

CHAPTER I

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY, BLACK CULTURAL CRITICISM AND THE PROBLEM OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Introduction

Black Liberation Theology and African American cultural criticism are two critical discourses in the academic study of black life in the United States. These discourses are oriented towards expanding descriptions of and the possibilities for black existence. James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and *God of the Oppressed* (1975), issued scathing indictments of white supremacy and called for a theology forged from the experiences of black people. He argued that white supremacy had poisoned white Christianity and rendered it incapable of speaking to and for the oppressed and downtrodden. Cone argued that theology is relevant only when it is drawn from the experiences of the people whom it addresses and when it can speak positively to those experiences. Reading Cone's theology, I found his descriptions of black life and his call for a revision of God as a God who liberates the oppressed provocative and compelling.

His argument concerning God's identification with the most despised of the earth prompted me to begin interrogating Black Liberation Theology concerning what I saw as an omission, namely, the silence regarding sexuality and sexual difference in black communities. This omission led me to the work of womanist theologians like Emilie Townes, Katie G. Cannon, and Kelly Brown Douglas, and black cultural critics like Michael Eric Dyson, Cornel West, and bell hooks. In contrast to the first wave of black

liberation theology, I found womanist theologians and black cultural critics to be indeed open to discussions about sexuality in black life.

Womanist theologians and black cultural critics decry sexism in black communities, characterizing oppression of black women as part of the destructive nature of white supremacy. Further, these critics condemn heterosexism and homophobia in black life, claiming that these attitudes assist in the oppression of black people. What these critics seek is the physical, spiritual, and social emancipation of blacks from what Cornel West calls “a market culture dominated by gangster mentalities and self-destructive wantonness.”¹ This second wave of theologians and cultural critics contend that an emphasis on ruthless profit-making and acquisition of wealth, a political system that pits whites against blacks, men against women and gays against straights, and popular film, music and television that reinforces rather than dismantles racial and gender stereotypes exacerbates racial crisis in America. These critics contend that this market culture thrives on reductivist and negative portrayals of black people. They contend that the promotion of sexist images of black women, the promulgation of images of bestial black men and the widening gap between the black middle class and the black poor are all part of an enduring racial crisis that threatens black well-being and flourishing.

Womanists and black cultural critics alike oppose sexism, classism and homophobia by turning to and actively critiquing black cultural productions. Through African American literary theory and cultural criticism, these critics seek to retrieve black cinema, music and literary productions from the margins of American life. The goal of

¹ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 10.

this strategy of retrieval is to defeat monolithic presentations of black life and experience. It is that goal that drew me to the work of womanist theologians and black cultural critics.

Reading these critics who had previously turned to black literature, film and television as a means of expanding descriptions of black life, I began to question the ways in which they approached discussions of sexual difference in black communities. Unlike Cone's theology that led me to question if and when black homosexuals entered into Black Liberation Theology, black cultural critics and the second wave of black theologians prompted me to ask how black homosexuals were portrayed in contemporary African American cultural criticism.

Through an examination of these cultural critics and theologians, I question the adequacy of descriptions of black gay life in America. When Cornel West or bell hooks or Kelly Brown Douglas identify homophobia as one threat to the well-being of black communities, who is the subject of this homophobia? When Douglas speaks of a sexual discourse of resistance as a necessary corrective to homophobia in the Black Church, what sources will assist womanist theologians and cultural critics in achieving that goal?

This dissertation is an attempt to return to the question of black gay visibility in Black Liberation theology and African American cultural criticism. This work begins with an examination of the controlling themes in black theology and black cultural studies. Themes such as experience, black culture and black religion are examined as to how they apply or do not apply to sexual difference in black communities.

Further, this is an interpretive study. In *Methodologies of Black Theology* (2002), Frederick Ware argues that black liberation theology participates in a hermeneutical school. That is, black liberation theology is concerned primarily with examining and

revising interpretations of black life in America. Likewise, African American cultural criticism is also concerned with examining and revising interpretations of black life in America. Both of these critical discourses turn to the voices of black people in formulating theological and ethical responses to problems in black life. The interpretive move within black liberation theology and black cultural criticism involves a hermeneutics of narrative retrieval. That is, black theologians and cultural critics seek to retrieve the voices of black experiences that have receded into the background of religious and cultural criticism. In *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (1995), Victor Anderson argues that Black Liberation theology attempts to return to various sources in black life in order to legitimize their theological project. Drawing on Edward Said's discussion of a "hermeneutics of return" in *Culture and Imperialism* (1994) Anderson notes that the black theological project

returns to African traditional religions and *slave narratives, autobiography, and folklore* in order to assure the vitality of the black church (church theology) and the cultural solidarities that transcend the individualism that drives our market culture and morality, and rob the black community of moral vitality.(emphasis mine)²

By turning to the African American literary tradition, black theologians ground their theological project in black sources. Black theologians contend that slave narratives, autobiographies, and other forms of literature produced by black people provide critical theological resources that spring from black communities. They mine the rich literary history and tradition of African Americans in order to ensure that black theology is not wholly dependent upon white theological sources.

² Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum Press, 1995), 93.

This dissertation follows this method of black theologians and cultural critics and turns to the literary expressions of black gay men. Three questions are critical to this hermeneutical study. What are black gay writers saying about their experiences? How do they construct their self-understandings vis-à-vis black culture and black religion? What can we glean from black gay literature and how may we use this literature in revising our theological understandings of black life in America and our descriptions of black culture?

This dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter One is an introductory chapter that focuses on the development of black liberation theology and black cultural studies. This chapter focuses on addressing the question of where and when sexual difference enters into black liberation theology and black cultural criticism. Chapter Two examines how black theologians and cultural critics present sexual difference in black communities. Chapters Three and Four turn to black queer literature. These chapters represent a shift in the nomenclature regarding sexual difference. Using queer theory, I argue that the term “gay” in both black liberation theology and black cultural criticism represents a particular conception of sexual difference that is static and rigidly dichotomous. However, queer is suggestive of a sexual politics of difference and an ethics of openness. These chapters examine how black queer writers construe black queer identity in experience, culture and in black religion. Chapter Five is a synthesis of the previous four chapters, putting black queer literature in conversation with black cultural criticism and black liberation theology. The goal of this chapter is to suggest an ethical reorientation of these critical discourses towards an ethics of openness. This ethics of openness is not predicated upon a perpetual crisis. Rather, an ethics of openness

is oriented towards acceptance and appreciation of sexual difference in African American life rather than appropriating such difference in order to combat white supremacy.

Introducing Black Liberation Theology

To understand the development of Black Liberation Theology, it is necessary to understand the conditions that made such a theological discourse possible.³ Black Liberation Theology is as much a theological response to three statements that came out during the 1960s as it is a response to the general racial climate in the United States. The first of these statements, “Black Power,” was released on July 31, 1966 by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCBC) and appeared as a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. The statement itself was a response to the burgeoning Black Power movement, spearheaded by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). According to Gayraud Wilmore, this statement was designed to “vindicate the young civil rights workers laboring in the rural south...[and to] galvanize the left wing of the Southern-based civil rights movement and reassemble it within the province of Black

³ I draw heavily on Frederick Ware’s *Methodologies of Black Theology*, James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore’s *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volumes I and II* as well as Cone’s original works, *Black Theology and Black Power*, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and *God of the Oppressed* and the work of Dwight Hopkins, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas. As I discuss black cultural criticism, I draw on the works of cultural critics like Michael Eric Dyson, bell hooks, and Cornel West. These figures write extensively about black religious life in the United States and present concerns similar to those in black liberation theology. In this chapter, I turn to Dyson’s *Race Rules*, and *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*, hooks’ *Black Looks: Race and Representation* and *Salvation: Black People and Love*, and Cornel West’s *Keeping Faith*, *Race Matters*, and *The Cornel West Reader*.

Christians who lived in the urban North.”⁴ In short, black clergy in the North sought to mediate the growing division between Martin Luther King, Jr.’s non-violent philosophy and SNCC’s strident call for active black resistance to white oppression.

The NCBC’s affirmation of Black Power set in motion a series of moves by black academics and laid the groundwork for a black theology of liberation. A Detroit conference held in 1967 and organized by black grassroots organizers addressed the role of churches and synagogues in alleviating the problems of the urban poor. From this conference, the “Black Manifesto” was released. This manifesto outlined economic grievances held by black Americans. The presenters of this manifesto demanded that white Christian churches and Jewish synagogues, as “part and parcel of the system of capitalism” pay reparations to black Americans in the form of \$500,000,000. These reparations would be used in order to establish independent economic, social, and educational institutions for black Americans. Further, the manifesto called on black Americans to avail themselves of “whatever means necessary” in pressuring white churches and synagogues to acquiesce to the half-billion dollar demand.⁵ According to the manifesto, it was the churches and synagogues that not only possessed the majority of wealth in the United States, but also profited from the slave trade and continued to exploit black people.⁶

⁴ Gayraud S. Wilmore, “Introduction,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I: 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), pp. 15-16.

⁵ “The Black Manifesto,” in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Vol. I*, pp. 30-31.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 31.

Joseph Washington's *Black Religion* is the third statement that influenced the development of Black Liberation Theology. Washington asserted that the theology of black religion was inadequate. For Washington, black religion was only a "folk" religion and lacking fundamental qualities necessary to be considered "true" religion. In the preface to *Black Religion*, Washington makes his beliefs concerning black religion plain: "...I believe, the religion of the Negro lacks the following: a sense of the historic Church, authentic roots in the Christian tradition, a meaningful theological frame of reference, a search for renewal, an ecumenical spirit, and a commitment to an inclusive Church."⁷ Washington argues that Christianity in black communities is "pseudo-Christianity," a folk religion committed more to the emancipation of black people than establishing itself as a non-folk religion.⁸ Perhaps his most damning charge is that the folk religion of black people is "dysfunctional." While black folk religion is dynamic and energetic, it is not particularly creative, nor does it contribute anything to larger Christendom. Because of segregation, repression and the like, black folk religion has concentrated solely on the enfranchisement of black people and, thus, has not created congregations that are more than "amusement centers."⁹

Washington's charges that the black church is not a church "in the theological sense" and that black religion lacks a theology are as damning as white claims of black inferiority and cultural deficiency. As is noted in the first volume of *Black Theology, A*

⁷ Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1984) p. vii.

⁸ Ibid, p. 33.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 42ff.

Documentary History and is shown in a review included in a later edition of *Black Religion*, white scholars hailed Washington's work as groundbreaking. For example, Martin Marty's review asserts that *Black Religion* "succeeds in involving all of us, all who live in and profit from and hope for Western culture."¹⁰ Marty agrees with Washington: black folk religion has no tradition, no theology. It is a religion predicated solely on race. The solution to this problem is assimilation into dominant Protestant Christianity.¹¹ According to Washington:

Assimilation is a mediating concept—more realistic than integration and less provocative than miscegenation. If Negroes and whites are to the 'one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress,' a heightened sense of assimilation beyond integration is the conscious process toward this objective. It is visionary to place confidence in integration, for the realization of the Negro as integrant will hardly lead to the desired end of assimilation. As an integrant the Negro perpetuates compartmentalization, and in the specific area of faith this means a continuance of a heritage without roots in the Christian tradition, cut off from the Protestant perspective.¹²

By assimilating into dominant Protestant Christianity, African Americans will be able to abandon the separatism engendered by black folk religion. For Washington, the only way for both black and white people to be faithful to the Gospel is to abandon "separate but equal" religious accommodations. Washington's call to abandon such religious accommodations and to embrace assimilation assumes that what he calls black folk religion is bereft of genuine theological roots in Protestantism.

Major Themes in Black Liberation Theology and Black Cultural Criticism

¹⁰ Ibid, p. xvi.

¹¹ Ibid, xvii, 251, 261ff.

¹² Ibid, 261-262.

The development of academic black theology responds to these three proclamations concerning black identity and religion. However, black liberation theology is also an academic systematic theological reflection on three themes. Black theology is organized around the controlling themes of black experience, black culture, and black religion. When Cone speaks of Black Theology of Liberation and black experience, he foregrounds an existential crisis. Black liberation theology is a hermeneutical theology that is concerned with describing the conditions in black communities that would (and should) give rise to a theology of liberation. Black theology depicts black existence as being fraught with turmoil, imposed by the forces of white supremacy. According to Cone, black theology is a “passionate theology” that rejects an unemotional theological discourse that fails to take seriously human experience. Cone contends that any theology that does not spring from the experiences of humans is an alienated, abstract discourse that cannot defeat evil in the world.¹³ He indicts American theology for failing to speak with passion. This dispassionate theology has also failed to speak prophetically against white supremacy. I will quote Cone at length concerning the use of black experience as a controlling theme for black theology:

There can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black experience—a life of humiliation and suffering. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk. This means that black theology realizes that it is humans who speak of God, and when those human beings are black, they speak of God only in the light of the black experience. It is not that black theology denies the importance of God’s revelation in Christ, but blacks want to know what Jesus Christ means when they are confronted with the brutality of white racism.¹⁴

¹³ James H. Cone, *A Theology of Black Liberation, Twentieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), p. 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

Black experience is fraught with misery and travail. The existential horrors of the Atlantic slave trade, chattel slavery, and lynching prompt black people to ask what Jesus Christ has to offer them. Cornel West argues that black people, have, since the first encounter with chattel slavery, struggled against nihilism. Indeed, for West and other critics, the “nihilistic threat” posed by white supremacy is a “loss of hope and absence of meaning.”¹⁵ Black theologians and cultural critics recognize that humans in general and black people in particular cannot speak of God without reflecting upon their own experiences. Cultural critics like Dyson, West and hooks agree with Cone in noting that speaking about black life and black religion requires a passionate love and respect for black experience. Indeed, hooks’ latest works have focused on the issue of love in black communities. In *Salvation*, she contends that “doing the work of love” will “ensure our survival and our triumph over the forces of evil and destruction.”¹⁶

According to black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, black experience is laden with a history of struggle against the powerful forces of white supremacy. It is black people being subjected to a system that dehumanizes black people. The black experience according to black theology is black peoples’ heroic responses to attempts by whites to dehumanize black people. Black religious critics turn to such cultural productions as music and literature to show that black people employ creative tools in resisting white racism and affirming black identity and experience.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 23.

¹⁶ bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2001), p. xxiv.

¹⁷ Ibid, 25.

For these critics, black culture grows organically from black experience. The experiences of slavery, degradation, sorrow and loss of family members at the hands of white racists, living in dilapidated tenements, joblessness and poverty, have forged among black people creative, innovative ways of singing and writing these experiences. That which Cone calls “black soul” emerges out of black cultural forms such as music, art and literature. These cultural forms serve a heroic function in black life, as is clear when Cone refers to Don Lee’s assertion that “black art will elevate and enlighten our people and lead them toward an awareness of self, i.e., their blackness.”¹⁸

In their use of black literature, black theologians form a theological interpretation of black culture. However, black religious critics do not rely solely on black literature as a source for interpreting black culture. Both Cone and Dwight Hopkins argue that this cultural genius appears in the black church in the form of spirituals, the blues, and in the form of slave narratives. These narratives are exemplars of the black soul that Cone alludes to in *A Black Theology of Liberation*. The black soul that emanates from black culture in black theology is a direct product of the Black Arts movement. The black soul, as Cone argues is James Brown’s “I’m Black and I’m Proud” and Aretha Franklin’s “RESPECT.”¹⁹ These hallmarks of black cultural genius are theological resources for constructing a black identity that defies white cultural supremacy.

¹⁸ Don Lee, as quoted in *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 29.

¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 25.

Cornel West also speaks of black culture as that which contains black genius. He, like Cone, presents black cultural genius in and through the cultural productions emanating from the black church. I will quote West at length:

Rhythmic singing, swaying, dancing, preaching, talking and walking—all features of black life—are weapons of struggle and survival. They not only release pressures and desperation, they also constitute bonds of solidarity and sources for individuality...The heartfelt groans acknowledge the deplorable plight of a downtrodden people. The cathartic acts provide emotional and physical relief from the daily scars of humiliation and degradation. The individual stylistic vocals assert the sense of ‘somebodiness’ in a situation that denies one’s humanity.²⁰

Echoing W.E.B. DuBois, the music of the black church stands alongside European classical music in its ability to provoke the listener’s awareness of the human condition. For West and other black religious critics, this elevation of black music as a cultural production to the status of genius is a call for a revised approach to black cultural productions. When West likens the black spirituals to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* or poet Fyodor Tyutchev, and when Cone says that Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” and other forms of black expressive culture contain a “mythic power” that aids the “present revolution against white racism,” they do not seek a paternalistic tolerance of black culture. They want a re-positioning of black cultural productions that echoes W.E.B. DuBois’ arguments concerning black life and culture in *Souls of Black Folk*. Instead of a bemused pity and thinly veiled contemptuous attitude towards black culture, these religious critics seek an appreciation of black culture and the black church.

Black cultural critics and black liberation theologians also take seriously forms of popular cultural productions and seek to place them in discussion with black religion.

²⁰ Cornel West, “Subversive Joy and Revolutionary Patience in Black Christianity,” in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1999), p. 436.

When speaking of black popular culture, I am following John Fiske's description of popular culture that refers to those cultural productions (literature, art, music, film, television) that are mass produced but selected by people according to "socially located criteria of relevance."²¹ I agree with Stuart Hall when he contends that black popular culture involves those cultural productions that draw their strength from black communities.²² When I speak of black popular culture, I am speaking of those mass-produced productions of literature, art, music, film and television that have relevance for and draw their meanings (both overt and covert) from the experiences within black communities. For example, James Cone's *Spirituals and the Blues* is an attempt to reposition black spirituals and blues as theological sources for doing black liberation theology. In *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Cone gives a theological defense of forms of black folk music. For Cone, the spirituals and blues music represent an important moment in black religious life. He dismisses the idea that the spirituals were concerned solely with achieving relief in an otherworldly afterlife. Rather, he argues that the spirituals were intimately concerned with black existence on Earth and that God too was concerned with black existence and black flourishing. The spirituals are the expression of black people's sufferings and yearnings for freedom and self-determination:

The spiritual, then, is the spirit of the people struggling to be free; it is their religion, their source of strength in a time of trouble. And if one does not know what trouble is, then the spiritual cannot be

²¹ John Fiske "Popular Culture," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study, 2nd Edition*, edited by Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 327

²² Stuart Hall, "What Is This 'Black' In Black Popular Culture?" in *Black Popular Culture, A Project By Michele Wallace*, edited by Gina Dent (New York: The New Press, 1998), 26.

understood...Trouble is inseparable from the black religious experience...The spiritual is the people's response to the societal contradictions. It is the people facing trouble and affirming, 'I ain't tired yet.'²³

Here, Cone not only places the spirituals as reflections on black existence, he makes a categorical judgment about black existence. Black existence is an existence bound by trouble. The spirituals that arise out of this troubled existence bear witness to black perseverance in the face of such overwhelming odds. Further, Cone argues that the spirituals contain a prototypical black theology of liberation. He contends that the spirituals that African Methodist Episcopal bishop Daniel Alexander Payne once dismissed as heathenish are, in fact, part of a distinctly black form of resistance to slavery and white supremacy.²⁴ These spirituals "affirmed their somebodiness," and presented a God who was intimately concerned with the suffering of blacks.²⁵

The God of Black Liberation Theology is configured so that God is not only intimately concerned with the well-being of blacks, but also intends the liberation of blacks in this world. While God in Black Liberation Theology is connected to and concerned with black experience, this assumed connection raises two questions. What constitutes liberation for blacks? Whose experience counts when doing black liberation theology? When Cone speaks about liberation, he is not clear about what liberation for black people would look like. He argues that blacks in the United States must be freed from economic and social oppression. However, if black experience is constituted by

²³ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1972) pp. 32-33.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid, 35-39.

poverty and suffering, then it would appear that those blacks who belong to the middle class are not black. Cone attempts to ameliorate this possible contradiction by arguing in *Risks of Faith* (1999) that “it is not that poverty is a precondition for entrance into the Kingdom.” In the next sentence, Cone claims that “those who recognize their utter dependence on God and wait on him despite the miserable absurdity of life are usually poor, according to our Lord.”²⁶ As part of a black theology of liberation, Cone cannot and does not separate blackness from poverty. Thus, liberation for blacks entails some form of economic improvement. However, when Cone argues that the Kingdom of God “breaks through even now like a ray of light upon the darkness of the oppressed,” he is not clear about what that metaphor means. If God breaks into history only occasionally and brings hope to oppressed blacks, it appears that this relief might manifest itself in the form of class mobility. Second, Cone’s theology assumes that black people in the United States have a unified, singular experience. When he speaks of black experience as being an experience of ghettos, poorly-maintained tenements and rats in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he is speaking about an urban Northern setting. However, Cone does not allow for any descriptions of black experience that are not framed by living in abject poverty and misery. While Cone positions Aretha Franklin’s “Respect” as a nationalist anthem that proclaims black resistance to white oppression, it is also possible to read that song as a declaration of independence from male oppression. Cone says in a 1971 interview in the *Christian Century*, “I cannot be free until all men are free. And if in some distant future I am no longer oppressed because of blackness, then I must take upon

²⁶ James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998*(Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 9

myself whatever form of human oppression exists in the society, affirming my identity with the victims.”²⁷ However, if Cone recognizes that he cannot be free until all are free, and argues that all blacks suffer from oppressive conditions, then it is surprising that this first wave of black liberation theology fails to acknowledge sexism as a problem. It is all the more evident that there is a gap in black liberation theology’s appraisal of black life and experience given black women’s response to Stokeley Carmichael’s assertion in 1964 that the only position for women in SNCC was “prone” and Eldridge Cleaver’s statements in *Soul on Ice* that he “practiced” rape on black women before perfecting the crime upon white women.²⁸

Womanist Theology

In the evolution of both black liberation theology and black cultural studies, black women critiqued the lack of presence of black women in religious and cultural studies. They critiqued the blatant sexism within the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. These women scholars acknowledge and affirm black male critics’ concerns with racism, black experience and black religion. The development of womanist theology both affirms and critiques the liberation project begun by Cone.²⁹ For example, in her essay “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Experience as a Source for Doing Theology, With Special Reference to Christology,” Jacquelyn Grant acknowledges the damage white

²⁷ James Cone and William Hordern, “Dialogue on Black Theology: An Interview with James Cone,” *Christian Century*, September 15, 1971, p. 1085

²⁸ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (New York: Delta Books, 1968), 33.

²⁹ Cone, “Introduction,” *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume II*, p. 257.

supremacy has done to black communities. However, she shifts the critical gaze from black men to black women. Grant, bell hooks, Angela Davis and other black women critics address what they perceive to be the omission of black female presence and voice in black cultural criticism, black theological discourse and in the life of the black church. For example, in the introduction to *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*, Barbara Smith draws on a Robert Altman film, “Kansas City”, and the presence of a black cleaning woman named Addie. When Addie is cautioned by a white woman against telling the police about her apparently illegal activities, Addie replies, “Oh, nobody’s gonna ask me anything. They never do.” Smith is obviously affected by the presence of Addie, arguing that she echoes the state of public discourse concerning race, gender, sexuality, and class.³⁰

According to Grant, womanist scholarship takes seriously black liberation theology’s claim that black people are oppressed by white supremacy. Further, they take seriously the use of black people’s experiences as a point of departure from traditional white Christian theology. However, womanist scholars begin their project by questioning the replication of black male hegemony in black theology. They developed a critique of the male chauvinism within black theology and the black church. Womanist theologians did not call themselves feminists, claiming that feminism was primarily a movement promulgated by white, middle-class women who failed to acknowledge and criticize their own participation in racist oppression of black women.³¹ Instead, black female

³⁰ Barbara Smith, *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), p. xi.

³¹ James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II: 1980-1992* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 257.

theologians chose to call themselves “womanist,” following Alice Walker’s definition of the term in a trope contained in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*.

Delores Williams outlines the efficacy of the term in an essay, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices:”

What then is a womanist? Her origins are in the black folk expression ‘You acting womanish,’ meaning, according to Walker, ‘wanting to know more and in greater depth than is good for one...outrageous, audacious, courageous and willful behavior.’ A womanist is also ‘responsible, in charge, serious.’ She can walk to Canada and take others with her. She loves, she is committed, she is a universalist by temperament.³²

Here, Williams turns to black women’s literature as a source for theological reflection.

Using Walker’s trope, she rejects individualism in favor of communalism. By repositioning black women as the center of theological discourse, womanist theologians highlight black women’s heroic qualities. It is the black woman who is committed to the spiritual and social emancipation of black folk. It is her universalist temperament that allows her to act on behalf of the entire black community.

Womanist theologians do not differ significantly in their appropriation of the major themes that shape black liberation theology and black cultural criticism. However, they want to take seriously women’s roles in the black church and in black religious life. In addressing black women in the church, they seek to expand black theological and cultural discourse concerning black life. For example, the anthology *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation, and Transformation* contains several essays by womanist scholars that address black women’s existence, their spirituality and how that spirituality sustains and renews the black community. Rosetta Ross’ 2003 book

³² Delores S. Williams, “Womanist Theology: Black Women’s Voices,” chapter in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II*, 265.

Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion and Civil Rights examines the ways in which black women's faith and spirituality sustained the Civil Rights Movement.

As black women have traditionally been excluded from the positions of power within the church, womanist religious critics locate black women's experience in the church in ways that cannot be easily quantified. Indeed, Delores Williams argues that the black church "escapes precise definition."³³ She locates the black church in the experiences of black women:

The black church is invisible, but we know it when we see it: our daughters and sons rising up from death and addiction recovering and recovered; our mothers in poverty raising their children alone, with God's help, making a way out of no way and succeeding; Harriet Tubman leading hundreds of slaves into freedom; Isabel, the former African-American slave, with God's help, transforming destiny to become Sojourner Truth, affirming the close relation between God and woman; Mary McLeod Bethune's college starting on a garbage heap with one dollar and fifty cents growing into a multimillion dollar enterprise; Rosa Parks sitting down so Martin Luther King, Jr., could stand up.³⁴

In presenting this litany of black women's activity on the behalf of black people, Williams shows that the black church is ever present, an institution that is not located solely in brick buildings and led by black men. By moving the black church from neat, concrete definitions to a more abstract, universal set of actions, Williams is able to foreground black women's experience and narratives. For womanist critics, the

³³ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 205.

³⁴ Ibid.

foregrounding of black women's experience combats the marginalization of black women's experiences by white people and black men.³⁵

By turning to black women's activities, womanist theologians argue that black women have borne the burden of protecting and nourishing black communities. Emilie Townes examines the development of black women's clubs in *In A Blaze of Glory* (1995). These clubs function as a public manifestation of black women's "intense personal experience of the divine in their lives."³⁶ Townes is careful to note that the reform movement by black women in the nineteenth century was not an individualistic movement, but a communal one:

Their spirituality, which at first viewing resembles a self-centered piety with little relation to the larger context, is an excellent example of the linking of personal and social transformation to effect salvation and thereby bring in the new heaven and new earth. These women sought perfection and advocated social reform in the framework of a spirituality that valued life and took seriously the responsibility to help create and maintain a just and moral social order. These women of the nineteenth century lived their spirituality.³⁷

The spirituality of black women in the nineteenth century affirms black women as they serve as co-laborers in the work of resisting white supremacy. The life-affirming spirituality of black women led them to engage in social activism oriented towards transformation. Townes rejects a possible interpretation of black women's spirituality as an individual otherworldly project. Rather, she wants to show that black women were

³⁵ Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995), p. 124.

³⁶ Emilie Townes, *In A Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 36.

³⁷ Ibid.

able to make their personal spiritual development relevant to ongoing reform projects that would benefit black communities.

Sexuality in Black Liberation Theology and Black Cultural Criticism

Some womanist critics argue that black liberation theology and black cultural criticism fails to take black sexuality seriously. Their arguments are not unfounded, as a perusal of the major works in black theology shows a dearth of substantial references to sexuality. For example, there are no references to sexuality in general in either *Black Power and Black Theology* or *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Cone's latest book *Risks of Faith*, which traces the emergence and impact of black theology, fails to even mention homosexuality as a reality within black communities. The chapter "New Roles in the Ministry" is an example of the lack of attention to sexual difference in Black Liberation Theology:

If black people are going to create new roles in the ministry, black men will have to recognize that the present status of black women in the ministry is not acceptable. Since the gospel is about liberation, it demands that we create structures of human relations that enhance freedom and not oppression.³⁸

The above quote addresses only gender, not sexuality. Within *Risks of Faith*, Cone does not mention sexuality. As presented by Cone, the primary concern for any incarnation of black theology is the survival of black people and the heroic resistance to white racism. The purpose of the above quote is to show that, according to Cone, black men and women are engaged in a valiant struggle against white supremacy. Cone appears to have left it to others to address issues of sexuality.

³⁸ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 118.

A recent sociological study of the effects of religion in the lives of black folk also fails to yield any references to sexuality in black life. *Religion in the Lives of African Americans: Social, Psychological, and Health Perspectives* (2004) is a sociological study that seeks to contribute to “scholarly discourse on the nature, antecedents, and consequences of religious involvement among African Americans.”³⁹ The authors of this study acknowledge criticisms of prior portrayals of black religious life as failing to take “social class, region, gender, and socioeconomic status” into account.⁴⁰ While the authors make space for understanding the intersections of gender and religion in the lives of black people, sexuality, however, enters nowhere in this study.

Womanist religious critics respond to what they perceive to be a crisis in black life that rivals the issue of race. Womanists point to teenage pregnancy rates, the increase of HIV/AIDS infection in black women and continued and consistently negative portrayals of black women in popular culture as indicative of an ongoing crisis concerning black sexuality. bell hooks discusses the representations of black women’s sexuality in both white and black popular culture. In her essay “Selling Hot Pussy,” hooks calls attention to contemporary black culture’s often stereotypical portrayals of black women’s bodies. She perceives the portrayal of black women as “mammy or slut, and occasionally a combination of the two” as a moment of crisis in black life.⁴¹ For

³⁹ Robert Joseph Taylor, Linda M. Chatters, and Jeff Levin, *Religion in the Lives of African Americans: Social, Psychological, and Health Perspectives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), xii.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 74.

hooks, black women cannot rely on black or white men to speak positively about black women's sexuality, for they are too bound by historical racist and sexist presuppositions about black women's bodies. Her response to this crisis of representation in black life is for black women to speak for themselves in popular culture. She argues that black women producing images of black female sexuality produce imagery "outside a context of domination and exploitation."⁴²

While hooks seeks to foreground black women's sexuality in and through black popular culture, Renee Hill's essay "Who Are We for Each Other?" argues that black religious critics, including womanist scholars have failed to address black people's sexuality. For Hill, black sexuality should advance to the foreground in womanist scholarship. Taking her theological and ethical cue from Alice Walker's trope, Hill argues that black men have marginalized black women's sexuality and that acknowledging and affirming the diversity of black women's sexuality and, by extension, the sexuality of black people as a whole helps combat white racism. Hill argues that

Sexuality is an issue for Christian womanist theologians. It is not any less or any more important than community or survival. It simply is a part of community and survival. Sexuality (and male dominance) must be addressed in the Black community. Only then will we be able to begin to address subjects like rape, the AIDS epidemic, as well as sexual orientation in the Black community.⁴³

Hill presents sexuality as a problem in black life that needs to be addressed, as black male critics before her presented race and black experience as a problem that needed to be addressed. However, the question that confronts Hill and other womanists is: why does

⁴² Ibid, 76.

⁴³ Renee Hill, "Who Are For Each Other?" in *Black Theology, A Documentary History: Volume II*, p. 347.

sexuality in black life recede into the background in black theological and ethical discourse? Kelly Brown Douglas believes that black people have been reluctant to speak about sexuality based on a fear of affirming white racist views of black sexuality. Indeed, negative accounts of black sexuality are prevalent in white descriptions of African peoples. According to Winthrop Jordan, Europeans described African peoples as lustful and lascivious.⁴⁴ Patricia Hill Collins notes that, for centuries, black people in general and black women in particular have been subjected to invidious stereotypes regarding their sexuality. I will quote her at length:

From the display of Sarah Bartmann as a sexual ‘freak’ of nature in the early nineteenth century to Josephine Baker dancing bare-breasted for Parisian society to the animal-skin bikinis worn by ‘bootylicious’ Destiny’s Child to the fascination with Jennifer Lopez’s buttocks, women of African descent have been associated with an animalistic, ‘wild’ sexuality...Black men have their own variety of racial difference, also constructed from ideas about violence and dangerous sexuality.⁴⁵

In her introduction to *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas echoes Collins and bell hooks when she argues that whites have displayed a peculiar and curious fascination with black sexuality. Douglas recognizes that black people were burdened with responding to this torturous fusion of race and sexuality. Black Christians responded to this ongoing stereotype by adopting a set of responses that presented black men and women as being sexually chaste.

Although womanist religious critics have opened up black liberation theology and black cultural criticism to discussions concerning black sexuality, those discussions have not been limited to womanist scholars. For example, Michael Eric Dyson has contributed

⁴⁴ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968) pp. 33-34.

⁴⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 27.

significantly to discussions of black sexuality. For example, when discussing the O.J. Simpson trial in his book *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, Dyson contends that sexuality stands alongside race as problems in analyzing the case. He voices what tended to recede into the background. That is, Dyson examines how race and sexuality are intertwined when speaking of domestic violence. He argues, “the male sexual ownership of women, the presumption of male discretion over women’s bodies that feeds obsession and domination, must simply desist.”⁴⁶ Dyson charges that allowing sexual oppression within black communities to continue vitiates the possibilities for black flourishing. By categorizing domestic violence as a form of sexual oppression and labeling it an “epidemic,” Dyson seeks to call to attention a destructive approach to masculinity and femininity.

Black theologians and cultural critics have created and sustained a critical movement that has been responsible for critiquing race, class and gender in black life. These critical discourses argue that racial and class conflicts divide black communities and vitiate the possibilities of cultural and economic freedom. Black theologians and cultural critics address what they perceive to be a nihilism and sense of hopelessness in black communities that is rooted in American racism. Black religious critics have, through exploring black experience, black culture, and black religion resisted negative imagery of black people. What black religious critics seek in their discussions regarding black life in America is a revised hermeneutical approach to black folk. That is, they seek a different, more positive interpretation of black life in America. As black religious

⁴⁶ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 34.

critics approach sexuality in black life, they contend that distorted views of black people's sexuality are part of the enduring crisis of race in the United States.

However, in the discussion concerning black sexuality, I question when and where black homosexuality enters. As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, I approached black liberation theology and black cultural criticism with an assumption that the presence of black homosexuals is erased from religious and cultural descriptions of black life. Horace Griffin argues that black homosexuals are absent in black liberation theology and black cultural criticism as well. In his essay "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches," he states that black clergypersons and theologians either ignore or condemn outright black gay and lesbian experience.⁴⁷ However, that categorical judgment belies the fact not all black clergypersons ignore or condemn black homosexuality. Indeed, if we read the black church as a location where religious criticism takes place, we may also read the church as being intimately concerned with sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. Griffin is more correct in his assertion that the black church condemns homosexuality. For example, a study by the Human Rights Campaign that examined organized religion and gay people found that the major African American Christian denominations (African Methodist Episcopal, National Baptist Convention and Church of God in Christ) categorized homosexual sexual activity as outside divinely acceptable sexual behavior.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Horace Griffin, "Their Own Received Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches," in *Theology and Sexuality*, 12 (2000), pp. 88-100.

⁴⁸ Lisa Bennett, "Mixed Blessings: Organized Religion and Gay and Lesbian Americans in 1998," published by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation. Available online at www.hrc.org.

Victor Anderson is correct when he refutes the assertion that the black church is silent regarding homosexuality.⁴⁹ The church is quite vocal when it addresses sexual difference in black communities, as evidenced by some of the sermonic moments in black religious life. Operationrebirth.com is a website that tracks and critiques major black religious leaders' sermons regarding homosexuality. Nationally-recognized black preachers like Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia and Bishop Frank M. Reid III of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania have preached sermons that characterize homosexuality as a "lifestyle" that is incompatible with a Christian identity. That does not mean that all black preachers are categorically opposed to and vitriolic concerning homosexuality. Jeremiah Wright, pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, Illinois is a notable example of black clergypersons who does not ignore black gay people. In a collection of sermons entitled *Good News: Sermons of Hope For Today's Families*, Wright contends that gay people have access to the same God as heterosexuals. Wright argues that, theologically, God stands for the outcast. For Wright, God's love "is greater than your love and my love, wider than our love could ever be and deeper than we could ever comprehend."⁵⁰ Thus, "homophobes," or, those hypocritical preachers who would condemn gay people cannot prevent them from accessing God's love.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Victor Anderson, "The Curious Body of the Black Homosexual," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 297-301.

⁵⁰ Jeremiah A. Wright Jr., *Good News: Sermons of Hope for Today's Families*, edited by Jini Kilgore Ross (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995), p. 83.

⁵¹ Towards the end of the "Good News for Homosexuals" sermon, Wright argues that "whoremongers" cannot separate gay people from the love of God. His use of the term

Dwight N. Hopkins' *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* yields few references to gays and lesbians. The sparse references to black gays and lesbians presents them as a problematic situation facing black theology. The introduction to *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* presents sexual difference as a challenge to black theology that must be resolved. As Hopkins traces the stages of development of black liberation theology, he approaches sexual difference as standing outside black liberation theology and black cultural criticism:

Finally, a small group of black Christian educators and ministers are openly establishing their lesbian and gay identities as gifts from God and are, therefore, directly challenging the black church and black theological beliefs about liberation.⁵²

In this brief introduction of the intersection of black gay sexuality and black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, Hopkins sets up a confrontational space in black life. As black gays and lesbians exist to confront black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, they exist on the periphery of black experience. Gays and lesbians appear again at the Conclusion of the book, and then, only in two paragraphs. In these two paragraphs, Hopkins argues that black heterosexuals have some form of "agreement to oppress and discriminate against African American lesbians and gays in the church, the family, and the community."⁵³ He also contends that black heterosexuals use the Bible in

whoremonger appears curious. However, earlier in the sermon, Wright relays a story wherein he engaged in a debate with an adulterous heterosexual preacher about affirming homosexual people. According to Wright, when the preacher voiced his objections about gay people, he responded with "I just wonder why you don't have a problem with being married and sleeping with women other than your wife." Ibid, 74.

⁵² Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 11.

⁵³ Ibid, 199.

order to “hold black lesbians and gays down.”⁵⁴ Further, Hopkins accuses the black church with clinging to a patriarchal worldview that ignores those “poor African American lesbians and gays” that “are struggling to build stable families and raise their children.”⁵⁵

What is curious about both Wright and Hopkins’ discussions of black homosexuality is that it is not at all clear about what is distinct about black homosexuals. Apparently, this group of poor black folk is struggling with the same problems as poor black heterosexuals. However, the two short paragraphs about black homosexuals in *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* reveals very little about black homosexuals other than that they are poor and downtrodden. Hopkins’ argument implies that the black church is wrong for oppressing black homosexuals, but since these black homosexuals are faceless and are mute in these paragraphs, it appears as if these poor black homosexuals are merely an incidental and problematic afterthought that requires attention before continuing to engage weightier matters in black life.

While Wright’s sermon is provocative in that he calls attention to questions of biological determinism and psychology, it appears as if gay sexual expression remains problematic. Wright’s sermon is even more problematic in the way it correlates black gay identity with death and oppression. As he cites Mary Borhek’s book *My Son Eric* and quotes her assertion that “God is confronting the church with the present crisis over homosexuality,” Wright reinforces that assertion by admonishing his audience to realize

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

that “AIDS is everybody’s concern.”⁵⁶ This statement, appended to the Borhek quote, seems to imply that the issue of sexuality, sexual difference and black religious life is centered on the problem of plague. The study questions at the end of the sermon present a peculiar ambivalence when speaking about gay sexuality. One question asks, “Should the church challenge sexual practices between consenting adult homosexuals? Are these practices any better or worse than illicit sexual practices among consenting heterosexuals, such as fornication and adultery?”⁵⁷ It is interesting to note that the sermonic moment does not mention sexual relations between persons of the same gender. The question presupposes that sexual relations between people of the same sex are equivalent to “illicit” sexual practices like fornication and adultery. Neither this question nor the other questions posed present the possibility that homosexual sex could be anything but illicit.

Both Hopkins and Wright are examples of the trend within black liberation theology and black cultural criticism of reducing black gay experience to a problem characterized by plague and oppression. What accounts for these discussions about black gays and lesbians in black theology? What is at stake for black liberation theology and black cultural criticism is not solely the representation of sexual difference. As this chapter has discussed, black liberation theology and black cultural criticism is concerned primarily with refuting negative claims about black identity. Black liberation theology and black cultural criticism’s account of black experience and existence leads to a monolithic account of black communities. As this chapter has shown, black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, whether in the form of black liberation theology or

⁵⁶ Wright, *Good News*, 80.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 85.

general black cultural criticism asserts that God is a real entity with real interests in black life and survival. Cone frankly states that God stands for and with the oppressed of the earth. Because God is a god of justice, God cannot help but align Godself with poor black people as they struggle against white supremacy. As Victor Anderson points out in *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, the DuBoisian “double consciousness” finds expression in black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, in that black thinkers are concerned primarily with addressing the “dialectic of race and citizenship.”⁵⁸ The masculinist, crisis-based orientation of black liberation theology and black cultural criticism prevents it from taking into account multiple representations of black life in America. As such, black homosexuality enters into black liberation theology and black cultural criticism as one of many problems to be fixed in order to combat white supremacy.

Conclusion

As I read black liberation theology and black cultural criticism, I understand it to be hermeneutical in orientation. That is, it takes seriously the stories within black life and considers attention to black narratives necessary in approaching black religious and cultural life. Black liberation theology and black cultural criticism concerns itself with what it perceives to be major problems within black life, namely the problem of white supremacy. As black liberation theology and black cultural criticism seek to address black existence and white racism, it focuses on providing critical analyses and interpretations of black experience.

⁵⁸ Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 65.

In keeping with its hermeneutical orientation, black religious critics have endeavored to include and speak about black sexuality as an important part of black experience. Although black male religious critics initially did not include issues of black sexuality in their writings, black women religious critics quickly corrected this oversight. Sexuality, or, more specifically, sexism advanced to the fore in womanist discourse concerning black religious life in the United States. Womanist religious critics have been instrumental in broaching the subject of sexual difference in black life. They have argued that homophobia and sexism were damaging to black life, as both homophobia and sexism prevent black people from living the type of socially-engaged, loving black Christian life necessary for continued struggle against white supremacy.

I will devote the next chapter to presenting detailed analyses of representations of sexual difference in representative texts in black liberation theology and black cultural criticism. I will use Kelly Brown Douglas' exploration of homosexuality in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* as a representative text in black liberation theology's minimal attempt to deal with sexual difference among African Americans. Her book is the most coherent work on sexuality and black people produced by the black theological academy. Her analysis of sexuality and the black church crystallizes the themes that other womanist scholars have hinted at in their works. While I find Douglas' exploration of sexual difference in black communities lacking, I acknowledge and appreciate that Douglas' work in the field has opened black theology up to dialogue regarding homosexuality and black peoples.

I will also turn to both bell hooks and Michael Eric Dyson's respective chapters dealing with issues of sexuality and sexual difference in two of their books. Of the two,

hooks has written more on the subject of sexual difference among black people. In *Talking Back*, she includes a chapter on homophobia. I will not focus on that chapter as her essay entitled “Embracing Gayness” in *Salvation: Black People and Love* is a more recent and detailed exploration of the subject. Although Dyson does not devote an entire chapter of *Race Rules* to a discussion of sexual difference and black people, he uses a good portion of his chapter on the black church and sex to examine sexual orientation and the black church. Dyson argues that the black church needs a theology that can accommodate same-sex sexual practices. It is my argument that this theology is only hinted at, rather than fully explicated. Further, I will argue that black liberation theology and black cultural criticism’s focus on homophobia obscures the subject of homophobia, the black homosexual. Also, I will further expand my argument that black liberation theology and black cultural criticism’s approaches towards sexual difference in black communities remain rooted in a presentation of black homosexuality as bound by plague and prejudice.

CHAPTER II

BLACK RELIGIOUS CRITICISM, AND REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY

Introduction

At the conclusion of chapter one, I outlined the logic of both black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism. I analyzed the ways in which these two areas of critical thought construct racial identity and difference. While black theology is clear that the primary criterion for its theological analysis is race, black cultural criticism seeks to move beyond racial essentialism as a primary category for doing the work of exploring black existence. In the previous chapter, I sought the presence of black homosexuals in black religious criticism. I found that in the work of womanist scholars and contemporary black cultural critics, sexual difference is mentioned as a problem to be solved. As I noted in chapter one, both black theology and black cultural criticism fail to adequately explore the reality of sexual difference in black communities. In the previous chapter, I put forward a hypothesis that the reason black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism marginalize homosexuality in black communities is due to a preoccupation with dismantling white supremacy.

A question lies in the background of this chapter. In the first chapter, I asked “When and where does the black homosexual enter into black religious criticism?” In this chapter, I ask, “How does the black homosexual enter into black religious criticism?” This chapter will explore my aforementioned hypothesis that black theology and African American cultural criticism marginalize homosexuality and focus primarily on

homophobia through a critical analysis of the ways in which sexual difference is represented in both black theology and black cultural criticism. Here, I will use representative figures of both black theology and black cultural criticism to disclose detailed representations of black gay people. To that end, I will look closely at Kelly Brown Douglas's exploration of homosexuality and the black church in her book *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* as well as Elias Farajaje-Jones' essay "Breaking Silence" in the second volume of *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*. After examining their representations of sexual difference, I will then turn to the African American cultural critics. Here, Michael Eric Dyson's chapter on the black church and sex in *Race Rules* as well as bell hooks's chapter in *Salvation: Black People and Love* will serve as the representative texts within black cultural criticism's analysis of homosexuality. Also, this chapter will address what is happening in black religious criticism's discussions of black homosexuality. I contend that black religious criticism deploys a rhetoric of tolerance. Such rhetoric allows for these critics to speak about black gay people affirmatively in that black communities should tolerate the existence of black gay people, as such tolerance is a defiant act against white supremacy. However, I believe that such tolerance leads to limited descriptions of black gay existence that are framed by death and prejudice.

The contours of this chapter are different from previous discussions of sexual orientation and religious thought. Prior discussions of sexual orientation have, by necessity, engaged in a discussion and interpretation of biblical injunctions against homosexual practices. I will not replicate those studies in this chapter, as that discussion does not fall under the scope of this dissertation. The purpose of this dissertation in

general is not to present a biblical defense of homosexuality, but to enlarge the categories of discourse in black religious criticism through the literary utterances of black gay men. As I noted in the previous chapter both black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics utilize black literature as a lens for interpreting black experience.

Currently, debates surrounding homosexuality have turned away from the ways in which heterosexuals perceive gays and toward securing equal rights, namely the right to marry. However, the gay marriage debate cannot completely escape the question of what is considered natural. Opponents of gay marriage contend that allowing homosexuals to marry degrades the “natural” institution of marriage. William Bennett argues that legalizing same-sex marriage would

...shatter the conventional definition of marriage, change the rules which govern behavior, endorse practices which are completely antithetical to the tenets of all of the world’s major religions, send conflicting signals about marriage and sexuality, particularly to the young, and obscure marriage’s enormously consequential function—procreation and child rearing.⁵⁹

Here, Bennett inscribes upon moral function upon marriage. Marriage in Bennett’s view provides the necessary model for sexual interaction. Gay marriage in his view would legitimate in illegitimate constellation of sexual behaviors. However, proponents of gay marriage argue that marriage is a right that ought to extend to gay people. The pro-gay marriage argument contends that homosexual identity and behavior is “not something one choose, it is something one is.”⁶⁰ By claiming sexuality as innate and immutable, gay

⁵⁹ William Bennett, “Leave Marriage Alone,” in *Newsweek*, June 3, 1996.

⁶⁰ Bishop John Shelby Spong, “Blessing Gay and Lesbian Commitments,” in *Same-Sex Marriage: Pro and Con, A Reader*, edited by Andrew Sullivan (New York: Vintage Books, 1997) p. 67.

activists argue that denying gays the same rights that pertain to heterosexuals is as immoral as the denial of equal rights to African Americans.

The aforementioned analogy of civil rights for African Americans and civil rights for homosexuals is fraught with controversy. In his book *One More River To Cross*, Keith Boykin outlines the conceptual differences that black people raise concerning the comparison of gay rights with civil rights for African Americans:

Many blacks, understandably hesitant after years of struggle against racist oppression, are reluctant to be compared and ‘reduced’ to the level of an even more disfavored group in society. ‘I don’t want to be put in that bag,’ a forty-seven-year-old black carpenter told the Wall Street Journal in October 1994. Homosexuality is different from blackness, he said, because homosexuality is wrong.⁶¹

An assumption regarding the nature of both identities is implicit in this man’s desire not to have his racial identity compared to homosexuality. When this man declares homosexuality is wrong, he is implicitly arguing that homosexuality is a choice, while a person’s racial identity is something fixed, natural, and thus, socially acceptable. This unnamed man’s opinion regarding homosexuality is not significantly different from the views about homosexuality presented by Frances Cress Welsing or Molefi Asante. While Boykin does not explicitly define homophobia, he does assume that negative discourse concerning homosexuality constitutes homophobia.

Scholars who address homosexuality in America assume that black people are “more” homophobic than whites, or that homophobia in black communities is more virulent than in white communities. However, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a study concerning American attitudes toward homosexuality that seems

⁶¹ Keith Boykin, *One More River To Cross: Black and Gay in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996), p. 48.

to contradict that assumption. Among the whites surveyed, 50% held unfavorable views of gays and lesbians. Among the blacks surveyed, 60% held unfavorable views of gays and lesbians.⁶² This does not indicate a marked difference between whites and blacks concerning negative views toward gays. Rather, this statistic, derived from black respondents who claimed a Christian religious orientation, shows that black people interpret the Bible as proscribing homosexual sexual behavior.

Sexuality and Black Theologians

Black intellectuals' perception of the intersections of race and sexual orientation are framed around the crisis of homophobia, or, heterosexuals' negative perceptions of sexual difference. As I will discuss later, black religious critics structure their discussions of black homosexuals not around the subject, but around homophobic representations of sexual difference. They argue that intolerance of sexual difference threatens the flourishing of black people in America. Such scholars argue that tolerance toward homosexuals is in keeping with a liberationist message to all black people. According to Dwight Hopkins black gays and lesbians who speak about their oppression constitute "a small group of black Christian educators and ministers [who] are openly establishing their lesbian and gay identities as gifts from God and are, therefore, directly challenging the black church and black theological beliefs about liberation."⁶³ For

⁶² "Religious Beliefs Underpin Opposition to Homosexuality," Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Study, pg. 4.

⁶³ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), pp. 11-12.

Hopkins, liberation for gays and lesbians is less about gays themselves and more concerned with the ways in which black heterosexuals should combat homophobia.

As I noted above, negative attitudes toward homosexual sexual behavior have been described as homophobia. Conversations among black intellectuals concerning homosexuality in black communities often overshadow homosexuals themselves in favor of attempts to either dismantle or reinforce negative assumptions regarding homosexuals. In this section, I will address the ways in which homophobia advances to the foreground in black theological discourse. I argue that talk of dismantling homophobia is part of a discussion of tolerance.

Elias Farajaje-Jones' "Breaking Silence: Toward an In-The-Life Theology" is one of the first attempts to graft categories of sexual difference onto black liberation theology. Farajaje-Jones begins his essay with a discussion of homophobia and biphobia. He acknowledges that a theology of liberation for gay and lesbian African Americans must address the oppression that they experience from not only whites, but also black heterosexuals. He contends that black Christianity forces black gays to remain secretive about their sexuality. His allegations are worth quoting at length, as they are repeated later in Kelly Brown Douglas and Michael Eric Dyson's respective works. Farajaje-Jones says:

Religion, especially African-American Judeo-Christian religion, is still being used to persecute and oppress people who are in-the-life. It forces people to remain closeted. Perhaps one of the worst things about it is that it is used to destroy people's self-esteem and to augment their self-hatred. Religiously-inspired homophobia and biphobia are actually killing people. It is one of the main reasons that the United States is not more aggressive in dealing with AIDS; it serves as an inspiration for violent crimes against lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender people, in much the same way that inflammatory anti-Jewish preaching often leads to pogroms...The white religious right is trying to co-opt the Black Church into supporting its

homophobia/biphobia. Some of us need to articulate theologies for the Black Church that teach that we are inclusive, not exclusive; that we are about life and not about death. This is my struggle.⁶⁴

Farajaje-Jones presents themes that will become constitutive of black academic discourse concerning sexual difference in black communities. When he speaks of black gays being forced to hide their sexuality, he is insisting that black gays are estranged from their communities. For Farajaje-Jones, the Black Church should be a place that welcomes all African Americans. Instead of serving as a haven for black gays, it is hostile to them. This hostility presents a dilemma for black gays. Either they affirm their sexual identity and risk being marginalized or vilified in the Black Church, or they hide their sexual identity and exist within the confines of a lie. The Black Church encourages the development of heterosexual relationships by providing rituals that solemnize commitments, provide legitimacy for sexual activity, and honor these relationships as part of the church, the family, and the community. For black gays, however, none of the aforementioned support is available. Farajaje-Jones indicts the Black Church for refusing to support black gays and aiding and abetting the negative attitudes towards black gays that subsequently force them to engage in clandestine sexual encounters and relationships lest they be figuratively (and, sometimes, literally) cast out of the church and the community.

Farajaje-Jones seeks to resolve such estrangement through the development of a theological discourse that resolves alienation and estrangement within black communities. In Farajaje-Jones' view, any orientation that estranges black people from

⁶⁴ Elias Farajaje-Jones, "Breaking Silence: Toward An In-The-Life Theology," in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume II: 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 143.

one another should not be tolerated. Homophobia must be vigorously opposed, as it alienates black gays and leads them to engage in self-destructive behaviors that, in turn, lead to the spread of HIV/AIDS. Further, African Americans must vigorously oppose homophobia as it is the product of a European worldview that stigmatizes sex in general and homosexuality in particular.⁶⁵

Farajaje-Jones' talk of an "in the life" theology draws on Joseph Beam's anthology and use of the term "in the life" as a way of describing black gay experience. He contends that the use of in-the-life is inclusive of the wide range of sexual identities open to blacks and, according to Farajaje-Jones, "has been used in our African-American tradition for generations."⁶⁶ Beam's anthology contains the following description of the term:

In the life, a phrase used to describe "street life" (the lifestyle of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers) is also the phrase used to describe the "gay life" (the lives of Black homosexual men and women). Street life and gay life, at times, embrace and entwine, yet at other times, are precise opposites. In this context, in the life, refers to Black gay men.⁶⁷

If Farajaje-Jones wants to take in-the-life seriously, he has to contend with the negative associations that that term entails. He argues that in-the-life is a term that is inclusive of all and that it grows out of the suffering and struggles of all oppressed peoples. However, if Beam's presentation of in-the-life is to be taken seriously, then the black gay men indicated in this term stand alongside the pimp, prostitute, hustler and drug dealer as unsavory elements in black life.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 152-154, 158.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 140.

⁶⁷ Joseph Beam, *In The Life, A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 12.

Farajaje-Jones does recognize that, according to black heterosexuals, black people who are “in-the-life” are undesirable. He combats the perception of black queers as unacceptable by reminding the reader that black queers are victims of a pernicious system of heterosexism and homophobia.⁶⁸ Heterosexism functions as compulsory heterosexuality, or, the assumption that all black people are (and should) be heterosexual. Compulsory heterosexuality leads to homophobia in that those who are heterosexual label those blacks who are gay, lesbian or bisexual as deviant, depraved, and contradictory to black interests.

Farajaje-Jones does not limit his critique of homophobia and heterosexism to the Black Church. Like Renee Hill, he indicts Black Liberation Theology for failing to discuss homosexuality. He contends that what is unacceptable is not the presence of black queers, but the presence of homophobia. Farajaje-Jones implicates Black Liberation Theology in aiding and abetting the perpetuation of homophobia because of its silence regarding black queer sexuality.

Farajaje-Jones adopts the method of black liberation theologians and points to black queer experience as the hermeneutical lens that informs a theology of liberation. In his hermeneutical approach to black queers, those who are in-the-life are the most despised. He points out that black queers are oppressed on multiple levels. Black queers are oppressed by the black church because of their sexuality, by whites because of their race, and by heterosexual black men because of their gender. The refusal of the Black Church to welcome black queers and affirm their relationships exacerbates the HIV/AIDS crisis in black communities. He says, “we often encounter Black gay/bisexual

⁶⁸ Ibid, 146.

men who have heard all of their lives that they are evil and bad. Many internalize this and then figure that there is no point in their practicing safer sex since they are condemned to be punished anyway.”⁶⁹

He situates black gay identity between the problems of plague in the form of HIV/AIDS and prejudicial attitudes and actions towards and against black gays. Further, Farajaje-Jones seeks an “in-the-life” theology that can speak against homophobia in black communities, but the contours and content of this theology remain vague and undefined. By situating black gay life between plague and heterosexual prejudice, Farajaje-Jones presents black gays as at the mercy of two seemingly overpowering forces that are by-products of the other. Black gay life, like black life in general, is a heroic struggle against nihilism.

Kelly Brown Douglas echoes many of Farajaje-Jones’s arguments in her book *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*(1999). *Sexuality and the Black Church* opened black theology to frank dialogue regarding the re-presentation of sex and sexuality among black Christians. She argues that black people have suppressed sexuality because white people have cast black sexuality as uncontrolled, lascivious, and dangerous. Her text is, as she indicates in her introduction, a response to a challenge laid down by Renee Hill. Her book is also a response to ethicist Cheryl Sanders’ critical analysis of womanist thought.

Hill contends that womanist scholars have avoided the issue of sexuality. In her essay “Who Are We For Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology,” Hill charges womanist scholars with failing to “recognize heterosexism and homophobia as

⁶⁹ Ibid, 152.

points of oppression that need to be resisted if all Black women (straight, lesbian, and bisexual) are to have liberation and a sense of their own power.”⁷⁰ Hill takes up Alice Walker’s trope and focuses on her description of a someone who is womanish as being someone who loves women sexually or non-sexually. As a womanist is someone who can love women sexually, this automatically includes the black lesbian. For Hill, any discourse that purports to resist oppression must also acknowledge the existence of sexual difference and oppression based on this difference. Hill articulates why it is important to listen to those who are homosexual:

By acknowledging the existence of lesbians (and gay men) in the Black community, including the Black church, womanists will confront the denial and invisibility of homosexuality that is a symptom of heterosexist oppression. It would be a way of raising the issue of oppression within the Black community. African Americans need not only theories of resistance and liberation from oppressive forces in the dominant white society, but also those theories which will address oppression *within* the community.(emphasis author’s)⁷¹

Hill does not seek to critique the logic of black and womanist liberation theology. Rather, she desires that this religious discourse include considerations of sexual difference in black communities. Douglas notes that “at the time of [Hill’s] critique, neither I nor any other womanist religious scholar had given any sustained consideration to issues of homophobia/heterosexism or any other issue related to Black sexuality.”⁷²

⁷⁰ Renee L. Hill, “Who Are We For Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology,” in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume II: 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), p. 346.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 349.

⁷² Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999), p. 1.

In her essay “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” Cheryl Sanders argues that the appropriation of womanist thought must be done so critically and must not lose sight of Christian ethics and values. She is concerned that uncritical adoption of womanist discourse leads to an ethical orientation that accepts homosexuality as a morally commendable practice. She contends that what is at stake for black communities is the development of healthy and stable black families. Homosexual practices threaten the stability of black families. Sanders is explicit about her concerns regarding womanist thought and unequivocal affirmation of sexual difference:

In my view there is a fundamental discrepancy between the womanist criteria that would affirm and/or advocate homosexual practice, and the ethical norms the black church might employ to promote the survival and wholeness of black families. It is problematic for those of us who claim connectedness to and concern for the black family and church to engage the criteria authoritatively and/or uncritically in the formation of theological-ethical discourse for these two institutions... There is a great need for the black churches to promote a positive sexual ethics within the black community as one means of responding to the growing normalization of the single-parent family, and the attendant increases in poverty, welfare dependency, and a host of other problems. Moreover, it is indisputably in the best interests of black children for the church not only to strengthen and support existing families, but also to educate them ethically for marriage and parenthood. The womanist nomenclature, however, conveys a sexual ethics that is ambivalent at best with respect to the value of heterosexual monogamy within the black community.⁷³

In Sanders’ view, the ethical norms of the Black Church include a commitment to a sexual morality that fosters stable black families. Her negative position on homosexual practice is borne out of a concern for the well-being and sustenance of black nuclear families. For Sanders, the ethical norms of the Black Church and the interests of stable families are linked, and the “uncritical acceptance” of womanist criteria is not in keeping

⁷³ Cheryl J. Sanders, “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” in *Black Theology, A Documentary History*, p. 342.

with those norms. She does not favor an interpretation of womanist thought that allows for homosexual practice as she believes that such practice runs counter to the ethics and theology of the black church. In *Saints in Exile* (1996), Sanders points out that the ethics of the Holiness tradition place an “emphasis on personal morality and ascetic lifestyles” and prohibits drinking, smoking, the use of addictive drugs, “extramarital sex, gambling, secular dancing and the like.”⁷⁴ This emphasis on personal morality is important, for it is part of a program of Christian formation and transformation that Sanders believes is necessary for maintaining black families and communities living in the margins of American society.

Sanders contends that if academic black theology is to be hermeneutically faithful to the church from which it claims to have sprung, then it cannot equivocate on the matter of homosexuality. Sanders explores her commitment to the moral standards of the Holiness tradition and rejection of homosexual practice as a form of legitimate sexual activity more fully in her essay “Sexual Orientation and Human Rights Discourse in the African-American Churches.” For Sanders, homosexual acts do not lead to the formation of healthy black families. Rather, the promotion of same-sex marriage as a means of legitimating homosexual practice may lead to the disintegration of extended familial relationships.⁷⁵ In order to promote a positive sexual ethics among African Americans,

⁷⁴ Cheryl J. Sanders, *Saints In Exile: The Holiness-Pentecostal Experience in African American Religion and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 132.

⁷⁵ Cheryl J. Sanders, “Sexual Orientation and Human Rights Discourse in the African-American Churches,” in *Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in American Religious Discourse*, edited by Saul M. Olyan and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 182.

the black theological project must promote heterosexual monogamy instead of homosexual practice.

Douglas' response to Sanders is simple and direct. Any discourse in black communities that limits the free expression of sexuality (including homosexuality) "threatens Black well-being instead of protecting it."⁷⁶ For Douglas, the white cultural attack, the exploitation and totalization of black sexuality, has negatively affected all black people, including black gays and lesbians.⁷⁷ This white cultural attack, along with the desire of black people to weather this attack, prompts black people to adopt an intolerant approach towards homosexuality. As shown in her introductory discussion of her experiences with black seminary students' reactions to homosexuality, Douglas characterizes these negative critiques as homophobia and heterosexism. Her section regarding homosexuality deals less with black gays and lesbians themselves and more with attitudes of black heterosexuals with regard to same-sex sexual practices. Black attitudes regarding homosexuality stem from black attitudes regarding sexuality in general. Douglas argues that black people derive their views of homosexuality from both the Bible and from particular cultural concerns.⁷⁸ For black people, the Bible serves as a primary source for ethical and moral reflection. Douglas cites both Vincent Wimbush and Renita Weems, as she presents the argument that black interpretation of the Bible with regard to homosexuality is part of the way in which black people have traditionally appealed to the Bible's themes of justice, freedom, and self-worth in the eyes of God.

⁷⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, p. 106.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

Douglas comments on African American interpretations of the Bible, arguing that blacks have shaped an oral/aural tradition biblical tradition. This tradition allows for blacks to draw on particular stories (such as the Exodus story) as wellsprings for black faith. According to Douglas, black people have uncritically accepted biblical injunctions against homosexuality. This uncritical acceptance of certain interpretations of homosexuality formed the basis for much of the homophobia present in black communities. Douglas does not find the use of the Bible to legitimize anti-gay sentiments in black communities persuasive. Rather, she finds the interpretations of biblical pronouncements regarding homosexuality to be harmful to the flourishing of black communities.⁷⁹ She suggests a wider discussion of homosexuality in black communities that “must take place within the wider context of Black people’s own struggle for life and wholeness.”⁸⁰ By presenting this suggestion, Douglas seeks to move discussions about sexuality away from questions about the moral life of blacks and towards larger questions of black oppression and resistance to oppression.

Douglas argues that black people’s use of the Bible to support a position against homosexuality is understandable, “in light of their history of oppression.”⁸¹ The history of white supremacy is replete with examples of white denigration and demonization of black sexuality, as Winthrop Jordan’s study shows. In the initial contacts between Europeans and Africans, Englishmen first hypothesized that Africans “had sprung from the generation of ape-kind or that apes were themselves the offspring of [Africans] and

⁷⁹ Ibid, 97.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 96.

⁸¹ Ibid.

some unknown African beast.”⁸² By associating apes with Africans vis-à-vis sexual union, whites “were able to give vent to their feelings that [Africans] were a lewd, lascivious, and wanton people.”⁸³ The association of Africans with wanton, uncontrollable sexuality and savagery led to the formation and perpetuation of sexual stereotypes. Douglas highlights the development of the stereotypes of the Jezebel, the Mammy, and the Violent Buck. The Jezebel and the Violent Buck are both sexual deviants and are governed by their lusts. She notes that black people have fought these representations of deviant black sexuality by rejecting forms of sexual expression that might be considered aberrant.⁸⁴

Douglas’ argument mirrors Michael Eric Dyson’s argument in *Race Rules* (1996) that blacks have constructed a black Christian sexual identity that demonizes the sexual body. The rhetoric that Douglas displays in her argument is centered around a notion that blacks have, since the beginning of slavery, resisted white supremacist descriptions of black bodies. However, this resistance to oppression led to the rejection of any kind of sexual expression that did not lead to procreation or might confirm white suspicions about black sexual deviance. Thus, blacks cast homosexuality (as well as bisexuality, transgenderism, as well as other sexual practices) as a “white thing,” and not part of black sexual experience.

Douglas acknowledges Cheryl Sanders’ concerns and freely admits that black people consider homosexuality a threat to the well being of black families. In short,

⁸² Jordan, *White Over Black*, 30-31.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Douglas accepts the position held by many black religious critics that black people are in an existential crisis. She tacitly accepts Sanders' position that black families are in crisis. However, she contends homophobia exacerbates the black existential crisis rather than resolves it. Douglas turns to the statistical evidence surrounding HIV/AIDS in black communities. The alarming rate of HIV infection among African Americans in general and black women in particular should have elicited a swift response by the Black Church. Instead, the Black Church (via black preachers) equated HIV with homosexuality. Douglas argues that, despite the devastating effect the HIV/AIDS crisis has had on black communities, the Black Church has not effectively responded to this crisis. Following Elias Farajaje-Jones' earlier argument, she claims that homophobia within the Black Church leads to destructive behaviors by gays and lesbians, and it is those destructive behaviors that are responsible for the alarming spread of HIV/AIDS in black communities.⁸⁵

For Douglas, black people need a sexual politics of resistance in order to combat white sexual oppression. Homophobia, as a by-product of the white cultural attack on black sexuality, "mimics White culture in the way it destroys Black lives."⁸⁶ This discourse of resistance squarely places homophobia, not homosexuality, as a product of a corrupt white culture that consistently demonizes all forms of black sexuality. Douglas argues that "a sexual discourse of resistance could nurture the kind of discussion that promotes acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity—even *sexual diversity*—

⁸⁵ Ibid., 106.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

within the Black community”(emphasis mine)⁸⁷ Douglas believes that the only way to dismantle black reliance upon interpretations of biblical injunctions regarding homosexuality is to develop a sexual politics of resistance.

There are a few problems with both Douglas’s account of homosexuality and her suggestion of a sexual politics of difference. First, her account of homosexuality assumes the validity of certain accounts of black gay sexuality. For example, Douglas, using Keith Boykin’s book *One More River to Cross*, assumes that black gay and lesbian lives are bound by disease and hatred. Accepting Boykin’s assertion that reducing homophobia would reduce the “risky” sexual behavior that black gay men supposedly engage in reinforces the presumption that black gay men are uniformly promiscuous and are carriers of plague. Although Douglas says that a sexual discourse of resistance would promote acceptance and appreciation of sexual diversity in black communities, her own discourse concerning black gay experience is thin and does not substantively explore black gay experiences beyond encountering the finitude of either HIV/AIDS or homophobia.

Gays and lesbians are presented as a “problem people.” That is, they are both problematic in themselves and bound by problems. Although Douglas seeks to dispel the notion that black gays and lesbians are a threat to black people, Douglas fails to present alternative accounts of black gay and lesbian lives that would counter those negative descriptions. Black gay people exist only through the paradigm of homophobia. Douglas fails to separate black gay sexuality from homophobia. By equating black gay sexuality

⁸⁷Ibid., 107.

with homophobia, Douglas renders black gays and lesbians synonymous with the negative attitudes expressed toward them.

With regard to homophobia, Douglas effectively absolves black people and the black church from any moral culpability in the perpetuation of homophobic practices and attitudes.⁸⁸ The claim that homophobic attitudes among black peoples is the offspring of white racist attitudes toward black sexuality denies any responsibility black people have in fostering those attitudes. Her assertion that the negative sentiments expressed toward black gays and lesbians are the result of white culture infantilizes the black church. Her contention portrays the black church and community as being incapable of independently formulating responses to human experience.

Finally, Douglas calls for a “sexual discourse of resistance” to combat the white cultural attack responsible for homophobia in black communities. The sexual discourse of resistance is intended to reveal how white culture and racism perpetuates homophobia. It is supposed to show black people that accepting homophobia means complicity in efforts to destroy black communities. Douglas reinforces the argument that homophobia is not a natural reaction to homosexuality by black people but rather a disruptive force perpetuated by white people by the claim that a sexual discourse of resistance will “disrupt the terrorizing manner in which Black people have used biblical texts in regard to homosexuality.”⁸⁹ Although she contends that black people have misused the Bible with regard to black gays and lesbians, it is apparent that she believes that this misuse is the result of white oppression. Even if one were to regard Douglas’s assignation of

⁸⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 107.

blame to white people as true, it is still unclear what a sexual politics of resistance would look like.

Her final chapter, “A Sexual Discourse of Resistance” appears to draw the contours of the discourse of resistance she proposes in her chapter on homophobia. However, the contours of this discourse are still not clear. This discourse seems as if it is intended solely to “help [the black church] understand the role of black sexuality in maintaining the white hegemonic, racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist structures.”⁹⁰ If this is the case, then black sexuality exists only to combat white supremacy. Consider what Douglas says regarding the usefulness of a sexual discourse of resistance:

The Black community needs this discourse to help it to understand the role of Black sexuality in maintaining the White hegemonic, racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist structures. A sexual discourse of resistance is needed also to help Black men and women recognize how the White cultural exploitation of Black sexuality has corrupted Black people’s concepts of themselves, one another, and their God.⁹¹

According to the quote, black heterosexuals should accept homosexuality as a part of the titanic struggle between black and white cultures. The difference that sexual difference makes for black communities is constructed vis-à-vis white racism. In other words, black homosexuality ought to be affirmed, not for the sake of promoting and respecting difference in black communities, but for the sake of reifying racial difference.

Douglas’s arguments concerning homophobia bracket sexual difference among black peoples. Black gays and lesbians are either carriers of plague or victims of homophobia. Neither description allows for possibilities of transcendence. Douglas so

⁹⁰ Ibid., 142.

⁹¹ Ibid.

thoroughly grounds black sexual identity in the vicissitudes of white supremacy that it appears as if Douglas is rendering black gay sexuality and responses to it as pathological.

Homosexuality in African American Cultural Criticism

Cornel West's essay "The New Cultural Politics of Difference" sought new ways of understanding black life in America that were not bound to only racial difference. For West, this new cultural politics of difference was a response to the "precise circumstances of our present moment." In other words, this new politics is the product of a postmodernist moment wherein previous modes of cultural and political representation are coming under increasing scrutiny. West writes,

The new cultural politics of difference is neither simply oppositional in contesting the mainstream (or *malestream*) for inclusion, nor transgressive in the avant-gardist sense of shocking conventional bourgeois audiences. It embraces the distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality.(emphasis author's)⁹²

This new cultural politics seeks coalitions across boundaries of race, class, gender and sexual orientation in order to secure democracy and freedom of expression for individuals. West sees the "old" politics of difference as being concerned primarily with the difference that race makes. The old politics, as I noted earlier, responds primarily to negative conceptions of racial difference. For example, W.E.B. DuBois' "The Conservation of the Races" or *The Souls of Black Folk* only engages the marker of race as that which differentiates humans. West does not dismiss altogether previous conceptions

⁹² Cornel West, "The New Cultural Politics of Difference," in *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 4.

of cultural criticism that were predicated solely on race. Instead, he seeks to fuse the critical theories of the Frankfurt School, the burgeoning revisionist movement within American history that opens inquiry into the histories of the working class, women, gays and lesbians, and Native Americans, and forms of popular culture into a cultural critique that recognizes and appreciates difference in black communities.⁹³

The central argument in “The New Cultural Politics of Difference” is that black cultural politics has assumed the existence of a monolithic black community. This presentation of a unified, singular black folk, while useful in addressing white supremacist notions of black identity, distorts the reality of multiple layers of difference in black communities. The efforts of black people in resisting negative and degrading stereotypes led to cultural judgments that were “moralistic in content and communal in character.”⁹⁴ These moralistic and communal presentations of black identity “rested upon a homogenizing impulse that assumed that all black people were really alike—hence obliterating differences (class, gender, region, sexual orientation) between black peoples.”⁹⁵

For West, instead of relying on a monolithic notion of what constitutes appropriate “black” sources for doing cultural politics, the new cultural politics draws on a wide variety of sources. The canon in the new cultural politics of difference reflects an eclecticism whose intent it is to present more open descriptions of contemporary black life in America:

⁹³ Ibid, 18.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 17.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

We listen to Ludwig van Beethoven, Charlie Parker, Luciano Pavarotti, Laurie Anderson, Sarah Vaughn, Stevie Wonder or Kathleen Battle, read William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, Ralph Ellison, Doris Lessing, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison or Gabriel García Márquez, see works of Pablo Picasso, Ingmar Bergman, Le Corbusier, Martin Puryear, Barbara Kruger, Spike Lee, Frank Gehry or Howardena Pindel—not in order to undergird bureaucratic assents or enliven cocktail party discussions, but rather to be summoned by the styles they deploy for their profound insight, pleasures and challenges.⁹⁶

West here is not employing what he calls a “mindless eclecticism” for the sake of appearances. Rather, he argues that this wide array of sources assists cultural critics in fighting enduring problems of racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia. He goes on to say that the homogenizing impulse of racial unity in black cultural criticism was largely driven by “anxiety-ridden, middle-class” black intellectuals who were in a crisis of legitimation.⁹⁷ West, like Michael Eric Dyson and others, wants to move beyond this homogenizing impulse and open black cultural criticism up to a multiplicity of difference. West believes that black cultural criticism and the struggle for representation of black peoples must reflect the complex realities of black life in America.

West is not alone in forging this new cultural politics of difference. Michael Eric Dyson and bell hooks are two other major figures in this cultural politics. Dyson’s work generally focuses on issues of class, religion, and race, while hook’s work emphasizes gender issues in black communities. That is not to say that Dyson and hooks’ work is focused exclusively in those respective areas. Rather, a brief perusal of their collected works shows that while Dyson and hooks both address issues of race, class, sexuality and religion, they have concerns about black life that are specific to their respective works.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 24.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

bell hooks is concerned with representations of black people in popular culture. However, she characterizes those concerns as those of a black feminist. She wants to bring black women to the forefront of cultural criticism and reify their voices as a location for doing cultural criticism. While West and Dyson speak strongly against sexism among black people, hooks conducts more detailed and sustained analyses of sexism within black communities.

The new cultural politics of difference combats internal and external representations of black people that appear to be essentialist. However, black cultural criticism often characterizes all negative representations of black people as by-products of white supremacy. For example, when speaking of the movie “Boyz ‘N the Hood,” bell hooks claims that black reactions to the violence in the movie was a “powerful testimony, revealing that those forms of representation in white supremacist society that teach black folks to internalize racism are so ingrained in our collective consciousness that we can find pleasure in images of our death and destruction.”⁹⁸

The goal of the new cultural politics of difference is not dissimilar to the goal of the old cultural politics. The new cultural politics of difference is as concerned with the presentation and re-presentation of black people as the old politics were. However, the postmodern black cultural critics like West, Dyson and hooks want to bring other mitigating factors into cultural analysis. Returning to hooks’ brief analysis of “Boyz ‘N the Hood,” she contends that black people will not be able to make “radical interventions” that may help alleviate their existential crisis unless they change the ways

⁹⁸ bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 7-8.

in which they see themselves. For hooks, movies like “Boyz ‘N the Hood” prevent black people from seeing beyond dehumanization and disempowerment.⁹⁹

When Cornel West presented the new cultural politics of difference, he mentioned that sexual orientation is one of those markers of difference that failed to advance to the fore of the old cultural politics of difference. The new cultural politics of difference then aims at broadening representations of black people and demystifying the binary oppositions of race.¹⁰⁰ West argues that the new cultural politics of difference is part of his vision of radical democracy and its transformative possibilities for black people.

The new cultural politics of difference as presented in black cultural criticism seeks to explore the multiple forms of difference that constitute black life in the United States. As noted above, the new cultural politics of difference argues that black life ought not be interpreted solely in terms of race. Class, gender, and sexuality (including sexual difference) stand alongside race in postmodern African American criticism. However, homosexuality does not receive the same thick descriptions and analyses as race, gender, and class do in the literature. Rather, homosexuality recedes into the background. When it does appear in black cultural criticism, homosexuality is presented as a problem. It is often spoken of in terms of homophobia. Michael Eric Dyson’s chapter on the black church and sexuality in *Race Rules* and bell hooks’s chapter on black gays and lesbians in *Salvation: Black People and Love* serves as illustrative examples of how the new cultural politics of difference fails to adequately take up sexual difference in black cultural criticism.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰⁰ West, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference,” in *The Cornel West Reader*, 133.

Dyson's chapter on the black church and sex is a bold chapter. Dyson begins the chapter with an anecdote about a moment in his early preaching days. The scene begins at a revival that Dyson was attending. Dyson describes in great detail the appearance of the unnamed visiting preacher, the "climax" of the sermon, and the orgasmic response of the congregation. It is worth quoting at length:

The visiting preacher, a brawny brown man with smooth skin and teeth made of pearl, was coming to the close of his sermon, a ritual moment of climax in the black church. It is the inevitable point to which the entire service builds. Its existence is the only justification for the less dramatic rites of the community—greeting visitors, collecting tithes, praying for the sick, reading scripture, and atoning for sins. These rites are a hallway to the sanctuary of zeal and vision formed by the black sermon. The furious splendor of the preacher's rhythmic, almost sung, speech drove the congregation to near madness. His relentless rhetoric stood them on their feet. Their bodies lurched in holy oblivion to space or time. Their hands waved as they shrieked their assent to the gospel lesson he passionately proclaimed. His cadence quickened. Each word swiftly piled on top of the next. The preacher's sweet moan sought to bring to earth the heavenly light of which his words, even at their most brilliant, were but a dim reflection.¹⁰¹

Dyson's use of sexual imagery is not accidental. Dyson intends to convey an image of the black church as a complex organization rife with quasi-sexual over- and undertones. In his recounting of the "climax" of the service, Dyson is careful to use language similar to that of a romance novel. The suitor, in this case, the visiting preacher, brings his lover, the congregation, to a frenzied pitch. Phrases such as "the preacher's sweet moan" and "they shrieked their assent to the gospel he passionately proclaimed" serve as double signifiers, signifying not only the emotive force of the service itself, but also the erotic components that undergird the experience of the sermon in the black church.

¹⁰¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996), p. 78.

The anecdote is not complete, however. Dyson recounts a conversation that reveals how “dishonest we’re sometimes made by the unresolved disputes between our bodies and our beliefs.”¹⁰² During the course of the congratulatory meeting of ministers in the pastor’s study, the visiting preacher inquired about a woman who he considered attractive. His “shameless lust” stood in stark contrast to his status as a married man.

Dyson asks whether this preacher was acting out of some misguided sense of “black Christian sexuality” that is both repressed and excessive. His question is asked in anticipation of his thesis: black Christians have been sexually repressed by white racism. He claims that white people have labeled black sexuality sinful. His argument regarding the negative status accorded black sexuality vis-à-vis white racism is based on a genealogical reading of the encounter between black people and white people. Dyson argues that white people demeaned black bodies in order to justify enslaving Africans. This demonization of black bodies extended to sexuality. According to Dyson, sexuality for blacks existed only in the service of breeding more black people for slavery.¹⁰³

Dyson goes on to note that the institution of the black church served as a way to protect black bodies from the assaults of white racism and as a channel to “redirect black sexual energies into the sheer passion and emotional explosiveness of its worship services.”¹⁰⁴ However, as Dyson further argues, the black church that nurtured black bodies also repressed them in an attempt to present a sexually chaste black Christian.

¹⁰² Ibid., 80.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 83-85.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 86.

This repression was employed in the service of refuting the myths surrounding black people's sexuality.

Dyson believes that what the black church needs in order to combat repressed black sexuality is a theology of eroticism.¹⁰⁵ This theology of eroticism will free black Christians from the dualism that is a pervasive feature of Christianity. This theology will allow for an embracing of our sensual, erotic selves. However, when speaking of black gays and lesbians, Dyson argues that they require a different theology tailored to accept their form of sexual expression.¹⁰⁶

His account of black gays and lesbians in *Race Rules* is centered on the theme of sexual dishonesty. This account of gay and lesbian identity presents them as Other, almost wholly separate from an assumed "normal" black people, and forced to live their sexual lives in some sort of Purgatory due to intolerance by heterosexual black people. Dyson's account of black gays and lesbians begins with a stereotypical "scenario of black church life" that "is repeated Sunday after Sunday:"

A black minister will preach a sermon against sexual ills, especially homosexuality. At the close of the sermon, a soloist, who everybody knows is gay, will rise to perform a moving number, as the preacher extends an invitation to visitors to join the church. The soloist is, in effect, being asked to sing, and to sign, his theological death sentence.¹⁰⁷

Dyson goes on to note that the presence of the gay person in the service serves to negate the preacher's attempt to "deny his legitimacy as a child of God." However, the gay

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 106.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 104-105.

person's presence and performance of ecclesiastical duties serves as a silent approval of the preacher's sermon.

Dyson's section regarding homosexuality and the black church has less to do with sexual relations between black gays and lesbians and more to do with black heterosexuals regarding black gays and lesbians as people of equal worth. For Dyson, vanquishing homophobia frees the black church to carry out its mission of providing comfort to oppressed black people. Eliminating homophobia also has the effect of freeing black gays and lesbians from "destructive behaviors." As an example of the destructive sexual behaviors that are seemingly particular to black gays and lesbians, Dyson notes that James Cleveland died from AIDS, thus indelibly correlating AIDS with homosexual practices. When Dyson presents situations such as gays remaining faithful to their partners, it appears as if he is positing a hypothetical situation rather than a reality.

bell hooks' chapter called "Embracing Gayness" is similar to Dyson's section on black gays and lesbians. That is, her chapter presents gay identity among black people as a problem to be solved. Hooks blames homophobia in black communities on patriarchy. She contends that this patriarchy did not always exist, but arose during the 1960s and 70s during the black liberation struggle. Hooks claims that there was a time in the black community when the community affirmed sexual difference. I will quote her at length:

Hatred and fear of homosexuals was taught to many black folks by religious leaders. Prior to the sixties, black folks were much more willing to interpret scripture in ways that affirmed loving one another. Growing up in our small Kentucky town, as a family we had the good fortune to live across the street from the Smith family, an elderly couple who lived with their adult son, Mr. Richard, a schoolteacher. In those days everyone used the word "funny" to describe homosexuals. We learned at school that Mr. Richard was "funny." At home we were taught to respect him, to appreciate the way he cared for his mother and father. When I told Ms. Rosa Bell, my mother, that I was writing this chapter, we talked about why

there had been this spirit of tolerance then. She shared that in small towns where black people “had known someone all their life,” you accepted folks’ sexuality because they were “just born that way”—“They couldn’t change themselves and you could not change them, so there was no point in trying.”¹⁰⁸

This passage about Mr. Richard is telling. Hooks speaks of the word “funny” as if it is a benign signifier of sexual difference. The term “funny” suggests a difference that is not quite acceptable. As Rosa Bell tells hooks later, this difference cannot be changed. However, what she implies is that change would be desirable. It would have been desirable for Mr. Richard to somehow change himself and become respectable to the rest of the community by engaging in the rites of heterosexuality. Because he cannot change, and because no one else in the community can change him, his difference is merely tolerated.

It is also curious is that Mr. Richard does not speak for himself. He never enters into the discussion about embracing gayness and embraces it for himself. Instead, hooks leaves it to her friends, relatives and acquaintances from her “small Kentucky town” to speak for him. It is hooks’ relatives (who are presumably heterosexual) who define Mr. Richard as being gay. What is even more interesting is how hooks was taught to “appreciate” Mr. Richard. She says she was taught to “appreciate the way he cared for his mother and father.” Although it is commendable that hooks was taught to appreciate Mr. Richard’s concern for his parents, it is problematic that what actually constitutes Mr. Richard’s alleged difference never surfaces. All the reader has access to are whispered assumptions that fail to acknowledge Mr. Richard as a subject with a voice and an autonomous identity. Hooks even notes that no one in her community had actual

¹⁰⁸ bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. 189-190.

evidence that Mr. Richard was gay. Despite the lack of evidence concerning Mr. Richard sexuality, hooks goes on to use the example of Mr. Richard as proof of the existence and tolerance of black gay people in pre-Civil Rights black America. She states that “by today’s standards [black gay men and women] would appear closeted, because even though everyone knew that they were gay, they did not speak about it openly.”¹⁰⁹

Hooks presents the black church as the major black institution that taught love and compassion. It is also the major black institution that perpetuates negative stereotypes of black gays and lesbians. Like Dyson, hooks locates the presence of black gay people squarely within the musical activities of churches.¹¹⁰ However, unlike Dyson, hooks claims that the ministry of music in black churches served as a refuge for black gay men in particular. She continues her analysis of homophobia by reiterating her contention that homophobia is a by-product of the militant patriarchal thinking that arose during the civil rights movement. For hooks, this turn to patriarchy continues to inform “young black heterosexual militants” who claim that homosexuality is an unnatural condition that has no place within black communities. This is a problematic claim. First, hooks simply assumes that the reader clearly understands what she categorizes as homophobia. However, if homophobia is described as negative views about homosexuality, certainly the people in her small town could be considered homophobic, as they called him “funny.” Even though the adults encouraged their children to not mistreat Mr. Richard, it is clear that he occupied a different space than the putatively heterosexual people in hooks’ childhood town.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 190.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 193.

In one passage, hooks notes that black gays and lesbians do not require the validation of heterosexuals.¹¹¹ However, in order to recover some of the most articulate and powerful black leaders, black people must come to terms with and vanquish homophobic thinking. According to hooks, “judging one another as traitors based on sexual preferences has been the easiest way to discount and dismiss the work of black people who have given or give their all to the black liberation struggle.”¹¹² It seems that for hooks, like Dyson, the only way for black people to struggle against the titanic, nihilistic force of racism is to embrace the “Other.” In the case of hooks’ *Salvation*, the other is the black homosexual. Thus, it does seem that, in order to defeat white supremacy, black gay people require, at the minimum, a level of tolerance by black heterosexuals.

Hooks characterizes gay identity as one that is framed by crisis and struggle. These crises and struggles that black gay people face are precipitated by the homophobia of black heterosexuals. The crux of her argument in this chapter is that black people who love themselves should also love black people who happen to be gay. She inverts a statement by the late Marlon Riggs that “black men loving black men was the most revolutionary act”, transforming it into a psychoanalytic statement that black men who “deal psychoanalytically with their childhoods” is the most revolutionary act. I will quote her at length:

When he was alive, Marlon Riggs, activist, scholar, and filmmaker, used to insist in conversations with me and Essex that ‘black men loving black men was the most revolutionary act.’ To Marlon this statement was

¹¹¹ Ibid, 196-197.

¹¹² Ibid., 198.

an affirmation of the importance of self-love. He believed that a self-hating individual black male, irrespective of his sexual preference, would never be able to love another black male. While I agree that anyone mired in self-hate cannot love anyone, I used to tell him that the ‘most revolutionary act’ black men could make was to deal psychoanalytically with their childhoods. For it is in childhood that so many black males, gay and straight, come to fear masculinity and manhood. This fear is often based on painful and abusive interaction between fathers and/or male parental caretakers and sons.¹¹³

If black people, men especially, love themselves and have dealt with their traumatic childhoods, they will be able to love black gay people. If I follow hooks’ argument, if black people are not able to love gays and lesbians then black people are participating in assaults on the “integrity of the black body politic.”

Both Dyson and hooks as representative figures of the new cultural politics of difference are examples of what I find problematic within black cultural criticism as it relates to sexual difference among black people. Black religious criticism essentializes black gays, problematizes them, and renders them silent by failing to explore the relationships between gay people. These shortcomings make for narrow readings of black gay and lesbian experience and fail to fully open up black cultural criticism to areas of difference in black communities.

Black cultural criticism has, as its primary concern, the survival and flourishing of black people. Black cultural critics like hooks and Dyson attack homophobia in order to advance a program of racial uplift. However, their truncated accounts of homosexuality undercut their stringent attacks on homophobia. That is, while their accounts of the damaging nature of homophobia may be strong, their accounts of gays and lesbians

¹¹³ Ibid., 204.

themselves often are thin and laden with stereotypical assumptions about black gay experiences.

In black religious and cultural criticism, black gays and lesbians have been rendered silent and spoken for. Even when black gays or lesbians speak, their words are subverted to advance a program of racial uplift. I return to hooks' subversion of Riggs' assertion that black men loving black men is the revolutionary act. Changing the statement to insist that black men must deal psychoanalytically with their childhoods implies that sexual difference is a problem rooted in some form of childhood psychological trauma. Also, rewording the statement reduces Riggs to a mute figure that can be reconfigured at will. He no longer speaks for himself, and if he does speak, he speaks incorrectly. He requires the assistance of heterosexuals to fully flesh out his own thoughts.

This subversion, or syndication of black gay and lesbian utterances is not unique to hooks. Henry Louis Gates subverts Audre Lorde in his book *Loose Canons*. In his effort to include African American literature among the literary canons in the United States, Gates claims that only the master's tools may be used to dismantle the master's house. This claim is a direct inversion of Lorde's famous quote "the master's tools can never be used to dismantle the master's house." Once again, the black homosexual does not speak for herself. She is also considered to be in error regarding her own experience.

I will quote Gates at length:

Maybe the most important thing here is the tension between the imperatives of agency and the rhetoric of dismantlement. An example: Foucault says, and let's take him at his word, that the 'homosexual' as life form was invented sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. Now, if there's no such thing as a homosexual, then homophobia, at least as directed toward people rather than acts, loses its rationale. But you can't

respond to the discrimination against gay people by saying, 'I'm sorry, I don't exist; you've got the wrong guy.' The simple historical fact is, Stonewall was necessary, concerted action was necessary to take action against the very structures that, as it were, called the homosexual into being, that subjected certain people to this imaginary identity. To reverse Audre Lorde, only the master's tools will ever dismantle the master's house.¹¹⁴

As Gates wants to point toward the necessity of forming a black literary canon, he simultaneously pushes black gay and lesbian experience to the periphery of black experience. His reversal of Lorde is a selective reversal. Gates merely mentions Lorde without attending to the context that gave rise to the statement.

Further, black religious critics' minimal use of the voices of deceased black gay writers suggests to me a selective reading that situates black gay experience within the context of plague and death. Black religious and cultural critics draw on deceased figures like Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs and Audre Lorde because their writings emphasize a particular type of protest politics operative in the black community. As I will discuss in chapter three, Hemphill's writing adopts the nationalist tone that was prevalent in the late 1960s into the 1990s. His nationalism urges black communities to confront their homophobia and to confront the HIV/AIDS crisis. The angry, strident tone of Hemphill's writings indict both whites and blacks for rendering the black homosexual invisible. In Hemphill's essays and poems, it is evident that gay sexuality is secondary to his identity as a black man in America. Black religious critics then use Hemphill as a gay exemplar of black identity. Black religious critics selectively utilize Hemphill's arguments against white racism and black homophobia in support of their larger project of combatting white supremacy.

¹¹⁴ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 38.

For black theology and African American cultural criticism, the interests that black gays and lesbians might have are taken up into the generalized interests of “mainstream” black communities.¹¹⁵ Thus, the sexuality of black gays and lesbians has no distinct identity except that as an object of hatred and oppression. By not attending to the “particular of the particulars,” black theologians and cultural critics avoid a potential quagmire of attempting to justify or validate homosexual sexual activity.

If, as Douglas and Dyson argue, the black church is a primary site of black homophobia, then the theologians and cultural critics have to attend to the possible reasons for the presence of homophobia. Theologians like Douglas and critics like Dyson and hooks might alienate the black church by speaking at length about black gay and lesbian experience. Instead, black theologians and cultural critics appeal to African Americans’ common history of white Christian misappropriation of the Bible in a desire to modify black biblical interpretations of sexuality. Perhaps speaking extensively about black gay and lesbian sexuality would be considered an affirmation of a “lifestyle” that is considered antithetical to Christian living. As can be seen in Cheryl Sanders’ critical essay on womanist scholarship, black religious critics are primarily concerned with preserving black heterosexual familial structures and the ways in which white supremacy threatens the integrity of those structures. Kelly Brown Douglas’ response to Sanders in both essay and book form do not contradict her assertions about the primacy of the black family. Rather, Douglas presents the black church as a community, a body of black people that is akin to the black family. Black homosexuality in both Sanders and Douglas’ works appears as a problem that needs to be addressed by the larger black

¹¹⁵ See hooks, “Homophobia in Black Communities” in *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 121.

family. However, as I have noted before, what constitutes the life-world of black homosexuals is never explicated. Descriptions of black gay life turn on the categories of problem and prejudice. Addressing the responses to a thinly defined identity and placing those responses as a by-product of white racism works to cement white supremacy as the “real” enemy, not totalized racial discourses in institutions within the black community.

Tolerance in Black Religious Criticism

The aforementioned theological and cultural discourses argue for tolerance of sexual difference in black communities. They contend that tolerance of sexual difference is a necessary activity in that it resists received European notions of sexuality. While both black liberation theology in the form of womanist theology and African American cultural criticism decry homophobia, I find both of these conversations to be silent concerning the black homosexual. Indeed, hooks makes mention of Mr. Richard, the schoolteacher in her town whom her parents and relatives assumed was gay, but does Mr. Richard speak for himself? Hooks argues for black communities to embrace gayness in the same ways in which her Kentucky town appears to have. However, in reading her account of her town, instead of embracing sexual difference, I find a mere toleration of Mr. Richard’s unspoken (and unshown) difference. Certainly, the townspeople were tolerant of Mr. Richard, but their tolerance did not require much more than unsupported assumptions about Mr. Richard’s identity and personal life.

In my talk of tolerance, I borrow heavily from Janet Jakobsen’s discussion of difference both in *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* and *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Tolerance*. In *Working Alliances*, Jakobsen describes

toleration as “accompany[ing] compartmentalization where each part manages its co-existence with the others, precisely by limiting contact and interaction among parts.”¹¹⁶

In other words, the concept of tolerance allows for difference by rigidly maintaining boundaries between particular differences. She argues that tolerance itself is narrow and serves only to reinforce and regulate difference. Jakobsen contends that tolerance “creates an exclusionary, rather than democratic, public” and that it also “sets up a political culture in which extremism, rather than injustice, is the major problem to be addressed in public life.”¹¹⁷ Jakobsen presents the case of Matthew Shepard’s murder and the subsequent media coverage as an example of the rhetoric of tolerance in the United States. She examines *Time* magazine’s coverage of the Shepard case.

Specifically, she scrutinizes the cover caption, “The War Over Gays.”¹¹⁸ Jakobsen argues that the preposition “over” as opposed to “on” “exempts ‘ordinary’ Americans from any responsibility for hatred or violence.”¹¹⁹ The rhetoric of tolerance absolves those who consider themselves part of the “tolerant middle.” For Jakobsen, the rhetoric of tolerance creates three polarized groups: those who hate, those who are the subject of the hatred, and those who purport to tolerate the hated.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Janet R. Jakobsen, *Working Alliances and the Politics of Difference* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 167.

¹¹⁷ Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love The Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), pp. 50-58.

¹¹⁸ “The War Over Gays,” *Time*, October 26, 1998.

¹¹⁹ Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love The Sin*, p. 55.

¹²⁰ *Ibid*, 56.

In the case of black religious criticism, homophobia becomes the primary category by which attitudes towards sexual difference are regulated. Black homosexuals become a faceless group constantly acted upon by the malevolent force of homophobia or tolerated by more “accepting” black heterosexuals. For black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics, this toleration of homosexuality has less to do with presenting a fuller picture of the lives of black gay people and more to do with absolving black heterosexuals in general and the black church in particular of culpability in homophobic discourse. As a problematic “other,” black homosexuals must, at a minimum, be tolerated in order to advance a larger, more important agenda of combating and defeating white supremacy. Thus, it is efficacious for black theologians and cultural critics to attend only to the oppression of black gays by heterosexuals instead of presenting a more complete picture of black sexual difference that is not framed by oppression. By linking homophobia to white supremacy, the black homosexual recedes into the background, while tolerant black heterosexuals advance to the foreground. Further, this form of tolerance maintains stable, recognizable boundaries between black heterosexuals and homosexuals. Tolerance in black religious criticism does not provide space for black gay self-description outside of oppression by intolerant heterosexuals and death by disease.

Conclusion

As I read black religious criticism, I find that black religious criticism relegates black gay people to a problem status. The representative texts highlighted in this chapter show that black gay sexuality as represented by black religious criticism is placed at the

margins of black experience. Instead, homophobia is foregrounded in these critical discourses as a way of distinguishing between tolerant and intolerant heterosexual African Americans. Any interests that black gays and lesbians might have are bracketed in order to advance a rhetoric of tolerance in black communities. This rhetoric of tolerance functions within a larger agenda of defeating white supremacy. As black religious critics discuss tolerance within black heterosexual communities, they argue that black heterosexuals who voice anti-gay sentiments replicate the same dysfunctional attitudes towards sexuality impressed upon black people by white people. However, the rhetoric fails to take seriously the experiences of black homosexuals beyond oppression and plague.

The rhetoric of tolerance within black religious criticism retains stable descriptions of black people by maintaining black heterosexuality as the center of black experiences and keeping black homosexuals at the periphery of black life. By turning only to a constellation of negative attitudes towards homosexuals and categorizing those attitudes as homophobia and then arguing that those attitudes are the by-products of white supremacy, black religious critics fail to substantively attend to the voices of black gays and lesbians.

What I propose to do in the next two chapters is engage in a “queering” of black religious criticism. By queering, I intend to turn to black gay men’s literature and engage in a queer reading of black experiences. The next two chapters will operate out of what I call a “black queer hermeneutics of retrieval.” Since black religious criticism functions hermeneutically, I ask how black gays have been represented in black religious criticism. As I have argued that black gay voices have receded into the background in black

religious discourse, careful attention to the literary utterances of black gay men destabilizes the centrality of black heterosexuality in black religious criticism.

The next two chapters will also represent a shift in language concerning black sexual difference in black life. Heretofore I have referred to black sexual difference through the signifiers “black gay” or “black homosexual.” Henceforth, I will begin using the term “black queer” to refer to sexual difference in black life. In shifting toward “queer,” I seek to show the ways in which black queer literature destabilizes the aforementioned stable descriptions of black life. The use of the term gay signifies a stable, fixed sexual identity that stands opposite heterosexuality. Within black religious criticism, I find that the deployment of the term gay (and lesbian) assumes two distinct sexual orientations within black life. Within black religious criticism, gay has been deployed in a way that masculinizes black queer identities. In other words, black religious critics have followed the language of the sexual revolution and its adoption of gay and lesbian as controlling signifiers of a mainstream, “coherent community.”¹²¹ Gay and lesbian signifies an easily accessible, easily identified Other who stands as the polar opposite to the black heterosexual.

¹²¹ Annamarie Jagose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 62.

CHAPTER III

THE REPRESENTATIONS OF HOMOSEXUALITY IN BLACK QUEER MEN'S FICTION

Introduction

In chapters one and two I explored representative texts in black religious criticism. I addressed the question of when, where and how black homosexuals enter into black religious criticism. I argued that black queer identity enters into black religious criticism as a “problem people.” The experiences of black queer men are often described only in terms of homophobia and plague. What is find missing in black religious and cultural critics’ accounts of black queer life and experience are the voices of black queer men. To be sure, theologians like Kelly Brown Douglas, and cultural critics like Michael Eric Dyson, and bell hooks have spoken extensively against homophobia. However, I am concerned that the limited attention to the ways in which black queer men speak of and for themselves distorts our understandings of and limits the possibilities for an appreciation of sexual difference in black life. As I argued in Chapter Two, the concerns and interests of black queer men are syndicated into a general concern for protecting black communities from the effects of white supremacy. Continuing interest in explicating resistance to white supremacy precludes a fuller reading of the lives of black queers.

Mere tolerance of sexual difference fails to present wider understandings of sexual difference in that tolerance is far less concerned with the lived experiences of black queers and more interested in presenting black heterosexuals as needing to tolerate

difference as part of a larger agenda concerned with defeating white supremacy and racism. I argued that it is openness to those voices that may enlarge our understandings of sexual difference in black communities. Commitments to the interests of particular black communities might obligate black theologians and cultural critics to gloss over the particularities of black queer experiences. The repeated use of dead writers may show that black theologians and cultural critics have not understood that there are other literary and cultural voices that can illuminate our understandings of sexual difference in black communities. I ended chapter two by presenting the possibility that black queer men can, have, and continue to speak for themselves.

This chapter turns to the voices of black queer male writers. I will look at the ways in which these writers represent sexual difference. The controlling question in this chapter is, “How do black queer writers describe and interpret black queer experience?” Do these writers subordinate sexual difference to racial difference? Further, this chapter explores the ways in which black queer writers describe black queer sexuality. While black queer male writers’ representations of homosexuality give a more complete picture of homosexuality in black communities, those representations also subordinate sexual difference to racial difference. Much of the literature written by black queer men appeals to a God who is either for or against homosexual sex and identity. The discussion of black queer writers and spirituality, however, is reserved for Chapter Four. Further, this chapter as well as the following chapter will thematize the literary expressions of black queer men. The writings of black queer men are arranged around themes of hunger, estrangement, anxiety and alienation. As I read black queer literary productions, I find that while these writers critique negative assumptions of black queer identity by

heterosexuals, they maintain a tenuous relationship with heterosexual black communities. These writers do not seek to reject black institutions (i.e., the black church) altogether. Rather, they hope that these institutions can enlarge their views of black identity to accommodate and appreciate black queer experience.

This chapter shifts from speaking about black gay men to speaking of black queer men. This shift occurs out of my usage of queer theory. I recognize that the terms gay and queer contain different significations. Annamarie Jargose contends that “queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire.”¹²² The terms gay or lesbian imply fixed sexual orientations and preferences as much as they signify discrete, stable sexual identities.

Black Queer Literary Formation

This chapter and the following chapter argues that the literary expressions of black queer men signify on both black queer experience as well as the encounters between black homosexuals and black heterosexuals. This signifying includes a transvaluation of black religious traditions in ways that call into question the rhetoric of tolerance as well as a claiming of voice. By a “claiming of voice,” black queer writers dare to “spill the tea” about their own lives, instead of waiting for black religious and cultural critics to speak for them.

¹²² Annamarie Jargose, *Queer Theory: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), p. 3.

In the anthology *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction*, the editors delineate three eras of black queer writing.¹²³ Those eras are the Harlem Renaissance (1900-1950), the Protest Era (1950-1980), and the Coming Out Era (1980-2000). The editors' rationale for demarcating black queer fiction in distinct yet interconnected eras is informative and worth quoting at length:

The methodological approach we take in the introduction is "integrative." That is, each introduction attempts simultaneously to engage black history, women's history, and gay and lesbian history (to employ the conventional identity labels), as well as to illuminate the literary movements of each of the foregoing groups. We adopt this methodology for two principal reasons. The first is to make clear that race, gender, and sexual orientation are interconnected aspects of personhood. The second and related reason is to deliberately complicate our understanding of history, civil rights, and social and literary movements. Typically, we study black history as though it were disconnected from women's history; often we study gay and lesbian history as though it were somehow not a part of women's history; and rarely do we study black history in the context of making sense of gay and lesbian history (or vice versa). The tendency is to study literary movements in the same disaggregated way.¹²⁴

What Carbado, et. al seek to do in this collected volume is to ground black queer writing historically. That is, they want to show that black queer writing is as much a part of American history as other literary productions. Further, the editors of this anthology seek to bring black queer literature from the margins of literary discourse and "expand the literary canon of black queer writing."¹²⁵

This chapter and Chapter Four makes use of the editors' periodization of black queer writing. However, it is possible that delineating black queer writing into distinct

¹²³ Devon W. Carbado, Dwight A. McBride, and Donald Weise, editors, *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual African American Fiction* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 2002), p. xvi.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, xvii.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

periods might deform understandings of black queer literary production. For example, the editors designate the period from 1950 to 1980 “The Protest Era.” While this era describes the period of the modern Civil Rights Movement, it also implies that all black queer writing that appears during these years may be categorized as protest writing. When we compare writers like Samuel Delany and Essex Hemphill, both of whom have writings that are grouped in this period, we see that their writings are radically different. Delany’s science fiction short stories and novels are general meditations on race, gender and sexuality, while Hemphill’s poetry and critical essays directly confront homophobic expressions within black nationalist thought and other areas of black life. Langston Hughes’ short story “Blessed Assurance” is another example of black queer literary productions that fall outside neat temporal categories. Although Langston Hughes is most noted for his writings during the Harlem Renaissance, “Blessed Assurance” appears in the 1960s. However, the story is categorized as part of the Harlem Renaissance, which ended prior to the publication of the story. Further, Essex Hemphill’s work is catalogued as part of the Protest Era, but it is evident that Hemphill wrote well past 1980 and into the early 1990s. Despite these concerns, the periodization of black queer literary production in *Black Like Us* is helpful for tracing broad movements in black queer literature and, as such, provides the general framework this dissertation uses for thematizing black queer literary production.

This chapter and the following chapter propose that black queer writers take an approach to black queer experiences of alienation from institutions in black life as “reading.” According to the documentary “Paris is Burning,” the read is a performance that takes place within black queer communities. To *read* someone is to verbally expose

that person's lies or hypocrisies. For example, Essex Hemphill describes a scene between two men on a bus in Washington, D.C.:

You my bitch!

No! Uh uh. *We* are bitches!

No! You listen here. *I* ain't wearing lipstick, *you* are! I ain't no bitch! I fucked *you*! You *my* bitch!

This argument continues without resolution until we arrive at 16th and U Streets. The bus is packed with passengers, and as we approach the stop, I see ten more waiting to board. Just as the first person at the stop steps aboard, a strident, hysterical voice cuts loose from the back:

"I'm a 45-year-old-Black-gay man-who *en-joys* taking dick in his rectum!" SNAP! "I'm not your bitch!" SNAP! "Your bitch is at home with your kids!" SNAP! SNAP!(emphasis author's)¹²⁶

The last statement contains the read. The 45-year-old black gay man reads his companion (Hemphill calls him "Homeboy) for his use of the word bitch, arguing that both of them are bitches but he is not Homeboy's bitch. The read exposes and inflates a person's shortcomings or imperfections. In the case of Hemphill's story, it is Homeboy's classification of his receptive partner as a "bitch" that is read. As reading evolved from the drag balls in New York City during the 1970s and 80s, it, like the drag subculture that spawned the practice, is larger-than-life. As Charles Nero points out, the read is a practice that belongs to the rhetorical strategy of signifying.¹²⁷ A *read* is performative in the sense that it is a dramatic interpretation of the person (or, in this particular case, institution) being read. The reader directly "calls out" the person being read. The

¹²⁶ Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1992), 84-85.

¹²⁷ Charles I. Nero, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature," in *African American Literary Theory, A Reader*, edited by Winston Napier (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 400.

reading is not covert. The reader not only brings the person being read into focus but also brings the reader him or herself into sharp focus.

As black queer writers perform a reading of black experience, they do so in order to bring black queer experience from the periphery of black experience. Black queer writing employs a hermeneutics of retrieval. This hermeneutics is in keeping with method employed by the writers of the Harlem Renaissance as well as contemporary African American cultural critics. Through this hermeneutics of retrieval, black queer writers seek to also retrieve those voices that have been marginalized within black queer communities. They seek to rescue the voice of the black “sissy,” the drag queen, the effeminate black queer. However, by retrieving these voices, black queer writers do not seek to marginalize the voices of the black “butch queen” or the black “trade.” By employing this hermeneutical approach, black queer writers create literatures that, as Charles Nero states, validate the lives of black homosexuals.¹²⁸

At the same time as black queer writers retrieve black queer experience from the periphery of black existence, these writers and their literatures also destabilize stable, steady readings of black identity. This reading of black queer literature’s destabilizing function is drawn from Annamarie Jargose’s deployment of the term “queer” and the development of queer theory. Jargose argues that queer theory “debunk[s] stable sexes, gender and sexualities” and that such a function “develops out of a specifically lesbian and gay reworking of the post-structuralist figuring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions.”¹²⁹ As I take Jargose’s description of this particular

¹²⁸ Ibid, 415.

¹²⁹ Jargose, *Queer Theory*, 3.

claim concerning queer theory and apply it to the literary utterances by black queers and argue that black queer writers “queer” black experience. This queering of black experience means that black identity, black experience, and black culture (including black religious expression) cannot be reduced to neat, distinct and discrete categories.

Thematizing Black Queer Literature

The Harlem Renaissance may be regarded as the first wave of black queer literature. The Harlem Renaissance gave birth to an era of black artistic production that was to dispel racist myths about black people.¹³⁰ For W.E.B. DuBois, those men and women who would produce superior cultural works were distinguished. They would help lift the black masses through their exceptional literary and artistic productions. This “talented tenth” would provide intellectual and moral leadership. Racial pride was a dominant theme during the Harlem Renaissance, and the productions of black queer artists reflected that theme. Carbado and others noted that

The topic of sexual orientation, however, lacked a forum in early black civil rights activism...Sexual minorities had been silenced out of shame, fear of criminal retribution, and, importantly, a lack of understanding of the inherently political nature of sexual identity...As DuBois’s “Talented Tenth” platform placed extreme emphasis on black respectability, the ‘outlaw’ community of homosexuals early in the century, no matter their education or social status, were effectively sidelined.¹³¹

While the politics of the “New Negro” and the Harlem Renaissance did not specifically address issues of sexual orientation, many of the writings of the period did.

¹³⁰ Devon W. Carbado, *Black Like Us*, pg. 1.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

Langston Hughes, one of the most celebrated artists of the period, wrote a short story entitled “Blessed Assurance.” In this story, Delmar (shortened to the more “effeminate”-sounding Delly) comes under the homophobic scrutiny of his father John. From the first paragraph, Hughes establishes the “otherness” of being black and gay in American society as well as in the black church. Delly’s suspected homosexuality leads to John’s “distrust of God.”¹³²

Hughes’ story does not originate from Delmar’s point of view. Rather, the story is told from John’s perspective. Delmar does not speak for himself. He is presented as a quiet, “sweet boy” who does not get into any trouble and sings in his church’s Junior Choir. As a singer, Delmar is described as having a “sweet high tenor with overtones of Sam Cooke.”¹³³

Although the story is not told from Delmar’s viewpoint, Hughes does indicate that Delmar and Dr. Manley Jaxon, the Minister of Music at Tried Stone Baptist Church, are involved in some form of romantic relationship. Early in the story, the reader finds out that Delmar has gone to New York with the Junior Choir and that “the Minister of Music had taken Delly on a trip to the Village.”¹³⁴ Hughes appears to leave the reasons for this side trip to the Village up to the reader. However, the interpretation of a romantic affiliation between Jaxon and Delmar is strengthened when the reader sees that Jaxon has written “an original anthem, words and score his own, based on the story of Ruth.”¹³⁵

¹³² Ibid., 58.

¹³³ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 60.

The work is dedicated to Delmar. Hughes notes that it would appear, based on the composition, that Ruth's part would be sung by a woman.¹³⁶ However, it is Delmar who sings Ruth's part. When Delmar begins singing, Jaxon, playing at the organ, falls off his stool in a "dead faint:"

The 'Papa, what's happening?' of [John's] daughter in the pew beside him made hot saliva rise in his throat—for what suddenly had happened was that as the organ wept and Delmar's voice soared above the choir with all the sweetness of Sam Cooke's tessitura, backwards off the organ stool in a dead faint fell Dr. Manley Jaxon. Not only did Dr. Jaxon fall from the stool, but he rolled limply down the steps from the organ loft like a bag of meal and tumbled prone onto the rostrum, robes and all.¹³⁷

His fall from the stool is dramatic, illustrating the erotic power that Delmar's singing commands. The erotic power of Delmar's voice is confirmed by his sister Arletta who notes that "Some of the girls say that when Delmar sings, they want to scream, they're so overcome."¹³⁸ Jaxon's dramatic response to Delmar's singing confirms the eroticism between them.

Hughes' story presents black queer men who exist within the black church. Their existence is not an open existence, that is, neither Delmar nor Jaxon appear to have spoken of their sexual orientation to anyone else. Indeed, it appears as if Delmar is not even aware of his transgressions. For his father, Delmar has violated nearly every tenet of black masculinity. Delmar never played sports; he did not even like football, the game

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 61.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

his father played in high school.¹³⁹ However, Delmar appears comfortable with his sexuality, whatever it might be. Not only has Delmar refused to go to a historically black college, he has decided to study at the Sorbonne:

But one night [John] remembered his son had once told his mother that after he graduated from high school he would like to study at the Sorbonne. The Sorbonne in Paris! John had studied at Morgan in Baltimore. In possession of a diploma from that fine (in his mind) Negro institute, he took pride.¹⁴⁰

Despite his dismay at Delmar's decision, John decides to allow Delmar to go to the Sorbonne:

Normally John would have wanted his boy to go there, yet the day after the Spring Concert he asked Delmar, "Son, do you still want to study in France? If you do, maybe—er—I guess I could next fall—Sorbonne. Say, how much is a ticket to Paris?"

In October it would be John's turn to host his fraternity brothers at his house. Maybe by then Delmar would—is the Sorbonne like Morgan? Does it have dormitories, a campus? In Paris he had heard they didn't care about such things. Care about such what things didn't care about what? At least no color lines.¹⁴¹

John's sudden change in attitude concerning Delmar's desire to go to the Sorbonne occurs following the Spring Concert where Dr. Jaxon faints at the sound of Delmar's voice. At first, Delmar's decision to go to the Sorbonne represents a betrayal of the race, but after the Spring Concert, John appears to no longer be able to tolerate Delmar's transgressive presence:

Well, anyhow, what happened at the concert a good six months before October came was, well—think it through clearly now, get it right.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 58.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

Especially for that Spring Concert, Tried Stone's Minister of Music Dr. Manley Jaxon, had written an original anthem, words and score his own, based on the story of Ruth:

Entreat me not to leave thee,
Neither to go far from thee.
Whither thou goest, I will go.
Always will I be near thee...

The work was dedicated to Delmar, who received the first handwritten manuscript copy as a tribute from Dr. Jaxon. In spite of its dedication, one might have thought that in performance the solo lead—Ruth's part—would be assigned to a woman. Perversely enough, the composer allotted it to Delmar.¹⁴²

The tribute, or gift, that Dr. Jaxon makes of the anthem is presented in the story as a declaration of love. Hughes, through Delmar and Dr. Jaxon, subverts the presumptive heterosexuality of the black church. Further, Jaxon uses the Bible to affirm the relationship he has with Delmar.

Hughes presents Delmar as a person who is not bound by rigid definitions. Instead, it is the heterosexual John who is imprisoned by rigid categories of race and masculinity. Ironically, it is the church that sets the scene for a transcendent moment between Delmar and Dr. Jaxon. It is the church that also sets the scene for John's apparent breakdown.

John's breakdown and his anxiety about his son's sexuality signifies something about John rather than Delmar. Delmar is oblivious to the erotic power he possesses, but his father is acutely aware of the power of sexuality. Perhaps John is not as heterosexual as he would like to appear. John has spent his life attempting to be the acceptable black man by joining the church, by participating in a black fraternity, and by marrying and having children. When Hughes describes Delmar as "a brilliant queer," perhaps the

¹⁴² Ibid.

person who is queer is not Delmar, but John. This text is a moment in which he who is queer unknowingly queers the non-queer. John is estranged. He desires to be part of an acceptable black middle class, but his wayward wife (who leaves him for another man) and his sexually ambiguous son threaten to shut him out from among the class of acceptable black persons. Being cast out from among acceptable black society would automatically render John a queer person. As such, John desires to be non-queer. However, his reaction to his son's singing queers him. As his son's singing continues, John becomes visibly upset. Delly's singing and his reaction to it destabilizes his neat concepts of acceptable black identity and throws him into confusion about the limits of acceptable black masculine performance.

The figures of Delmar and Dr. Jaxon say less about themselves and far more about black heterosexual men who aspire to be part of the elite. Delmar and Dr. Jaxon unknowingly signify on John's anxieties about masculine sexuality. Instead of Delmar and Dr. Jaxon "coming out" and affirming their sexual orientation, it is John who protests what he considers to be a deviant identity. Through his anxiety concerning his son's sexuality, John betrays to the reader an acute unease with difference. During the solo that serves as the climax of the story, the presence of Delly's queerness overwhelms John's taken-for-granted world.

"Blessed Assurance" is an atypical example of writings of the Harlem Renaissance as it is one of the few literary productions that is explicit about sexual orientation. Much of the literature from the period that is purported to deal with sexual orientation does so through inference. For example, Richard Bruce Nugent's controversial "Smoke, Lillies, and Jade," published in 1925, is a "dreamy, heavily

elliptical plot” that revolves around an apparently bisexual artist who is musing about a sexual encounter with a person named Beauty.¹⁴³ “Smoke” predates “Blessed Assurance” by over thirty years, and is considered to be the first “explicitly gay story published by an African American writer.”¹⁴⁴ Its publication in the short-lived periodical *Fire!!* signaled an end to the racial heroism of the Harlem Renaissance. “Blessed Assurance” may be read as a more explicit dismantling of the racialized assumptions of the Harlem Renaissance by using black masculine anxiety as a means to highlight black heterosexuals’ hyper-awareness and intolerance of sexual difference.

The years following the Second World War saw the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. The *Brown. v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that desegregated public schools marked the beginnings of what Carbado, et. al. call The Protest Era. During the years from 1950-1980, African American people actively worked to dismantle legal systems of segregation and de facto systems of employment and housing discrimination. As the movement grew, questions of leadership and representation surfaced. Younger black people questioned the parochial nature of the Southern leaders of the movement, while black women charged black men with blatant sexism.

Although the literature produced in this period was more diverse than that of the Harlem Renaissance, poetry, short stories, and critical essays formed the dominant literary forms of the period. This period saw greater diversity in the type of literature produced by black queer men. The writing of this period is bolder than much of that

¹⁴³ Ibid, pgs. 72-73.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, pg. 73.

which preceded it. Many of the pieces I will look at are explicit in their descriptions of gay experience, both sexual and non-sexual. During this period, writers like Essex Hemphill, Joseph Beam, and Samuel R. Delany emerged. These writers and others were more able to explore the boundaries of race, sexual orientation, and gender than their predecessors during the Harlem Renaissance. While not wholly abandoning the racial heroism present in much of the writings of the Renaissance, people like Hemphill, Beam, and Delany were able to use different genres to tease the limits of sexuality. For example, Delany used the genre of science fiction to write stories and novels that repositioned categories of race, gender, and sexual orientation.

In an essay titled “The Possibility of Possibilities,” Samuel Delany and Joseph Beam discuss the contours and possibilities of black queer literature. Both Beam and Delany understand science fiction as a genre in which future visions signify on present conditions. When Beam asks about the role of personal vision in the creation of “futuristic cultures and worlds” and the role of queers as society’s visionaries and seers, Delany notes that “it’s a societal flaw when social forces nudge gay people toward a single (or limited group of) social function(s)...if the choices for gay people is conceived of as singularly limited by the general populace, then none of the three societies provide real freedom.”¹⁴⁵

For Delany, gays should have the same “possibility of possibilities” that are open to heterosexuals. As a literary genre, science fiction proves “mental practice in dealing

¹⁴⁵ Samuel R. Delany and Joseph Beam, “The Possibility of Possibilities,” chap. in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), pp. 200-201.

with a whole *range* of different situations.”(emphasis author’s)¹⁴⁶ *Tales of Nevèryon* is a compilation of short stories located in the ancient (and perhaps mythical) land Nevèryon. In the world of Nevèryon, race, gender, and sexual orientation are fluid constructs. Gorgik, a former slave-turned-liberator is a central figure in this world. Through Gorgik, Delany calls notions of a “correct” sexual orientation into question. Gorgik’s rise from slavery to become a member of the Child Empress’ High Court and then a military captain can be read as a signification on W.E.B. DuBois’ notion of the Talented Tenth. Delany describes Gorgik as

...a man who was—in his way and for his epoch—the optimum product of his civilization...for the civilization in which he lived, this dark giant, soldier, and adventurer, with desires we’ve not yet named and dreams we’ve hardly mentioned, who could speak equally of and to barbarian tavern maids and High Court ladies, flogged slaves lost in the cities and provincial nobles at ease on their country estates, he was a civilized man.¹⁴⁷

Although Gorgik may be read as a signification on the Talented Tenth, Delany presents Gorgik in other tales in such a way as to simultaneously subvert the racial heroism of the Talented Tenth. Gorgik’s relationship with a purchased slave is of special interest here.

His relationship with Small Sarg subverts conventional “sidekick” relationships in fantasy stories. Gorgik and Small Sarg have a sexual relationship. Their sexual relationship is one that challenges contemporary assumptions regarding sexual practices in society. In “The Tale of Dragons and Dreamers,” Gorgik and Small Sarg have a revealing conversation with two women. I will quote this conversation at length:

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, pg. 202.

¹⁴⁷ Samuel R. Delany, *Tales of Nevèryon* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993), pp. 77-78.

“I see a bruised and tired slave of middle age,” said the woman who wore a mask and who had given her name as Raven...“From that, one assumes that the youngest (Small Sarg) is the owner.”

“But the Boy,” added the redhead kneeling beside her, who had given her name as Normea, “is a barbarian, and in this time and place it is the southern barbarians who, when they come this far north, usually end up slaves. The older for all his bruises, has the bearing of a Kolhari man, whom you’d expect to be the owner.”

Gorgik, sitting with one arm over one knee, said: “We are both free men. For the boy the collar is symbolic—of our mutual affection, our mutual protection. For myself, it is sexual—a necessary part in the pattern that allows both action and orgasm to manifest themselves within the single circle of desire. *For neither of us is its meaning social, save that it shocks, offends, or deceives.*”(emphasis added)¹⁴⁸

In this passage, Delany deflects our modernist ways of apprehending sexual difference.

The collar, a symbol of slavery and oppression in the context of American history is given new meaning here. Gorgik is aware of the multiple layers of meaning that the collar presents. Delany uses the linguistic conventions in science fiction and fantasy to present possibilities for sexual expression not present in conventional society. In science fiction, or, sci-fi, futuristic and fantastic settings provide a backdrop whereby the writer may make commentary regarding contemporary issues.

As a figure in science fiction, Gorgik has the luxury of criticizing contemporary mores toward sexuality. Gorgik’s awareness of the multiple layers of meaning in both the collar and in the sexual activity with Small Sarg signifies on our protestations of having a “contemporary” or “advanced” view of sexual relationships. It is because this story takes place in a time that would, by the standards of modernity, be considered “barbaric” and “uncivilized” that Gorgik’s statements concerning sexuality are both powerful and confrontational. Interestingly, Gorgik signifies on other gay literary figures in that neither Gorgik nor Small Sarg express a sense of alienation from their respective

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, pp. 238-239.

cultures. Their status as barbarians and sexual dissidents perplexes those who encounter them, much in the same ways that black homosexuals perplex heterosexuals.

Black queer writers used poetry, short stories, and critical essays to reflect on black queer experience and critique black culture. Writers like Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill did not write in the shaded tones that characterized Delany's sci-fi/fantasy stories. Nor did they write using the type of metaphorical language that is in Hughes' "Blessed Assurance." Rather, they wrote in the clear and powerful protest language that was characteristic of the Black Power and Black Arts movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As the literature and other expressive elements of the Black Arts movement sought to refute white supremacist claims of black inferiority, the literary expressions of Riggs and Hemphill and Beam sought to refute black nationalist claims of black homosexual deviance. Hemphill's essay "If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing" is a refutation of Frances Cress Welsing's claims that homosexuality among black queer men is an effect of white supremacy. In *The Isis Papers*, Cress Welsing contends that white supremacy (the oppression of peoples of color throughout the world) forces homosexuality upon black men. In her view, homosexuality is a sexual identity that is a choice. She alleges "white male and female homosexuality can be viewed as the final expression of their dislike of their genetic albinism in a world numerically dominated by colored people."¹⁴⁹ Welsing argues that homosexuality among black men is a "result of the imposed power and cruelty of the white male and the totality

¹⁴⁹ Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis Papers* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1991), pg. 86.

of the white supremacy social and political apparatus that has forced 20 generations of Black males into submission.”¹⁵⁰

Hemphill’s essay charges that Welsing’s comments regarding the nature of black homosexuality are dangerous. He places Welsing’s homophobia in “collusion” with the very same white supremacist forces she claims to agitate against.¹⁵¹ This essay serves to place black queer men as an integral part of the black liberation struggle. Rather than place, describe or explain away black queer existence as an aberration that can be eradicated, Hemphill argues that black people cannot achieve liberation without the “unqualified support and participation of Black queers and lesbians.”¹⁵²

In addition to combating black nationalist claims against homosexuality, these writers also wanted to draw attention to the AIDS crisis that was devastating black queer men across America. Keith Boykin highlights the impact of the AIDS crisis on black queer literary production when he argues that “the AIDS outbreak had...mobilized a cadre of trailblazing black queer poets, writers, artists, and film makers in the 1980s. Many of these men had already told us about a culture that predated the down low.” For Hemphill, the AIDS crisis forced black heterosexuals to deal with the reality of black queer existence. AIDS highlighted the ways in which black queer men are alienated from both black and gay communities on the basis of sexuality and race, respectively. In short, Hemphill presents a fragile minority-within-a-minority that is in crisis. While Delany’s

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Hemphill, *Ceremonies*, 60.

¹⁵² Ibid, 64.

writing plays with the boundaries of sexuality, race, and class, Hemphill's writing is much more serious and much more urgent.

Hemphill's poetry, short stories and critical essays tend to be thematized around visibility and loss. Consider this excerpt from his poem "Commitments:"

I will always be there.
When the silence is exhumed.
When the photographs are examined
I will be pictured smiling
among the siblings, parents,
nieces and nephews.¹⁵³

This piece is a signification on black peoples' assumptions regarding the presence and visibility of black queer men in families. It is a lamentation, a dirge. The words "exhumed" and "examined" denote a death. In this poem, the existence of the black queer man's sexual identity will be uncovered at a future time.

The remainder of the poem lays out the traditional events that constitute black family life in America. However, in all of these events, the black queer man must keep his identity secret. The phrase "my arms are empty" signifies the loneliness he feels he must endure for the sake of his family. His arms are "so empty, they would break around a lover." In other words, not only are his arms empty, not only has he not been emotionally fulfilled, he has been emotionally starved by his family. His sexual identity dies so that the black family may continue to have gatherings and events undisturbed. Hemphill presents a sexuality that is in need of nourishment, not a depraved sexuality only in search of carnal pleasures. This figure has sacrificed his own happiness and his desire to have a lover for the good of the black family in order to be present for other family members recedes into the background and is rendered mute.

¹⁵³ Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1992), pg. 55.

For Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam and others, writing black queer literature is to write black queer existence into black history. The process of collecting poetry, short stories and critical essays and assembling anthologies is intentional. The development of black queer anthologies signifies a collective action. Anthologies suggest a collaborative effort and a community that supports that collaboration. Anthologies of black queer literature suggest an enterprise that represents not only the existence (and, hence, visibility) of black queer men, but also the diversity found among black queer men. Anthologies serve as a signification on the politics of racial identity. They directly challenge the notion of “the black man” as a singular, monolithic concept. The anthologies, the poetry, short stories and the like exist to name “that inexpressible existence,” and give voice to black queer men.¹⁵⁴ Further, the anthologies of poetry and short stories serves as an archival record of the existence and the experiences of black queer men. When Sylvester and Hemphill write that they wish they could have found works about and by black queer men when they were younger or that they were able to find themselves in the pages of the anthologies they had begun to produce, they echo Joseph Beam’s statement that “visibility is survival.” The AIDS crisis produced an acute crisis of visibility among black queer writers. As they collected anthologies like *In The Life*, they argued that these collections would provide a record of black queer existence that would endure beyond the AIDS crisis.

By bringing visibility to black queer existence, Hemphill, Riggs, Beam and other black queer writers sought to redefine what it means to be black and gay. Their writings

¹⁵⁴ Douglas Steward, “Saint’s Progeny: Assotto Saint, Gay Black Poets, and Poetic Agency in the Field of the Queer Symbolic,” *African American Review* (Terre Haute) 33, 3 (Fall 1999): pg. 515.

are hermeneutical, existential meditations on black queer experience. The foreword to *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* is illustrative:

Being first black and then gay, these words express things that I have experienced, things found in the black queer culture that are unknown to many. It makes me proud that these writers and artists have found a place to express our feelings and experiences. Many passages were so real to me and will be real to you as well. At times I cried just remembering how it is to be both black and gay during these truly difficult times. But here we are, still proud and living, with a culture all our own.¹⁵⁵

According to the late disco singer Sylvester, who penned the above foreword, black queer experience is real and in need of serious attention. The desire for attention echoes a desire for belonging. This desire for belonging may be read as desire for reconciliation with the larger black community. However, this reconciliation cannot happen if black queer experience is merely tolerated and addressed only in the service of fighting white supremacy, for black queer life is far more than an endless, heroic struggle against the forces of white racism. Rather, the writers of the 1970s and 1980s, many of whom began facing the HIV/AIDS crisis, saw the tendency in black religious and cultural life to either dismiss black queer experience as antithetical to heroic blackness or marginalize black queer experience as deviant and deserving of divine punishment in the form of plague. They responded by arguing that black queer identity was not a problem that needed to be fixed. I also find this passage in an essay by Daniel Garrett to be provocative:

It will be important for us to begin to recover black queer history, and not simply the history of the famous or ‘talented’ gays and bisexuals such as Langston Hughes and Bessie Smith, but the black queer postman or teacher or nurse or milkman or parent. It is important to discuss with black queers over 50 the changes they’ve seen over the years.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁵ Foreword, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, edited by Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1986), p. 11.

¹⁵⁶ Daniel Garrett, “Creating Ourselves: An Open Letter,” in *In the Life*, p. 96

What Garrett is proposing is far different from what we see in bell hooks' description of Mr. Richard. As I noted in the previous chapter, if Mr. Richard was indeed gay, he never spoke for himself. He never spoke to his own existence and experience. Garrett suggests that writers pay close attention to the voices of black queer men.

These anthologies of black queer writing in the 1970s and 80s directly challenge black nationalist assumptions about black masculinity and homosexuality.¹⁵⁷ Not only were black queer writers in the 70s and 80s attempting to write themselves into the black literary canon, they were rebelling against nationalist rhetoric that marginalized black queer existence as a by-product of white supremacy. Additionally, these writers, influenced by the radicalism and the confrontational approaches of the black power movement and the sexual revolution, dared to speak the unspeakable by discussing what was at the core of black queer experience. They spoke about black queer sexuality and sexual experience.

The longing that these writers spoke of, this desire for home, also finds expression in a desire for love. These writers are open about a desire for sex, for companionship, for love. In "Isn't It Funny," Hemphill reflects on the irony of a lover's inability to see him as a man:

Look at me!
standing here
with my dick as straight as yours.
what do you think this is?
The weather cock on a rooftop?¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁷ Essex Hemphill, "I Am A Homosexual," in *Fighting Words: Personal Essays by Black Gay Men*, edited by Charles Michael Smith (New York: Avon Books), p. 150-151.

¹⁵⁸ Essex Hemphill, "Isn't It Funny," in *In The Life*, p. 108.

This passage is a demand. The man voicing this demand commands visibility. He does seek to have his sexual identity and sexual experience feminized in order to facilitate sexual relations with another man. However, he does acquiesce to his lover's desire to obscure what is real with what is ideal. The lover obscures his sexual activity with another man through the consumption of alcohol and through furtively sneaking "all over town like two damn thieves."¹⁵⁹ Hemphill's protagonist is not in love with his sexual partner. He recognizes that his lover serves the purpose of fulfilling his sexual needs. Despite that, the protagonist desires to be seen. He understands that the lover might assure himself that he is not "gay" if he can be with a man who looks like his current girlfriend.

By invoking the lover's girlfriend, Hemphill acknowledges the queerness of black queer experience. The pervasive repression of black queer sexualities leads black queer men to furtively sneak around, hiding their sexual desires from others, lest they be judged by black nationalists and black preachers as defective and detrimental to "the race." Hemphill calls into question a politics of respectability within black life by explicitly showing the effects of such a politics. This politics forces black queers to hide their erotic relationships and estranges them from a putative "normal" black culture. In this poem, what black queers long for is not tolerance by a paternalistic black heterosexual community. Instead, what they seek is a society that appreciates sexual difference.

In the 1990s, anthologies of black queer writing gave way to novels featuring a single linear narrative. These narratives centered on fictional characters. Writers like James Earl Hardy and E. Lynn Harris gained wider audiences with their representative

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

novels *B-Boy Blues* and *Invisible Life*. Of the two writers, Harris appears to have acquired greater fame. He has written six novels since *Invisible Life*. His writing has captured the attention of a black mainstream, as he has been featured or profiled in “Ebony” and “Essence” magazines as well as “Black Issues Book Review.” He has been hailed as having brought homosexuality in black communities out of the closet.

I will focus on Harris’ first two novels, *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am* and highlight his portrayal of black queer life and experience through his protagonists and antagonists. *Invisible Life* introduces the main protagonist, Raymond Tyler, Jr. At the beginning of the novel, Raymond is a college senior at the University of Alabama. He comes from a black middle-class family—his father is a politician and his mother a schoolteacher. Ray aspires to a career in politics or law, and is a highly popular member of a fictional black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Omega. He is also in a steady relationship with Sela, a cheerleader (and, thus, also highly visible) and a member of the non-fictional Delta Sigma Theta sorority. These facets of Ray’s life present him as a “normal,” desirable black man.

It is Ray’s first sexual experience with a man that destroys his “normal” world, and introduces him to the apparently abnormal world of homosexuality. Ray’s first encounter with gay sex comes in the form of a college football player named Kelvin. Ray first notices Kelvin at a fraternity party. Harris presents Kelvin in a way that signifies him as an ideal masculine type:

I noticed a tall, muscular guy who seemed to be attracting a lot of attention from all the females. He stood against one of the banisters looking unapproachable, not saying a word. He was dressed in white linen and looked too mature to be a freshman. From his muscular body I could tell he was a jock, but he wasn’t with the athletes at the party. Sela and her

sorority sisters gathered in a clique, laughing and flirting with the stranger.¹⁶⁰

Kelvin is presented in such a manner as to ensure that the reader will perceive him as an ideal masculine type. Kelvin's physique, dress, and "unapproachable" pose suggest heterosexuality.

Ray runs into Kelvin a few days later, setting into motion a chain of events that lead to Ray's first sexual encounter with a man. After an excursion to a neighboring town to buy beer, Ray invites Kelvin up to his apartment to drink some of the beers. During their conversation, Kelvin reveals that he is bisexual and inquires about Ray's sex life. In essence, Kelvin, the worldly bisexual (who is also from the more culturally sophisticated North), seduces the innocent Ray:

I didn't respond, silenced by his stare. His eyes were deep-set and defiant. Then he touched my nose and moved his fingers down to my lips. I don't know why, but I didn't stop him as he cupped my face and suddenly kissed my lips. I couldn't believe it, but it felt so natural. It was the first time I had ever kissed a man. Honest to God. But his kiss. I had never kissed anyone like this, not even Sela. Before I was conscious of it, I was kissing Kelvin back and putting my arms around waist. His force left little room for hesitation or resistance. I felt his strong body press toward mine—and an erection in my Jockey underwear, just aching to come out... What was happening? This sinful, sexual longing. This was wrong. Everything in my head screamed *no!* Yet my body was saying *yes...* On that night, the first Friday in October, I experienced passion and sexual satisfaction that I had never in my twenty-one years dreamed possible... how would I have known that rubbing two male sexual organs together would bring such a complete feeling of ecstasy? (emphasis author's)¹⁶¹

Ray's first same-sex experience constitutes a massive disruption in the continuity of his social world. However, the reader is denied information regarding the nature of that

¹⁶⁰ E. Lynn Harris, *Invisible Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), pg. 7.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, pp. 16-17.

experience. From the above passage, it may be assumed that Ray and Kelvin only kissed and performed frottage. If these are the only actions that occurred, does this encounter actually constitute sex? The ambiguity of the sexual relationships between Ray and other men persists throughout not only *Invisible Life*, but also *Just As I Am*.

The virtual silence surrounding the sexual exploits of Harris' gay characters is not a matter of merely prurient concern. This silence, particularly when juxtaposed with Harris' florid detailing of heterosexual sex, is disturbing. Later in *Invisible Life*, Ray goes home to Alabama for a Christmas visit. During this visit, he has a meeting with Sela, who, at this point, is engaged to a dentist. Not only do they meet, they have sex. Harris details Ray and Sela's sexual encounter in a way that he never does when Ray has sex with another man. The silence regarding homosexual sex continues in *Just As I Am*. In this continuation of *Invisible Life*, the story shifts away from a singular focus on Ray. *Just As I Am* follows both Ray and his ex-girlfriend Nicole Springer, a Broadway singer. Ray becomes involved with Basil Henderson, a closeted, presumably bisexual pro-football player, while Nicole becomes involved with Pierce Gessler, a wealthy Jewish obstetrician. Once again, the erotic encounters between Ray and Basil are only alluded to, while Nicole's sexual activities with men are given far more detail.

Given Harris' description of how he broke onto the writing scene, the marginalization of black queer men's sexuality in *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am* may be read as intentional. When Harris wrote *Invisible Life*, he failed to interest publishers. He then self-published the book and sold it to

...beauty salons and book groups in Atlanta's black communities. Word spread among women shocked and compelled by the story line. They bought copies and told friends to do the same, sparking first-time

conversations about the possibility that the men in their lives might be bisexual.¹⁶²

Harris presents a sanitized portrayal of the sexual behaviors of his gay/bisexual characters. This sanitized presentation of black gay and bisexual characters is easily packaged and marketable. With the notable exception of Ray's best friend Kyle, all the black queer men in Harris' novels are "unclockable," that is, they present an image of heterosexuality. They are masculine, handsome, dress conservatively, and have prestigious, high-paying jobs. These men lead glamorous lives. Raymond, as the main protagonist in *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, conforms to this masculine ideal. He is a conformist in the sense that he adopts an upper-middle class status and profession as a lawyer in order to refute white supremacist stereotypes of black men. His character is successful, intelligent, articulate, and deeply concerned with the ways in which his sexual orientation might be perceived by both black and white people.

In Harris' work, those black queer men who do not conform to the idea of a black masculine hero draw either rebuke from Ray or Basil or pay a stiffer penalty for their transgressions. Ray's best friend Kyle is an example of the marginalization of less desirable representations of black homosexuality. Kyle is portrayed as a flamboyant "queen." His language and mannerisms portray him in stark contrast to the more conservative Ray. Kyle's world is filled with men, sex, alcohol, and drama. Kyle's first appearance is, in and of itself, a dramatic entrée into the narrative:

When I opened the door to the small, dimly lit bar, I immediately spotted Kyle sitting on his regular stool at the end of the bar close to the door. He

¹⁶² Theoloa S. Labbe, "E. Lynn Harris: Black, Male, Out And On Top," *Publishers Weekly* (New York) 248, 31 (2001): pg. 54.

had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was surrounded by several admirers, who seemed to be hanging on his every word...¹⁶³

Kyle's positioning and demeanor are intended to represent sophistication, popularity, and style. His holding "a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other" is evocative of the ways in which Hollywood actresses like Bette Davis and Joan Crawford presented their characters in movies. This performative gesture signifies a diva-like attitude, in which the person projects an air of urban sophistication. Harris' use of the phrase to define Kyle is no accident. Kyle is presented as "a master at all the wiles and ways of the black queer community."¹⁶⁴ It is Kyle who teaches Ray the linguistic and expressive codes of the black queer community in New York City.¹⁶⁵ Kyle is glamorous, but appears to exist in Ray's (and, later, Nicole's) shadow. His honesty about his sexual orientation is nullified by his excessiveness. Indeed, his honesty is portrayed as excessive. Where Raymond appears to be extremely selective about his sexual partners, Kyle is portrayed as being very indiscriminate about his sexual conquests.

Kyle's queerness remains marginal in that Raymond comments negatively on it. Although Ray initially describes Kyle's flamboyance and openness about his sexuality as refreshing, Ray also describes it as trying. However, as I read Kyle's queerness, I find it odd that his queerness leads him repeatedly to disappointment and, finally, a tragic death from AIDS.

The black queer men presented in Harris' novels are quite different than those in the writings of Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam. Whereas black queer men in their writings

¹⁶³ Harris, *Invisible Life*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 48.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*.

protest the silencing of homosexuality in black heterosexual communities by signifying on the hypocrisy of said communities, the black queer men in Harris' writings have their sexualities bracketed by issues of race and class. The crisis of sexuality, so blatant and urgent in Hemphill's work, appears as a deeply personal and individualistic moment for Harris' protagonists and antagonists.

As an example of the black queer literature that emerged in the 1990s, Harris' novels present a packaged and sanitized portrayal of black queer experience. Using the conventions of soap operas and traditional romance novels, Harris packages his protagonists and antagonists in appealing and desirable forms. While the characters in Harris' novels acknowledge to some extent the alienation of sexual difference in institutions of black life, those forms of alienation recede into the background in favor of presenting more the entertaining drama of boardroom and bedroom machinations.

In the early years of the twenty-first century, black queer literature continues to follow the dramatic, soap-operatic conventions of the 90s. For example, J.L. King's *On The Down Low: A Journey Into The Lives of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep With Men* is a book that purports to be a factual account of black men who consider themselves heterosexual but have sex with other black men. King claims to illuminate a shadowy area of black life in America by presenting "the down low" as a valid, yet predatory sexuality. According to King, the rising number of HIV-positive black women is attributable to black men who conceal from their wives and girlfriends their sexual relationships with other men. These men do not consider themselves to be gay, for, as King argues,

Gays march in parades, hang out at gay clubs, go to gay beaches. Gay people may even attend gay churches. They may have the gay flag on their

homes and cars...Open and out gay men are not confused about their sexuality...These brothers accept their gayness...But they don't enjoy sex with women, because they are *gay*.(emphasis author's)¹⁶⁶

For King, gay, heterosexual, and bisexual are stable, fixed sexual identities. Bisexual men “want it all” and are honest with their male and female sexual partners. However, men on the down low, or, the DL, are “so undercover, so in denial...that they are *behind* the closet.”(emphasis author's)¹⁶⁷ These men are so alienated from acknowledging their own sexual desires, that they will not classify sexual activity with other men as being “remotely homosexual.”¹⁶⁸

King presents the DL as a coping mechanism for black men to be able to deal with the fact that they have sex with other men. He describes sexual relations between men as purely predatory and devoid of any emotional attachment. By deifying black women, whom he describes as being the innocent victims of predatory black men, and by vilifying black queers (in which group I include those “on the DL”), King presents black queer sexuality as an internal threat to the life of black communities. In King's estimation, there is no institution in black life that black men who are on the DL do not utilize in order to find other DL black men.

King claims to have written *On the Down Low* in order to save black women from unwittingly being infected with HIV from black men on the down low. In the

¹⁶⁶ J.L. King, with Karen Hunter, *On The Down Low: A Journey Into The Lives Of 'Straight' Black Men Who Sleep With Men* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), pp. 19-20.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 20.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 21.

introduction to the book, King makes it clear that his allegiances are primarily to God, black women, and, by extension, the black community:

I do this work because I still love my ex-wife, the mother of my children. In high school, she was more than just my girlfriends. After we married, she was more than a wife. She was my best friend, confidante, and running partner. It's difficult for me to fathom how I lied to her, but I did...I do this work for all of the women who have loved me and who deserve the truth from me during a time that I was unable to give it.¹⁶⁹

The themes of alienation that Hemphill, Riggs, and other black queer writers evoked in earlier periods appear in King's work. However, King takes the forms of alienation that, in Hemphill's poetic utterances, forces black men to conceal their sexual orientation and remain estranged from their families, churches, and friends and positions them as entrances into salacious descriptions of black "Others." Further, he seems to confirm the "love the sinner, hate the sin" position held by Protestant black churches when he argues that the black church should "provide support systems for men who want and need help dealing with homosexual desires."¹⁷⁰ He claims to promote "education, compassion, and understanding," but that compassion seems to be in the service of protecting black heterosexual relationships, not affirming black queer sexuality.

Keith Boykin counters King's assertions about the DL in *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America*. Boykin argues that the DL is not a separate sexual orientation, but a slang term that signifies an illicit sexual relationship. He presents a brief history of the down low within black popular culture, arguing that black people, heterosexual and homosexual, have kept sexual secrets. Initially known as "creepin'," the DL simply was when a person kept unfaithful behavior a secret from their

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, xv-xvi.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 84.

boyfriend or girlfriend.¹⁷¹ Further, Boykin seeks to divest the DL of its primarily racial connotations by invoking the 2004 scandal involving former New Jersey governor Jim McGreevey. He argues that McGreevey's duplicitous behavior and its subsequent national exposure should expose the presentation of the DL as a primarily African American "phenomenon" as a meaningless lie concocted to cast black gay men as a scapegoat for the HIV crisis in black American life. He argues

When black men become involved in fake relationships, we process the issue by ascribing negative characteristics to an entire group of people, and we tend to think in global terms concerning the breakdown of the black family and other such nonsense. When white men become involved in fake relationships, we simply call it what it is and move on. We don't make sweeping generalizations about all white men, and don't try to study the pathology of their behavior.¹⁷²

What Boykin intends in *Beyond the Down Low* is a different presentation and interpretation of black queer existence and experience. He argues that the major institutions in black America must do more than offer empty platitudes in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Boykin offers an eight page long treatise on practical steps black people can take to prevent HIV infection as well as educate others about the disease. However, his final chapter, entitled "Love and Fear," is a vague, three page conclusion to the text. It appears to be a critique of what Boykin considers to be a "politics of fear." He argues that "fear paralyzes our productivity by turning our constructive energy into

¹⁷¹ Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2005), pp. 39-60.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 72.

panic and defensiveness.”¹⁷³ Further, he implies that those who live on the DL and those who are afraid of men on the DL are paralyzed by that fear.¹⁷⁴

As I read both King and Boykin, their writings are framed by the existential crisis of prejudicial attitudes of heterosexuals and the ongoing HIV/AIDS crisis. King’s *On the Down Low* presents black men as sexually confused predators who, due to the prejudicial attitudes of heterosexuals, threaten the integrity of the black community. *On the Down Low* is less an argument for increased understanding of the complexities of black queer life and more an apologetic treatise that seeks to reconcile these defective men on the DL with the more acceptable black heterosexual community. While Boykin’s *Beyond the Down Low* seeks to counter the negative assertions about black queer men in King’s work, his descriptions of black queer life are often framed between prejudice and plague.

Conclusion

The representations of sexual difference by black queer writers are diverse. Black queer writers have used and continue to use multiple genres and forms to re-present and package experiences of sexual difference. The different moments in black queer writing address the intersections of sexual difference, race, class, religion, and gender.

The black queer literature that emerged prior to and during the Civil Rights movement saw writers like Langston Hughes and Samuel Delany using short stories, poetry and critical essays to explore sexual identities. However, those stories and poetic expressions were not explicit. Hughes’ “Blessed Assurance” may be interpreted as a

¹⁷³ Ibid, 286.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 287.

signification on the attitudes of heterosexuals toward homosexuals. Delany's science-fiction/fantasy stories, while investigating the possibilities of sexuality, sexual difference, and race, exist on the periphery of even black queer literature. These writings represent less a coherent movement and more individual attempts to call attention to assumptions about sexuality and race.

Those literatures written by people like Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam represent a massive shift in descriptions of black queer life. Sexual difference became the primary location from which these writers fashioned their short stories, novels, poetry, and essays. Using the linguistic and stylistic conventions of the Black Arts/Aesthetic movement, Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam portray sexual difference as a category equal to race. That is, the black queer writers of the 1970s and 80s wrote out of a revolutionary impulse. These writers saw what they perceived to be a crisis. They contended that the institutions of black life (the church, family, educational institutions, etc.) had ignored and vilified the presence of black homosexuals.¹⁷⁵ Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam wrote to counter arguments presented by black nationalists that claimed black masculinity as the province of black heterosexual men.

The popular novels of E. Lynn Harris represent yet another shift in black queer writing. The novel became the primary mode of literary expression for black queer men in the 1990s. This time, black queer literature followed romantic conventions and was far less revolutionary and far more commercial than the writings of Hemphill, Riggs, and Beam. The dramatic and serialized nature of black queer writing in the 90s made these writings more commercial and marketable to a mass audience. While these writings did,

¹⁷⁵ Hemphill, "I Am A Homosexual," 151-152.

in some instances, reveal some of the complexities of black queer experience, they also present black queer men as heroic exemplars who wish to reconcile their sexual identities with their racial identities.

In this introductory overview of black queer literature, I have found that the majority of the literature explores the intersection of and tension between sexuality and race. I believe that these representative texts enlarge our understandings of the complexities of race and sexuality. I also believe that, though these writings enlarge our understandings of sexual difference among black queer men, these writings are not perfect texts. As they open us up to wider categories of difference, they may also present distorted images of black queer men. The literature of black queer men presents images of black queer identity that are heroic, tragic, comical, and ironic. Through these images, we see that black queer experience in particular, and black experience in general, is diverse and multi-faceted.

In the next chapter, I continue my discussion of black queer literature. However, I examine how black queer literature takes hold of religion and spirituality. I am primarily interested in how the literature of black queer men represents the encounter(s) between homosexuality and the black church. I will investigate the tensions between race, sexuality, and religion that these literary expressions uncover.

CHAPTER IV

TRACING REPRESENTATIONS OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN BLACK QUEER MENS' LITERATURE

Introduction

The previous chapter engages in an introductory analysis of black queer literature. It traces different movements in black queer literature and analyzed the representations of black queer experiences in those literatures. I argued that those literatures signified on conceptions of masculinity and race. I also found that black queer literature serves as a response to negative conceptions of black homosexuality. Black queer literature assumes the task of defending an oppressed minority-within-a-minority from the vicissitudes of white supremacy and black homophobia.

As I noted in chapter three, black queer men's literature is often organized around themes of alienation and longing, or, a search for home. Black queer writers address this longing and combat alienation by seeking to make the invisible (black queer existence and experience) visible. That is, by writing about black queer experiences and sharing them in anthologies, short stories, poetry, and novels, black queer writers show diversity in black queer life that is often marginalized in more common descriptions of black homosexuality. This chapter engages in an analysis of the ways in which black queer men's literary expressions take hold of religion and religious life. Several questions will guide this chapter. How do black queer men take hold of the black church? How does black queer literature address the black church—if at all? In the literature of black queer men, is the church held accountable for its marginalization of black queer experience?

Finally, are black queer men's literary expressions open to categories of transcendence? This chapter proposes that black queer men approach spirituality and religious life through a variety of strategies. I will show that black queer writers approach religious life in black communities by signifying on major motifs in Christianity, critiquing what they perceive to be deficiencies in black religious life and by presenting revised approaches to spirituality.

Black Queer Literature and the Black Church

I begin my examination of black queer men's literary responses to the black church by returning to Langston Hughes' "Blessed Assurance." As noted in Chapter Three, Hughes' story acknowledges the existence of black queer men in the church. However, the story portrays that existence as an invisible existence. The parishioners and clergy are seemingly oblivious to the existence of black queer men in their midst.

In the eyes of Delmar's father, John, the black church is an important site that validates middle-class black sensibilities. Delmar's suspected homosexuality causes John embarrassment. Hughes couples John's homophobic fear with his shame at having been abandoned by his wife (for a man who had "racket connections) and shows that John's "distrust of God" may be less an apostasy and more a fear of how he might be perceived by the members of Tried Stone Baptist Church. John perceives strong pressure from his social world to conform. Those forces occlude his ability to appreciate his son for whom he is and what he may be.

Hughes infuses Delmar's climactic solo and Dr. Jaxon's response with sexual tension. Once the voices of the silenced and marginalized are unleashed, they overwhelm the "normative" heterosexuality represented by the traditional conservative services:

Amens and Hallelujahs drowned in the throats of various elderly sisters who were on the verge of shouting. Swooning teenage maidens suddenly sat up in their pews to see the excitement. Springing from his chair on the rostrum, the pastor's mind deserted the pending collection to try to think what to say under the unusual circumstances.

"One down, one to go," was all that came to mind. After a series of pastorates in numerous sophisticated cities where Negroes did everything whites do, the Reverend Dr. Greene had seen other choir directors take the count in various ways with equal drama, though perhaps less physical immediacy.¹⁷⁶

Delmar and Jaxon's sexual orientation disrupts the veneer of "sophistication" black churches use to mimic white traditions. This story serves as a parody that reveals the hypocrisy of middle-class black Christians. John is portrayed as a typical middle-class black Christian who operates out of the racial philosophy of the Talented Tenth. For John, any outward expression or action that does not "uplift the race" may be seen as a blemish upon the race. Hughes portrays John as a man who is concerned only about the superficialities of religious life.

As a parody, "Blessed Assurance" shows how a preoccupation with status and racial obligation blinds homophobic black Christians to the transformative capacities black queer Christians bring to the black church and black communities. The story implies that there is no contradiction in being black, gay, and Christian. However, the character of John represents those who seek to make homosexuality incommensurate with blackness and Christianity. When John screams "Shut up!" at Delmar, he shouts his denial of Delmar's homosexuality as well as shouting his desire for Delmar to fit within

¹⁷⁶ Devon W. Carbado, *Black Like Us*, pg. 61.

the parameters of heroic black masculinity. In the end, it is the proper black citizen in the form of John who transgresses. He transgresses because he is incapable of seeing beyond his narrow conceptions of black identity.

While “Blessed Assurance” deals with black homosexuality and the black church in a comical fashion, Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* deals with the intersection of homosexuality, religion and spirituality in a more sustained and serious fashion. It follows the struggle of two men, Horace Cross and his cousin, James Malachai Greene. Horace is young, black and gay, while James, or, Jimmy, is a heterosexual minister. The story unfolds over April 29-30, 1984 and December 8, 1985. The temporal situation of this book is important, as it positions Horace’s existential crisis and resolution to that crisis as a signifier on the Christian story of Jesus Christ’s crucifixion.

Over the course of April 29th and going into April 30th, Horace struggles to literally transform himself into an animal.¹⁷⁷ He seeks to become a bird. Keenan tells us why Horace wants to become a bird:

He wanted to be alone, to think undistracted. But now he was buoyed by the realization that he knew how he would spend the rest of his appointed time on this earth. Not as a tortured human, but as a bird free to swoop and dive, to dip and swerve over the cornfields and tobacco patches he had slaved in for what already seemed decades to his sixteen years. No longer would he be bound by human laws and human rules that he had constantly tripped over and frowned at.¹⁷⁸

Those “human laws and human rules” impede Horace’s ability to fully embrace his sexual orientation. For Horace, the only way to escape from the limiting expectations of his community is to become something altogether different. Failing that, the pressures of

¹⁷⁷ Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) pp. 11-15.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 12.

trying to reconcile his seemingly contradictory sexual orientation with the expectations of his community drive him to suicide. In a very detailed analysis of *A Visitation of Spirits*, Robert McRuer notes that Henry Louis Gates “praised Kenan’s novel...but was nonetheless wary of the suicidal ending.” Gates indicated that he would have preferred for Kenan to move Horace from the small North Carolina town of Tims Creek to the “big city.”¹⁷⁹ I will quote McRuer at length:

Gates’ prescription for Kenan is in many ways predictable; the “migration to the big city” is a widely available trope in contemporary lesbian and gay literature, with a long and illustrious history. And yet I find the need to transport characters like Horace off to the “big city” symptomatic of a regional elision in queer theory generally. What Gates elides in his suggestion to Kenan is the fact that taking Horace to anywhere entails taking him from somewhere. In this case, the unmentioned “somewhere” is the fictional Fundamentalist Christian, rural, African American community of Tims Creek, North Carolina. Not the most conducive atmosphere for the expression of queer desire, certainly; but as liberal lesbian and gay thought likes to remind us, “we are everywhere,” and rather than concede that “everywhere” actually means New York and San Francisco, I am interested in the (perhaps more radical) implications of recognizing that “everywhere” includes such an apparently marginal and inhospitable place.¹⁸⁰

The above quote also can be applied to Hughes’ “Blessed Assurance.” Hughes “removes” Delmar (albeit temporarily) from his location and places him in the “big city,” that is to say, Greenwich Village. The big city represents new (and possibly frightening) ideas as well as a facelessness that allows one the possibility of acting upon previously suppressed urges or feelings. The removal of the black queer man from the small town is a trope. It is a trope that operates as a double signifier, signifying on both the black queer

¹⁷⁹ Robert McRuer, *The Queer Renaissance: Contemporary American Literature and the Reinvention of Lesbian and Gay Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 1997) pg. 69.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

man and the town from which he is removed. The relocation of the black queer man from the small town to the big city continues to render that man invisible insofar as his rural roots are concerned. This recurrent trope implies that the black queer man has no place in the small town and the only place he can survive is in the faceless “big city.” The sundering of one’s roots by relocating to the big city also renders that person invisible to and alienated from his or her home. However, Kenan keeps Horace in Tims Creek. He does not “save” him by evacuating him to the large faceless big city.

According to McRuer, Horace occupies the position of the trickster. Referring to Gates’ work in *The Signifying Monkey*, McRuer notes that Horace’s presence does the work of double signifying. Horace signifies upon the racial and sexual inflexibility of Tims Creek. McRuer reads Horace’s eventual suicide as a transformative moment for the community akin to Jesus’ crucifixion. However, there is no resurrection. There are only James Greene’s recollections of his deceased cousin.

McRuer also notes that *A Visitation of Spirits* functions as a signifier on James Baldwin’s *Go Tell it on the Mountain*. There are obvious parallels between the two novels. The respective protagonists of both books, Horace Cross and John struggle with their burgeoning homosexuality. Both seek solace and validation within the framework of black Christian traditions. Both have had expectations placed upon them by their communities. Horace understands that his family, church, and community have placed their hopes in him. That expectation constrains his freedom to explore his sexuality. His cousin, Jimmy Greene, reflects on how that constraint “got to Horace” as he remembers a Thanksgiving meal in which Horace is expelled from the table after his aunts and grandfather see Horace’s pierced ear:

This is what finally got to Horace, isn't it? I keep asking myself. He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was concerned. First, he loved men; a simple, normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. And second, he didn't quite know who he was. That, I don't fully understand, for they had told him, taught him from the cradle on.¹⁸¹

Despite being told who he was by the community, Horace knows that he is not totally what or who they say he is. Baldwin's John Greene, like Horace, is constrained by the expectations of his religious community. Those salvific expectations conspire to trump John's homosexuality:

Everyone had always said that John would be a preacher when he grew up, just like his father. It had been said so often that John, without ever thinking about it, had come to believe it himself...Around the time of his fourteenth birthday, with all the pressures of church and home uniting to drive him to the altar, he strove to appear more serious and therefore less conspicuous.¹⁸²

The communities that Horace and John inhabit are closed communities and are dominated by the black Christian church. Although John lives in New York City, his surroundings may be read as rural, just as Horace's world of Tims Creek, North Carolina. John's father (or step-father) refuses to allow his family to watch television, or go to the movies or participate in the lived experiences of the rest of New York. Harlem seems to inhabit an entirely different space than the rest of New York, which John identifies as being occupied almost exclusively by white people.¹⁸³ Both Horace and John are warned by their families to avoid emulating the ways of white people. Through the eyes of

¹⁸¹ Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*, p. 188.

¹⁸² James Baldwin, *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1981), pp. 11, 13.

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, pg. 36

Horace and John, we see that their families and communities construe sexual difference as being part of those “ways” of being white and sinful.¹⁸⁴

Using their communities as the bases for their ethical analysis, Horace and John come to see their sexuality as sinful, and in need of alteration. Neither boy is able to reconcile their sexual difference and their racialized identities. Thus, they employ radical strategies to resolve those identity conflicts. Religion stands in the background in Horace’s case and in the extreme foreground in John’s case. Horace’s decision to kill himself comes after he refuses to “kill” the demons of his past.¹⁸⁵ After John’s apocalyptic conversion experience, he figuratively kills his desire and submits to the authority of the church.

The black church in these novels functions as an oppressive institution. In one way, both *A Visitation of Spirits* and *Go Tell It On The Mountain* call into question black liberation theology’s assertion that the black church stands as a liberating institution. While Cone, Hopkins, and Douglas recognize that the black church marginalizes some black people, both Kenan and Baldwin’s novels show how stark and potentially devastating that marginalization can be.

The church stands at the center of the black community in Baldwin and Kenan’s works. Baldwin’s John does not confront the church’s assumptions about homosexuality. Rather, his salvation experience is a capitulation to the oppressive forces of the church’s teachings about homosexuality. Horace’s suicide can be read as an act of defiance. He knows he cannot exist as he is in the world of Tims Creek. Thus, he seeks transcendence

¹⁸⁴ Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*, pp. 186, 187.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 81.

by transforming himself into an animal. He knows he cannot transform the church. In the form of his venerable family, Horace realizes that he cannot force the church to accept his sexual difference. His one act of overt defiance finds him banished from the “community” in the form of the Thanksgiving table.¹⁸⁶

The dominant theme in black queer literature regarding sexual difference and religion is “otherness.” The church functions as a totality wherein difference is absorbed or eliminated. In the case of John Grimes, the church through conversion absorbs his sexuality. For Horace Cross, he does not allow the church to absorb his homosexuality, and thus, he is cast adrift. The black church in the works of Kenan and Baldwin offers black queer men no tools with which to resolve their identity conflicts. Instead of serving as a harbor or haven for John and Horace, the black church constrains their complex identities and presents them with the notion that it is they who are in need of transformation in order to take their place as heroic black men.

As the church stands as the mediating institution between John and Horace’s respective struggles with their sexualities and their conception of God, neither boy is able to formulate a conception of God that is not punitive and remote. For example, Horace derives his understanding of God from his community as well as his own experiences. He had been told that God answers prayer and that God would “fix” his sexuality.¹⁸⁷ However, he is led to reevaluate the unquestioned goodness of God:

I remember church and praying. I remember revival meetings and the testifying of women who began to cry before the congregation and ended their plea of hardships and sorrow and faithfulness to the Lord with the request for those who knew the word of prayer to pray much for me. I

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, pp. 181-188.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, pp. 110-114.

remember taking Communion and wondering how the bread was the body and the grape juice was the blood and thinking how that made us all cannibals. I remember worrying that I was not worthy of taking Communion because I was unclean, no matter how much I prayed and asked forgiveness. I remember wondering what God looks like and I remember after a time stopping wondering what he looked like and wondering more who he was, thinking it was surely possible that he did not like some people so much, despite what my grandfather and the Bible said.¹⁸⁸

Through John and Horace, Baldwin and, more pointedly, Kenan suggest that it is not black queer men who require transformation, but the black community vis-à-vis the black church that requires transformation. It is at this point that I agree with McRuer that Horace Cross brings John Greene's more ambiguous sexuality out of the closet. However, Horace goes further in its representations. Horace signifies on Greene's belief in God and the transformative power of the church.

The productions of the protest writers (Hemphill, Riggs, Beam) present the church as one of the chief enemies of black queer men. Their writings decry the black church's silence in the face of the AIDS epidemic, equating that silence with complicity in the deaths of black queer men. Their charges against the church follow the pattern of the rest of their writings in that there is a strong sense of urgency. They want to call attention to the ways in which the church marginalizes, oppresses, and invalidates black queer men.

These writers do not challenge the assertion that the black church stands as a prominent institution in the black community. Rather, they want the black church to accept sexual difference as a part of black identity that need not be apologized for nor demonized. Charles Nero links the black church's resistance to sexual difference with

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, p. 251.

sexism in his essay, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature." Nero notes how the black church is "eager to oppress gay people to prove its worth to the middle classes. For the sake of conformity which, with hope, leads to success, the middle class is willing to oppress its children."¹⁸⁹

Essex Hemphill's writings are an example of Nero's charge against the black church. In Hemphill's poetry and essays, it is clear that he believes that the black church is a major purveyor of homophobia in the African American community. His poem "Heavy Breathing" excoriates the institutions of black life in America for rendering black queer people invisible. Hemphill questions politics, religion, and middle-class status in black communities. They are all illusory, and do not provide any safety for black queer men. His criticism of the black church is potent:

I enter the diminishing
circumstance of prayer.
Inside a homemade Baptist church
perched on the edge
of the voodoo ghetto,
the murmurs of believers
rise and fall, exhaled
from a single spotted lung.
The congregation sings
to an out-of-tune piano
while death is rioting,
splashing blood about
like gasoline,
offering pieces of rock
in exchange
for throw-away dreams.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Charles I. Nero, "Toward A Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature," chap. in *Brother To Brother: Collected Writings by Black Gay Men* (Los Angeles, California: Alyson Publications, Inc., 1991), p. 241.

¹⁹⁰ Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1992), pp. 19-20.

Hemphill suggests that the black church itself is ill. The believers' murmurings come from a "single, spotted lung," signifying that the church as an organism is ailing. This phrase indicates that the church is as ill as the homosexual men it castigates and alienates. The "out-of-tune" piano may serve as a signification on what he would consider to be outdated sermons and messages within the church. The black church's refusal to acknowledge black queer men stands in stark contrast to the reality of the hundreds of thousands of black queer men who suffer from HIV/AIDS.

The black church in Hemphill's poem offers few resources for dealing with the complex realities of black life in America. Hemphill accuses the black church of offering a "pie in the sky" theology while "death is rioting." His accusation is contemporaneous with black liberation theology's criticism of illusory theologies. Hemphill and black liberation theology wants to call attention to the precarious predicament in which black America finds itself.¹⁹¹ Both Hemphill and black liberation theologians argue that black communities have been ravaged by HIV/AIDS, black-on-black crime, and a general sense of lovelessness. They both see existential crises in black life that demand the black church's attention.

G. Winston James' short story "Church" discloses a more complex and ambiguous relationship between black queer men and the black church. This ambiguity is displayed in the opening sentences of the story:

Eerie. That's what it was. Eerie walking into that church after all those years. It was like hearing myself say, "Why do I gotta go to church, Mama?" all over again. It was like hoping that it wasn't first Sunday this

¹⁹¹ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. xix, xx, 24-27, Essex Hemphill, *Ceremonies*, p. 189.

Sunday and praying that if I had to be there, at least the Gospel Choir would be singing.¹⁹²

The story, told from a first person perspective, details Langston Ambrose's emotional reconciliation with the church. He goes back home to die after contracting a fatal cancer due to HIV infection. As he stands before his congregation, he appears to be a successful black man. Langston has acquired all the accoutrements of black middle-class status: he has graduated from New York University, has written several books and has traveled around the world. He has also performed what would be called in the language of the church, missionary work, as he has done work for Save the Children and CARE.¹⁹³

After a lengthy monologue during the church service, Langston partially discloses his illness. That is to say, he tells the church that he has cancer and omits the fact that he is HIV-positive. It is his mother that screams "Can't no AIDS just take my baby!" However, the significance of that admission appears to be lost in the emotional tide that sweeps the congregation. During this emotional moment, Langston realizes that the church is a family that is part of the Black family.¹⁹⁴ He later wishes that he "could believe in more than just gospel music."¹⁹⁵ At the end of the story, Langston questions the nature of God by wondering if God is "whatever made you truly happy in life." If, as Langston believes, God is whatever makes a person happy, and if being with other men

¹⁹² G. Winston James, "Church," in *Shade: An Anthology of Fiction by Gay Men of African Descent*, Bruce Morrow and Charles H. Rowell, editors (New York: Avon Books, 1996), p. 91.

¹⁹³ Ibid, p. 96.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, p. 101.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

makes Langston happy, then God cannot be opposed to black queer sexuality. His answer seems to be an affirmation of his heretofore unspoken sexual orientation.

The difference between James' short story and Hemphill's poem are stark. Hemphill wants the black church and the black community to be more than what it appears to be. His writings present a black church that is disconnected from the lived experiences of black people. This disconnection leads to the impoverishment of the church's message. Hemphill's poem portrays a church that is ineffectual in bringing solace or change in the lives of black queer men. James' portrayal is much different, in that the church is portrayed as an integral part of the black community, and one that can, when pressed, bring comfort and reconciliation in the lives of black queer men.

Hemphill does not find spiritual fulfillment within the black church, but within the outcast black queer community. In the arms of black men, Hemphill finds those "carnal secrets" that are hidden from those loyal to the cult of black masculinity:

For my so-called sins against nature and the race, I gain the burdensome knowledge of carnal secrets. *It rivals rituals of sacrifice and worship, and conjures the same glassy-eyed results—with less bloodshed.* A knowledge disquieting and liberating inhabits my soul. It often comforts me, or at times, is miserably intoxicating with requisite hangovers and regrets. At other moments it is sacred communion, causing me to moan and tremble and cuss as the Holy Ghost fucks me. It is a knowledge of fire and beauty that I will carry beyond the grave. When I sit in God's final judgment, I will wager this knowledge against my entrance into the Holy Kingdom. There was no other way for me to know the beauty of Earth except through the sexual love of men, men who were often more terrified than I, even as they posed before me, behind flimsy constructions of manhood, mocking me with muscles, erections, and wives. (emphasis mine)¹⁹⁶
(Brother to Brother, p. xxviii)

¹⁹⁶ Essex Hemphill, "Introduction," in *Brother To Brother: Collected Writings by Black Gay Men*, Essex Hemphill (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 1991), p. xxviii.

Hemphill categorically rejects the Christian notion that homosexual sex is deviant. Rather, homosexual sex is sacred and represents more than just a union between two men. At times, sex is so transcendent, that Hemphill argues that it reveals knowledge of the world that cannot be attained through Christian piety. Hemphill intimates that homosexual sex is so sacred that it is analogous to being possessed by the Holy Spirit. This possession and this knowledge is even hidden from those with whom Hemphill has sex, for they are. He argues that Christian piety may even cause more bloodshed than sexual relations between two men.

Black Queer Literature and Spirituality

Critical essays by black queer men reinforce Hemphill's assertion that black queer men can find their spirituality among each other and, at the same time, transcend the notions of the "Talented Tenth" that straightjacket the African American community as a whole. In *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, E. Patrick Johnson presents a compelling argument concerning the fusion of the sacred and the spiritual in the black queer club scene. He recognizes that the club is a place that re-positions the black queer body and soul. The club is a place that affirms the holiness and sacredness of black queer male sexuality.¹⁹⁷ Johnson recognizes the erotically charged moment of black church worship that Michael Eric Dyson recognizes and criticizes in *Race Rules*. However, Johnson wants to critique that moment from a black queer perspective. He

¹⁹⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African American Gay Community," in *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, Delroy Constantine-Simms (Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2000), p. 89.

notes that while the black church affirms the sexual subtext within worship, the church “ holds a contradictory and duplicitous attitude toward sexuality in regard to its heterosexual members, [and] the same is true for its attitude toward its gay and lesbian members.”¹⁹⁸ Here, Johnson is not significantly different from Dyson in his assessment of black church attitudes toward homosexuality. However, Johnson moves beyond criticism and toward an expanded conception of black queer spirituality. Like Hemphill, Johnson recognizes that the black church may not be capable of meeting the spiritual needs of black queer men. Its insistence on re-presenting a “Manichean dualism” regarding the body and sexuality prevents the black church from resolving the tension surrounding sexuality in general, and surrounding black queer men in particular.¹⁹⁹

Johnson, in a similar, yet different manner than Dyson, turns to the particular experiences that constitute black queer life. It is similar to Dyson’s work in *Race Rules* in that Johnson follows Dyson’s method of using anecdotes to illuminate certain facets of black experience. However, it is different in that Johnson attends to a particular feature of black queer life that is absent in either Dyson’s *Race Rules* or *Open Mike*. Johnson details his experiences at black queer nightclubs. He notes that the culture of black queer clubs in some ways reflects the culture of black churches. The club fuses the carnality of dancing, sweaty bodies with the religious fervor of a Pentecostal church service. The disc jockey’s metamorphosis from a mere record spinner into an exhorter transforms him into a worship leader styled in the tradition of black Baptist ministers.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 95.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 90-95, Dyson, *Race Rules* pp. 83-95.

Even gospel songs are transformed into affirmations of black queer identity. For example, the Shirley Caesar song “Hold My Mule” was transformed into a popular “house” song. The song tells the story of a man named Shoutin’ John who belonged to a church that did not “believe in dancing and speaking in tongues.” The church did not appreciate John’s different manner of worship. Ultimately, the church expels Shoutin’ John. However, John’s reply to the deacons of the church is “If I can’t shout in your church, hold my mule, I’m gonna shout right here!” The house version modifies lyrics like “It’s just like fire! Shut up in my bones!” by adding the word “Yes,” which is repeated over and over rhythmically in the background. Johnson notes that the song is transvalued from a confirmation of Christian righteousness to an affirmation of the sacredness of black queer sexuality. Johnson argues that the church is repositioned in this song:

John’s relationship with the “dead” church is similar to African American gay men’s relationship to the church in general. Despite John’s perception that the church is “dead,” he decides to join, hoping he might be able to put some “life” into it. But John soon discovers that the church is not only dead—it is spiritless. Indeed, the members work hard to “quench” the spirit in him and in the church in general...the black church condemns the African American gay male’s sexuality, denying him the opportunity to be out within the context of the church.²⁰⁰

In this view, the black church quenches black queer men’s sexuality, forcing them to find alternative forms of expression of their sexuality. Johnson believes that when black queer men incorporate elements of black Christian worship into the nightclub space, they

²⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 104.

“forge alternative epistemological frames of reference...they create new ways of understanding the linking of body and soul or sexuality and spirituality.”²⁰¹

In this essay, Johnson wants to show is that black queer men are not constrained in the ways in which they take hold of their sexuality and spirituality. He argues that the black church constrains black bodies in general. The black queer nightclub allows the black queer body to “affirm both the sexual and the spiritual.”²⁰² This affirmation allows black queer men to claim their sexualities with neither apology nor need for repentance. He follows Dyson’s call for a “theology of queerness” in the black church. Supposedly, this theology would build bridges between gay and straight church members. For Johnson, this theology of queerness would “imagine that the same God who can identify with other oppressed groups...can also identify with gays and lesbians.”²⁰³ This God affirms black queer men’s sexuality.

This open-ended affirmation of black queer men’s sexuality is a hallmark of the writings of E. Lynn Harris. However, Harris’ characters come to reconceptualize God and humankind after overcoming tumultuous events in their lives. Sheila Smith McKoy notes that Harris’ novels function in the tradition of black Christian morality plays. In these plays, the protagonist, usually a decent Black person (often a female) is seduced by the wily ways of either the “big city” itself or a person from the big city. At the end, the protagonist usually finds that he or she should have followed his or her mother’s advice regarding fidelity to the church. Harris follows this formula in his novels, with some

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid, p. 105.

²⁰³ Ibid, p. 108.

variations. In Harris' novels *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, Raymond Tyler is presented as a Christian exemplar. In McKoy's essay "Southern Gay Masculinity," she notes that Harris' works are centered on Christian morals as well as black queer identity:

It is worth noting that the contemporary black queer writer most concerned with reforming Christian doctrine and church policies concerning homosexuality is E. Lynn Harris. Harris, whose works are as much gay romance novels as they are novels about Christian morals, is a best-selling author. All except one of his black queer characters, Basil Henderson, are committed homosexuals and Christians. His novels, then, work to develop a Christian theology that validates gay desire.²⁰⁴

It is also worth noting that although Christian doctrine, policies and morals are in the foreground of his novels, Harris does not place any of his characters within a particular church tradition. The presence of a physical church does not figure prominently in Harris' novels. That is to say, not one of his black queer characters holds any sort of office within a church, nor is a regular church attendee. However, the black church is present in the background of his characters' lives. The title of Harris' second novel, *Just As I Am* itself is a signification on a Christian hymn. The song itself is a hymn about repentance and return to a God who forgives humans of sin. Harris' use of the song as a title for a novel about the lives of black queer men suggests that Harris is re-positioning homosexuality as an identity marker that does not require God's forgiveness.

As a novel that is centered on Christian morality, Harris' black queer characters embody three positions with regard to black queer sexuality. His protagonist, Raymond, is the black Christian moral exemplar. Basil Henderson, the antagonist in both *Invisible*

²⁰⁴ Sheila Smith McKoy, "Rescuing the Black Homosexual Lambs: Randall Kenan and the Reconstruction of Southern Gay Masculinity," chapter in *Contemporary Black Men's Fiction and Drama*, edited by Keith Clark (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 34n.

Life and *Just As I Am* is Raymond's moral opposite. Raymond's friend, Kyle, is the worldly "trickster."

Raymond, as the moral center of *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, offers commentary about the moral status of the black community. Unlike E. Patrick Johnson, the fictional character Ray offers a less theological opinion of black queer nightclubs and bars. As he describes his experiences at the Nickel Bar, a popular after-work hangout in New York City, Raymond distinguishes himself from the rest of the patrons both morally and socioeconomically:

As I sipped my drink, I eavesdropped on the conversation of two men standing close by. "Miss Thing, I can't believe you didn't work that fine man," the guy standing next to me said to his friend in a high-pitched voice. "He wasn't my type, Miss Honey. Did you see those hands? Trust me, he's not the one," the other giggled. I wondered if these guys talked like that most of the time, and if they did, where did they work?

The Nickel Bar had not changed since the first time I had come here in almost three years before. A real fear came over me the first time I entered. I remember feeling as though I were walking through a dark tunnel into a secret world. The music was loud and aggressive. Beating faster than my heart.²⁰⁵

Raymond's comments about other black queer men serve as moral commentary about black queer men who do not fit into the black masculine ideal. These nameless black queer men are shallow and obsessed with sexual exploits. Raymond cannot imagine these men having high-paying, successful careers with their overly effeminate behavior and speech patterns. Raymond attaches a moral significance to black queer men's mannerisms.

In Raymond's view of black queer club culture, the music does not serve a liberating function. The black queer nightclub space does not uncover anything more

²⁰⁵ E. Lynn Harris, *Invisible Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), pp. 44-45.

than sexual desire bereft of commitment. The black queer nightclub only foments predatory sexual instincts among black queer men. His description of another black queer hangout, Keller's, is even less complimentary. The club space is a place where black queer men meet other black queer men, primarily for the purpose of having sex, something that Raymond claims he does not do.²⁰⁶

It is clear that Raymond possesses a moral character that neither Basil nor his friend Kyle possess. It is that moral character that highlights his ambiguity about his sexual orientation. Raymond claims that the black queer "lifestyle" is an arduous lifestyle. His moral assessment of said lifestyle is not positive. As a person with Christian morals, Raymond sees the black queer lifestyle as one rife with deception and promiscuity. He seems to avoid some of the pitfalls by maintaining some form of moderation when drinking and refraining from one-night stands. He displays a preference and desire for monogamous relationships. Although in *Invisible Life* we see Raymond dating and having sexual relationships with men and women, the reader sees that Raymond possesses a moral consciousness through his conflict about his duplicity. Although it appears that Raymond has accepted his sexual orientation by *Just As I Am*, it is clear that Raymond continues to have problems with self-acceptance and spirituality. Towards the end of the book, it is Kyle's death that serves as the catalyst for Raymond's rebirth as a self-affirming homosexual.

Kyle represents the "typical" amoral black queer man. He drinks, he smokes, and he has multiple one-night-stands. Raymond describes Kyle as being averse to

²⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 68.

commitment.²⁰⁷ Although Kyle becomes Raymond's best friend and "mentor in terms of teaching [him] about the gay world," Raymond often refers to Kyle with disdain. For example, early in *Invisible Life*, Kyle meets a man named Rock on the same night as Raymond meets Quinn, the married man with whom he subsequently develops a relationship. Raymond's description of Rock is not flattering, nor is his condescension to both Rock and Kyle.²⁰⁸ Raymond is critical of Kyle's sexual partners, his attitude and his mannerisms. Raymond's criticism implies that Kyle is less than Raymond on the basis of his overtly effeminate mannerisms and his aesthetic taste in sexual partners.

As noted above, Kyle's death serves as the sacrifice that makes Raymond's self-actualization possible. However, what is being said when Kyle dies? It appears that Kyle must die, to fulfill a trope in black literature. That trope is the one of the tragic mulatto, or, in this case, the tragic homosexual. Kyle is a "sissy," and, worse, is an unrepentant sissy. Even though Kyle has all the visible accoutrements of middle class black life (an Ivy League education, and a high-paying-but-undefined occupation), he does not conform or wish to conform to the tenets of heroic black male existence. He does not even pay lipservice to the church, preferring to "hold court" in the black queer bars and nightclubs of New York City. As a homosexual, he is the receptive partner ("bottom") and proud of it, unlike his friend Raymond, from whom the reader only gets a vague notion that he even has sex with other men. In *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, Kyle even serves as a form of "gay conscience" to Raymond, chiding him and

²⁰⁷ Ibid, pp. 74-75.

²⁰⁸ Ibid, pp. 50-51.

admonishing him to be as proud of his sexual orientation as he is about his racial identity.²⁰⁹

Kyle appears to embody some traits of the African Trickster as explained by Henry Louis Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. Gates contends that the trickster figure embodies several characteristics. He says “a partial list of these qualities might include individuality, satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty, closure and disclosure, encasement and rupture.”²¹⁰ Kyle does not embody all the characteristics of a trickster figure, but, as Gates argues, trickster figures do not have to encompass all of the above characteristics.²¹¹ As Raymond’s guide to the black gay community of New York City, Kyle displays an individuality that does not conform to Raymond’s expectations of blackness. That is, Kyle does what he wants to do, with whom he wants to, and when he wants to do it. His quick wit, expressive gesturing and generally “feminine” behavior mocks black expectations of macho behavior.

However, Kyle’s presence as an unrepentant, unapologetic homosexual is presented as problematic. Unlike Raymond, Kyle does not make his racial identity a priority. He did not attend a historically black college, nor does he concern himself with “giving back to the community”—at least, not prior to contracting the AIDS virus. Kyle’s expression of his homosexuality is presented as unreflective and excessive. His

²⁰⁹Ibid, pg. 51, *Just As I Am*, pp.89-91.

²¹⁰ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 6.

²¹¹ Ibid.

unreflective and excessive homosexuality as expressed in his alcoholism and promiscuity is presented as immoral, and thus, demands some form of punishment as a consequence. Thus, Kyle not only becomes addicted to crack cocaine in *Invisible Life*, he contracts HIV and subsequently dies from complications as a result of AIDS in *Just As I Am*, thus fulfilling the trope of the tragic homosexual. Kyle's tribulations and death serve as a moral warning to those who would embark upon a "lifestyle" of excess. Kyle functions as a scapegoat, upon whom all the sins of the black queer community are cast. His death is atonement, not for himself, but for Raymond, as demonstrated in the letter he leaves for Ray in the event of his death:

I want you to live your life the way you feel most comfortable. Please know that Christ made you from His own image. If it's good enough for Him then why worry about mere mortals... You know I'm leaving because it's time. Maybe God needs me to deal with all the kids taking over heaven.²¹²

It is interesting that Kyle notes "Christ made you from His own image." At first, it may be read as a mistake or typographical error on Harris' part. However, I read this statement as a re-positioning of Christ for black queer men. Jesus Christ and assumption of the message of the Gospel as a message of love and acceptance becomes central in the lives of black queer men like Raymond.

John Basil Henderson is decidedly the antagonist in both *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*. In the first book, Basil's presence as an antagonist is almost tertiary. He appears as one of Kyle's clients after Kyle becomes a male escort. Kyle is enamored with Basil's sexual prowess and physical beauty, while Raymond, drawing on his knowledge of professional football, realizes that Basil (using an alias) is actually a player

²¹² Harris, *Just As I Am*, 306.

for the fictional New Jersey Warriors. Basil's moral ambiguity concerning his sexual orientation does not lead to critical reflection as it does with Raymond. Instead, Basil's ambiguity leads him to unabashed deceit and promiscuity.

Basil is presented as Raymond's opposite number. He is similar to Raymond in physique: both men are tall, muscular, light-skinned and have light-colored eyes. However, that is where the similarities end. Where Raymond does not consciously use his attractive physical appearance to further his goals, Basil does. Where Raymond sometimes goes by "Ray," Basil drops his first name altogether. If Kyle is amoral, then Basil is altogether immoral, exhibiting behaviors that Harris presents to be the worst traits in black queer communities. He is a violent, duplicitous, selfish person driven by his desire for sex. In *Invisible Life* and *Just As I Am*, Basil cannot acknowledge that his desires for sex with men are a part of him and that those desires are acceptable.²¹³ By the end of *Just As I Am*, Basil has condemned himself to life of futility by proposing marriage to a woman.

Basil is portrayed as a sexual predator, one who trades on his good looks and his carefully cultivated masculine charm. His personality is a play or a signification on the biblical scripture that portrays Satan as possessing the capability to transform into an

²¹³ In later works, Harris seems to take bell hooks' advice concerning black men dealing psychoanalytically with their childhoods seriously. Harris creates a backstory for Basil that explains away his intemperate sexual lifestyle. In *Not A Day Goes By*, Harris reveals that Basil had been sexually molested by his uncle. This molestation, apparently, serves as the precursor to Basil's later promiscuity.

appealing form.²¹⁴ Basil is able to use his physical appearance to his benefit, and to the detriment of unsuspecting gay men and heterosexual women.

Basil is enslaved to his passions. He is either unwilling to or incapable of governing his passions. He is committed to a life of vice, nor does he desire the Good--in the case of Harris' novels, the Good can be construed as survival and flourishing of both traditional black nuclear families and non-traditional families such as gay and lesbian relationships. Unlike Raymond, homosexual sexual practices have no possibility of expressing a deeper emotional connection whatsoever, nor should they. Basil views men who express love for other men as weak. For him, sexual relationships between men take on a nakedly aggressive characteristic. He uses other men's bodies as conduit to his own sexual satisfaction. At the end of *Just As I Am*, Raymond sums up Basil's attitude toward sexual relationships between men:

...this is more than sex, Basil. You can't use me for your sexual needs. I can no longer use you. I want and deserve more and so do you. But you've got to understand that relationships between men are not just about sex.²¹⁵

Raymond's admonition to Basil may also be read as an admonition to heterosexual black communities. As the moral black queer man, Raymond is telling heterosexual black people as well as predatory black queer men that sex and sexuality among and between black queer men does not and should not be perceived as merely the result of animalistic, uncontrolled urges.

²¹⁴2 Corinthians 11:14, *New Oxford Annotated Bible, Third Edition, New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press) 2001

²¹⁵ Harris, *Just As I Am*, pg. 345.

Conclusion

Black queer men's literature addresses issues of black queer men's sexuality and spirituality in diverse ways. The various literatures I have examined show the various literary strategies black queer men employ in reconciling their sexual orientation with religion. These strategies include parody, and cultural and religious critique. This chapter has also shown that many of these writers call for a theology that is open to sexual difference in black communities.

When approaching spirituality, black queer men's writings are organized around themes of alienation, reconciliation and revision. The black church as the central religious institution in black life offers little for black queer men. Although it is supposed to be a source of comfort in a hostile world, its members and leaders often prevent black homosexuals from receiving that comfort. Rather, as black queer writers demonstrate, it serves as another source of hostility towards those whom Janet Jakobsen terms "sexual dissidents." The ignominy of having to refer to a deceased lover as merely a "friend" or risk having the church deny that lover the same funeral rites accorded to a heterosexual partner is as demeaning and painful as being refused service in a store on the basis of skin color. Black queer writers show the ways in which black heterosexuals make black homosexuals appear as a threatening Other. What is operative in alienating black homosexuals is the presentation of black homosexuals as immoral and operating outside the bounds of nature. This presentation of black homosexuals as immoral and unnatural as an appeal to standards of biblical morality allows the black church to adopt strategies of minimizing black queer existence and experience. The strategy within black queer writing is to expose these tactics within the black church as antithetical to not only the

putative mission of the black church, by damaging to the black community. In his 1996 book *One More River To Cross: Black and Gay in America*, Keith Boykin tells the tale of a black queer man's confrontation with a preacher at a friend's funeral. He also notes that at Essex Hemphill's funeral, his accomplishments as an outspoken and prolific black queer writer were minimized.²¹⁶ Despite presenting black queer protagonists who lead fabulous lives with six-figure incomes according to soap-operatic conventions, E. Lynn Harris' characters also struggle with their relationship to the black church. Further, as they reconfigure their relationship to the black church, Harris' characters come to realize happiness by making their sexual selves visible to their family and friends instead of allowing themselves to remain marginal in the life of the black community. Whether through fiction or critical essays, black queer writers rebel against alienation through foregrounding black queer experience.

Through foregrounding black queer experience, black queer writers are also able to present revised views of God and human beings. A reimagined vision of God's relationship to the world hints at the possibility for reconciliation of black queers to those black religious communities that had marginalized them. For the protest writers like Essex Hemphill, the black church stands as an impediment to black queer men's search for a spirituality that affirms their sexuality. Hemphill's literature represents a strand in black queer men's literature that rejects the black church altogether and agitates for a different conception of God. These writers present a God who is open to multiple expressions of sexuality. They lambaste the black church as an institution that prioritizes race to the exclusion of other concerns within black communities. This prioritizing

²¹⁶ Keith Boykin, *One More River To Cross: Black and Gay in America* (New York: Anchor Books, 1996) pp. 123-125.

binds the church up in totalities. Writers like Hemphill occupy what I call a liberal position as it concerns black queer men and the church.

However, other literature by black queer men shows that some black queer men want to the black church to change. Using G. Winston James and Randall Kenan as an example, we find that some black queer men identify with traditional black churches. They represent a moderate approach to the black church and black queer men's spirituality. These writers show that the black church, and, by extension, black communities benefit from the presence of black queer men. They show that sexual difference is not a threat to the existence or integrity of black churches. Rather, they show that the denial and marginalization of black queer men is a detriment to the flourishing of black communities. They present a moderate viewpoint regarding black queer men's sexuality as it intersects the interests of the black church.

E. Lynn Harris' writings represent what I call a conservative position regarding black queer men, their sexuality and their spirituality. Raymond represents a black queer man who prioritizes the concerns of black community above the concerns of black queer communities. Indeed, it is difficult to find a black queer community in Harris' novels. Black queer men in Harris' novels require religion and spirituality as a civilizing force. As Harris' chief protagonist in several novels, Raymond Tyler represents the black queer man who desires the same goods as other, more "normal" black heterosexual people.

Harris' writings represent a conservative approach to the black church and spirituality. While the black church may need to amend its homophobic ways, the character of Raymond offers an indictment against the politics of black homosexuality. Raymond's critique of black homosexuality may be read as an implicit indictment of

Hemphill's more aggressive politics. While Hemphill rejects the black church because of its homophobia, Harris' protagonist wants black queer men to have a place in the life of the church. Raymond criticizes the black church's homophobia, but does not explicitly hold the black church accountable for the marginalization of black queer men. Harris' gay characters assume total responsibility for their moral choices. For Raymond, morally praiseworthy behavior for black queer men entails monogamous relationships and fidelity to the interests of the black middle class. Although Harris reveals in a later novel that Basil had been molested by an uncle and offers that as a possible excuse for Basil's promiscuity, it is Basil who has to, as bell hooks states in *Salvation*, "deal psychoanalytically with his childhood."

God is repositioned in the literary works of black queer men. God as presented in much of the literature is open to difference. Sexual difference is not a threat to God's existence. Black queer writers uniformly call for a theology that does not bind God to limited conceptions of existence and opens God as well as the human being up to sexual difference and multiple accounts of being in the world.

While these writers call for a theology that is open to sexual difference, their theological frameworks are somewhat unclear. As it is not the task of black queer novelists to present a clear theological framework, my previous statement is not a criticism, but an observation. I infer from their writings a desire to present a different conception of God. Black queer men's writings have shown diversity in approaches to God, spirituality, and sexuality. However, the theological sources for those approaches have, at times, been thin and not well sustained. For example, E. Lynn Harris' characters repeatedly espouse a belief in a God who loves all God's children, but God retains an

aloof presence that is not immediately accessible to black queer people. Although Horace Cross in *A Visitation of Spirits* signifies a call for revision within black religious communities, it is not clear how black queer folk are to reconfigure God, if at all.

Despite that critique, and as I noted above, it is not my argument that reconfiguring God's relationship to black homosexuals is the work of fiction writers. Black queer novelists, fiction writers, poets and the like have, as I outlined in chapter three and in the preceding pages, concerned themselves with black queer visibility. They have outlined recurring themes and motifs in black queer life in an attempt to write black queer identity into visibility. Thus, they have been more concerned with black queer experience than doing theological work. However, when I turn to critical essays such as Horace Griffin's "Their Own Received Them Not" or Elias Farajaje-Jones' essay in *Black Theology, A Documentary Witness*, I find their theological formulations lacking in two areas. First, both Griffin and Farajaje-Jones address homophobia as a problem for black religious criticism that requires amelioration. Second, I find that black queer theologians like Griffin and Farajaje-Jones tend to elide discussions of black sexuality as they discuss black homosexuals as victims of the homophobia present in the black church.

They present a dialectic in black queer life that mirrors black liberation theology's dialectical approach towards black life in general. Whereas the black liberation theologians and other black religious and cultural critics speak primarily about the dialectic of race, Griffin and Farajaje-Jones speak of a dialectic of sexuality. In this dialectic of sexuality in black life, black heterosexuals are charged with being complicit in a program of oppression. As James Cone earlier charged white Christians with

complicity in the oppression of black peoples, Griffin asserts that “the question therefore becomes whether African American heterosexuals are going to do justice toward their daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, mothers and fathers, other relatives, friends, colleagues and fellow Christians who are lesbian and gay.”²¹⁷ Griffin is not speaking about black queer sexuality as much as he is indicting black heterosexuals for having spoken negatively about other black people who happen to be gay.

Griffin’s discussion of God is not dissimilar from discussions of God that are present in the writings of heterosexual black religious critics. God is as anthropomorphized in his talk of a “true black liberation theology” as it is in Cone’s early texts. God for Griffin is a liberating entity who has positive intentions toward its creations. Like black heterosexuals, God has to take sides in the dialectic between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Since heterosexuals oppress homosexuals, Griffin argues that God can and must stand on the side of the oppressed. Therefore, God cannot help but favor black homosexuals.

As I argued in chapters one and two, such theological discourses need to be revised. As I read black queer writers like E. Patrick Johnson who argue for an expanded view of black queer spirituality that draws on the black church but also draws on the lived experiences of black queer people, I believe that it is not efficacious to attempt to graft this form of black queer spirituality onto a monolithic description of God. As I noted in the first chapter, presenting a God who is oriented toward the oppressed keeps black queer people bound in crisis with no hope of transcendence. As I read black queer writers and as they read their existence and experiences and as they *read* those

²¹⁷ Horace Griffin, “Their Own Received Them Not,” p. 100.

institutions in black life that would exclude them, I find that an expanded, non-anthropomorphic theological formulation that is oriented toward transcendence rather than finitude is capable of speaking not only toward those moments of oppression and finitude, but also speaking about the specifics that constitute black queer life and experience.

The previous discussion about black queer men's literary approaches to religion and spirituality lead to more questions. If, as I have shown in this chapter, black queer writers "read" the black church for constraining black queer people's sexuality within the rubric of black heterosexuality and if these writers present a desire to revise descriptions of God and God's relationship to and with human beings, then what should these revised descriptions entail? As black queer novelists and poets are not theologians and ethicists by training, where and how then does the black queer religious critic enter into discussions of black queer sexuality? In the next chapter, I will suggest that attention to black queer literature as it approaches black spirituality offers black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism resources for a constructive ethics. I call this ethics an ethics of openness. I will argue that the contours of this ethics open our discussions of liberation beyond freedom from white supremacy and move black theological discourse towards critical and creative engagement with the various modes of difference that are present in African American life.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this dissertation has been to explore black liberation theology and African American cultural criticisms' descriptions of black queer experience. This dissertation has addressed what I perceive to be a problem within these critical discourses, namely, the marginalization of black queer experience and the syndication of black queer experiences into larger racial concerns. I have asked where, when, and how does homosexuality in black life appear in black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism and have found that homosexuality appears in and through homophobia and plague. By presenting black queer experience and identities as subject to the vicissitudes of homophobia and the HIV/AIDS crisis, black theologians and cultural critics facilitate a discussion about black queers that does not actually attend to the particulars of black queer experience. To be sure, black queers do experience the alienating effects of homophobic discourse and the fear surrounding HIV/AIDS and they attend to homophobia and fear of plague in black communities in their writings, but black queer writers also concern themselves with the representations of black queer experience and identity.

I characterize such descriptions of black queer life by black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics as problem and plague. The problem of homophobia in black communities somehow leads black queers to engage in destructive lifestyles (such as the DL), and, in turn, leads to the spread of plague in otherwise "normal" black heterosexual communities. As I read black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics' discussions of black sexual difference as a problem

that fosters the spread of plague, I cannot find much hope for black queers. It appears as if the only hope available to black queers is to have “tolerant” black heterosexuals “embrace” their wayward “gayness.” However, such a tolerant embrace appears as vulgarly pragmatic, since African American cultural critics and black theologians argue that failure to tolerate homosexuals in black communities and in the black church is derived from white supremacist notions concerning black sexuality. Thus, if black heterosexuals do not want to be perceived as negatively as those who perpetuate white supremacy, then, according to black theologians like Douglas and cultural critics like hooks and Dyson, black heterosexuals would do well to eschew homophobia.

However, I have argued that perhaps black theologians and African American cultural critics should pay greater attention to the black queer subject. As black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics argue that difference in America matters, I contend that in speaking about black sexual difference requires adequate attention to the subject. To that end, I turned to black queer literature. My examination of black queer literature was guided by several questions. First, what are black queers saying about themselves? How are they constructing their identities as black, as queer? Further, how do black queers attend to their religious experiences? My reading of black queer literature in chapters three and four argues that black queer writers seek to not only write themselves into black experience, but also to describe their experiences and revise critical approaches to sexual difference in black life and black religion. These literatures call attention to what Victor Anderson calls the “curious body of the black homosexual.” When Anderson speaks of this curious body, he echoes the literary works of the writers invoked in chapters three and four. Anderson is quoted at length:

Looking at social and cultural reality, if we get past stereotyping the poor sissy choir director and organist or the butch-dyke truck driver, we Black queers and lesbians are the Black Church's fathers and mothers, its sisters and brothers, uncles, aunts and cousins. In the Black community, we nurture Black youth as their teachers from pre-school till college. We are Sunday school teachers and preachers, deacons, ushers, and trustees, not just church musicians and choir directors. We also not only play the worship instruments, we also write the hymns and songs that feed Black heterosexual members' souls Sunday after Sunday and throughout the week, even in the darkest hours of their despairs. Seen from social and cultural reality, the Black homosexual's bodily presence both in the Black community and church calls into question the very idea of a 'homosexual lifestyle.' In both the church and the Black community, the everyday, ordinary existence of Black queers and lesbians at work and play, in family life and in the pews, fosters and nourishes forms of generative care and creativity that keep Black culture and the Black Church themselves open to novelty and creativity.²¹⁸

Anderson's statement that black queer people are present and visible in the life of the black church calls to mind Essex Hemphill's statement in his short essay "Does Your Mama Know About Me?" that "our communities are waiting for us" and again in his poem "Commitments" when he states that "I will always be there."²¹⁹ The problem of visibility in the black church, in black life and in black religious criticism has not been the absence of black homosexuals. Rather, the problem has been how black heterosexuals speak about black queer presence. By evoking a previous generation of black queer writers, Anderson signifies on black religious criticism's tendency to reduce black queer presence to a problem that needs to be corrected. Anderson and other black queer writers are asking the same question that serves as the organizing question of this

²¹⁸ Victor Anderson, "The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 310.

²¹⁹ Essex Hemphill, "Does Your Mama Know About Me?" and "Commitments," in *Ceremonies* (San Francisco: Cleis Press, 1992), pgs. 46 and 55.

dissertation, namely, when and where does the black homosexual enter into black religious criticism?

I argue that the black homosexual enters into black religious criticism in and through black queer literature. Through fiction, poetry and critical essays, black queer writers write black queer experience into existence, foreground sexual difference, and offer possibilities for transcending fixed representations of black sexuality. The writings of black queer men and the characters, situations, and metaphors contained therein not only speak to these possibilities, they represent black queer people speaking for themselves, rather than being spoken for. The task of the black queer religious critic as represented by these literatures is not to present an idealized, heroic black homosexual. Rather, by speaking the unspeakable (to borrow from Toni Morrison), by illuminating those areas of black life that are not wholly positive but also not wholly negative, and by presenting visions of difference and appreciation, black queer writers as religious critics enliven theological and ethical discourse beyond mere suppositions of a mythical “tolerant” black America. They enliven theological and ethical discourse by calling into question assumptions about what it means to be human and in relationship with God. As womanist scholars have done, I contend that black queer writers step beyond the physical confines of the black church in constructing black queer spirituality and religious discourse.

Although Randall Kenan’s Horace Cross may be read as a tragic figure, I believe that Horace may also be read as a figure that is a critic of a society that renders him invisible. While his suicide takes him from this mortal coil, he finally acquires the visibility that had been denied him. As a signification on the passion narrative in the

synoptic gospels, Horace's final hours, his final battle with the world around him before his suicide is a call for a revision of the ways in which black people take hold of sexual difference. All the markers of difference that make Horace stand out in his community also call into question the assumptions black folk make about black identity. However, while Horace was alive, it was easier for his community to dismiss his difference, his queerness. However, his sacrificial suicide does not serve solely as a moment of finitude for black people in Tims Creek. Despite his failure to transform himself into an animal, he does succeed in transforming not only himself, but his community as well. Horace does fulfill his purpose, albeit in ways that his community has not been prepared to accept. His suicide shows the black community that mere tolerance does not lead to cultural fulfillment for black queers.²²⁰

While this dissertation has been focused on using black queer men's literature as a source for theological and cultural reflection on the lives of black queer people, I do not wish to privilege such cultural productions over and against other forms of black queer cultural expression. For example, the statement that "black men loving black men is the revolutionary act" evokes Sylvester's song "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" in which the late singer sings of how another man makes him feel. He sings of a passion that is typically invoked only in pop or rhythm and blues songs that are oriented towards heterosexual relationships. This song emphasizes a relationship that is not only balanced

²²⁰ In using the term "cultural fulfillment," I draw on Victor Anderson's use of the term in *Beyond Ontological Blackness*. He defines cultural fulfillment as "the satisfaction of categorical and reflexive goods." Drawing on Jurgen Habermas and Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle and John Finnis, Anderson reads cultural fulfillment as satisfying both those needs that are constitutive of and necessary for human existence: "life, safety, work, leisure, knowledge, and the like." Cultural fulfillment also satisfies those other needs that "[assure] subjective meaning and [alleviate] alienation." pp. 26-27.

and mutual, but is also visible. In extolling the qualities of his lover, Sylvester foregrounds something that appears to recede into the background in black religious criticisms' discussions of black sexual difference. He foregrounds the intersubjective relationships between black queer men, instead of focusing on the objectifying gaze of homophobia. What Riggs and Sylvester do in and through their respective statements is expand our appreciation of homosexual relationships. In his essay "Constructing a Doctrine for the *Ecclesia Militans*," Michael Joseph Brown argues for the importance of revising black religious criticism in order to facilitate an appreciation of African American sexual relationships. He states:

As a complement to the rather disconnected notion of agape, the intensity that characterizes most understandings of eros balances and humanizes the Christian appreciation for, and appropriation of, love. For example, the idea of sex as an expression of generosity rarely arises in African American religious discourse. As a consequence, predatory or mercenary orientations dominate popular African American discourse on sex. Love, as a balanced transcendent experience that encompasses sex, is frequently diminished to a relationship that functions primarily as an exchange for sexual and material goods (e.g., the song "Bills, bills, bills" by Destiny's Child). Eros, if deeply appreciated, can expand and complexify the representation of human relationships in African American culture.²²¹

While I understand that African American religious discourses seek to highlight and address crises in black life in America, I am concerned that when discussing black queer people, black religious critics have presented black queer people as a problem to be fixed.

The current debates surrounding gay marriage along with the increasing political conservatism within the black church will present serious intellectual challenges to black

²²¹ Michael Joseph Brown, "Constructing a Doctrine for the *Ecclesia Militans*," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, edited by Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) p. 68.

theologians and cultural critics. The 2004 presidential election and statements concerning gay marriage by black preachers like Eddie Long show that there is not a black community preoccupied with white racism. Thus, casting homophobia in black communities as a function of white racism is likely to be met with resistance by many black people. African Americans who are opposed to legalizing gay marriage are likely to argue that they are following their moral convictions independent of any overriding white influence.

What can black queer literature offer black theology and African American cultural criticism? I contend that black queer literature offers these critical discourses a different way of viewing black queer identity and a different way of describing God and God's activity in the world. As African American cultural criticism and black liberation theology draws on the experiences of black people, I have found it that, within these discourses, the voices of black queers become muted. By that I mean it is odd that black theologians and African American cultural critics who draw heavily on black men and women's literature suddenly fail to draw substantively on black queer literature when discussing black queer experiences. To be sure, they do refer to Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, and Marlon Riggs and Essex Hemphill. However, those references are fleeting and only employed in the service of refuting white claims of black inferiority. Further, black theologians and African American cultural critics do not survey the contemporary literatures of black queers.

I will briefly return to my discussion of James Baldwin and Randall Kenan's literatures. Their literary productions take sexual difference in black life seriously and seek to present alternate visions of black queer life. Further, both Baldwin and Kenan

present different conceptions of God and spirituality that are open rather than closed. Unlike Keith Boykin and E. Lynn Harris, these black queer writers present literatures that dare to call into question the presumptive goodness of God and the efficacy of the black church in ameliorating crises in black sexual identity. Where Boykin and Harris seek a God that will affirm black homosexuality, Baldwin and Kenan wrestle with, as Anthony Pinn describes it, the “nitty-gritty” moments in black life. To simply say, “God loves everyone” and construct black male characters as being able to “pass in and out of the heterosexual world” is not a sufficient response in the face of the enduring questions about black queer sexuality.²²² Further, such statements obscure the particularities of black sexual experiences.

I began this dissertation project hoping to find a theologically critical voice in black queer literature. What I found were moments where black queer writers engaged in critical reflections on God and black queer sexuality. Those moments in black queer writing appear to have been disrupted by a turn toward popular black queer literatures that are easily accessible to and easily digested by the masses. Contemporary popular black queer writings do not radically shift black religious understandings of God and black queer sexuality. Rather, they seek to reconcile black queers to a predominantly heterosexual black community by adhering to a politics of respectability that promotes the formation of monogamous, heterosexual black nuclear families and recommends a minimal tolerance of homosexuality as a way of distinguishing black communities from a presumptively homophobic white community.

²²² E. Lynn Harris, *Invisible Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994) p.

In examining the experiences and narratives of black queers, black liberation theologians and African American cultural critics and black queer writers must remain vigilant and resist predicating their analyses of black queer lives upon the acceptance of a heterosexual superiority. By encouraging heterosexual blacks to “embrace” an elusive and often ill-defined “gayness,” black theologians and cultural critics subordinate sexual difference to a conception of normative heterosexuality. This normative heterosexuality in black communities functions to inscribe an inferior status upon black queer bodies and renders any work on black queers apologetic.

What this dissertation suggests is an ethics of openness that is predicated on acceptance and appreciation instead of mere tolerance. This appreciation of sexual difference in black communities does not require black heterosexuals to speak for black queers, nor does it require black queers to advance apologetic explanations for black queer sexual expressions. Rather, an ethics of openness, as oriented towards appreciation, calls for three strategies. First, I believe an ethics of openness in black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism calls for critical dialogues between black people of various sexualities. Second, as black cultural and theological studies advance dialogues surrounding difference in black life, they must devote critical attention to black queer literatures. In this dissertation, I have examined but a few of the contemporary literatures produced by black queers. By attending to the diverse range of black queer literature, I contend that black cultural critics and black liberation theologians may avoid the pitfall of speaking for black queers and inadvertently syndicating black queer experiences into a monolithic black struggle against white supremacy. Third, I believe that an ethics of openness may lead to critical examination of black queer

experiences. By this, I mean that as black liberation theology and African American cultural criticism engage in critical dialogues with black queers and examine the diverse range of black queer literature, I hope that these critical discourses come to expanded understandings of black queer experiences.

This ethics of openness I suggest in this study makes a constructive contribution to black liberation theology by critiquing the content of liberation for African Americans. As I follow Robert S. Corrington and Jerome Stone's discussions of transcendence and openness in their respective works, *Nature and Spirit* (1992) and *The Minimalist Vision of Transcendence* (1992), an ethics of openness is oriented towards openness instead of closure, the possibilities of transcendence instead of the limitations imposed by finitude. As I relate an ethics of openness that encourages creative exchanges and encounters between black people of different genders, sexualities and the like, this ethics reconfigures liberation so that it is not merely the rhetorical response to white domination, but a practical reality in black life. As part of this constructive move, I argue that such an ethics is open to the multiplicity of possibilities in black life. That is, black life in America is not necessarily framed and determined by white supremacy.

To be sure, racism and white supremacy and their effects are very real possibilities and bear the potential to diminish the flourishing of African Americans. However, such an ethics recognizes such possibilities as possibilities that exist in the world and need not be reified as the main problem facing African Americans. Such an orientation makes liberation predicated upon the cessation of racist discourse and behavior by whites. Further, an ethics of openness as predicated upon a view towards openness and transcendence brings the black church into the conversation. As I envision

this ethics, I contend that this ethics of openness fully and creatively engages all the sources that inform black life in America. Part of this creative engagement involves serious and sustained conversation with black churches. As an institution that is deeply involved with the practical realities of black life in America, the black church offers black theology and African American cultural criticism much more than a sentimental site of a nostalgic blackness. What the black church offers is a site of critical discourse concerning the cleavages within black life. For an ethics of openness to be more than an academic reflection on black identity, it must acknowledge and fully engage the black church as a site of moral discourse.

This ethics does not ignore that within black churches, there are doctrinal and denominational commitments that would preclude such churches from affirming sexual difference as normative in black communities nor does it suggest that discussions surrounding sexual difference in black life would be without contention. This ethics does not suggest a normative turn towards sexual difference. By that I mean, this ethics does not nor should it seek to make homosexuality normative in black life. Further, this ethics does not nor should it seek to make heterosexuality normative in black life. What this ethics seeks is a re-presentation of the Golden Rule that Jesus Christ made as a maxim for his followers and a reinterpretation of black experiences. By treating people as we would wish to be treated, we become open to difference. Treating others as we would wish to be treated requires deep appreciation of the intrinsic value that humans possess. As African Americans encounter people of different sexualities, religious faiths, and other socio-economic locations, an ethics of openness that is based upon the various traditions that have framed black life requires close attention to difference not solely for the sake of

vanquishing racism and white supremacy, but for the sake of bringing about the community that Martin Luther King called the Beloved Community.

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