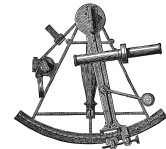


### A Queer Black Man's Inheritance in *Don't Cry for Me*: Exploring Black Masculinity



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#### Abstract

This essay examines the inheritance of masculinity left by previous generations to queer black men as represented in Daniel Black's novel, *Don't Cry for Me*. Masculinity in the black community is often comprised of the rigid standards of emotional stoicism and conformity to heterosexuality. Such standards are and have been responsible for the destruction of interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships within the black community. This essay specifically explores how black male figures have through generations contributed to the destruction of the emotional and sexual self of queer black men and boys. Additionally, this essay, through the work of *Don't Cry for Me* and the suggestion of understanding and restorative love, seeks to provide healing for those queer black men and boys who wish to move forward.

**Keywords:** Black masculinity; gender; race; queer; literature

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## Introduction

Daniel Black's novel *Don't Cry for Me* explores the inheritance left behind to queer black boys and men. Jacob, the father of protagonist Isaac, is dying of cancer. In his final days, Jacob writes a series of letters to Isaac, which explore Jacob's past, his role as a father, and his reactions to Isaac's gayness. The letters about Jacob's past, set in Arkansas at the immediate end of slavery, explore the strained relationship he had with his grandfather. These letters are the backdrop by which Black examines the inheritance of masculine ideals taught to Jacob. The letters, detailing how Jacob raised and parented Isaac, examine the inheritance Jacob has left for Isaac as his grandfather left him. Black weaves together three prominent tenets worthy of scholarly attention through these fictional letters left from father to son. First, all black boys will be confronted with the choice of whether to sever their emotional self. This often serves as the foundation for choosing masculine ideals over authenticity. Second, queer black boys will endure additional emotional assault as they choose whether to embrace their sexuality or to conform to the masculine ideals. Third, there is a way forward. Although generations of misguided black men have left behind destructive notions of masculinity that have rendered countless queer black men and boys unable to love, if queer black men and boys practice understanding and restorative love, they will be able to father the next generation and leave them with an inheritance that will not cause destruction.

## The Inheritance: Ideas of Masculinity

Often, when the term 'inheritance' is used, it is positively associated with some tangible asset passed down from some previous generation. But generally, 'inheritance' means something that is or may be left by an ancestor. I believe this term best captures what has been left to queer black boys and men from earlier generations. As will be discussed in more detail below, queer black boys and men have been handed notions of masculinity that they must either accept or reject, with each having their own consequence. Additionally, the term further highlights both the inner conflict and outer conflict queer black boys and men will endure. Every black boy, queer or not, will be confronted with 'what it is to be a man', or more aptly called, notions of masculinity. But to fully embrace these notions, black boys must deny their emotional selves. These ideas and examples of manhood that consequently cause conflict with the self and destruction are left to these young boys by previous generations. Furthermore, those black men who believe and support the idea of ideal masculinity see the inheritance of such as a gift. It is something to be valued and treasured. But for queer black men and boys, the inheritance

of the heterosexual norm is not without its challenges. In effect, queer black men and boys will be faced with the decision of whether to live openly in their truth, to deny such either by completely forgoing same-sex relationships or to hide their identity by pretending to subscribe to the inheritance of heterosexuality while engaging in same-sex behaviour in private. In both cases, queer black men and boys must grapple with the inheritance of the emotional severance of self and the heterosexual idea of masculinity.

### **Don't Cry: Black Emotional Stoicism**

Throughout the book, Black demonstrates the inheritance of emotional stoicism among black men. But while there are many examples, two passages are most noteworthy because, when taken in conjunction with one another, the passages emphasise the effect black fathers have on their sons.

When Jacob's brother was dying, Jacob started to cry (Black, 2022, p. 47). But he stopped because his grandfather "shot him a glance" and he feared the wrath of his grandfather. The exact behaviour exhibited by Jacob's grandfather is then exhibited by Jacob when Jacob observes Isaac giving a kiss to one of his action figures. After witnessing Isaac's actions, Jacob proceeds to make Isaac collect all his action figures and dispose of them in the trash. In fact, the only thing that 'saved' Isaac from the physical wrath of his father was that "he took the correction like a man" (Black, 2022, pp. 98-99). In other words, Isaac did not cry or show any emotion during such time as his father was reprimanding him.

In essence, Isaac, like all black men, is praised for his emotional stoicism. Black men are often taught that they must sever the emotional part of themselves. Fathers and male peers "enact rituals of power to assault" the self-esteem of those males who defy the norms of masculinity (hooks, 2004a, p. 5). The assault on the emotional self that black boys endure requires that they show no emotion but one, rage (hooks, 2004a, p. 7). The consequence of such is the perpetuation of the idea of male emotional stoicism. However, it is important to note that the phenomenon of denying one's feelings is common to all members of the African American community. This was born from the need to survive during slavery. Jacob writes "we were Negros, after all, Colored people who were glad simply to be alive. Feelings were irrelevant" (Black, 2022, p. 202). But male emotional stoicism is unique in that there is little to no reprieve. Black women were and are traditionally allowed to feel their full emotional range, within the home, but black males are not. Jacob writes "the only place to express emotion was the church, and even there, black men

rarely did. We kept our heart to ourselves" (Black, 2022, pg. 202). Even within the home and community, black males are taught to deny their emotions. Such repression of emotions does not allow black boys and men to "take responsibility for nurturing their emotional growth" (hooks, 2004b, p. 93). Therefore, black men raising black boys cannot teach them how to emotionally grow and reject the demands of masculinity their sons will inevitably encounter. Such emotional stoicism, originally borne out of necessity but perpetuated by those men who 'cling to the past,' now only serves as a destructive inheritance passed down to the next generation.

## **Queer Black Men**

Black further explores the inheritance black men receive in the context of sexuality. Jacob recalls verbally assaulting his classmate, Elliot Strong, while Jacob's other male classmates sexually assaulted Elliot. Jacob specifically writes, "a group of boys and I approached and asked if he was a sissy" (Black, 2022, p. 38) Elliot began to cry, which only fuelled the boys' anger. Jacob explains, "we thought it our job to toughen him up" (Black, 2022, p. 38). But this was not the last time Jacob would engage in such behaviour. The morning after a play in which Isaac dressed up as Annie from Little Orphan Annie, Jacob asked his son repeated "Do you want to be a sissy, boy?" When Isaac failed to answer Jacob, Jacob picked up Isaac by the collar (Black, 2022, pp. 115-116).

While the two examples may be considered extreme, it is often the case that queer black men experience violence in their youth because of their deviance from male-sanctioned behaviour. Such violence and rejection by fathers and other male peers foster not only homophobia and hate crimes but also a diminished sense of emotional self (Collins, 2004, p. 173). This mutilation of the emotional self further promulgates behaviours that reinforce the notion that homosexual or homosexual-like behaviours are not acceptable. As Collins (2004) notes, "many black men who are gay or bisexual hide their sexual orientation, preferring to pass as straight" (p. 173). This is captured when Isaac dates a string of girls right after his failed attempt to come out to his father and mother. It was not until Jacob accidentally saw Isaac kissing his boyfriend the night of prom that Jacob knew that his prayers to turn Isaac straight had failed (Black, 2022, p. 183).

While not a main theme throughout Black's book, the question of why negative attitudes towards homosexuality in the black community persist throughout generations in the black community is addressed in the following passage:

Gay boys were first *boys*, which meant, in our eyes, manhood was their natural inheritance. We couldn't understand why they – why you [Jacob] – didn't want it. It was power and influence and godliness. We equated gayness with womanness back then . . . We believed that men who loved men went against the fabric of society. They threatened to undo the natural order of things. This would be the end of the world as we'd known it. What could be more frightening? (Black, 2022, p. 226)

This passage captures three distinct reasons why homophobia continues to be left as an inheritance for black men. The first is that black men conceptualise the act of same-sex love differently. When men are equated with women, certain characterisations are also attached, such as submission and weakness (Collins, 2004, p. 189). When the idea of black men being submissive and weak is understood in the broader context of 'symbolic emasculation', references to Uncle Tom or Uncle Ben are brought forth (Collins, 2004, p. 174). Thus, straight black men may see gay black men as abdicating power back to whites. The second concerns physical acts of gayness. In other words, the sexual acts that take place between two men. As Blechner (1998) points out, masculinity is often conceptualised in terms of sex. Traditionally, masculinity holds that men should be the penetrator while women should be the penetrated. However, when queer black men challenge this notion by engaging in sex with one another, such acts are seen as forfeiting masculinity. The third reason homophobia continues to be left as an inheritance for black men is the church. Studies show that Blacks are more 'religious' than their white counterparts (Chatters *et al.*, 2010) and it is clear, as hooks (2000) notes "[that] religious beliefs and practices in many black communities promote and encourage homophobia" (p. 122). The history of black churches on same-sex issues has been nothing short of the "most intolerant and oppositional" (Griffin, 2000, pp. 110). Churches have long taught that the consequences of same-sex relationships could be the end of the 'natural order' or simply that it is against the will of God. In either case, because the church plays such a prominent role in the black community, its authority on the matter does influence the teachings of community members.

### **A Way Forward: Understanding and Love**

While many scholars have dedicated time exploring the issues with black masculinity as it currently manifests, very few have spent time focusing on how to move forward. Otherwise stated, what are black queer boys and men do with their inheritance as discussed. Luckily, Jacob offers a bit of insight,

All I wanted was to look you in the face and tell you I'm sorry . . . I'd never seen a black life free from [pain], so my job as a father, I assumed, was to prepare your back for the loan. I hope that, after you read this, you'll return my pain to me. (Black, 2022, p. 284)

The primary way by which to combat the inheritance of homophobia and emotional stoicism is understanding and the restorative work of love. Queer black men and boys must understand that their inheritance is one that has been passed down for generations. As Jacob writes, "we were taught what to think – not how" (Black, 2022, p. 39). Generations of black men have been taught that "male pain can have no voice" and if pain is felt, it should be buried (hooks, 2004a, p. 6). But this must change if queer black men and boys are to pay off their inheritance. It must be understood that the love of the fathers and peers that has been responsible for so much damage was not necessarily intentional. These men "were burdened with a notion of manhood that destroyed so many sons' lives; but they didn't know another to teach" (Black, 2022). Through understanding, queer black men and boys may recognise that their fathers and peers, while responsible, also destroyed themselves in perpetuating the notions of ideal masculinity.

Furthermore, while understanding enables queer black men and boys to identify that their inheritance was not solely passed down by their fathers and peers, it does not stop its transference. Only the work of restorative love can pay down the inheritance and ensure that future generations of queer black men and boys can love freely and express their emotional selves. They can authentically embrace the emotional self as well as engage in loving relationships with each other. They may restore relationships with fathers and peers, if such is an option, or they may embark on a life filled with new relationships in which they practice the art of love. But most importantly, when the work of restorative love by queer black men and boys, they pass down an inheritance which does not bind future generations of straight and gay black children.

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