing out of ‘queer theory’, LGBTQ+ theory and its critical conceptions have occupied their own rightful place in ‘Theory’ for some time now (Pruitt, 2016). LGBTQ+ fiction itself has a long and rich history within the literary canon, arguably beginning with depiction of same-sex relationships in Plato’s *Symposium* and Homer’s *Iliad*. In recent years, however, evidence suggests (Sandy et al, 2016; Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2016; Meyer, 2012) that some members of the LGBTQ+ community feel their identities are unrepresented by LGBTQ+ genre fiction due to a lack of intersectional (different aspects of socio-cultural and political identity) acknowledgement within these texts, such as the intersection of race and class. Indeed, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016) go as far to suggest that a lack of such intersectional identities available to consume “reify neoliberal ideas about sexuality’s relationship to race and class, and encourage gay assimilation into normative but problematic, non-equitable institutions” (p. 847) in their portrayal of primarily white, middle-class homosexual/lesbian characters.

Despite this work, there remain gaps in the narratives of the queer experience. This article addresses this in its analysis of Brontez Purnell’s semi-autobiographical² *Since I Laid My Burden Down* (2017). A text broadly overlooked and under analysed in LGBTQ+ and queer literary study, Purnell’s text addresses the problematic relationship between the characteristics of sexuality, race and class through the lived experience of a black, gay, working-class, punk man from Alabama named DeShawn. DeShawn represents a unique and overlooked lived experience within the LGBTQ+ spectrum due to the repression he faces not only based on his sexual identity, but also his race, location and class. As he is both desired and shunned by hetero and homosexual people, DeShawn is the recipient of unique combination of discrimination ranging from homophobia and repression alongside other traumatic experiences.

By utilising a methodology synthesised from queer theorists and the work of Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan, this article presents a complex reading of the entanglements between race, class, sexuality and gender, and by doing so, updates conceptions of queer characters in LGBTQ+ Fiction in the twenty-first century. To achieve this, I argue that Purnell regularly utilises two distinct coping methods for DeShawn to process his individual and generational trauma: detachment and performance. It argues detachment is one method by which DeShawn psychologically retreats from his repressive, homonormative experiences as a queer survival strategy to cope with his temporal present. In addition it argues that DeShawn ‘performs’ to the identity(s) which are inscribed upon him by others, engaging in a unique queer experience through these performances that both liberates and further represses him. It outlines how Purnell documents a distinctive lived experience that engages with the concept of ‘queerness’ itself, and in doing this, I argue *Since I Laid My Burden Down* illustrates a seldom-seen experience of non-normative homosocial and homosexual experiences. In short, in its depiction of the lived experience of a non-white, homosexual man, I analyse how DeShawn uses performances of his sexuality and identity in combination with detachment to cope with his lived experience.

To explore these perspectives, the article first presents the theoretical context relevant to contemporary LGBTQ+ genre fiction, exploring concepts within the genre and the work of theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler to construct an interrogative model of sexuality and gender. Then, via a close reading, it argues that DeShawn embodies the concepts of detachment and performance which are entangled in his lived experience, concluding that DeShawn’s identity operates within a reciprocal feedback loop of fetishized deviance and detachment from his lived experiences to cope with institutional racism and homophobia. Thus, *Since I Laid My Burden Down* is allegorises survival and the tension between homonormativity (Duggan, 2002) in the twenty-first century.

2. Theoretical Context

To understand how DeShawn’s experiences are shaped, this article first explores the concepts of detachment and performance that are formative in constructing his queer identity. Queer theorists have repeatedly

¹ Members of the community have most recently adopted the term ‘LGBTIQ+’ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, plus) to fully encompass the breadth of identities represented by the spectrum. The shorter term is used throughout the chapter for ease of reading and accounts as use of the longer term.

² See 356SMission Road (2017). At around 23:00, Purnell explains that DeShawn, the protagonist, is a combination of his and his closest friend’s lived experiences.

cited Michel Foucault's (1990a; 1990b; 1990c) writing on the history of sexuality and his "assertion that the very concept of sexual identity is historically and discursively produced" (Carroll, 2012, p. 5). Reading a text through such a lens thus supports the "interrogation of how sexual identities are produced and policed" (pp. 5-6) and reinforced by socio-cultural and political forces. In turn, this reading provides a greater understanding of the "binary structures by which sex, gender and sexuality conventionally understood" (p. 6). This view is also adopted by Valocchi (2005), who notes that queer theory enables a shift to "new ways of thinking about old concepts" (p. 753), and "by so doing points again to the limitations of identity-based analysis" (p. 754). Chevette (2013) also promotes this approach, positing that queer theorists have historically emphasised both the "issues of sexuality and heterosexual privilege" and therefore the "socially constructed, performative aspects of sexuality" (p. 172). Such an approach interrogates the framework and dominance of the 'heteronorm', defined as "heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society" (Warner, 1993, p. xxi), and how it is upheld.

The above implies that there is a dissonance between certain characteristics such as sexuality and gender identity and how they are performed based on their inscription by others. In performing these inscriptions and expected roles, this creates an identity of 'detachment' as exhibited by characters in LGBTIQ+ fiction. This analytical approach accords with Carroll's (2012) observation that 'reading queer' has the propensity to extend "the terms by which heterosexuality can be understood through its discursive analysis of heterosexuality as an effect of historical and cultural construction" (p. 2). This construction is generated from the historic institutional machinery (cultural capitalism, traditional notions of gender roles) by which heterosexual identities are produced by socio-cultural expectations, and the extent to which homosexual identities are constructed as "deviant and abnormal" (p. 2). This is a formative concept for 'reading' queer texts in their illustrations of the lived experience of protagonists.

According to Caprioglio (2021), queer theory offers a platform by which to view homosexual identities in either a connotative (implied, effectively deniable), or denotative (openly claimed, and substantial) manner. In what will be a denotative reading of Purnell's text as an LGBTIQ+ person is the subject, the 'deviant and abnormal' identity of DeShawn is one of detachment. Specifically, aspects of DeShawn's sexuality are constructed as a method by which he 'detaches' from his experiences, traumatic or otherwise. In an analysis of Walter Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873), Price (2015) conceives of detachment in queer literature as a form of relief: "striving for emotional and psychological detachment from his [Pater's] sociohistorical environment, shrinking from a homophobic world" (p. 648). Price continues, noting that "Amanda Anderson has demonstrated that other writers of Pater's era [...] promote detachment less as a reified stance than 'as an ongoing aspiration and incomplete achievement'" (p. 648). Detachment then is arguably an acknowledgement that the world continues to be heteronormative, and analysing this detachment is a fundamental component of reading a text through a queer lens. As Grindstaff (2006) posits, there is an "interrelatedness between identity, power, and resistance [which] is more complicated than it first appears" (p. 2) as the non-normative experiences of those within the LGBTIQ+ umbrella are experienced differently and individually depending on other factors such as race and class.

Furthermore, whilst specifically investigating the experiences of queer people in America, Grindstaff (2006) notes that male homosexuality (specifically of white men) has been "homogenising non-heterosexual citizens' experiences and struggles" (p. 3). Thus, queer texts (specifically written by non-white people) reflect this detachment in their texts. The individual and collective trauma experienced by members of the LGBTIQ+ community is reflected in queer literature, as Caprioglio (2021) states, such literature has been "providing space for the articulation of that trauma, then, echoes the provision of space for queer coming out" (p. 454). Therefore, LGBTIQ+ fiction has the propensity to become a site where this trauma is articulated and thus a further detachment in identity is simultaneously processed yet reified.

Such detachment from an inscribed identity or experience infers a performance of an alternative as a result. Queer theory has an ostensible history with interrogations of performance and performativity when relating to gender and sexuality (Sullivan, 2003; Elia et al, 2014; Bradley & McCallum, 2019). As detailed by Butler (1999) through their conception of gender as 'performance' within heteronormative systems, Butler examines gender and sexuality binaries in accordance with Foucault's work through "the cultural, historical, and political discourses around which sexuality is constructed" (Chevette, 2013, p. 172). Butler's deconstruction of gender, sexuality and identity defines a turn away from the 'universal' feminist experiences of white, western, middle-class women and recognised gender from the perspective that gender itself is "inscribed on the surface of bodies...it seems that genders can be neither true nor false [...] produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (Butler, 2006, p. 160). Butler sees gender as a concept projected onto bodies, and are thus expected to act in accordance with expectations of gender. Thus, gender is conceived as performance that infers a societal dissonance when those who do not conform to stable notions of gender act 'deviantly'. As Butler (2006) attests, this "suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance" (pp. 161-162). This dissonance thus de-centres the heteronormative focus within mainstream cultural theory and its tendency to speak universally about its subject, particularly from an intersectional perspective. I will utilise this focus on the performative aspects of gender and sexuality in the context of heteronormativity when approaching *Since I Laid My Burden Down*.

This performative dissonance extends to the relationship between concepts of gender and sexuality, particularly when these concepts are both desired and labelled deviant. Such *fetishization* of the psychoanalytic 'other' infers it as Jacques Lacan's *objet a*. McGowan (2025) writes that, in this context,

Rather than being what the subject desires, the *objet a* triggers the subject to desire the object of desire [...] the *objet a* gives that ordinary object an extraordinary quality that makes it desirable. Without the *objet a* – which infuses the real-life object with an intimation of exceptionality, even of sublimity. (p. 110)

The desirability of the unique other inscribes additional layers of performativity upon the body to meet this weighted expectation. Despite this ‘extraordinary quality’ being brought into existence by those who desire a particular body, it is the fetishized body itself that generates the exceptionality by performing to this very expectation. These concepts are frequently explored in LGBTIQ+ genre fiction.

Thus, I explore DeShawn’s queer, performative identity in combination with the perspective that it is used as a means of detachment in Purnell’s text. Therefore, reading a text through a ‘queer’ lens, as noted Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016), “serves both as a way to name identities and practices which complicate or fail to fit the normative, stable formulation of these categories and as a way to name the process of that disruption and recognition” (p. 849). Such a reading emphasises an awareness of homonormativity. Duggan (2002) defines homonormativity as the “naturalised variation of a fixed minority arrayed around a state-endorsed heterosexual primacy and prestige” (p. 190), which problematizes the importance of sexual and gender diversity. Specifically, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan (2016) write that such homonormativity suggests that “heteronormative constructs are assimilated and applied within LGBTIQ+ communities, particularly when they cooccur as the sexual politics of a larger neoliberal perspective in economic and political spheres” (p. 849) at the expense of characteristics such as race and class. Reading fiction through the lens of performance and detachment will interrogate the hetero and homonormative structures which reinforce gender and sexual stereotypes within LGBTIQ+ fiction and perhaps of the queer community more generally, opening possibilities for refreshing perspectives on queer texts.

3. Methodology

The analysis engages with the theoretical material introduced above to frame the work within a critical queer paradigm, exploring how DeShawn’s queer identity is constructed within the text within the purview of a discursive and historical production, noting the entangled relationships between race, class, sexuality and gender. To achieve this, the analysis first interrogates DeShawn’s identity from the perspective of detachment as defined by Price (2015). It enquires into how DeShawn constructs his queer existence as one that detaches from his lived experience, as a means to cope with the traumatic coming-of-age in heteronormative world. I then employ a reading utilising performance and performativity that is enmeshed with DeShawn’s detachment. Drawing from the work of Butler (2006) the analysis engages with the concept of performance, arguing DeShawn adopts and rejects the expected gender and sexual customs as an African-American, homosexual man that are generated for him by others, as a further means of coping with homosexual repression. As his sexuality is considered ‘deviant’ in a homonormative world, I also frame his sexualised body as an embodiment of the Lacanian *objet a* (McGowan 2025) as DeShawn performs to this fetishized expectation. This both liberates and represses him further.

Finally, I conclude by relating the analysis to ongoing debates within critical queer studies, such as its continued engagement with gender norms and colonial perspectives in queer theory that remain pertinent to twenty-first century literary study, and frame the analysis as an engagement with queer theory’s shortcomings in its analysis of race, class and queerness. Through the implementation of this research methodology, I engage with Sedgwick’s (1999) approach to reading ‘queer’ that casts a wider net “along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these and other identity-constituting, identity fracturing discourses” (p. 544). This article is situated with this approach in analysing Purnell’s text, specifically when considering societal attitudes towards the protagonist, and the identities that he embodies to resist these attitudes.

4. Detachment

Brontez Purnell’s *Since I Laid My Burden Down* challenges preconceptions of a queer experience, demonstrated through protagonist DeShawn’s detachment from his experiences. His detachment is, I argue, a conscious and protective mechanism that foregrounds his lived experience and how he copes, shrinking from his social-historical environment. He employs detachment to resist the universal propagation of homo- and heteronormativity that contemporary USA reifies. Detachment is deployed by DeShawn through his experiences of loss and childhood, foregrounding trauma as an archetype of his experience. His first recollection in the text is the loss of a black identity that causes to return home (Purnell, 2017). This sense of identity loss permeates throughout the novel; his most recent lover, uncle, first lover, stepfather and later biological father – all black men – die, three of whom by suicide. Phillip Gordon (2016) underlines such identity erasure as ghostly presences all too apparent in LGBTIQ+ texts, surmising that the institutionalised “treatment of sexual otherness and queer desire [is] a kind of death drive for which no gay character can go unpunished” (p. 1264). In an acknowledgement of this, DeShawn hypothesises that as a young, black gay man, “you needed detachment to be non-judgemental” (Purnell, 2017, p. 14), before engaging in acts of rebellion, forged from experiences of institutionally racism and repression. Detaching from his own identity, one that is literally and symbolically constructed, enables DeShawn to exist outside of it, as he is marginalised in numerous ways. He stares at himself in the mirror, asking “why do I look like this?” (p. 25). His sense of identity is detached due to both a sense of loss and grief, in addition to experiences with his peers to which DeShawn utilises as a coping mechanism.

Purnell's novel challenges the universalisation of gay experiences in its portrayal of a black identity as DeShawn both rejects and upholds homonormative conceptions of the queer experience. Recalling childhood experiences, DeShawn notes the struggle of growing up black and gay in bible belt America. He notes how "He hated driving to Cullman, it was Ku Klux Klan territory" (Purnell, 2017, p. 89) and recalls how he saw "black churches burning down all over the place" (p. 89) at night on the news. This perhaps reinforces DeShawn's detachment from the Church as, contrary to the expected norm, the Church is not a safe space for him. DeShawn is forced to consider this detachment when he recognises an old lover, Skylar, from his youth whilst he is visiting his family. Contrary to DeShawn, Skylar is a white man who has a liberal upbringing, subsequently rejecting this for conservative and religious values later in life. DeShawn notes that:

The years passed, and Skylar became more and more of a Christian. DeShawn figured he was rebelling against his too-liberal upbringing. Skylar began posting shit online about God, and how he was happy that he had found faith in the Almighty, and had a wife who obeyed him. (p. 95)

Through DeShawn, the reader experiences the entangled relationships of sexuality, race and class as they relate to institutions such as the Church. This extends to the practiced detachment of another gay male character, who channels his repression into religion and re-inscribing his sexuality as straight whilst they adopt conservative religious values. DeShawn spurns this and notes extensively that he hates Skylar (p. 98), due in part to the townsfolk being accepting of Skylar's sexuality, as DeShawn notes, presumably because of the fact he is white (p. 91). DeShawn ruminates on the fact that "when Skylar was a depressed teenager the world came running, but when DeShawn was depressed no one gave a shit" (p. 92) and harbours a resentment because of this. The societal acceptance of Skylar's race, class and sexuality forces DeShawn to detach from his childhood and position in the Church once more which he uses as a justification of his detachment from his youth. Whilst Skylar eventually rebels by embracing a more conservative adulthood and DeShawn's rebellion is to embrace liberalism, they are both examples of queer identity detachment in the pursuit of acceptance elsewhere.

In seeking to escape the repression of his socio-historical environment, DeShawn propagates his participation in the homonormative and heterosexist stereotyping by his peers by detaching from them. Denoted as a form of relief from his repressive upbringing, DeShawn detaches from a stable sense of self by indulging in drug use and casual sex, creating a new identity for himself in an act of rebellion. In a psychological study on the experience of 'black identity', Brandon Velez et al (2019) found that when "minority individuals encounter discrimination based on a particular status, they may reorient themselves or switch frames to another identity that is less stigmatised in that immediate context" (p. 133). In the text, DeShawn reorients himself by *attaching* to a different, preferential identity in line with the inscriptions of those around him, thus relieving himself from generational trauma and homonormative repression. He "ditched Sunday school and Bible study and started running with his middle school's premiere group of headbanger girls" (Purnell, 2017, p. 16) in a rejection of his upbringing as part of his rebellion. These 'headbanger' girls perform their identity by wearing "all black, smoked weed, were sort of sexually active (Margret was rumored [sic] to have been fingered the summer before), and they practiced Satanism. How fucking cool was that?" (p. 17). DeShawn idolises this group as they allow him to rebel against his upbringing, implementing this new identity of detachment as a rebel by wearing a Nirvana T-shirt and engaging in ritualistic drug use (p. 13). His act of rebellion in this embrace of otherness results in further repression enacted by his mother. She physically chastises DeShawn for his choice in attaching to the girls: "She beat his ass, took all his Nirvana records, and left to spend the night at her boyfriend's house" (p. 18). DeShawn admits to frequenting with these girls because "It pissed off his bitch-ass [sic] Mom" (p. 18), allowing him freedom from the confines of the Church. In detaching from his lived experience and embracing a rebellion through otherness, DeShawn's construction of a new identity is actually a means to cope with the heteronormative, societal institutions that repress him.

A constituent factor in DeShawn's rebellion is his rejection of the historical reproduction of accepted and homonormative experiences. DeShawn's childhood experiences and education detail the institutionalised racism and his pre-destination of 'otherness' that he experiences, a reminder of the history of the USA continuing to have very real effects for contemporary African Americans. Purnell uses this experience to promote a reading of queer that aligns with Sedgwick's (1999). DeShawn writes that

A lot of schools in the Deep South still practice forms of segregation. In a middle school with close to a 40% black population, DeShawn was one of three black kids placed in advanced-placement classes. He was, as his father lovingly put it, 'a nigga [sic] who knows how to talk to white people'. (Purnell, 2017, p. 124)

That said, DeShawn's detachment and rebellion have both positive and negative outcomes. Despite his upbringing in an impoverished community, DeShawn remains intelligent and studious at school, a rejection of historic notions of race and class in contemporary USA. Yet, he also notes that he had to endure a class of "thirty redneck motherfuckers" (p. 124.) who taunted and teased him because of his race, and the questionable approaches of the principle in trying to relate to DeShawn by claiming that "he loved his Gran-pappy" despite his family keeping him as a slave (p. 125). Furthermore, DeShawn explicitly notes that a customer at his teenage place of work is made uncomfortable by young black teenagers as "she got robbed by a group of them once" (p. 37). The ongoing racism, both through positive and negative discrimination, by white folk in the context of his education and religious childhood echo the sentiment of Gordon (2016), in that he appears "ultimately doomed", a master trope of "LGBTIQ+ representation because [it is] a reality in LGBTIQ+ lives" (p. 1265). Whilst DeShawn is gifted and intelligent, his detachment from this upbringing in his escape to California is a direct result of these experiences.

In a further obfuscation and detachment of his constructed identity, DeShawn (re)embraces religion upon his return to Alabama following the death of his uncle and cousin (Purnell, 2017). Whilst this further entangles the intersectional, queer experience with loss and detachment, this decision is taken to reconstruct his family unit, united behind the shared experiences of loss, grief and racism. Through this, DeShawn submits to Foucauldian (1990a) notion of “the interchange of sexuality and alliance” (p. 108) that the family unit exemplifies, conveying “the law and the juridical dimension in the deployment of sexuality” (p. 108). DeShawn finds compromise with his mother who asks him to assist with Church ceremonies and is offered the position on the condition that “he kept all his pentagram tattoos completely covered and not to mention his own religious proclivities to anyone on the church...they don’t know anything about you unless you tell them” (Purnell, 2017, p. 57). DeShawn hides his identity to appease his mother and gain acceptance back into the community which he readily embraces, in this instance detaching from his constructed identity to assimilate, heteronormatively, into his biological family and to that of the Church.

Through these moments of racism, rejection, repression and detachment Purnell uses DeShawn as an allegorical character for the experiences of African Americans and other people of colour. DeShawn notes his mode of fighting back is staying quiet, as “He learned that the only way to beat an enemy bigger than you is to survive them. It’s hard” (Purnell, 2017, p. 82). The enemy in question are the institutions and systems in place that repress his identity. DeShawn engages in detachment to “fill the void” (p. 146) left by the men in his life who use him, spurn him and leave him either by choice or by dying. It is through the practice of detachment that DeShawn relates his methods of resisting hetero and homonormative experiences to the audience, thus giving insight into the ever-present racism, homophobia and traumatising socio-historical experiences of child and young adulthood for an African American homosexual in USA.

DeShawn’s relationship with institutions such as the familial unit, education system and the Church reinforce both his literal and metaphorical detachment, edifying the discursive reproduction of gender, racial and sexual norms that work to repress DeShawn and indeed other queer people in the text. He detaches to feel safe, secure, wanted and desired. In turn, I argue this reinforces his embrace of performativity as an openly gay, black, working-class man and thus his adoption of the *objet a* as his *dramatis personae*, as will be explored below.

5. Performance

DeShawn’s identity is entangled with the concepts of performance and performativity relating to his experiences of gender and sexuality, born from the detachment he symbolically and literally undertakes. He performs to the expected and desired identities that those around him construct *for* him in a form of assimilation to this expectation. Consequently, the formulation of DeShawn’s identity is inherently unstable from a young age and is constructed of his experiences with religion, childhood racism, loss and fetishization. Purnell explores the stereotyping of western society that anti-LGBTIQ+ views are rooted in black religious culture, perpetuated by class divide. Meyer (2012) finds that “black and Latino gay men underscored their emotional and physical strength to undermine perceptions that they were weak for identifying as gay” (p. 849). In both conservative Latino and black culture, belonging to the LGBTIQ+ spectrum in any facet is potentially a sign of weakness, and one that Purnell explores by challenging conservative black class preconceptions, in addition to the fetishization that DeShawn faces for being the colonial other. Utilising the theoretical work of Judith Butler and Jacques Lacan, this section analyses DeShawn’s self-actualised construction of a ‘deviant’ sexuality emerging from his dissonant experiences, and how this enmeshes with *objet a* as a form of rebelling against homonormative repression.

Intriguingly, DeShawn’s detachment and escape from cyclical and institutional repression offer a rejection of Michel Foucault’s (1990a) perspective on the family unit. Foucault argued that the historical role of “The family, in its contemporary form, must not be understood as a social, economic, and political structure of alliance that excludes or at least restrains sexuality that diminishes it as much as possible [...] its role is to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support” (p. 108). However, DeShawn’s detachment from his family unit, the institutions of the Church and educative systems and the repression they enforce, operates as a rejection of Foucault’s assertions. Purnell (2017) foregrounds the institution of the Church as intrinsic to a black, queer experience in USA. He is shocked by his childhood church, when he returns to it “by how much hadn’t changed. Maybe it was even moving backward” (p. 2). As he grows up in a religious household and community, what is expected of him by the teachings of the bible and the African American community differs to what he truly is, creating a Butlerian dissonance in his identity.

In addition, the Church is a site of contradictions that feed into DeShawn’s performativity as an openly homosexual man. DeShawn notes the “fags and dykes [sic] in church growing up” (Purnell, 2017, p. 58), and recounts how the youth deacon in training ran “off to New Orleans in the late nineties and was dancing for men in strip clubs” (p. 58) in a move to detach from his present similar to DeShawn’s. Purnell uses the figure of the deacon as a form of pseudo role model for DeShawn; he trades performing duties in Church to literally performing for other the gratification of other homosexual men, allegorising DeShawn’s own experiences in later life. The instability that this childhood bestows DeShawn causes him to “pray for the courage to quit and become a drug dealer” in a fit of performative detachment, to go to jail and “find a boyfriend” (p. 36). DeShawn’s uneasy relationship with the Church, causes him to consider incarceration to escape it. Yet, despite the repressive homonormativity the Church propagates, it is the institution of the Church, however repressive, that catalyses DeShawn’s development as a young homosexual man. Purnell thus explores an intersectional identity grappling with burgeoning homosexuality and repression in the twenty-first century through DeShawn’s lived experience.

DeShawn's expectation to conform results in rebellion through performing to these very expectations to inevitably reject them. He is confined to existing in societal fringes because of his homosexuality and non-conforming relationship with religion which signals the homonormativity inherent in DeShawn's life. The dissonance of the relationships between DeShawn's family, the Church and his sexuality are typified by his own Mother, as she becomes the preacher of the local church to dispel any mythos surrounding her contribution to the community via her own non-religious and homosexual son (Purnell, 2017, p. 53). DeShawn explains that his mother "feared his impending homosexuality" (p. 55), who also describes him as "intriguingly feminine" and prone to sexual assault because of his "fat ass" (p. 56). She notes that this causes his "mounting rebellion" (p. 56) which contributes to his elopement with a group of young homosexual punks to California. DeShawn thus rejects the institutions of family and Church for its lack of support for his identity.

The struggle with homonormative systems of repression continue into other aspects of DeShawn's life. Namely, it is the racial discrimination that DeShawn faces through others inscribing performative notions of gender and sexuality upon him, as he becomes the desired other in the text. Thus, Purnell utilises racial stereotyping by DeShawn's peers and acquaintances to reinforce negative archetypes of African American culture through the objectification and fetishization of DeShawn. This inherently post-colonial fetishization of DeShawn as 'other' instates him as a "site of disavowal [...]" and specifically of contradiction" (Krips, 1999, p. 8). In detailing this concept Krips argues that "fetish is a special instance of the [Lacanian] *objet a*, one for which repression is breached to the extent that the subject more or less clearly recognises the real source of his [sic] pleasure, and thus enters an economy of disavowal" (p. 9). Purnell's use of the *objet a* for DeShawn identifies tumultuous relationships around DeShawn due to his fetishization, and is an indirect site of repression he faces based on his race. This is true for those who are sexually interested in him, and by DeShawn's ability to play into the repression held by those that fetishize him.

Such fetishization continually reinforces certain performative aspects of DeShawn's identity that he has constructed of others and self-imposed throughout the text. As *objet a*, DeShawn "generate[s] desire for that person in a way that physical perfection does not" (McGowan, 2025, p. 111). His first act in the novel is to recall the "drinking, drugging, and fucking all those fucking worthless men" (Purnell, 2017, p. 1) as a "failure" of himself. He confesses that "there had been too many self-publicised stunts of him unabashedly expressing himself in public, not to mention all those photos of him getting fucked floating around the internet" (p. 25), including a self-imposed exile as a drag queen. This self-expression, which includes intimate moments in DeShawn's life, arguably forges his identity as the ultimate performative *objet a* for the consumption of others. DeShawn perhaps embraces his designation as *objet a* in his performance as queer man, noting "The thought of only fucking one man was its own unique form of hell; DeShawn understood that he left his mother's home mostly to score dick [sic] and try drugs" (p. 59). Repressed by his conservative neighbourhood and childhood upbringing, DeShawn understands his fetishized body is a method to entice other men to have sex with him in acts of rebelling against this repression. His experiences serve to denote an inherent instability that refutes a homogenous queer experience.

The fetishism of DeShawn's mere existence is further bestowed both positive and negative discrimination by other men, both black and white, resulting in DeShawn operating within a dissonant feedback loop that further informs his performativity. He personifies the function of the *objet a*, as "the *objet a* is able to render an object of desire desirable even without augmenting it with any enigmatic intimations of exceptionality" (McGowan, 2025, p. 111). It is DeShawn's race and status as a black, queer man that paradoxically makes him desirable in addition to the connotations that DeShawn's mere existence is deviant. The objectification of DeShawn from the perspective of race categorises him as both art/object and human/other. Sven, a white, European male and one of his lovers, asks if DeShawn knows "how to make his ass clap like the black girls in the rap videos" (Purnell, 2017, p. 27). In a distorted version of his mother's fear he is sexually assaulted because of his physical attributes, DeShawn uses his detachment to catalyse his performativity as a sexually ambiguous queer man, performing to the fetishized identity inscribed onto him by Sven. This continues throughout the novel, notable in an instance whereby "DeShawn was fucked up on MDMA, with a group of equally fucked up queens, when an Indian man with a German accent, holding a camera, came up to him" (p. 142), rendering him as the observed object of homosexual desire whilst dressed in drag. He is consistently described as "thick, always thick" (p. 149), and is repeatedly objectified as a woman. DeShawn's performance as the *objet a* reinforces the negative stereotypes prevalent in LGBTIQ+ fiction that non-white queer people are seen as trivial and interesting due to their otherness, reproducing notions of his sexuality in line with socio-cultural expectations. He is further othered by his fetishization as both man and woman, lending an inherent instability into his sexual identity.

Another illustration of DeShawn both performing and enacting the *objet a* is within his relationship with John, his 'old rival' from adolescence. DeShawn's personification of *objet a* is constructed by John yet embraced by DeShawn:

In the years that had passed it turned out John had kept tabs on DeShawn. John was gay too and had seen DeShawn's dirty movies online. They had made a beeline for Alan Gold's, the legendary gay club in Chattanooga. They did blow, watched a drag show, and gave each other blowjobs in the restroom. Later, they made it back to the house and fucked all night. (Purnell, 2017, p. 113)

Although a 'sexual' rival, John fetishizes DeShawn to the point that he consumes pornographic films that he was a part of and shares a night of intimacy with him. DeShawn is fetishized as an 'other' in these intimate relationships, which reinforce stereotypes of black men and women and are imprinted on DeShawn. Though contradictory, DeShawn's awareness that he is fetishized by others not only destabilises his identity but

constructs one that is purely to be fetishized. DeShawn both reinforces certain tropes of a heterosexist identity and radically deconstructs them, thus casting attention to the binary structure by which sexual and gender identity are understood and the dissonance by which they exist in DeShawn.

The hyper-sexual and performative nature of DeShawn's experience forges his queer identity, one that is non-white and working-class, refuting the perspective of 'white queerness'. Given that race and class are but some characteristics whereby a person is reciprocally understood by themselves and society, DeShawn's identity is characterised by the tension inherent within homonormativity (Duggan, 2002). To this end, DeShawn also projects his internalised dissonance with identity, gender, and performance in his judgement of other men in the novel, inscribing a sense of the *objet a* performativity onto others that further problematises intersectional notions of a queer experience. He describes one of them, Mark as "cute, black. Better company" (Purnell, 2017, p. 140). DeShawn seeks his company as Mark notes that "ever since my divorce from my wife I prefer the company of black men" (p. 140). DeShawn inscribes Mark as an *objet a* as he fetishizes an older, divorced and sexually ambiguous man. Thus, DeShawn reciprocally fetishizes the other as Mark does him, personifying Foucault's historicization of homosocial relationships between men and younger boys in Ancient Greece. For Foucault (1990b), "The role of the boy was a focus of a good deal of uncertainty, combined with an intense interest" (p. 217). DeShawn not only updates this conception by performing emotional support akin to a married partner, but also reifies Mark's sexual interest in him by continuing the performatively sexual feedback loop. Whilst he feels at ease with Mark, perhaps due to shared lived experiences, he is also inscribed as the figure of fetish that allows Mark to process the separation from his wife. His liaison with Mark continues the dissonance between DeShawn's status as a black, gay man and *objet a*, who throughout the text, adopts multiple personas as part of his performativity. Thus, DeShawn wrestling with this assimilation and rejection of homonormativity and the cultural expectations of his performance as a queer, black, working-class man lead to his attempts to 'detach' from them, and the cycle of performance and detachment continues.

6. Discussions and conclusion

Brontez Purnell's *Since I Laid My Burden Down* is a unique representation of a queer, African American identity in contemporary USA, one that presents a complex account of the intersections of race and class, of sexuality and gender. These characteristics are used by homonormative systems to repress DeShawn, yet *Since I Laid My Burden Down* is a story of a queer character's resistance of this heteronormative repression, providing a renewed awareness of an intersectional queer lived experience. DeShawn's primary coping mechanisms for dealing with the repression of his lived experience are detachment and performance. Indeed, their use by DeShawn indicates the practice of "fabulation – the invention of selfhood, of stories of origin and belonging [which] necessarily emerges out of Black queer precarity" (Nyong'o, 2018, p. 5). DeShawn's narrative is part of a burgeoning awareness in LGBTIQ+ study of the intersections and impacts that race and class have on the queer experience, particularly for a twenty-first century audience, as the marginalisation of queer experiences continues particularly along racial lines.

For DeShawn, practicing detachment is one means of coping with his unstable identity, founded on his experiences with institutionalised racism and repression from the Church and his own family. Detachment is presented as but one option of processing, rejecting and reconstituting institutionalised racism and homophobia in both religious and educational contexts. Through DeShawn, Purnell rethinks, updates and entangles concepts of sexual and gender identity through detachment as a modality of coping with the queer experience. Detachment destabilises DeShawn's identity, illustrating the complex experiences, for better or worse of contemporary queer men. Detachment serves to both liberate DeShawn from repression in addition to paradoxically repressing him further. Thus, Purnell's 'queer worldmaking' is an invention of queer selfhood, and an engagement with "antiracist and class-resistant practices of reimagining social relations" (Krishnan 2024, p. 1314) as told through DeShawn's detachment.

In addition, Purnell addresses gender and sexual repression through DeShawn's performativity. His reciprocal fetishization as the Lacanian *objet a* further underpins this fabulation as the deviant post-colonial 'other'; DeShawn performs to a fetishized identity that other men construct of him, be it feminine, masculine, or through relationships with unstable power dynamics. Through this engagement with performativity, DeShawn illustrates the institutionalised racism and sexism that fetishization continues to bring for queer, black men and women. His performativity further implicates the process of "opting out" (Ruti, 2017, p. 1), living by an "alternative set of rules" (1), promoted by radical queer critics in the twenty-first century as an outright rejection of homonormalization and homonormativity.

Thus, whilst the combination of performance and detachment undertaken by DeShawn creates his unique yet unstable queer experience, and though at times archetypally negative, DeShawn is a protagonist that consistently resists and rejects the hetero- and homonorm in trying to forge his identity. Purnell's *Since I Laid My Burden Down* is an overlooked and underappreciated novel, an allegorical story of queer survival and self-preservation in the backdrop of a twenty-first century hetero- and homonormative world.

7. References

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