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The “Black” Church organize, sort, and select members of their congregation based on the leadership’s understanding of spirituality, morality, and traditional socialization of religious practices within faith communities. The “Black” Church doctrine: *homosexuality is immoral*, creates a crisis for lesbian and gay Christians and many other members with multiple gender identities. I use the phrase “the black church” as a phrase to encapsulate seven historically black church denominations in the United States: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

Using critical ethnography, as a minister of music and a long standing member of several black churches, I investigate, why the black church, an institution of liberation for the black community especially during the Civil Rights movement, continue to engage in oppressive practices with regard to members of the black gay and lesbian community. I provide a historical overview and critical analysis as a part of this inquiry.

Black church leadership who once refused to accept white church leaders’ use of the Bible to justify oppressing them during the periods of slavery and segregation, presently utilize the Bible in a similar fashion to justify oppressing lesbians and gays.

Historically and traditionally membership in the “black” church was often due to the parents and/or grandparents membership. Attending church was an expected role within the black community. It was a way to socialize with friends, engage in political activity and often times conduct business. This was especially true when it came to the different denominations. Often times I would hear members stating, “You can’t join in it, you got to be born in it.” For African American lesbians and gays being born into families with strong religious church affiliations, as a rite of passage must endure pain while their humanity, sexuality, and love relationships are denigrated. As a counter-narrative to these negative teachings, I offer new approaches to understanding scripture and homosexuality through black liberation theology.

THANK YOU GOD: A WAY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS OF DOUBLE
STANDARDS, MISINFORMATION, AND FEAR TO THE
PROMISED LAND OF WELCOME AND
RADICAL INCLUSIVITY

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Black Church's Teaching that homosexuality is immoral has created a crisis for African American lesbian and gay Christians. Through this dissertation, I utilize the phrases "the black church" and "black churches" as a reference to churches affiliated with the seven historically black denominations or predominantly black congregations: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA., Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC).

According to Lincoln and Mamiya (1990) the "black" church is an institution that organizes African Americans in their understanding of spirituality, morality, people, and issues of faith within faith communities. This dissertation provides a historical overview and critical analysis of the black church and its current engagement with African American gay and lesbians Christians. I characterize this engagement as oppressive and duplicitous. Although black church leaders once refused to accept white church leaders' use of the Bible to justify oppressing them during the periods of slavery and segregation, presently many use the Bible in a similar fashion to justify oppressing gays and lesbians. African American gays and lesbians are generally born into black churches and as a consequence of this existence endure pain while their humanity, sexuality, and love

relationships are denigrated. Much of the preaching and many teachings create psychological and theological problems for lesbians and gays in black churches because of the legalism and religious dogma often presented to parishioners. The presentation of Jesus Christ and his message of reconciliation with God impact black GLBTIQQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual, Transgendered, Intersexual, Queer and Questioning) congregants in a way that creates binary opposition to one's sexual identity with one's community (Gause, 2008). Because of this impact black gays and lesbians and their heterosexual friends, family members, and fellow congregants may be burdened and imprisoned by their denominational affiliation and faith. As a counterpoint to these negative teachings, I offer new approaches to understanding scripture and homosexuality through black Christian liberation theology.

While engaging in this inquiry, I wondered what the reaction might be to one of few works that break hundreds of years of silence about a topic considered taboo in the Black Diaspora as noted by author Delroy Constantine Simms (2001). While this may be true, I feel it is important to add my voice to a group who are frequently ignored, denied, dismissed, and rejected: African American gay and lesbian Christians.

When I found it especially difficult to continue writing this audacious work, I received encouragement from the words of the eminent scholar and former Morehouse College President, Benjamin Mays, "to never accept the world as it is handed to you" and "to leave the world a better place than [we] found it" (Mays, 1971, p. 70). I respond to May's charge by engaging this inquiry project to unearth the often overlooked, downtrodden and hidden aspects of my gay brother and sisters. This writing further

engages a progressive Christian conversation about the black church and homosexuality. I hope others will follow and offer more progressive understandings of homosexuality and black religion, and broaden the focus to include Islam and needed discussion on bisexual and trans-gendered persons.

Throughout my life as a gay African American Christian Minister of Music, I have been conscious that my activism could create tension. However, in that tension I believe it is a needed and helpful dialogue regarding the black church and homosexuality to bring wholeness and healing to our (very) divided community. I have chosen to foster the critical analysis of race and sexuality in the context of religion, assessing how they are parallel and how both are used as indicators of cultural morality.

Frustrated and angered black by church ostracism, I viewed myself and my homosexual relationships as inferior to heterosexuals and their relationships. To add insult to injury, I spent several hours, several days a week practicing, teaching, and serving in several leadership capacities; particularly as the music minister while hiding my sexual identity and regurgitating to choir members some of the same poison that was fed to me. I write this work to share with others the sexual shame and self-hatred I came to accept through my work and belief in the black church. Like many others because of black church leadership I thought my same-sex sexual attractions and love relationships were flawed, sinful, and immoral because of what I had learned from sermons and teachings of the church; however, I have been redeemed. I no longer accept this religious dogma, the scales have fallen from my eyes.

There will be those who will welcome this dissertation with joy and celebration, relieved that finally a black gay Christian whose experience has been diminished or ignored in black churches is now speaking for himself. This work will add to the few who have gone before, including prolific writers like Keith Boykin, Kelley Brown Douglas, Michael Eric Dyson, and Johnetta Betsch Cole, to name a few. Yet there will be others for whom this inquiry will awaken dormant rage and hostility toward homosexuality. Some will decry it as polemical, untrue, and a diabolical betrayal of the black church. In a society where African Americans have been the victims of racial oppression, it is difficult for many of the same people to be self-critical and view themselves as oppressors, treating others in ways that they deem oppressive to themselves. Others will appreciate it for being honest, brave, and liberating. But probably the most common response may be “Why do you have to talk about it?”

At the very core of this question is resistance; at another level its bewilderment. In a world that talks about good things (and its heralding of heterosexuality as one of those good things), and is silent about failure, illnesses, and sexual maladies, many people cannot understand why homosexuality would be discussed. Researchers (Glave, 2008; Richardson, 2007) show African Americans consider homosexuality shameful and are unwilling to consider their silencing and more denigration of gay people could be similar to the historical racist attacks by whites on black people’s worth and moral legitimacy. Standing in the two worlds of racial and sexual oppression and experiencing similar responses of hostility, prejudice, and discrimination directed at me because of my skin color and because of my sexual orientation, I felt the need to examine this parallel and the

hypocrisy of a people that claim liberation and equality while working to oppress lesbians and gays.

To this end, this disquisition was written to save lives from lies and oppression. I have come to believe the words of the late African American lesbian writer Audre Lorde: “We’ve been taught that silence would save us, but it won’t” (Lorde, as cited in Lewis, 2009, para. 14). Silence maintains the status quo of oppression. Lorde’s words inspire me to give voice to African American lesbians and gays whose blackness is often ignored by majority European American lesbian and gay faith and social settings and whose gayness is often ignored in predominantly heterosexual African American churches and communities.

White gays’ racism can be observed when they insist on ending homophobia while keeping their world white, resisting any contact with the equity for black people in their gentrified neighborhoods, Euro-centric gay churches, private dance clubs, and television programs, for example, *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*. Black heterosexuals’ homophobia and hetero-centrism are apparent when they continue ignoring the voices, concerns, interests, and suffering of gay African American in their public forums, black publications, (namely *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines), black church organizations, community marches, and black college campuses.

I write as a son of a black church born, nurtured, and “raised up” in the southern rural Black National Baptist church. Having been in black churches throughout my 39 years, and leading and directing choirs for 18 of those years, I know what it is like to be black and gay in a historically black denomination. While I cannot speak for every gay

African American in a black church, I do not believe my experiences were aberrations. My hope is that this treatise will awaken our spirit to the dignity of every human, so that we will see ourselves in the other, recognize our common humanity, and celebrate our God-given gift of sexuality, whether it is with the same or opposite sex. I hope that in reading this dissertation my heterosexual sisters and brothers will allow themselves to be self-critical about their participation in a system that has privilege them over lesbians and gays. In this respect, heterosexuals, especially African American heterosexuals, will better understand that historical and contemporary religious and social teachings have created a supremacist notion of gays in families, communities, and churches. This is the challenge for African American Christians who read this dissertation and take seriously the call of Christian faith and community liberation, and the Gospel demands for justice and peace. Most of all, I want to make public the often suppressed gay Christian narrative in black churches of victimization, ridicule, and rejection I experienced by a heterosexual majority.

The black church for me has been and continues to be a wonderful institution of support, nurture and uplift from a sometimes hostile world. Unfortunately, however, my experiences have been that black church leaders and congregants have been resistant and even closed in treating gay and heterosexual congregants equally or, in many cases, offering simple compassion to the suffering of gay people. I find this church practice to be an ironic tragedy, antithetical to black liberation theology, a theology organized around black experience, black culture, and black religion. It is a theology that espouses the gospel of Jesus Christ, one offering justice for all. Historically, black church leaders

opposed oppressive actions against humans and played an active role in socially just causes. These institutions sought to end slavery, mobilize African Americans in the political process, organize educational institutions, and provide places of worship, recreation, and training for black people (Cone 1975).

Gays in the Twenty-First Century: A Time of Hope

I believe the twenty-first century will address gay and lesbians issues in unprecedented ways including the move toward full acceptance of lesbians and gays, religious scholars getting more involved in the discussion of homosexuality, political leaders and pastors involved in critical discussion and the legalization of gay marriages. In order for this progress to happen, meaningful discourse as I attempt here must be critical. Critical discourse is one form of a justifiably reflective and suspicious inspection of how conversations shape and frame us; and it is explicitly intent on making a difference, and not merely describing extant conditions (Jakobsen & Pellegrini, 2003). To this end, I believe that all members of the black community need to be more critical and more demanding of the black church as an institution that honors the civil rights of all of its members; not just the heterosexual ones.

Homosexuality, Homophobia, and the black community are critical discourses discussed in detail by Keith Boykin in *One More River to Cross*. He examines, in clear and simple language, what the major concerns are, and he defines them in such a way that even the most conservative heterosexual cannot help but be moved by the logic of his arguments. Boykin (1996) understands why many African Americans are unconcerned with gay and lesbian rights, and he writes from a perspective of understanding their fears.

In doing so, he shows the obvious societal parallels of oppression and prejudice that link blacks and gays—illustrating how self-destructive it is when an oppressed group oppresses another. I found his research to be provocative and compelling. Comparing the oppression between both blacks and gays, he states:

To compare gay behavior with black behavior is merely to compare one stereotype with another, and on that score we find common ground. Members of both groups are identified by assumptions that connect their status with some sort of unflattering behavior. The specific behaviors themselves may differ, but the nature of the stereotyping is exactly the same. (p. 51)

Each of the chapters in this dissertation both directly and indirectly expounds on concepts from Boykin's work. Boykin's main concern is how the black community and the mainstream gay and lesbian community view and treat black gays and lesbians. Boykin knows that the battle for fair treatment must begin with your own people for any real progress to be made. Thus, *One More River to Cross* does what so few books about race and gay issues do: It educates readers on how to reduce their own sexual fears and insecurities while recognizing their racial hypocrisies. Against a backdrop of civil rights and the black experience in America, Boykin interviews Baptist ministers, gay political leaders, and other black gays and lesbians on issues of faith, family, discrimination, and visibility to determine what differences—real and imagined—separate the two communities.

Research Design and Methodology

I use my experience as a minister of music and a long standing member of several black churches, to investigate why the black church, an institution of liberation for the

black community especially during the Civil Rights movement, continue to engage in oppressive practices with regard to members of the black gay and lesbian community. I provide a historical overview and critical analysis as a part of this inquiry. I examine the theological, social, and psychological problems that emerge from the view that homosexuality is immoral and offer new perspectives for assessing scripture and African American Christianity in the context of black liberation. Using the methodologies of Critical Ethnography, Social Analysis, and mostly Autobiographic, I consider how oppression toward gays and lesbians in the black church is historically, culturally, and politically located. Each of these theories reflects my personal experiences related to homophobia in the black church.

Critical Ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain. (Madison 2005) I incorporate critical ethnography throughout this project to assist me in developing a framework to write and talk about the oppression that blacks and gays experience in The Black Church. I do not posit myself as a single, authoritative voice. For me ethnography has been invaluable, because I am living proof of some of the experiences that many black gay men in the Black church face in coming out and coming to terms with my sexual orientation and sexual identity. To truly “question is to interrogate something from the heart of our existence, from the center of our being” (Madison, 2005, p. 67). As a black gay Christian, this genre provided greater legitimacy to my research in relationship to my community.

Using Social Analysis (Cornish, 2007), I investigate the social phenomenon of the black church in a systematic and analytic way—answering the questions: What do I want to know? How do I find out? How do my biases and self-interest influence what I see? What is necessary for action? I start with describing what happens with gay blacks in the Black church as it relates to oppression and move to exploring why it is happening. Using this approach kept me from making purely emotional responses without adequate information or understanding. I was able to not only examine why the oppression exists, but the different factors involved and the relationships between them; and what supports the injustice and what works against positive change.

Social justice matters are often complex, involving many different factors belonging to different categories. A range of strategies may be needed to address the different factors involved and to take into account the interaction between them (Cornish, 2007). Social Analysis influences my strategies and recommendation for action in Chapter V.

I use an autobiographical method throughout this dissertation. For as I engaged in the personal and political work as a longstanding member of the Black church, writing from my personal experiences was a great source of inspiration and information. It helped me, and hopefully those who read my work, to come face to face with the intricacies of attempting to make meaning and sense of a black gay man lived experiences in the Black church and other socio-cultural spaces (hooks, 1994; Pinar, 1994). This aligns with Clandinin and Connelly's (1998) perspective locating autobiographical writing as "a way to write the whole context of life" (p. 167). When the writing takes shape as

autobiography, they say “it is a research text” (p. 167). In my research, I create a space to confront homophobia; to transgress heteronormativity as the normative perspective on sex, sexuality and gender; and to explore an illimitable array of homosexual positionalities. This locates my research as a curriculum counter practice (Pinar, 1976), which is a way to utilize gay and lesbian difference strategically to counter normative silence and to tell my story of a viable, emerging and productive homosexual who grew up in the Black church.

While being a (black) male, middle class, and educated are privileges that help ease my burden, these advantages have mattered little over the years on those occasions when I have been verbally assaulted, stalked, or otherwise belittled for being gay. As a black man, I have worked in and attended what has been historically perceived to be a nurturing and social justice institution—the black church. However, this support from the Black church is exclusive. It upholds heteronormativity—the assumption and privileging of heterosexuality. It dismisses or erases outsider sex, sexual and gender differences through policies, and practices designed to reproduce biological males and females as stable, coherent identities with heterosexualized needs and desires (Britzman, 1998). It ignores the contradictions and tensions of being gay and avoids taking up the complexities of homosexuality. Many of my experiences during the 15 years that I spent as minister of music demonstrated these things time and again. My reality was routinely underrepresented (homosexuality as invisible or non-existent) or misrepresented (homosexuality depicted as deviant and disgusting) (Grace & Benson, 2000). This is because institutions, especially the Black church, have a history of hiding or disparaging

homosexuality, hence feeding the ignorance and fear of sex, sexual and gender differences that perpetuate homophobia and gay bashing. (Pinar, 1998) Thus, I turn to writing this autobiographical account of my experiences to help build knowledge about black homosexuality. I use my stories as a springboard to help other homosexual and heterosexuals interrogate anti-gay stances and actions as they consider the parameters and possibilities of an ethical, just and inclusive (spiritual) community.

As a research method, Pinar (1994) characterizes autobiography as an expansive space for mediation when it discloses what has been historically ignored, suppressed or denied in the larger culture and society. He asserts that exposing the burden of the personal “is interesting when its telling enlarges and complicates the telling subject and the listening subject” (p. 219) In my research I use autobiography to place the researcher (as the researched) and the reader in a dynamic relationship whereby the ensuing revelation can foster a political process and theological possibilities that enhance black homosexual space and place in the Black church and beyond. As a black gay man and an educator, I take it as my duty and obligation to be a presence, a voice, a writer, an advocate, a deliberator, an agitator and agent in this process of building inclusionary and transformative (black) spiritual communities. This is my story; my work for social justice. This autobiographical account is an engagement in an ethical cultural practice.

Chapter I begins the critical examination of the Black Church and its homophobic engagement with lesbian and gay Christians. In Chapter II, I discuss in great detail my search for identity, how and when I chose to disclose my homosexuality, and how

homophobia and internalized oppression makes the process of identity formation more difficult.

In Chapter III, I explore hyper-masculinity, an exaggeration and distortion of traditionally masculine traits. Hyper-masculinity is a value system extolling male physical strength, aggression, violence, competition, and dominance that despises the dearth of these characteristics as weak and feminine. This chapter deconstructs black hyper-masculinity and its influence within the black communities.

In Chapter IV, I challenge the present assumption that black love is uniquely heterosexual and the heterosexuals are the only ones with the capacity to love their bodies. I explore the theological perspectives that shape the present “homosexuality is immoral” view, contributing to black Christians’ mode of resistance to a different Christian understanding.

In Chapter V, I discuss the implications and possibilities for a sexual discourse of resistance in the black church. I explore ways the black church can address black sexuality without alienating its gay and lesbians members. I will offer creative suggestions on how black churches can begin to provide an atmosphere conducive to engaging in a sexual discourse of resistance.

It is my fervent hope that this investigation will be a stepping stone toward serious self-examination, self-knowledge, and self-healing for each and every (black) gay man who decides to read it and embrace it. I also hope that it will persuade heterosexual black men, women, and the black church not to jettison other blacks who may be in a position to make valuable contributions to the struggle for political and economic empowerment.

May this dissertation embolden African American lesbians and gays, inside and outside of church communities, to confront the religious injustice imposed on them by African American clergy and laypeople and challenge them to understand homophobia and heterosexual supremacy as evil constructs akin to the racism and white supremacy that divide and destroy the human family of God.

Definition of Terms

Biphobia: Refers to an oppressive social construction with situates some combination of power, wealth, privilege, and prestige to persons who are not bisexual. Although the designation refers mainly to discrimination against bisexuals, it can also be used more generally for anyone who is gay, lesbian, or transgendered.

Black: Refers to individuals of African heritage having similar cultural and racial/ethnic experiences.

Coming Out, or Out: GLBT individuals who choose to share their sexual orientation identity with others.

Down Low (DL): A term used to define men who secretly have sex with men while in sexual relationship with women. Men on the DL do not identify as gay or bisexual. Although the term is often linked to Black men, the behaviors associated with the term are neither unique nor specific to any particular racial/ethnic group. (King 2004)

Family: The creation of alternative or non-biological family support units in the gay community; a term that refers to one's membership or the gay community (e.g., "he/she is family") (Hawkeswood 1996).

Gay/Homosexual: Refers to individuals whose primary attractions are to people of the same sex/gender. Typically, men who are attracted to men are referred to as gay; and women who are attracted to women are referred to as lesbians, though they may also identify as gay.

GBLT/LGBT: An acronym that refers to individuals embraced by the gay community and stands for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered; or, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered.

Heterocentrism: A term that applies to negative attitudes, bias, and discrimination in favor of opposite-sex sexuality and relationships. It can include the presumption that everyone is heterosexual or that opposite-sex attractions and relationships are the norm and therefore superior. People of any sexual orientation can hold such attitudes. As a predisposition toward heterosexuals and heterosexuality, heterosexism has been described as being “encoded into and characteristic of the major social, cultural, and economic institutions of our society

Heteronormative: Refers to an oppressive social construction which situates some combination of power, wealth, privilege, and prestige in those who conform to the heterosexual construct vis-à-vis those with gender differences, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and the intersexed.

Heterosexism: As an attitude, it is the belief that heterosexuality is the preferred sexual preference and the only normal sexual orientation, and that all others are inferior. As a social system, it is the system of laws and cultural attitudes based on the beliefs that heterosexuality is preferable, normal, and/or right.

Homophobia: A fear of homosexuals and fear of establishing close relationships with the same sex; an attitude of disgust, repulsion, or hatred toward GLBT people based upon the belief that homosexuality is morally wrong, disgusting, or shameful.

Internalized Oppression: This term refers to the subjectification of oppressive ideologies and their institutionalized expressions (such as racism, and institutionalized racism) It is similar to the Marxian concept of *false consciousness*. When oppressed persons believe the lie, or ideology of oppression told to them, reactions may include self-hatred, isolation, poor performance, and lashing out at others.

Queer: A formerly derogatory term that has been embraced by mainstream GLBT communities as an all-encompassing term that refers to all individuals who defy sexual or gender norms, including transgender or transsexual individuals.

Racism: This term refers to an oppressive social construction which situates some combination of power, wealth, privilege, and prestige in European, or white, Americans.

Sexism: This term refers to an oppressive social construction which situates some combination of power, wealth, privilege, and prestige in males.

CHAPTER I
HOMOSEXUALITY AND THE POWER AND
PRESENCE OF THE BLACK CHURCH

A good way to understand a people is to study their religion, for religion is the most sacred schedule of values around which the expression and the meaning of life tends to coalesce (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). The study of a people's religion is not guaranteed to provide all of the answers to what gives a culture its characteristics. Religion is essentially a subjective experience, and an external study or investigation will inevitably miss some of the critical nuances experienced (and valued) only by those on the interior or belief. Nevertheless, a critical observer with an open mind can gain invaluable insight into the structural and motivational cosmos out of which particular behaviors emerge as distinctive earmarks particularizing a given population. Religion, seriously considered, is perhaps the best prism to cultural understanding, not as a comparative index, but as a refractive element through which one social cosmos may look meaningfully at another and adjust its presuppositions.

Religion plays a vital role in the lives of African peoples, providing them with a moral compass in their families and communities. Black church historian Albert Raboteau (1978) reminds us Africans came to the Americas religious but not Christian; most entered this land as practitioners of the traditional African religions and Islam. When examining African cultures, scholars have agreed that religion permeates every

dimension of African life. (Paris 1995). As a culture, Africans and their descendants are of course not alone in valuing religion; Europeans, as well as other groups, also value religion, and indeed share some similar spiritual beliefs. Both groups came to America believing in a spirit world, the power of dead ancestors, and godly retribution (Paris, 1995). In some cases, Christian practices paralleled those of the traditional African practices so much that Christianity had a great appeal to Africans and allowed for a continuation of their religion. This blending or syncretism of traditional African religion with Christianity enabled the transition from African religion to Christianity.

Even after being converted to Christianity in the context of slavery, Africans generally considered religion and religious practice important aspects of their lives. They always valued religion and understood God and Jesus as having sustained them through slavery and having given them the hope for and the experience of a liberated life. It is therefore no surprise that religion plays such a big role in the lives of contemporary African Americans.

The Bible

Through my experiences in the Black Church, I have found that the Bible is the book most often used by (religious) African Americans to make meaning of life and foster a closer connection with God and all of mankind. Because of the time in which it was allegedly written and in the many different languages it is recorded, there are several translations and versions to help readers and preachers make it relevant to modern life. The King James Version of The New Open Bible (Nelson, 1990) is the version that is

most helpful to me and the one I refer to in the scriptural references throughout this dissertation.

The Evolution of the Black Christian

African Americans slaves maintained elements of their traditional African beliefs and Islam for decades, but in a slave culture that largely controlled their religious practices, they eventually adopted Christianity as their primary religion, dismissing African religions as illegitimate. Raboteau (1995) characterizes this transition as “death of the gods.” Phyllis Wheatley’s own words, as noted by Paris (1995), about herself as a Christian would later become a common representation of African American’s religious worldview:

‘Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there’s a God, that there’s a Savior too. (p. 46)

Despite the initial reluctance by many white slave owners to offer African slaves salvation due to their anxiety that a Christian status could disrupt the master-slave relationship, white Christian ministers later received African American slaves into Christianity, indoctrinating them with a selective biblical ethical code that emphasized subordination, slave ethics, and sexual immorality.

African Americans looked for other similarities in the religion of their white masters. The first and second Great Awakenings and the evangelism of the Baptist and Methodist denominations in particular had the greatest appeal for African Americans due to their more demonstrative and less rigid style of worship as well as their emphasis on

the Bible. As a consequence, African Americans primarily identified with these two communions during and after slavery. Hence, “the majority of the black preachers and separate black churches were Baptist, which helps to explain why the Baptists attracted as many members as they did. Baptists simply offered more opportunity for black participation than any other denomination” (Raboteau, 1978, pp. 187-188). When African Americans found themselves in other denominations, like the Episcopal Church of their masters, they often exercised their freedom after slavery and united with black Baptist and Methodist denominations (Shattuck, 2000). Slaves soon valued Christianity as the invisible institution that fostered their ability to cope with the atrocities of slavery. Religion established a dominant presence in the lives of most black people.

Since the majority of African American slaves became Christian through the evangelical efforts of Methodists and Baptists during the Great Awakening revivals and plantation missions, they also adopted the conservative Christian traditions and strict adherence to the Bible characteristics of these denominations. This particular strain of Christianity differed from the liberal Quaker tradition that opposed slavery and emphasized gender equality and an “inner light” in all people, and the Roman Catholic, Congregationalist, and Episcopal traditions that placed less emphasis on scripture and proselytizing. Despite Quakers’ and Congregationalists’ dedicated efforts to abolish the slavery endured by blacks, African American slaves found the quiet, non-demonstrative worship style of these denominations less familiar and therefore less appealing.

African-Americans and the Bible

This biblical indoctrination by conservative white Protestants laid a foundation for African Americans' understanding of scripture in strict literal and legalistic ways.

Conservative white Protestants generally taught blacks that it was the Bible itself that insisted they were to be slaves to whites. Among the African American Christian slaves who accepted this perspective was the famous preacher Jupiter Hammond.

A poet and preacher, Hammond did not condone the institution of slavery and, despite his doubts about whether blacks could handle freedom, hoped for black emancipation. Nonetheless, he thought that physical freedom should not take precedence over spiritual freedom and that there should be “reinforcement of the master-slave relationship” (Sernett, 1985). If Hammond's view seems contradictory, it is a reflection of the quandary in which many black Christians found themselves; at one and the same time understanding God to be the arbiter of justice and freedom and yet also aware of scriptural passages that they understood as identifying God as upholding the institution of slavery and thus their slave status.

However, most African American Christians did not find the slavery passages compelling. As African American biblical scholar Vincent Wimbush (2000) notes,

... from the beginning of their engagement with [the Bible] African Americans interpreted the Bible differently from those who introduced them to it, ironically and audaciously seeing in it—the most powerful of the ideological weapons used to legitimize their enslavement and disenfranchisement—a mirroring of themselves and their experiences, seeing in it the privileging of all those who like themselves are the humiliated, the outcasts and powerless. (p. 17)

As black Christians embraced biblical stories of Jesus' love and God's liberating power, it became more and more difficult to reconcile a God who delivered Israelites from oppressive Pharaohs with a god who was apparently keeping them enslaved. In this approach to scripture, blacks, like other groups, demonstrate a practice of selectively choosing scripture. This selection bias attends to information that confirms what is already believed (based on teachings and interpretations of that community) and offers validation while viewing other biblical injunctions as irrelevant to their present status. Thus, the Bible can and historically has been used by the oppressors and the oppressed, each for their own liberation and benefit. Yet it is much too simplistic to refer to the Bible in binary ways as either an oppressive book or a liberationist document. As noted by African American biblical scholar Dr. Renita Weems (1998), the Bible has less to do with either oppression or liberation. Rather, Christians read the Bible and assign meaning or create oppression or liberation in their lives and the lives of other human beings.

Nancy Ambrose, the slave grandmother of African American theologian Howard Thurman, expressed this reality in the following case:

During the days of slavery . . . master's minister would occasionally hold services for the slaves. Always the white minister used as his text something from Paul. Slaves be obedient to your masters as unto Christ. Then he would go on to show that if we were good and happy slaves, God would bless us. I promised my maker that if I ever learned to read and if freedom ever came, I would not read that part of the Bible. (as cited in Thurman, 1949, pp. 30-31)

This example points to the limitations of scripture and the different hermeneutical or interpretive lenses that a Christian culture may bring to a passage. As Wimbush's analysis and Ambrose's Christian experience affirm, black people's experience of God's

grace and Christ's presence in their lives made them full and equal children of God. In Ambrose's mind, Paul's biblical writing suggesting that as a slave Ambrose was subordinate to free whites failed in its meaning and reflection of God's intention. For her, faith and relationship with God told her that she was a child of God and should be treated the same as whites who claimed God's favor, regardless of what was stated in the Bible.

The example above also shows that African American Christians demonstrate that you can be faithful Christians without accepting all scripture as authoritative. The rejection of scriptures that support slavery is the clearest example. So in the context of slavery, two theologies emerged from the same Bible and Christian religion: one initially supported by a majority of white Christians who promoted slavery, and the other supported by a majority of blacks who opposed slavery. Both groups used the Bible to endorse their cultural views and practices.

Many black Christians, like Frederick Douglass and Ambrose, refused any theological doctrine that subjugated them, and protested white supremacy both privately and publicly. In 1787, the first such protest of white racism in the church came from African American Methodist minister Richard Allen and others. After experiencing racism in the white Methodist Church, Allen, Absalom Jones (the first ordained black priest in the Episcopal Church), and others left, and instead organized the Free African Society. Twenty-nine years later, Allen would organize the first black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

One of the most powerful displays of this kind of Christian protest came from Bostonian David Walker, a young free African abolitionist. In his now famous *Appeal to*

the Colored Citizens of the World, Walkers uses the biblical Exodus story to declare that God's judgment on white America would be like the destructions inflicted upon the thousands of Egyptians whom God hurled into the Red Sea for afflicting his people in their land. He called on Blacks to "prepare the way of the Lord" by "throwing off the yoke of slavery" (Sernett, 1985).

Some African American Christians, like Nat Turner, believed that biblical passages of this sort revealed God's intention that they overthrow the evil system of slavery. In 1831, Turner took the bible as its word and executed the most deadly protest of slavery. Unlike the attempted insurrections of Prosser and Vesey Turner's revolt was largely successful. A slave preacher and visionary of "righteous vengeance," Turner confessed before his execution that God had directed him to lead a bloody slave revolt that claimed the lives of some fifty-five whites. (Sernett, 1985). The publication of *The Confessions of Nat Turner* reveals that Turner never repented for the revolt since in his mind it was a God-inspired act revealed in scripture as "the hosts of good would meet the armies of evil" (Styron, 1967). Though these biblical interpretations were viewed as extreme by most African American church leaders, these leaders still viewed scripture regarding slavery and black subjugation in fundamentally different ways than whites, and taught this interpretation to generations of blacks. African Americans identified with the Israelites in the Bible and interpreted the Civil War as God creating dramatic events to bring about their liberation from slavery. As such hermeneutics created a community of black people, it also demonstrated that God was on their side and would take care of them.

African Americans, the Bible, and Homosexuality

The black church has functioned as the center of black people's lives from its origins as an invisible institution during chattel slavery to its present day as a highly visible institution. Being one of the few institutions owned by black people for black people, the black church, at its best has not only served as a house of worship, but has also provided social status, hope, and stability for millions of Africans who have lived in America. As Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier notes, the black church is

a nation within a nation . . . [the impetus for other] institutions such as schools, banks, insurance companies, and low income housing . . . an academy and arena for political activities [and a place that] nurtured young talent for musical, dramatic and artistic development. (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990)

It has provided places of worship that black people could own and offered a community of “comfort, nurture, and care among an outcast people, a refuge in a hostile white world, where they could sing, shout, laugh, and cry among those who understood and shared the pain [of racism]” (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990).

Despite the rich history of using the Bible to oppose oppression, black church leaders have ironically not taken a similar approach on sexual oppression and oppressive religious societal actions against black women, lesbian and heterosexual, and gay men. Instead, blacks often internalize this country's racist sexual depictions of a black sexuality that is out of control and in need of salvation by Christianity. As a consequence, black bodies have been devalued, bought and controlled in slavery by whites who “[felt] no compunction about exploring those bodies for their sexual gratification, . . .

[subjecting] black women . . . to sexual abuse and black men . . . as progenitors of new slaves through siring” (Roberts, 2001).

Womanist Theologian Kelly Brown Douglas (1999) asserts that whites in general still perceive “black men and women as [being] highly sexualized, lascivious beings . . . prone to a sexual prowess’ or sexual promiscuity” (p. 11). Such representations are not uncommon within black communities and pop culture of rap and hip-hop videos. In this respect, African Americans have internalized some of the racist sexual depictions of themselves as sexually obsessed individuals or sex predators. Even when there is acknowledgment of being sexually active, African Americans may not feel good about sexual expression, even when it is in loving, caring relationships.

Douglas goes on to say that African Americans are inheritors of a racist past that victimized all aspects of their lives, not the least of which was their sexuality. Following slavery, the racist attitudes that defined black men as sex predators cause black men extreme hardship and death. By appealing to the age-old stereotype that black men harbor an insatiable sexual desire for white women, black men existed as targets to be blamed for raping white women. Rape was used more than any other reason as the cause for lynching black men. (Lewis, 2000) Indeed as Paula Giddings notes, it was black women themselves and not white men who were identified as the culprits for their own rape due to the purported insatiable appetite that blacks had for sex. This mythical construction by white racist men became an excuse for lynching black men. Lynching functioned as the white male solution to protecting white women from the sexual savagery of black men. Given the majority culture’s racism and sexual attitudes, African Americans soon learned

that their very survival depended on distancing themselves from any representation of “sexual perversions.” Much of black heterosexuals’ anti-homosexual sentiment exists as a means of countering the perception of black sexuality being perverse in order to survive and gain respectability and acceptance by the majority. Thus, it is understandable that African Americans would approach homosexuality with more dread and disdain than others, often denying a black homosexual presence to avoid being further maligned in a racist society.

As in the days of slavery, the black church maintains a conservative theological approach to issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual expression. All of the historically black denominations—the African Methodist Episcopal; African Methodist Episcopal Zion; Christian Methodist Episcopal (formerly Colored Methodist Episcopal); National Baptist Church, USA, Inc.; National Baptist Church of America, National Progressive Baptist Church; and the Church of God in Christ—have restrictive doctrinal views about sexuality (Griffin, 2006). All of these church bodies promote a theological view that homosexuality is sinful and that the only legitimate sexual expression is toward the opposite sex in marriage.

It is difficult to determine exactly when African and African Americans integrated negative views about homosexual expression into their theology and espoused anti-homosexual pronouncements in black religious and social communities. History shows that it was Europeans who strongly influenced Africans and African Americans to adopt puritanical views about sexuality and homosexuality (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). As European Christian missionaries encountered black Africans, it was common for them to

identify Africans as unholy and uncivilized, as “lewd, lascivious, and wanton people” (Douglas, 1999). This racist sexualizing of black people impacted African Americans in a variety of negative ways, leaving black leaders in a perpetual reaction of hiding black sexuality.

Black leaders adopted a rigid biblical theology of sexuality and transmitted it to black Christians and black culture (Wimbush, 2000). Whereas from the beginning blacks refused to simply accept whites’ interpretation of scripture, the same “hermeneutic or suspicion” did not occur regarding scripture and sexuality. Wimbush is correct that the understanding of sexual mores outside of heterosexual marriage and the understanding of gender roles is hardly different between the predominantly white Southern Baptists and the predominantly black National Baptists.

So how did this come to be? Following slavery, many of the African American leaders received their education about the body from “Puritan” New England missionaries (founders of the first black colleges); later black educators instilled in young black minds negative messages about the sexual expression of black bodies by stressing that “it was only ‘common’ Negroes who engaged in premarital and unconventional sex relations . . .” (Frazier, 1957). As famed black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier notes in *Black Bourgeoisie*, black educators on black college campuses put forth this image of the “chaste” black body as “proof of respectability in the eyes of the white man, who had constantly argued that the Negro’s ‘savage instincts’ prevented him from conforming to puritanical standards of sex behavior” (1957).

Douglas argues that this internalized negativity about black bodies can still be observed in behavior expressed by black church members, such as women covering their legs when sitting in the pew (Douglas, 1999). I will explore more about the black church, sexuality and the black body in Chapter IV.

For generations black people lived under the assumption that because they were perceived as sex predators they would also pay the ultimate price. In order to gain respectability and simply to survive, black people adopted a sexual conservatism, it not sexual prudishness. So while it is understandable that blacks would distance themselves from society's "sexual perversions" such as homosexuality, it is unfortunate that such a reaction has led a black majority to adopt harsh attitudes toward lesbian and gay people, their relationship and equality.

Homosexuality in Black Churches

In most black churches, parishioners experienced sermons identifying homosexuality not only as a sin, but with a rage that placed it as an even greater sin, as monstrosity, a part of a wicked spirit. I sat front and center listening to these sermons and asking myself several years later, why I continued to attend services that clearly discounted me as human at best. In addition to the cultural and familial connections, I have come to realize that I was caught up in the dialectical tension of the black church as a confidence builder and an institution that teaches us that we are the beloved as well as the despised. I begin to internalize the vitriolic sermons by (my black) preacher waging a war against (my) homosexuality. Having attended black churches in several southern

states, I realized that this type of preaching was common and did not begin with my generation.

One of the first recorded accounts of a black minister leading an organized protest against homosexuality and black gays is from the early twentieth century. In 1929, the Harlem Renaissance gave birth to a number of gay African American artists, including Richard Bruce Nugent and Alain Locke. African American pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr., of Harlem's famous Abyssinian Baptist Church, "initiated a vigorous crusade against homosexuality" (Wirth, 2002, pp. 229-230). Powell's "crusade" is the first of what would become a common response of African American ministers. Messages that would ordinarily be considered messages of hate were justified by black ministers as being faithful to their calling to preach against sinful behavior.

More than fifty years later, on May 5, 1985, at another famous New York City church—Riverside—the Reverend Dr. Channing Phillips, an African American heterosexual supremacist minister, used the Bible (Gen. 1:27) to denounce gay love relationships:

Male and female God created them . . . it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that heterosexuality . . . is being lifted up as the model of human sexuality . . . Those are hard words . . . that imply that deviation from the parable of heterosexual relationship ordained by marriage is contrary to God's will is sin . . . And no theological or exegetical sleight of hand can erase that word or the Lord. (Nelson, 1992, p. 55)

Just as pastor Adam Clayton Powell Sr. had railed against homosexuality decades earlier, Channing Phillips made it clear to the gay Christian present that he understood their relationships to be inconsistent with God's intention for humankind (Cohen, 1999).

However, unlike fifty-five years earlier when Powell Sr. led his crusade against black gays, this time there was a counter-response by a white heterosexual man who invited congregants to join him at the front of the church at the end of the service. Singing the last hymn, over five hundred worshipers stood with him as a demonstration of the love, justice, and equality that they felt for their lesbian and gay sisters and brothers.

Dr. William Sloane Coffin, the white heterosexual senior pastor at that time, disturbed by the bigotry, preached a sermon the following Sunday that was in sharp contrast to the message delivered by Dr. Phillips. Coffin acknowledged the pain and struggle that Christians on both sides must feel:

I can only begin to imagine the hurt and anger felt by those of you who thought you had found here at Riverside what you had almost despaired of finding anywhere: a church where, despite the misinformation, superstitions and prejudices of our culture, not only black and white could feel at home, celebrating and affirming each other's existence in the name of Jesus Christ, but also gay straight. I can also understand the pain of other who thought that what they heard confirmed their moral apprehensions questioned by a demonstration. (as cited in Cohen, 1999, p. 101)

Nonetheless, Coffin did not hesitate, declaring that “we now have a sharply divided church . . . [over] homosexuality . . . the most divisive issue the churches of America have encountered, or evaded, since slavery” (as cited in Cohen, 1999, p. 101). He stated, “I do not see how Christians can define and then exclude people on the basis of sexual orientation . . .” (p. 101). The following two Sundays, other Riverside clergy made “clear their convictions affirming the church's inclusiveness of all sexual orientations” (Cohen, 1999, p. 101).

Though his was a common black ministerial response, Channing Phillips's example is not to suggest that all African American ministers are heterosexual supremacists. Some African American heterosexual ministers disagree with the position of many fellow African American clergy in the same way that they oppose white homophobic ministers' condemnation of gays. However, an overwhelming number support Phillips's theological understanding and resist viewing this perspective as oppressive. Such uncritical responses send forth a message that concern for oppression is only a concern when the oppression is racial oppression. Regarding issues of sexual equality within the church, many of the proponents are white and many of the opponents are black, with very few black heterosexuals advocating for gay equality in black churches. In 2000, Rev. Jimmy Creech, a white heterosexual United Methodist pastor, was stripped of his credentials because he opposed the injustice of the denomination that denies its lesbian and gay Christian members the rite of marriage. Although many white heterosexual Christian ministers continue to deny lesbian and gay Christians ordination and marriage, there are some who have ordained and married gays. This is not the case in the historically black denominations. While no black denomination has ordained an openly gay black minister, recently the oldest black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church, became the first black denomination to deny ordination to an openly gay black man, Tommie Watkins.

Like the parishioners at the Riverside Church, African American Christians also find themselves presently in the middle of what has become a moral dilemma. Although a black church Christian majority continues to view homosexuality as immoral, some find

themselves conflicted with the traditional perspective of identifying homosexuality as a sin. Others attempt to sidestep the issue by resorting to a Christian view of “love the sinner, hate the sin.” Many who find this perspective illogical argue if same-sex sexual attraction or expression is what makes the person gay, then what is being loved? With sexuality being an inextricable part of one’s being, the popular saying has as much success in reality as loving brown-eyed people while hating brown eyes.

African Americans’ rage and silence about homosexuality reflect this pervasive black cultural sexual shame and often leads to pain and abuse for both gays and heterosexuals. Yet it is striking that most of these perceptions have been constructed from the often vitriolic anti-gay sermons by black ministers. With so few resources on homosexuality and the black Christian faith, African Americans can experience difficulty adopting progressive Christian views that place homosexuality on par with heterosexuality. Almost nothing has been written on the subject from a black religious standpoint and even less engaging social scientific and theological perspectives. This is a problem. It has only been within the last decade that a few scholarly resources emerged addressing homosexuality and black faith.

In *Sexuality and the Black Church* and *One More River to Cross*, authors Kelly Brown Douglas (1999) and Keith Boykin (1996) respectively, assert that a significant number of African American heterosexuals are moving from some of the past derisions and beginning to accept African American lesbians and gays. And while Douglas and Boykin correctly point out that a decade ago African Americans supported civil rights for gays more than other groups, more recently the tide has turned. At the time of their work,

Boykin and Douglas documented that in terms of civil rights for lesbians and gays, African American heterosexuals held a slightly better track record than their white counterparts. They supported this claim not simply in terms of support for civil rights legislation for gays, but also based on community responses, contrasting the hostile attacks made by Irish American heterosexuals toward Irish American gays at the infamous St. Patrick Day parades in Boston and New York with the relative acceptance of black heterosexuals toward black gays at Chicago's Bud Billiken parade in 1992 and the 1994 Million Man March. Such citations are important and perhaps allow perhaps allow blacks to move from mere tolerance and benign acceptance of a gay presence, as in the above examples, to a position that publicly recognizes same-sex sexual relationships as moral and equal to heterosexual unions. Since neither the parade nor the march affirmed black lesbians and gays and their concerns or included gay speakers, there is considerable work that must be done in this area.

As pointed out earlier, African American heterosexuals no longer provide solid support for the civil rights of black and other gays. Undoubtedly, this change in support is related to a resurgence of gay demonizing and the religious and political opposition to gays' civil rights for marriage by black clergy and leaders such as the late G. E. Patterson of Memphis, Tennessee (Church of God in Christ). To be sure, African American heterosexual Christians as a group support a number of civil rights for gays, but as a result of black church teachings on the matter, they lag behind other groups in their support of gays more broadly. Thus, the group may feel gays deserve civil rights relating to fair housing and employment, but given the common view that homosexual

relationships are immoral, would be conflicted in their support for civil rights protection for such relationships, even in the privacy of the home. The following is an example.

In a study that followed the 2003 *Lawrence v. Texas* Supreme Court ruling legalizing private consensual sexual expressions between lesbians and gays (a right granted to all heterosexuals), African Americans were identified as the group least accepting gay marriage and homosexuality as a moral expression (only 36% of African Americans, compared to 48% of non-African Americans, feel that African American lesbians and gays and other gays should be allowed to marry) (USA Today poll, 2003). African Americans, even those who may not be regular churchgoers, typically base their refusals to accept homosexuality in biblical authority.

The Bible and Homosexuality in the Black Churches

Today, many religious scholars like Michael Eric Dyson, Kelly Brown Douglas, and Stephen Boyd suggest that—given the cultural and historical limitations of the Bible—the Bible is not an adequate source for responding to the issue of homosexuality any more than it sanctions organizing a free society or providing women and men with equal authority in the home and church. African American Christians, like other Christians, “treat so literally the references to homosexual practice in the Bible while at the same time they interpret biblical texts on almost every other topic with considerable flexibility and non-literalness” (Nelson, 1992, p. 181). Since few African American Christians have been encouraged to read all the passages related to homosexual activity, engage in a discussion about these passages, and provide a context for why these passages likely were written, they generally find it difficult to accept the morality of

homosexuality and move toward viewing gay relationships as equivalent to those of heterosexuals and worthy of the religious and social sanction of marriage.

Wimbush (2000) argues that it is not just what is in the Bible that makes black Christians passionate about following certain passages, but rather the pastor's emphasis on certain passages as authoritative. Few blacks raise this logic: since whites were wrong on their use of the Bible to support the practice of slavery, perhaps the majority of whites are also wrong on their use of the Bible to support a view of that homosexuality is sinful.

The first reality about homosexuality in the Bible is that the biblical writers were not as preoccupied with the issue of homosexuality as the present day church and larger Christian church. There are no more than six or seven passages that address homosexual activity: Genesis 19:1-29 (Judges 19); Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20:13; Romans 1:18-32; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11; and 1 Timothy 1:8-11. (The King James Version of The New Open Bible, Nelson, 1990) Moreover, these biblical passages reportedly relating to homosexuality had little to do with early Christian misgiving on the subject (Nelson, 1992). The writers refer to homosexual activity (a practice that was assumed to be a deviation from a "natural" heterosexual construction), but there is no specific reference to—or for that matter condemnation of—two people of the same sex cohabitating in a loving, committed, and long-term sexual relationship.

Many point out with good reason that it is anachronistic to use the Bible to address the homosexual reality of the twenty-first century unknown to ancient and first-century biblical writers. New Testament scholar Robin Scroggs (1983) offers the following brilliant summary:

The basic model in today's Christian [gay] community is so different from the model attacked by the New Testament that the criterion of reasonable similarity of context is not met. The conclusion I have to draw seems inevitable: *Biblical judgments against homosexuality are not relevant to today's debate*. They should no longer be used in denominational discussions about homosexuality, should in no way be a weapon to justify refusal of ordination, not because the Bible is not authoritative, but simply because it does not address the issue involved. (p. 127)

Finally, Jesus' silence on homosexuality in all four Gospels ought to make African American Christians think twice before assuming that homosexuality is the great sin that the majority of black and white churches declare it to be. This statement should not be read to imply that predominantly Asian and Latino churches do not have similar views. However, the level of emotion, attack, and politicization of this issue tends not to be as high as is true in black and white congregations, especially in the conservative Protestant denominations.

A reasonable response is that if homosexuality were a great sin or a sin at all, at some point during his ministry, Jesus would certainly have addressed this terrible way of life, as he did other sins. The fact that the black church has been able to assert the dominant position that "the Bible opposes homosexuality and is definitive for what the church should think and do about it" supports Wimbush's point of the culture's interpretation rather than a biblical emphasis against homosexual relationships.

Some African American heterosexual pastors and academics, like Drs. A. Cecil Williams, James Forbes, Michael Dyson, Dwight Hopkins, and Kelly Brown Douglas, differ with this common cultural response to scripture and—like their response to passages sanctioning slavery—view biblical passages on homosexual activity as culturally and time bound. In addition to hermeneutical considerations, this view

recognizes that the writers wrote with a limited, understanding of human sexuality. Our early twenty-first century understanding of science, social science, and human sexuality offers insight regarding gender, sexual expression, and activity in ways unavailable to first-century writers like Paul.

So, for example, in *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, authors Patricia Jung and Ralph Smith (1993) argue that Paul's writing in Romans 1, the most commonly cited New Testament passage for identifying homosexuality as immoral, must be placed in context. It is important to note that "Paul presupposed that all same-sex desires and behaviors among the Gentiles resulted from their insatiable lust for sexual variety, rooted intimately in their idolatry" (Jung & Smith, 1993, p. 80). People living at that time did not share the contemporary notion of sexuality that someone's sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex might be deeply ingrained and natural, in the same way that heterosexual desire is directed toward the opposite sex, implied in the phrase "sexual orientation."

Paul's invoking of the word "natural" in the twenty-seventh verse leaves no doubt that he understood everyone's sexual constitution to be directed toward the opposite sex.

And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. (The Open Bible, Nelson, 1990, p. 1265)

Many African Americans heterosexuals also use the term "natural" when referring to themselves and use "unnatural" to identify homosexuality as an illegitimate sexual expression. Since much of the present resistance to accepting homosexuality as a

Christian perspective has to do with the “unnatural” language found in Romans, it is important to keep in mind that when the passages about homosexual activity were written, the biblical writers also understood that in nature certain humans were naturally slave and naturally free. Thus, it would not register as odd for most white Christians of the eighteenth century to view

[African Americans] as biologically inferior to . . . white(s)—that race determined mental and moral traits. [African Americans] as . . . member(s) of an inferior race, [were] meant to be . . . slave(s), [their] normal and natural condition. (Quarles, 1987, p. 82)

This example allows us to see that what is presented is perceived as natural does indeed change over time.

Also noteworthy of further analysis is Paul’s reference to idolatry and the fall in this passage. In verses 20-23, Paul refers to creation in the Hebrew Bible to discuss the fall.

For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse:

Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, And changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts and creeping things. (The Open Bible, Nelson, 1990, p. 1265)

In Paul’s mind, idolatry and the fall are causal in homosexual practice, a manifestation of this disordering. What is in question here is not Paul’s understanding about homosexual

practice—Paul does not look favorably upon homosexual acts and attributes—but the way black church Christians and others uphold Paul’s position on homosexual practice as pure and infallible to be followed by all people throughout time and space. Jung and Smith (1993) argue that

Paul might well conclude that the fall results in both the sexual disordering of desires and behaviors and the sexual disorienting of some of us. However, were he a part of our world, it is also possible, and we think theologically consistent, for Paul to conclude that although sin has disordered everyone’s sexuality, it has disoriented no one’s. (p. 82)

This approach to Paul’s writings does not mean, however, that black gay and heterosexual Christians disregard scripture altogether or refrain from judging right and wrong behaviors. I regard sin as those behaviors that violate, destroy and abuse our fellow human beings and our relationships with them. In this respect, homosexuality does not belong in the category of sin any more than heterosexuality does. Abusive and destructive sexual relationships between two men or two women are just as wrong as, but no more wrong than, abusive and destructive sexual relationships between a man and woman. The affirmation of gay relationships is in no way intended to disregard or diminish heterosexual relationships but rather to broaden the concept of family in black faith and social communities. This will mean adopting a different understanding of traditional anti-homosexual passages.

A Tragic View

Many black heterosexual Christians erroneously understand the Sodom and Gomorrah story as representative evidence that gay men are more inclined to rape. The

Genesis 19 (The King James Version of The New Open Bible, Nelson, 1990) passage of Sodom and Gomorrah continues to be misused widely by black preachers, exacerbating the pain and tension between gays and heterosexuals. Sermons on this text are largely responsible for heterosexuals' perception that gay men are sex predators and child molesters. Such preaching further contributes to the crisis faced by gay men, already perceived as flawed by many in the church. For some heterosexual men, this preaching fuels their loathing toward gays. At the heart of this homophobia is the fear that gays, already deemed to be unnatural, if not controlled will harm the good heterosexuals with their sinister and sinful predatory sexual behavior.

This thinking about sexual predatory behavior is not unlike the racist thinking that black men are innately sex predators and will prey upon good white women. Such unchecked cultural thinking cost many innocent black men their lives and still causes pain and injustice for black men today. Unfortunately, many African Americans rarely reflect upon the similar flawed "sex predator" labeling of gay men and the moral injustice that comes with such labeling on an innocent gay majority. This is why black church minister and gospel artist Donnie McClurkin's story about his molestation as a child and its connection with homosexuality did not cause a stir among black Christians.

The Reverend Donnie McClurkin, an award-winning songwriter and gospel singer of such hits as "Stand" and "We Fall Down but We Get Up," has spent the last half decade talking about his success and perpetuating the oldest myth about homosexuality: that it results from child molestation by an adult male. In a 2001 interview, McClurkin shared his story about his childhood sexual abuse, which is detailed in his book *Eternal*

Victim, Eternal Victor. McClurkin is one of the few African American men in the country who has shared this type of story: being raped by an uncle at eight and sexually abused by male relatives while growing up in New York. Rape should never be understood as the cause of one's homosexuality any more than the more common rape of heterosexual girls should be equated with having caused their heterosexuality. Since the interview, however, McClurkin has related the early years of abuse of his brush with homosexuality. He goes on to report that he experienced subsequent "deliverance."

While I am sorry about this horrible evil that occurred in McClurkin's childhood, I find it regrettable that his bitterness and inability to work through this trauma lead him to generalize that homosexuality is a bad "choice" that should be overcome. This understanding of homosexuality does not consider that most gay men and lesbians were not raped and are not rapists. Even for gay men raped at an early age, there is no more reason for them to "change" their love relationships with men to be with women because they experienced rape by some abusive men than it is for heterosexual women to "change" their love relationship with men to be with women because of violent sexual encounters with men. McClurkin's advice to adolescent gay boys "that homosexuality is a choice they can overcome" is without merit. No reputable scientific study concludes that homosexuality is a choice and can be overcome. (Boykin 2002) Even if homosexuality or heterosexuality were a choice, there is no reason that either should be avoided. Both expressions possess the potential to offer sexual fulfillment and spiritual wholeness.

The two remaining Hebrew texts in the book of Leviticus (Lev. 18:22): “you shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination”; and (Lev. 20:13): “If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them” pertain to male homosexual activity as prohibitive and punishable by death. The fact that only men are mentioned points to the lack of scientific knowledge about reproduction. Such activity for males also carried with it a stigma of at least one of the men being placed in what was understood to be the sexual position appropriate for a woman. In the sexist cultures of time, “to lie with a man as with a woman” became a powerful symbol of shame in societies where the dignity of the man was held in such high esteem (Nelson, 1992, p. 185).

Noting Wimbush’s claim that the culture interprets the importance of the text, it is because we live in an anti-homosexual culture that are more aware of the texts from Leviticus that address homosexuality rather than those that enumerate other sins and their punishments: death to children who curse their father or mother (Lev. 20:9) (Nelson, 1990) or death to men who commit adultery with another man’s wife (Lev. 20:10). Furthermore, those in the black church generally do not think that it is sinful to eat shrimp (Lev. 11:10) or pork (Lev. 11:7), or to wear clothes with mixed fabric (Lev. 19:19), as the Levitical code describes along with male homosexual activity. The practice of raising the homosexual passages in Leviticus by black ministers and their relative silence on heterosexual adultery, as in the 1990s cases of Rev. Jesse Jackson and Dr. Henry Lyons (former president of the largest black Christian body, the National Baptist Convention USA, Inc.) indicate black Christians’ unwillingness to treat scripture with

consistency, making Leviticus only relevant when it comes to homosexuality. The Levitical laws do not allow for adherence to one offense over others.

The meaning of the remaining two New Testament passages (1 Cor. 6:9-11 and 1 Tim. 1:8-10) used to express God's condemnation of homosexuality is also not as clear as many black Christian opponents of homosexuality claim.

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. (1 Cor. 6:6-10)

Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the lawless and disobedient, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, . . . and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching that conforms to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me. (1 Tim. 1:8-11) (Nelson, 1990, p. 1369)

First of all, these are the writings of Paul or a writer using Paul's name. Since Paul's admonition regarding slavery is rightfully questioned and opposed, one can raise similar questions about Paul's view of sexuality. Moreover, cultural translations or mistranslations further problematize what is being communicated in these texts. In the original Greek, the terms that seemed to imply homosexual practice for some translators were the words *malakoi*, actually meaning soft male, and *arsenokoitai*, meaning lying with or sleeping with a male" (Jung & Smith, 1993). There is no reference to loving relationships or to women at all.

Jung and Smith (1993) further point out that in the 1611 King James Version of the Bible, the Corinthian passage is translated as "effeminate" and interpreted to mean

homosexual. Herein lies the problem. A general definition of effeminate means “having feminine qualities, and inappropriate to a man.” Not only is such a description culturally subjective, but the greater problem is that there is no necessary correlation between effeminate behavior and homosexuality. There are butch men who are homosexual and effeminate men who are heterosexual. If effeminacy is the issue, many heterosexual men in the world (a majority based on U. S. definitions of masculinity) would be guilty of this sin, while masculine homosexual or gay men would not be sinful.

Jung and Smith (1993) also note the homophobic bias of later translators (1946-65) to insert the word “homosexual” in this passage, even though there is no word “homosexual” in Greek language. Other versions like the Revised Standard Version and the Jerusalem Bible include words like “sexual pervert” and “call boys,” clearly reflecting a twentieth-century cultural derision of gay males rather than the accurate, if unclear, translation of “abuses of themselves with mankind.” Considering that the New Testament passages written by Paul (or attributed to Paul) are the most relevant concerns for black church Christians, Paul must be examined if we are ever going to place Paul and the texts in question in an appropriate context.

There is a striking irony that African American Christians are so uncritical of Paul’s writing about homosexual activity but have maintained a critical attitude or simple rejection of Paul’s injunction on slavery. For such as Christo-centric culture as the black church and its tendency to call on Jesus more than any other culture, it is especially curious that they would follow Paul’s response to homosexual activity rather than Jesus’. The use of Paul in the continued denigration of gays as immoral people raises the

question, at least on the issue of homosexuality, as to whether black church Christians are followers of Christ or of Paul.

Although Elliott (1994) may go too far in *Liberating Paul* by placing Paul as an opponent of gender and sexual exclusions, he may be correct that throughout history people and groups have invoked the apostle Paul, often inappropriately, to justify the worst kinds of oppression, including oppression against all African Americans, women, gays, and Jews. What is therefore curious is why so many black church Christians accept the limitations, flaws, and failures of a human Paul. They seem intent on making Paul more infallible than Paul ever claimed to be. By Paul's own admission in his first letter to the Corinthian church, he declares that he, like everyone else, saw through a dark glass, which allowed him to know only in part (1 Cor. 13:12): "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (The Open Bible, Nelson, 1990, p. 1299).

Knowing that sexuality can be mysterious even when it is revealing and recognizing that scientific and social scientific research informs us about our bodies and sexual expression in ways that were hidden from those who lived twenty centuries ago, it is reasonable that Paul could not have known about homosexuality as we know about it today. To accept this reality as responsible, reasonable Christians, we can conclude that the apostle makes an uninformed judgment limited by his time and space.

Christians of the nineteenth and twentieth century eventually considered this point when they moved away from other Pauline injunctions about slavery and women. Black church leaders' present knowledge about lesbians and gays as living spirit-filled lives and

serving faithfully in church (a counterclaim to Paul's description of such individuals in Rom. 1) demands a different treatment of scripture about the theological reflection of those engaged in homosexual practice. Certainly, "if the norm of the new humanity in Jesus Christ together would cause us to question some of Paul's moral convictions about the status of women and about the institutional of human slavery, surely his moral judgments about homosexual acts ought not to be exempt (Nelson, 1992).

So, I wonder: If Paul had been able to write about homosexual activity today with our level of knowledge, exposure, and critical thought, would he have drawn the same conclusions about homosexuality? If he had experienced the Christian witness and dedicated church work of the millions of lesbians and gay Christians in relationships serving congregations, shelters, choirs, youth programs, seniors, and community outreach services, could he still write about homosexual activity as producing "wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice, full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, . . . gossips, slanders, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boasters, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless" (Rom. 1)? I say a resounding no. Given how he worked to change the attitude of former Jews toward Gentile Christians, I can only imagine that his experience of God's lesbian and gay people in black churches and beyond would not allow him to draw the same conclusions. On what grounds could he dismiss the Spirit of God in their lives? By the same token, I believe that Paul would not support slavery if he were living among us.

While I share with my black church sisters and brothers that scripture is an important part of our faith and a valuable symbol and tool from which we make meaning

of our religion, I also strongly believe that we are called to be faithful to how the present context educates us in understanding the text. This present knowledge about our sexuality also calls for a different response to the scriptures. Scriptures demanded that women be removed from the community when they menstruate. Just as it would be irresponsible and frankly unconscionable to continue this practice with our knowledge that menstruation is a normal biological function of women and does not make women unclean, it is equally irresponsible if we interpret texts having to do with same-sex sexual expression as prohibitive when we know that lesbians and gays can and do reflect the same Christian moral character found in heterosexuals.

Conclusion

This chapter begins the critical examination of the Black Church and its homophobic engagement with lesbian and gay Christians. It is an engagement I characterize as oppressive and duplicitous. For though black church leaders once refused to accept white church leaders' use of the Bible to justify oppressing them during the periods of slavery and segregation, presently many use the Bible in a similar fashion to justify oppressing lesbians and gays. African American gays are generally born into black churches, and as a consequence of this existence endure pain while their humanity, sexuality, and love relationships are denigrated. Such preaching and teaching create psychological and theological problems for (black) lesbians and gays and for their heterosexual friends, family members, and fellow congregants. As a counterpoint to these negative teachings, I would like to offer new approaches to understanding scripture and homosexuality.

Like members of other stigmatized groups, lesbian, gay and even bisexual people face numerous psychological challenges as a result of (Western) society's hostility toward them. One of the biggest challenges results from the consequences of hiding one's sexual orientation. In the next chapter, I will discuss in great detail my search for identity, how and when I chose to disclose my homosexuality, and how homophobia and internalized oppression makes the process of identity formation more difficult.

In Chapter III, I will explore hyper-masculinity, an exaggeration and distortion of traditionally masculine traits. Hyper-masculinity is a value system extolling male physical strength, aggression, violence, competition, and dominance that despises the dearth of these characteristics as weak and feminine. This chapter will deconstruct black hyper-masculinity and its influence within the black communities.

In Chapter IV, I will challenge the present assumption that black love is uniquely heterosexual and the heterosexuals are the only ones with the capacity to love their bodies. I will explore the theological perspectives that shape the present "homosexuality is immoral" view, contributing to black Christians' mode of resistance to a different Christian understanding.

In Chapter V, I will discuss the implications and possibilities for a sexual discourse of resistance in the black church. I will explore ways the black church can address black sexuality without alienating its gay and lesbians members. I will offer creative suggestions on how black churches can begin to provide an atmosphere conducive to engaging in a sexual discourse of resistance.

CHAPTER II

HOMOPHOBIA AND INTERNALIZED OPPRESSION

In the previous chapter, we took a look at the black church's biblical responses to homosexuality and the tension that presently exists for lesbian, gay, and heterosexual congregants. In this chapter, I place emphasis on the historical and social factors that have shaped attitudes toward and inhibited the expression of homosexuality. In particular, I recount several of my experiences with homophobia and oppression within and beyond the black church. I, like Iris Marion Young's (1990) analysis of the relationship between racial and sexual oppression in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, find that if we want others to take the issue of religious and social justice seriously, we will have to consider that justice extends beyond the confines of race and refers not only to equal distribution, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities can collective communication and cooperation. Under this conception of justice, injustice refers to two forms of disabling constraints, oppression and domination. Both of which I will address I this chapter.

I hope that my compassion for the suffering of other homo and heterosexuals will make contributions to the steps toward changing these conditions and provide greater freedom and equality for all.

The Search for Identity

As a homosexual in our society I am constantly aware that I bear a stigma. I am constantly made aware of this, in the jokes and caricatures of stage and films, in the pain of my parents, in churches, schools, politics, and in my own uncertainties as to how I may be affected by a chapter like this, written under my own name.

Over the past few years I have come to realize that my homosexuality is an integral part of my self-identity, and that to hide it can only make my life, if less precarious, more difficult and unsatisfying. Yet I have not totally escaped the necessity to live a double life, at least in certain situations, nor rid myself of the tenseness that results from being constantly with people who assume everyone is heterosexual and are incapable of the imagination or empathy necessary to transcend this attitude. Like many other gay people, I know myself to be part of a minority feared, disliked, and persecuted by the majority and this gives my life a complexity and an extra dimension unknown to heterosexuals.

Our society, of course, stigmatizes other groups: nonwhites most obviously, and women, at least in some circumstances. Even worse perhaps are the stigmas borne by the old, the invalid, the crippled, and the ugly (Donald, 1970). Yet the stigma of the homosexual is unique in one central sense. Our gayness is not something, like skin color, or sex, or infirmity, immediately apparent to both us and others. We have to discover our homosexuality, and having discovered it, we have a wide range of options, hardly available to others who are stigmatized, as to how far we should reveal our stigma.

I shall in later chapters seek to develop some theories that explain just why homosexuals are so stigmatized, and what changes would be necessary to remove that stigma. For the moment, I am concerned with the experience of being a homosexual in contemporary Western society, and the oppression and homophobia that is associated with it. Let there be no confusion: the very concept of homosexuality is a social one, and one cannot understand the homosexual experience without recognizing the extent to which we have developed a certain identity and behavior derived from social norms.

The conventional definition of homosexuality has for the most part been a behavioral one: “a homosexual is anyone who engages in sexual acts with another of his or her own sex” (Webster, 1998). Homosexual is a generic term, including both men and women. If he or she has sex with both men and women, then he or she is bisexual. What could be simpler?

Yet a moment’s thought will show the inadequacy of the purely behavioral approach. Human beings are distinguished by a capacity for experience as well as by their behavior, and homosexuality is as much a matter of emotion as of genital manipulation. Celibacy, for example, is not an unknown state (we are all celibate for a time, and some manage life-long celibacy, either through determination or bad luck), yet are we to deny a celibate any sexual definition at all? Homosexuals often discover their homosexuality before any overt sexual experience, yet they are no less homosexual for that. Equally, many men and women have engaged in homosexual acts without being in any experiential sense homosexuals, for example in prison, at school, and as prostitutes (Epstein, 1970).

Many years ago, Gore Vidal (1965) claimed that “homosexual” should be used only as an adjective to describe a sexual activity, not as a noun to describe a recognized type. In an ideal society this would undoubtedly be true, and one might expect that if, as many writers in the field suggest, there is a continuum between homo-and heterosexuality, sexual behavior would reflect this. Yet most people seem to regard the two as mutually exclusive categories and there is considerable emphasis on the need to identify as either heterosexual or homosexual. Thus the expression “coming out,” common among homosexuals, implies much more than a first sexual act with another man or woman. Rather it is bound up with the whole process whereby persons come to identify themselves as homosexual, and recognize thereby their positions as part of a stigmatized and half-hidden minority. For the moment, I shall consider bisexuals as part of this minority, although their case is somewhat different. Nonetheless, author Kate Millette has had reason to note that it was her homo-rather than her heterosexuality which she is branded.

The development of a homosexual identity is a long process that usually begins during adolescence, though sometimes considerably later (Goodman, 1969). Because of the fears and ignorance that surround our views of sex, children discover sexual feelings and behavior incompletely, and often with great pangs of guilt. How much greater, then is the guilt of the teenager who discovers himself attracted to others of his or her own sex? Dave McReynolds, the former pacifist and political activist who first wrote openly of his homosexuality in 1969, has described how he waited for each birthday hoping he would become “normal” and his guilt on realizing he was irredeemably “queer.” Others,

like me, manage to enter into our twenties without full realization that we are not like others—that we are, in fact, one of them.

The actual origins of homosexuality remain a mystery, despite a profusion of psychoanalytic theories. We know that much of what is considered natural sexual behavior is, in fact, learned, and that somewhere along the way the homosexual diverges from the more common path and develop a different pattern of sexual response. Many believe this is proof of pathology, and men like Dr. Irving Bieber and Dr. Charles Socraides, who were both well-known exponents of “curing” homosexuals, made their names by branding homosexuals. According to Bieber (1963) in his book *Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytic Study of Male Homosexuals*, “homosexuality to be a pathologic biosocial, psychosexual adaptation consequent to pervasive fears surrounding the expression of heterosexual impulses” (p. 78). This work was based exclusively on men too disturbed to be undergoing treatment.

Speculation on homosexuality is often miss-construed as effeminacy in boys or butchness in girls. Thus one comes across statements such as that by Robert Stoller, a former Los Angeles professor of psychiatry, in his book *Sex and Gender* (1968), that “masculine homosexual men are an exception I cannot discuss since I do not yet understand them” (p. 111). Most studies of homosexuality, however, and certainly my own experience, tend to suggest that the majority are in fact masculine or feminine as we measure these things in our society. Most homosexuals do not have doubts about their own masculinity or femininity, nor do they wish to be taken for or in fact become the

opposite sex: many transvestites and transsexuals consider themselves determinedly heterosexual.

This confusion of sex roles with sexual preference continues to influence the public imagination and even the psychiatric because both sex and gender are a much more fluid concept than being masculine or feminine, male or female. Even the most masculine of men have some feminine qualities to him, and vice versa for the most feminine of women. It is far more complicated than the assumption that homosexuality involves wanting-to-be-the-other-sex. Norman Mailer, whom I shall have frequent reason to quote, referred for example to “queers” as humans-with-phalluses who choose to be female.” Which is nonsense: most homosexuals choose no such thing. They choose rather to love/sleep with others of their own sex which is a completely different phenomenon.

Mailer used the word “choose” which would be currently rejected by both biological and psychiatric determinists, and indeed probably by most homosexuals. “I can’t help what I am” is a frequent comment in homosexual conversation I have observed. I suspect this is less true than the orthodox wisdom suggests, and that there is at least sometimes an element of deliberate choice in the adoption of homosexuality. Robert Lindner in his book *Must You Conform?* Referred to homosexuality as “a form of rebellion” and the homosexual as a ‘non-conformist’ and there is some truth in this. To become a homosexual, particularly for women, is to reject the program for marriage, family, and home that our society holds up as normal.

I must admit to considerable confusion in my own mind as to the way in which we develop our various patterns of sexual response. The interaction of biological urges

and social pressures is a process that is little understood. Homosexuality, as we know, exists in some form in virtually all human societies, and is associated with very different personality types and adjustment to sex roles (Wittman, 1970). Thus some people can simultaneously assert that *many* male fashion models and *most* masculine women are lesbians. Perhaps the most sensible conclusion is that there are many reasons which may account for an individual's homosexuality, that this becomes a part of his or her total concept of identity, and that it is almost impossible to eradicate it without doing damage to the whole personality. (It may, of course, be possible to frighten a "patient" out of overt sexual acts, an archaic approach which underlies so-called aversion therapy.)

The "problem" of the genesis of homosexuality ceases to be of great concern once one is prepared to accept homosexuality as neither a sin nor pathology, but rather as one way of ordering one's sexual drive, intrinsically no better or worse than the heterosexual and with the same potential for love and hate, fulfillment, or disappointment. In Iris Murdoch's novel *A Fairly Honorable Defeat* (1972), remarkable among books that touch on the gay experience because the homosexual and more happily than the heterosexuals, one of the protagonists, Axel sees his homosexuality as "a fundamental and completely ordinary way of being a human being." Such is my own perspective.

Oppression: The Denial of Identity

In contemporary rhetoric, oppression has become a highly over-worked word. Yet its sheer fashionableness should not lead us to deny the existence of oppression. Strictly speaking, it results from the fact that societies are divided along class, race, and caste lines and that some groups occupy positions from which they are able to dominate others

(Lyon, 1972). In these terms oppression is a concept whose applicability to societies like the United States runs counter to the liberal myth of a society of autonomous individuals, a myth that has maintained itself despite quite remarkable evidence to the contrary (Lyon, 1972).

But even when one concedes that in these groups oppression exists, it may seem difficult to conceive of groups being oppressed for their sexuality. This is, I think, largely because of our concept of oppression has tended to be based upon crude sort of Marxist phenomenon, and many others still seek to incorporate all oppressed groups into such a uni-dimensional economic model. It is precisely the discovery that oppression is multi-dimensional that one may be simultaneously both oppressed and oppressor that underlies the analysis of the sexual liberation movements. Thus sexual oppression is probably, as feminists insisted, the oldest of all dominance/subordination relationships, though this is often clouded by the fact that while women form a caste which is oppressed by men, they themselves divide along class and ethnic lines, and so oppressed others, both men and women, in turn (Lyon, 1972).

A similar approach needs to be made in the case of homosexuals. That is, if we restrict ourselves to a primarily political or economic definition of oppression, it will be difficult to fit homosexuals into it. A failure to recognize that the oppression of gay people is somewhat different in kind from the oppression of other groups—women aside—lies behind some of the more inaccurate statements of participants in the gay movement. There exist, for example, gay ghettos, in the sense of areas where there are large concentrations of homosexuals, and where homosexual behavior is largely

accepted. In such areas, rents may well be higher than in comparable but non-gay sections of the city, and there will probably be a number of exploitative (that is, overpriced) bars, etc. But such areas do not suffer from the same constricting socioeconomic features as do ethnic ghettos, and it is poor analysis and bad politics to ignore the difference (Lyon, 1972).

Do not believe those who argue the queers are taking over, or it's in to be gay nowadays. It isn't, not in real life. Try an experiment, urged one girl at a rally at New York University. "Wear a button saying 'I am a lesbian' and watch how people react." The much vaunted sexual permissiveness of our time has not eradicated the oppression homosexuals suffer, though it may replace being largely ignored with being subjected to prurient voyeurism.

Oppression can take many forms; when it is most insidious, it is not always recognized. Many whites, for example, still conceive of racism as synonymous with lynching and enforced segregation; it takes an act of imagination to realize that racism rests on a certain set of assumptions that permeate virtually all of Western society, and whose effect is felt even by those who disavow it. The oppression of homosexuals has often taken very blatant forms. In the Middle Ages homosexuality was regarded as the "the unspeakable crime." To quote from a poem written by the (New York) Flaming Faggots Collective (1972), a group of gay men associated with gay liberation:

When witches were burned in the middle ages,
 the Inquisitors ordered the good burghers
 (all of them men, of course)
 to scour the jungles for jailed queers
 drag them out and tie them together in bundles,

mix them in with bundles of wood
 at the feet of the women,
 and set them on fire
 to kindle a flame
 foul enough for a witch to burn in
 The sticks of wood in bundles like that
 were called faggots
 and that's what they called the queers; too,
 and call us still,
 meaning our extinction, our complete
 extermination,
 anthroicide and gynocide their one response to
 any heretical blasphemy against
 a god-given manliness. (p. 8)

Persecution, Discrimination, and Tolerance

The oppression faced by homosexuals takes on a number of forms, and at its most pernicious may be internalized to the point that an individual no longer recognizes it as oppression (Pharr, 1988). According to Jill Johnston, homosexuals encounter oppression of three kinds: persecution, discrimination, and tolerance. The first of these is based for the most part on the illegality of homosexual behavior. Now it is obvious that as long as society attempts to legislate morality, millions of citizens will fairly constantly and consciously break the law, and in this sense the homosexual is rather like the marijuana-smoker or the woman seeking an illegal abortion. In fact most homosexuals know that they are reasonably safe from police action, certainly in private, for no society could afford to enforce fully the anti-homosexual laws that remain in many American states. Accurate figures are hard to find, yet it is clear that many more homosexuals are harassed by the police than is ever reported—and also that these represent only an infinitesimal

proportion of all homosexual “criminals.” Nonetheless knowledge of one’s lawless has certain implications. (Greer 1971)

Homosexuals and the Law

Like other stigmatized groups, homosexuals do not enjoy equal protection of the law. Robbery and blackmail of homosexuals are common, partly because of our legal status makes us uneasy about going to the police. Lack of equal protection is most threatening in regard to the violence from which homosexuals, particularly men who are at all effeminate, or women who appear too butch, suffer. Indeed anyone in a position where he is likely to be suspected of being a homosexual can expect rough police treatment. I was once stopped and searched—groped would be more accurate word—by two policemen because they saw me walking with a friend along a street known as a homosexual beat. Nor are gay women immune from police harassment, though the much more restricted nature of their world tends to limit it. The worst persecution is probably that encountered by transvestites, though it is interesting that in San Francisco (and perhaps elsewhere) the police department has sought to expand its contacts with and understanding of transvestites.

Usually persecution of this sort is encountered only by homosexuals acting as homosexuals; that is, it is only in overtly homosexual situations that I am likely to encounter it. If I walk arm-in-arm with my lover, I need fear persecution; if I walk beside him without physical contact, I needn’t. But if I am simply *known* as a homosexual, I will encounter discrimination even at times when no one seriously believes my sex life is directly involved. This is most obvious in the field of employment, and there are

homophile leaders who believe that job discrimination is the greatest single reason why homosexuals fear disclosure.

Homosexual Discrimination

Outside certain areas of work, of which entertainment and some personal services, such as hairdressing, are the major examples, one's career can only be adversely affected if one is known as—or suspected of being—a homosexual. It is as much this situation as the camp characteristics of certain jobs that lead to the high number of homosexuals commonly believed to be found in certain occupations. The military seeks to bar homosexuals and dismisses anyone found engaging in homosexual acts, a fact that many, including non-homosexuals, have used to avoid the draft.

In many branches of civil service homosexuals are similarly barred, particularly where security checks are involved. Gore Vidal (1965) claimed that

two male government workers living together in Washington, D.C. would soon find themselves unemployed. They would be spied on, denounced secretly and dismissed. Only a bachelor entirely above suspicion like J. Edgar Hoover could have afforded to live openly with another man. (p. 86)

Schoolteachers have been dismissed in America for being homosexual, even when there was no more reason to suspect them than their heterosexual colleagues of sexual interest in children. (In California at least the state supreme court has ruled that homosexuality by itself is not sufficient to debar somebody from teaching.) It is ironic that while the possibility of blackmail is often used to defend such discrimination, homosexuals who come out, and hence are hardly vulnerable to this, are not thereby guaranteed job security.

One can be refused a job, of course, without the real reason stated; who knows how many men are refused promotion because they lack a respectable family image, how many women because they seem “too masculine.” With the increasing information available to employers often purchased from private investigating agencies, the problem increases. In my case I realized some years ago that I was precluded from entering conventional politics, because I was not prepared sufficiently to hide my homosexuality. There are, of course, a number of politicians who are in fact closeted homosexuals, but I would not be prepared to live the quite tortured life of secrecy such men must suffer. We have probably moved beyond the senator in *Advise and Consent*, who committed suicide out of fear that his one-time homosexual act would be divulged. We have not yet reached the point, I suspect, where overt homosexuals could run for office and hope to win.

One of the most bizarre cases of discrimination on the basis of homosexuality was the refusal in late 1970s by the Connecticut Commissioner of Motor Vehicles to issue a license to a man because his “homosexuality makes him an improper person to hold an operator’s license.” Admittedly this event was an odd exception and happened many years ago, but it illustrates how far-reaching discrimination has been and can be.

Social discrimination against homosexuals helps produce a further variant of oppression—and one that most nearly approximates economic depression—best summed up in the term “exploration.” The existence of a separate gay-world is in large part the product of the stigma that surrounds homosexuality. The strength of social pressures against any overt homosexual behavior has made us particularly vulnerable to businessmen prepared to provide specialist services—for example, somewhere to dance

with another man or woman. To this extent, the ghetto analogy is accurate, for as in ethnic ghettos, “homosexual” restaurants, bars, shops, hotels, etc, tend to be overpriced and of inferior quality. Housing, too, can be a considerable problem, and gay couples in particular sometimes encounter hostility that limits their ability to rent or even buy. In a capitalistic society organized relentlessly around the norm of heterosexual family, the single homosexual or heterosexual couples encounter continual problems, particularly in matters concerning life-style.

It is impossible to be both a self-accepting homosexual and live a conventional life in Western society. This is the problem encountered by Stephen, the central (female) character in the classic *The Well of Loneliness* (Hall, 1990). “Could you marry me Stephen?” asks Angela her first lover, underlining the nature of Stephen’s outsiderhood. This form of discrimination may be of declining importance as marriage itself becomes less important, yet there remain important legal and taxation difficulties that result from the inability of homosexuals to establish legalized relationships. These difficulties can be of major consequence. In Isherwood’s *A Single Man* the hero experiences the death of his lover of many years, and realizes that he has less status for the man’s family than would a casual girlfriend. And if their relationship had been open, what then? If his lover died intestate, what court would treat him as it would a widowed *de facto* wife? A London report in the *Times* referred to a lesbian dying in a hospital who “was only allowed visits from her immediate family, and her partner of twenty years was excluded. When a lesbian loses her partner she can expect little or no comfort from conventional sources of

support like neighbors, a priest, or doctor who would try to ease the hurt of a heterosexual faced with bereavement or divorce.”

Homosexuality and Tolerance

The most common form of oppression to which we are exposed tends to be neither outright persecution nor discrimination but rather the patronizing tolerance liberals, or what Isherwood has referred to as “annihilation by blandness.” (I realize that my experience, for reasons of class and race, is more sheltered than most.) Certainly liberals would not wish to see me arrested for sleeping with another man nor even for cruising for one; they might of course, send me to their therapists; more likely they will ignore my homosexuality, rather as some liberals will say anything rather than describe a black by his color. The difference between tolerance and acceptance is very considerable, for tolerance is a gift extended by the superior to the inferior: “He’s very tolerant,” one says, which immediately tells us more about the other person’s social position than his views. Such an attitude is very different from acceptance, which implies not that one pities others—and pity has become the dominant emotion expressed in our society toward homosexuals—but rather that one accepts the equal validity of their style of life.

Thus most liberal opinion is horrified by persecution of homosexuals and supporters abolishing anti-homosexual laws, without really accepting homosexuality as a full and satisfying form of sexual and emotional behavior. Such tolerance of homosexuality can coexist with considerable suspicion of and hostility toward it, which is reinforced in all sorts of ways within our society. Plays and books on the subject are popular insofar as they reinforce the stereotype of the faggotry, unhappy homosexual.

We are fair butt for jokes—”Would you want your son to marry one?”—and the peculiar pain of the closeted homosexual is most marked when he finds himself laughing a bit too heartily at fag stories. There is a parallel here with the black experience. Many years ago, Stokely Carmichael spoke of black kids cheering as they watched Tarzan beat up the “savages.”

To complain about the scarcity of open homosexuals writing in the media may seem unreasonable, just as similar complaints by blacks once seemed unreasonable. But given the enormous social pressures that exists against homosexuals, the absence of the open homosexual make for distortions, misunderstandings, false concepts of balance (that is, pro-homosexual statements need always to be combined with anti-). As journalist Stuart Byron, a former member of the Gay Activists Alliance, wrote of the *New York Times*’ coverage of the riots that would lead to the emergence of gay liberation and of the paper’s failure to understand the significance of the riots: “you had to be gay to know just what ‘coming out’ in public meant, how protesting in the streets and risking still and film camera exposure and police arrest was something entirely different and new” (Altman, 1971). Of course, there are homosexuals employed by the *New York Times*. Given the pressures to conceal themselves, they were the least likely to provide adequate coverage.

Thus it is a common complaint among homosexuals that the media ignore their political activities, and even refuse space to homosexual organizations for advertisements, apparently regarding these as unfit to be printed. One of the earliest gay liberation protests in New York occurred because *Village Voice* refused to allow the word

“gay” in its classified ads—but printed “dykes” and “fags” in its news columns. (Altman, 1971)

The real mark of tolerance is its failure to imagine the experience of others. I am constantly made aware that even the most liberal of heterosexuals thinks of a world that is entirely heterosexual, in the same way as there are few whites who really comprehend that for millions of Americans theirs is not a white country. I lunched sometime ago with a male graduate student who was researching men’s attitudes toward women’s liberation. Angry in his enthusiasm for the movement, it had never occurred to him that there were men, like me, who viewed women in a quite different perspective from that of the average heterosexual.

Tolerance, too, tends to result from an ideological position which overrides an emotional attitude that is most intelligent heterosexuals reject, intellectual, their hostility to homosexuals while unable to conquer their emotional repugnance. The outward result is tolerance.

The Ideologues of Oppression

Social attitudes toward homosexuals in Western societies reflect a deeply imbued fear and hatred of homosexuality. Until recently the dominant position of both church and psychiatry was to advocate the repression of homosexual behavior; the demand that it should be eradicated as far as possible has led some gay militants to charge both the church and psychiatrists with advocating genocide (Martin, 1969).

Opposition to homosexuality is particularly bound up with the nature of our religious heritage, and the Christian church has traditionally viewed it as a sin, and a sin,

moreover, to be punished in this world as much as the next. As with all moral issues there is of course a broad spectrum of theological views, and to fully discuss Christianity positions on a matter of such complexity would demand more space and expertise than I possess. The most significant position for me is perhaps that of the black church, and here I rely on the “vulgar” teachings of the Church, that is, the position on homosexuality communicated to the congregants through the Sunday sermons.

Among the Protestant churches there is a broad range of opinions, from some sections of the Anglican, Unitarian, and Quaker churches who accept the validity of homosexual love, to the fire and brimstone of fundamentalists conjuring up technicolor threats of Sodom and Gomorrah. (Modern Jewish teachings tend to hover uneasily between the two.) As institutions, churches have been largely unsympathetic to their homosexual members; even R.E. L. Masters, whose book *The Homosexual Revolution* represents patronizing liberalism at its best—Masters condemns the churches for either rejecting homosexuals or else insisting that they “practice hypocrisy and deceit” in their worship. In recent years there has appeared on the fringes of the churches a new acceptance of homosexuality, and churches catering specifically for homosexuals have been established, sometimes manned by ministers debarred from more orthodox congregations for their homosexuality. In general, however, the bulk of organized religion continues to contribute to the hostility that supports oppression of homosexual.

With the growth of secularism, fewer people regard homosexuality as a sin, and the more popular image of it is as an illness. Dr. Irving Bieber’s definition of homosexuality and his view is widely shared by many psychiatrists—though hardly

represents the view of Freud (1935), who wrote in his “Letter to an American Mother”:
“Homosexuality is assuredly no advantage, but it is nothing to be ashamed of, no vice, no degradation, it cannot be classified as an illness; we consider it to be a variation of sexual functions produced by a certain arrest of sexual development.” (as cited in Angelides, 2001, p. 74). Though this is not the place, nor I the person, there is a need for a history of how Freud’s views have been corrupted.

Among homosexuals, psychiatry is particularly distrusted, for it is often viewed as seeking to enforce standard heterosexual normality on gay patients (Harvey, 1971). This attitude is a considerable exaggeration, for many psychiatrists seek to help homosexuals overcome social pressures, rather than advocate changing them into heterosexuals. Psychiatry, after all, embraces a wide range of views of human behavior and experience. That all psychiatrists regard homosexuality as a malady to be cured is an impression fostered by those practitioners who do in fact advocate such “cures,” the most objectionable of which, however, are those of the behavioral therapists, who sometimes relied on very crude forms of conditioning (including for example, the use of drugs that induce a sensation of suffocation and drowning, electric shocks, and emetics to induce vomiting). D. J. West, who discussed these methods in his book *Homosexuality*, reports at least one death resulting directly from such aversion therapy.

It is not merely that the infliction of pain in order to “cure” that was seen as unacceptable by many, it is, more importantly, that “curing” homosexuality was recognized as the imposition of conformity that it really is. Aversion therapists claimed

that their “patients” came to them voluntarily. They do not seem to understand how far their acts are responsible for leading homosexuals to see themselves as sick.

Guilt and the Internalization of Oppression

Insofar as society teaches its children about sex, and most of this teaching is indirect (which, considering most people’s hang-ups on the subject, is probably fortunate) it presents a model that is totally heterosexual in orientation. Look, for example, through advertisements in any gloss magazine. Thus is the difficulty of ‘coming out’: most of us become aware of vaguely homosexual feelings before having any model to help understand them. And from society’s refusal to acknowledge homosexuality as a valid part of human experience stems the most destructive aspect of oppression, the fact that it becomes internalized and affects the self-image of the oppressed. “You can only be destroyed,” James Baldwin (1962) wrote to his nephew, “by believing that you really are what the white world calls a nigger” (p. 79). So it is with the homosexual.

The phenomenon of internalized oppression has been extensively explored in the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). However, as Dan Foster (1993) suggests, the notion of a psychological “mark of oppression” (a term first coined by two American psychiatrists, Kardiner and Ovesey [1951]), a notion which focuses on the consequences and implications of living under various forms of oppression (particularly colonization and racial oppression) is one of a whole host of labels, drawn primarily from the human and social sciences, that have been used to describe this phenomenon over the past 50 years or so. Whatever the label, all of these notions carry a common referent: “the idea of internalized psychological consequences [e.g., a sense of inferiority, low self-

esteem, and aggression] due to social systems of prejudice, discrimination and oppression” (Foster, 1993, p. 128).

Paulo Freire (1970) provides a well-known and useful summary of these consequences. He begins by arguing that the goal of the oppressed is to liberate themselves *and* their oppressors. The difficulty of achieving this goal, says Freire, comes about because in the initial stage of their struggle against oppression, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend to become oppressors themselves (or “sub-oppressors”). This is because while their ideal is to be fully human, their model of “full humanity” has been the oppressor. This is what Freire calls “*identification with the oppressor*”—at a certain moment of their existential experience the oppressed have adopted an attitude of “adhesion” to the oppressor, they “find in the oppressor their model of ‘manhood’” (pp. 30-31), and they may even “feel an irresistible attraction towards the oppressor and his way of life” (p. 49). They have “internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines” (p. 31) for action and interaction in the world.

Freire offers two other insights about this “duality” under which the oppressed live. The first is to call attention to the phenomenon of “*self-deprecation*”—a sense of shame, humiliation, self-hatred, and low self-esteem that is characteristic of the oppressed. This attitude derives, he says, from the oppressed adoption of the opinion that the oppressors hold of them. “So often do [the oppressed] hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive--that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (p. 49).

Here Freire clearly echoes Memmi's (1967) analysis of the experience of colonization, in which the "mythical portrait" created by the colonizer profoundly shapes the view that the colonized hold of themselves:

Constantly confronted with this image of [themselves], set forth and imposed on all institutions and in every human contact, how could the colonized help reacting to [their] portrait? It cannot leave [them] indifferent and remain a veneer which, like an insult, blows with the wind. [They] end up recognizing it as one would a detested nickname which has become a familiar description. The accusation disturbs [them] and worries [them] even more because they admire and fear their powerful accuser. "Are not they partially right?," [they] mutter. "Are we not a little guilty after all? Lazy, because we have so many idlers? Timid, because we let ourselves be oppressed?" Willfully created and spread by the colonizer, this mythical and degrading portrait ends up being accepted and lived with to a certain extent by the colonized. (p. 87)

Freire also introduces the notion of "*horizontal violence*"—in which members of the oppressed group engage in violence against their own comrades. "Because the oppressor exists within their oppressed comrades," Freire says, "when they attack those comrades [the oppressed] are indirectly attacking the oppressor as well" (p. 48).

To support his analysis, Freire quotes Fanon's (1967) analysis of causes of the aggressiveness and violence that the oppressed/colonized "natives" direct toward each other, often for the pettiest of reasons:

The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people. This is the period where the niggers beat each other up, and the police and the magistrates do not know which way to turn . . . While the settler or the policeman has the right the livelong day to strike the native, to insult him and to make him crawl to them, you will see the native reaching for his knife at the slightest hostile or aggressive glance cast on him by another native; for the last resort of the native is to defend his personality vis-à-vis his brother. (p. 52)

While there is much more that can and should be said about Freire's conception of the dynamics of oppression and domination, suffice it to say that the strictly individual, psychological understanding of internalized oppression to which Freire's description seems to point has been widely adopted in the contemporary literature on oppression (see Baker-Miller, 1976; Bell, 1997; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Harvey, 1999; Lipsky, 1987; Pharr, 1988; Sennett & Cobb, 1972; Sherover-Marcuse, 1986; Young, 1990). Gail Pheterson (1990) provides a classic summary of this perspective:

Internalized oppression is the incorporation and acceptance by individuals within an oppressed group of the prejudices against them within the dominant society. Internalized oppression is likely to consist of self-hatred, self-concealment, fear of violence and feelings of inferiority, resignation, isolation, powerlessness, and gratefulness for being allowed to survive. Internalized oppression is the mechanism within an oppressive system for perpetuating domination not only by external control but also by building subservience into the minds of the oppressed groups. (p. 35)

Note in this description the primary emphasis on feelings and emotional responses, and the use of internal, interior images ("into the minds") to characterize this phenomenon.

Because society's attitudes are internalized, homosexuals develop a great sense of guilt about themselves; for myself, however much I try, I doubt if shall ever totally lose that. Guilt, in turn, produces self-hatred, and those who hate themselves will find it difficult not to despise others who share their guilt. Such a syndrome, Martin Hoffman (1968) argued in *The Gay World*, is the major reason for the difficulty so many homosexuals have in relating to each other, the obsessive search for new partners, the one night stands. This picture of unrelieved promiscuity can be overdrawn—as it is by Dr. Reuben—and there are other reasons, such as social pressures, for secrecy, that often

prevent homosexuals from developing lasting relationships, for such relationships threaten them with discovery. One should note, also, the considerably greater number of lasting relationships that appear to exist between female and male homosexuals, though how far this is merely a reflection of the social conditioning to which men and women are subjected is impossible to say. Nonetheless, the cycle of guilt and self-hatred is a vital factor in explaining much about the gay world.

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I have felt at times the various attitudes—sin, crime, illness, curse—with which society brands us and at times, and in the more dismal hours of lonely nighttime, I

wonder whether these may not in fact be right. There is a lurking sense that maybe my experience is not in fact the equal of straight, that however much pleasure and love I can take from a male lover, something is still denied me. Similarly, the sense of isolation and being excluded, which I have felt since I was a child, may remain an obstacle to my developing and maintaining a healthy homosexual relationship as an adult.

Guilt and self-hatred has been reflected in most overtly homosexual literature. “Show me a happy homosexual,” said Michael in *Boys in the Band* (Friedkin & Crowley, 1970), “and I’ll show you a gay corpse.” Indeed, a remarkable number of corpses dot the pages of homosexual literature, which traditionally has used most literary clichés except the living-happily-ever-after one. The typical homosexual novel—I speak now either of those with real literary merit nor of those written for purely pornographic effect, but rather those that fall in between, the E. Lynn Harris’ (1999) *Invisible Life* or Michael Moore’s (2005) *For What I Hate I do* of the gay world—are full of guilt, agonies, and melodramatic peaks of momentary happiness before the final reckoning. Few have a happy ending, and even fewer dispute that homosexual love must be a guilty love and that considerable effort be spent in hiding it.

One of the more significant ways in which self-hatred reveals itself is through the hostility that many homosexuals have for any kind of homosexual movement, a hostility that often seems irrational in strength with which it is voiced. Yet this is hardly surprising, for such movements threaten too closely the manner in which most homosexuals have arranged their lives. Self-hatred shows itself, too, in the way in which homosexuals “objectify” each other, that is, see each other purely as physical objects

rather in the manner of *Playboy* centerfolds (gay men should understand at least one of the aims of women's liberation—the one against sexual “objectification”—for we have experienced it ourselves). Many male homosexuals at least, myself included, pass through a period during which we seek to protect ourselves by refusing any contact other than the purely physical one. To move beyond this is an important stage in rejecting the internalization of oppression.

Living a Double-Life

As already discussed there are a number of good reasons for leading a double life, reasons connected with self-preservation, careers, and family. Yet beyond these reasons, the need to conceal homosexuality is often a psychological one, product of the self-hatred born of guilt. For reasons of self-esteem many homosexuals—though this now changing—seek to spend as much of their life as possible as straight, seeking to deny the longings that determine their sexual lives. I lived such a life for several years, and looking back on it, I can only wonder at the complicated tissue of half-lies, evasions, and deceits I had involved myself in. (To say nothing of the boredom and discomfort I suffered in forcing myself to imitate a straight life.) Yet even now there are times when I flinch from being identified as a homosexual, for I feel the contempt that the identification brings. It requires a self-assurance that very few, either gay or straight, possess, to be fully immune to the effect of social disapproval.

Like the black, the homosexual suffers from a self-fulfilling stereotype. Tell people long enough that they are inferior, and they will come to believe it. Most of us are “niggers” because we believe that we are in larger part what society constantly brands us

as; in response we come to exhibit the characteristics that justify our stigma. There are a large number of neurotic, unhappy, compulsively promiscuous homosexuals whom one might well regard as “pathological.” Their pathology is, however, the result of social pressures and the way they have internalized these, not of homosexuality itself. If people are led to feel guilty about an essential part of their own identity, they will in all likelihood experience considerable psychological pressures. (Malcolm X, 1970)

Much of the campiness of the homosexual world is a reflection of social pressures, and it is precisely because so much of the gay-world is a product of social ostracism, forcing together people who have only this one part of themselves in common, that it makes up what I call a pseudo-community. Most homosexuals, given a fully accepting society, would, I suspect, eschew constant gay company; one has interests that extend beyond sexual orientation. Yet there are very few heterosexuals who seem able to fully accept us, to treat us, that is, without pity or fascination or condescension but—and I hesitate to write something as corny-sounding—simply as people. Which is not to deny that there are heterosexuals who are capable of such acceptance; many homosexuals have one or two such friends, often of the opposite sex, who occupy a special importance in their lives, perhaps because they provide the reassurance which I fear we all need, that there is nothing so terrible or peculiar about our gayness.

Often unconsciously, homosexuals internalize the expectations that popular psychology and psychiatry have of us—homosexuals are by and large vociferous readers of books that purport to explain them—and come to believe these expectations. When homosexuals are surveyed for research purposes, they tend to echo these beliefs, and thus

the stereotype becomes self-reinforcing (Silverstein 1972). It takes little imagination to see how corrosive such internalization can become, for it is difficult to withstand the conventional wisdom even when it contradicts our own experience. I know in reflecting on my own experiences how far popular beliefs about homosexuality, and the guilt that I have felt, prevented me from accepting that I had fallen in love. Indeed, with memories of those myths that deny the homosexual the experience of love, I fled the first man who might have become my lover and sought an unsuccessful affair with a woman—who I seduced, with some irony, by telling her of my homosexual urges.

Of course, homosexuals *are* denied some experiences, most particularly, parenthood. Indeed the desire to have children is probably a major factor explaining why a number of homosexuals marry. Not all such marriages are necessarily failures, though aside from exceptional circumstances one would hardly counsel them. But there is no reason why gay men and women could not adopt and raise children, for children would certainly be happier in such a situation than in the sterile institutions which are the usual alternative for unwanted kids. There are, of course, a number of homosexual mothers and, more rarely, fathers, who do raise children, either by themselves or with a homosexual partner (Silverstein, 1972).

Beyond this, however, homosexuals are denied the right to publicly express their love (Silverstein, 1972). “All the world loves a lover”—yes, a heterosexual one. It is impossible to know to what extent love is strengthened by being public, yet romantic ideals of secret love notwithstanding, I suspect that after a time lovers have a real psychological need for the support that comes from being recognized as such.

(Commonly, heterosexuals need only hide their love when deceit is involved, but even without deceit, the very concealment of love tends in time to produce strains a more open relationship could better handle.) We are all social animals, and highly dependent on the approval of others. Each time other's love need be hidden, and jokes or excuses need be made about living with another man or woman, homosexuals feel the denial of what virtually all heterosexuals can take for granted—and thus usually miss out on its importance. There is real pain in not being able to walk hand-in hand with one's lover, a pain perhaps akin to that I feel as a black man who is constantly made aware of his color.

And even if we are unaffected by social disapproval, the knowledge that others close to us are not becomes a difficult burden. In this way the hurt of one's family becomes part of the homosexual's oppression, and one most difficult to resolve. Most parents are not only unable to help their homosexual children deal with their stigma, they themselves are sometimes more affected by it than the children themselves. There is something to the idea that the parents of a homosexual rather than the child itself should seek psychological help—or there would be if more psychologists and psychiatrists could be relied upon to understand “the problem,” which is not the child but the attitude of the parent toward what the child is (Tanner, 1970).

Some homosexuals will, of course, respond to oppression by hating in turn; it is a liberal delusion that those who are oppressed will be more accepting of others than are the oppressors. Indeed one might expect them to be worse, and thus one finds the stereotypic lesbian who hates men or the gay man who detests women and considers heterosexuals as sick. Others react by excessive self-pity (Tanner, 1970).

These reactions make us open to accusations of paranoia—we say there is hostility so that we can feel sorry for ourselves—and indeed some psychiatrists maintain that we are, by definition, paranoid. Again the metaphor of “the faggot as nigger” seems valid. It is the basic argument of Grier and Cobbs’ (1969) psychiatric study of the Negro, *Black Rage*, that “for a black man survival in America depends in large measure on the development of a ‘healthy’ cultural paranoia” (p. 136). This is obviously an extravagant statement, not meant to be taken too literally. Clearly Grier and Cobbs—who are both black—did not mean that all blacks, or all expressions of black life, are paranoid. What they are suggesting is that in a hostile environment the kinds of defense mechanisms people will develop may seem paranoid by the standards of the broader society. Like the black, the homosexual will exhibit a greater number of “unhealthy” character traits. But the remarkable fact about most homosexuals is not that they seem paranoid, but that they appear remarkably able to function in an anti-homosexual world.

The Function of Oppression

In so far as oppression is in large part psychological and thus, internalized, it must be understood existentially, and can hardly be chartered by the arid techniques of poll-takers. Yet for those impressed by such data, a survey undertaken by the sociologist J. L. Simmons (1969) and reported in his book *Deviants* suggests that homosexuals are considerably more disliked by the American public than ex-convicts, ex-mental patients, gamblers, or alcoholics. To explain why this should be so requires a full discussion of social attitudes toward sexuality and in particular the way in which masculine and feminine are evaluated in our society, topics that will be taken up in the next chapters.

It does seem clear that a good part of the hostility toward homosexuality derives from repressed homosexual urges. Discussing Sattre's view of Genet, Laing and Cooper (1971) wrote in *Reason and Violence*: "The honest people are able to hate in Genet that part of themselves which they have denied and projected into him." Those who are sexually insecure will often bolster up their confidence by directing hostility at homosexuals who threaten their own egos.

Yet it is too easy to attribute all hatred of homosexuals to the fear of the homosexual that lies within each of us—just as simplistic an arguments in its way as the one that homosexuals are all victims of a crippling fear of the opposite sex. There are other possible sources of the hatred of homosexuality. It is a common theory of social deviance that persecution of deviants is in part a ritual devised to maintain the boundaries of what is socially approved. "The majority exercises its power by creating an atmosphere which makes life uncomfortable for those who disregard accepted precepts of conduct and it enforces these sanctions not only on deviant outsiders, but also over its own members," wrote Andrew Hacker (1971) in *The End of the American Era*. Presumably, neither he, nor his mentor, Tocqueville, were thinking of the attitude toward homosexuals but the description fits. In many ways we represent the most blatant challenge of all to the mores of a society organized around belief in the nuclear family and sharply differentiated gender differences. Moreover, there seems to me some envy in the very condemnation of homosexuals, for while we are denounced as promiscuous, fickle, and sex-crazed, there is a sense too in which our apparent freedom is envied by the

average heterosexual, as confused as we are in his or her competing desires for personal freedom versus emotional security.

Beyond this we are hated because we are different and Donald Cory has suggested that it is from this difference that there springs the word “queer.” Many societies have linked homosexuality with magic. The witches of the Middle Ages, as much as the shamans of some Indian tribes and the court jesters who gave their name to the Mattachine Society, are all examples of this linkage. Some of the hostility to homosexuals is born of the same fear and dislike of outsiders that mark ethnic prejudices, and those who hate and fear homosexuals are likely to hate and fear other outsiders. Although there is some oversimplification in the statement, it is generally true that what has been termed “the authoritarian personality” does display a consistent hatred of all out-groups, and that the homosexual, under some circumstances, becomes a convenient scapegoat who can be accused of responsibility for all sorts of moral degeneracy.

The taboo on homosexuality has considerable social importance and this, I suspect, underlies much of the conservative opposition even to token tolerance. If Freud is right about the major institution that dominates society, they are based upon the channeling of libidinal energies into nonsexual paths, thus maintaining group ties while displacing any overt sexual feelings outside the group. Add to this Lionel Tiger’s observation about the power of male-bonding and it becomes clear that homosexuality, particularly between males, has to be prohibited. The power of men in society is maintained by denying the existence of sexuality between them and turning women into

sex objects, either to be used or honored. In societies where, as Kate Millett (1971) observed, “sex role is sex rank,” homosexuality is a threat to the whole caste structure.

One police chief used to be fond of warning that homosexuals were “the greatest menace facing society.” By which he probably meant that they threatened *him*, for unlike other minorities, we lie within the oppressor himself, and our very invisibility, the fact that we represent a human potential that has been realized, makes the need to draw the line against us that much sharper. As Martha Shelley, the gay liberationist wrote: “We are the extrusions of your unconscious mind—your worst fears made flesh” (as cited in Blasius, 1997, p. 391). The oppression of homosexuals is part of the general repression of sexuality; our liberation can only come about as part of a total revolution in social attitudes.

Conclusion

This chapter emphasized the discourse of identity: an awareness of the historical and social factors that helped shaped attitudes toward and inhibited the expression of homosexuality. My personal stories with homophobia assisted in the unraveling of identity politics and provided space for a better understanding of why homosexuals are stigmatized, or put it in another, more political way, why homosexuals were oppressed; and how to respond to the “dominance” of oppression.

In the next chapter, I will call attention to the nexus among black identity, masculinity and the Bible. I will explore the construction of black masculinity and deconstruct black hyper-masculinity, an exaggeration and distortion of traditionally masculine traits (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984) and its influence within the Black communities.

CHAPTER III

THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK MASCULINITY

Black gay men have the difficult terrain of being black in a racist society, gay in a homophobic society, and gay in the black community.

—Thomas Glave, Author (as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 1)

The Black man in our culture represents so many archetypes—some of them scary, some of them powerful, some of them primitive.

—John Bartlett, Men’s Wear Designer (as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 1)

To be black and male in the United States is not only to live complexities of another’s making but also to attempt to construct a self and chart a life, however difficult, of one’s own.

—Charles H. Rowell, Professor of English/Editor (as cited in Smith, 1999, p. 1)

Whenever a black person asks me about my dissertation topic, I normally take a deep breath and launch into my summary, which goes something like this: I’m doing a critical examination of The Black Church and Its Treatment of Gays and Lesbians. This exchange is normally met by silence, after which I am invariably asked the question, why? To me the question is rhetorical in nature; however, it does require some thought. Why did I decide to study The Black Church? Being gay is a part of the quest to investigate and learn how the “black church” intersects with my sexual identity. It always intrigues me that out of all that I say in answering this question the one thing that stands

out most, and what I find most black people react to, is the word gay. Interestingly enough, the reaction to my response does not change, whether the person asking is heterosexual, homosexual, male or female.

I can for the most part speak comfortably about why I chose to examine The Black Church but I almost always stumble when it comes to answering the question “are you gay?” As presented in Chapter II, choosing to write about this controversial topic conjures up difficult feelings and perceptions of internalized oppression in me and homophobia in others. Like W.E.B. DuBois’ (1903) concept of double consciousness:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels this twoness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, who dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (p. 65)

Where blacks have a heightened awareness of the blackness and the whiteness around them, I find myself torn between the gay community, the Black community and what it means to be a (black) man in this society. Negotiating my multiply and complex identities and searching for acceptance as a minority in highly marginalized groups propels me to come face to face with my blackness, masculinity and gayness.

In this chapter, I will expound on concepts of homophobia and internalized oppression. I will also explore the influence of homophobia prevalent in the Black

community and the notions of masculinity and deconstruct black hyper-masculinity and its influences within the Black communities.

Background

Black communities have specific perceptions, ideals, and expectations of masculinities that are often couple with familial, communal, and peer acceptance (Harris, 1992; Whitehead, 1997). The media and the Black Church have been cited as influential in perpetuating negative attitudes toward homosexuality in the Black community (Fullilove & Fullilove, 1999; Johnson, 2003; Woodyard, 2000). Ward (2005) contends a culture of homophobia in many Black churches actually drives and defines “hypermasculine” behaviors among both heterosexual and homosexual Black men. Moreover, he argues homophobia is the main factor “crippling the willingness” of the church to positively respond to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the Black community. One potential reason for this is perceived gay identities may carry stigmas that contradict images and expectations of how Black men are socialized to perform their identity as men, which is often taught at an early age (Wright, 1993).

Direct contradictions between stereotypically masculine gender role expectations for Black men and stereotypes regarding effeminate homosexual men have been noted in the literature (Ward, 2005; Wright, 1993). Images of what it means to be a “Black man” often reflect “hyper” heterosexual athletes, thugs, criminals, and entertainers, while the term “gay” conjures up stereotypical notions of hypersexual public displays of affection, effeminate behavior, colorful parades, and cultural norms manufactured in White gay enclaves. Perhaps as a result of these conflicting social stereotypes, Black men may

equate gay identities with femininity and flamboyant behaviors (Fields, Fullilove, & Fullilove, 1999).

Conceptual Framework

Perspectives on the social construction of masculinities and male gender role conflict were converged for conceptual sense making in this chapter. Based largely on the work of Vygotsky (1978), social constructivism provides an appropriate lens for understanding the cultural nature of learning. Thus, social constructivists argue masculine behaviors and attitudes are learned, reinforced in social institutions, and recycled in various cultural contexts (Connell, 1993; Kimmel, Hearn, & Connell, 2005; Pollack, 2000). Harper (1994) asserts parents are among the agents of masculine socialization: “no father wants his son to grow up being a ‘pussy,’ ‘sissy,’ ‘punk,’ or ‘softy’—terms associated with boys and men who fail to live up to the traditional standards of masculinity” (p. 92).

Social constructivists argue that gender is “an active process of construction, occurring in a field of power relations that are often tense and contradictory, and often involving negotiation of alternative ways of being masculine” (Connell, 1993, p. 193). Male gender role conflict characterizes the consequences associated with male tendencies to conform to narrow, socially constructed masculine roles (O’Neil & Nadeau, 2004). According to O’Neil and Nadeau (2004), conflict typically ensues when prescriptive gender roles that are learned and socially reinforced result in personal restraint. *Fear of femininity* is central to male gender role conflict, which is described as “a strong, negative emotion associated with stereotypic feminine values, attitudes, and behaviors . . . learned

primarily in early childhood when gender identity is being formed by parents, peers, and societal values” (O’Neil & Nadeau, 2004, p. 337).

Black masculine socialization has traditionally emphasized physical and heterosexual prowess, reflecting the historical context of slavery and focus on the expectation of Black men to “work and breed” (Harris, 1992; Jackson, 1997; Whitehead, 1997). This is different from the more Eurocentric masculine attributes of competition, individualism, aggression, and paternalism, which may be denied to Black men by racist and classist structural institutions (Harris, 1992; Jackson, 1997; Staples, 1982; Whitehead, 1997).

Cool Pose

Majors and Billson (1992) proposed “cool pose,” a concept that describes a Black masculine strategy embraced by Black males to cope with and survive amidst racism, oppression, and marginality: “cool pose is a ritualized form of masculinity that entails behaviors, scripts, physical posturing, impression management, and carefully crafted performances that deliver a single, critical message: pride, strength, and control” (p. 4). In their interpretation, being “cool” for Black men can be reflected in expressive styles of dress, speech, and projected outward behaviors, represented by athletes, entertainers, or stereotypical representations of ostentatious “pimps.” Conversely, being “cool” may also mean being restrained at times, embodied by emotionless, stoic, and unflinching behavior. Regardless of whether it is expressive or restrained, the primary goal of cool pose, according to Majors and Billson, is to remain calm, detached, and together in the face of social chaos, discrimination, and trauma. Cool pose can serve as an initial positive

coping strategy in dealing with social stressors but may ultimately encourage self-destructive behaviors that adversely influence physical and mental health.

Sexuality

A theoretical emphasis on sexuality can generate textured and significant data on intra-group difference. Additionally, exploring homosexuality among black men allows for a deeper investigation of the assumed connection between sexuality and gender. The tendency within some of the literature is not to distinguish gender from sexuality. Gender refers most directly to ascribed roles, i.e., man and woman and how those roles are lived out daily. Sexuality refers to one's sexual orientation, i.e., heterosexual or homosexual. When discussing gender, or more specifically, men and women, the assumption is that those being discussed are heterosexual (Carbardo, 1999).

Gender

When conducting (scholarly) research on black men Belton (1995) suggests that the following three things should be considered: (a) black masculinity; (b) black manhood; and (c) the assumption that black men are or should be heterosexual. Black masculinity is a concept that denotes a form of male behavior or expression. For some, black masculinity incorporates certain physical attributes and material possessions while for others it incorporates more intrinsic qualities. The behavior can vary depending on the situation and the variables involved. Black manhood denotes a more permanent state of being. Arriving at manhood is a process. This process includes ascertaining certain values, morals, and experiences and enacting specific responsibilities. Black manhood also implies understanding this state of being in relation to family, community and the

larger society. It is necessary to emphasize race in relation to masculinity, manhood, and gender because the definitions and characterizations within the literature reflect the oppression and racism that black men have had to endure in the United States. This reality reinforces the interlocking processes, i.e., the intersection of race, class and gender, which are currently being debated within much of the social science literature.

The factor of race distinguishes black masculinity from masculinity in general. For black men, their definitions of masculinity are situated in the context of having been born, raised and currently living in the United States. Their lived experiences include the historical and psychological effects of racial, political and economic oppression. Many researchers have examined how these factors impact expressions of black masculinity (hooks, 2004; Majors & Billson, 1992; Staples, 1982).

Clyde Franklin (1984) argues that, “[M]asculinities are constructed. Black masculinities, in particular, are constructed under the cloud of oppression” (p. 278). I agree with Franklin’s analysis that masculinities are not only constructed, but constructed under oppression. My hope is to shed light on how a masculine ideology influences the lives of Black gay men.

The Perceived and Real Process of Becoming Masculine When You’re Black and Male

Clyde Franklin (1984) asserts that for most black men the socialization process of masculinity is triangular in that there are three different entities or influences that contribute to the process. He characterizes these factors as follows: the “black male’s primary group,” “black male peer group” and “mainstream society and black male. For

the purposes of this discussion, I think it is important to examine this socialization process as an inverted triangle. This approach will reveal the unique, complex and seemingly contradictory position of the black gay male in this socialization process. Franklin argues that mainstream society has constructed, maintained and perpetuated a hegemonic definition of masculinity by focusing on “proscriptive” instead of “prescriptive teachings” to black men (Franklin, 1984 p. 14). Thomas Gerschick and Adam Miller (1996) broaden this argument, through their research with physically disabled men, by asserting that there are certain characteristics associated with masculinity that are established, maintained and revered within society such as: independence, strength, autonomy, sexual prowess, athleticism, occupational accomplishment, and procreation.

Franklin (1984) then examines the role of the black male peer group as a critical aspect in this socialization process. He notes, “the Black male peer groups often serves as an anchor. He [the black male] often finds refuge with those who are undergoing the same conflicts, apprehensions, pleasures, and preparation for adulthood” (p. 13). Franklin delves deeper into the role of the black male peer group and in doing so reveals the dual role that the group plays in confirming one’s masculinity. He states,

Fortunately or unfortunately, the peer group slowly becomes more and more a significant self-validating agency supplanting, for a time, the primary group’s importance to the Black male. Certainly, it is not unusual for the Black male peer group to become the young Black male’s most significant other nurturing his masculine identity. (p. 13)

The first element that Franklin (1984) outlines as key to the masculine socialization process for black males is that of the black male primary group. He forwards that,

[T]he typical Black male's primary group mirrors mainstream societal values and norms, but usually from a Black community perspective . . . The version of American values and beliefs imparting Black male socialization typically is tempered by the Black experience in this country. (p. 12)

This is particularly relevant to the experiences of black men because it illuminates ethnicity, race and gender and how those who share this same ethnic group or primary group shape and prepare their men through a particular type of masculine socialization process. Gutmann (2002) alludes to the conditions in which a man learns how to be masculine and what it will mean in the larger realm of society.

With this as a background for understanding a socialization process of masculinity, I contend that many black gay men absorb each of these elements along with the added factor of their homosexuality. Because of their sexual orientation, black gay men are often depicted as anything but masculine by the mainstream. The ridicule that the black gay men receive from their peers and the silencing, which they receive from their primary group, compromises their masculinity. These competing pressures shape how the men think and express their masculinity.

Black gay men provide an interesting case for exploring Gerschick and Miller's (1996) concept of hegemonic masculinity because they for the most part have or partake in a majority of the above-mentioned characteristics, with the exception of one; that of perceived strength. The hegemonic masculinity construct asserts strength as a descriptor

for men and a gay man, because of his sexual orientation, is often perceived and/or represented as weak. Whitehead's (1997) research on masculinity among Jamaican men reveals that respect and reputation are attributes of strength and all men are measured by the influential community of men to which they belong for their ability to exhibit strength.

A Plurality of Masculinities: An Idealistic or Practical Solution

One method of moving beyond the more polar or dichotomous examination of masculinity is to construct a masculinity that incorporates difference, a "plurality of masculinities" (Conway-Long, 1994). The theoretical approaches to masculinity, according to Conway-Long, do not recognize the diversities that exist within a group. He forwards that the acknowledgment of these diversities has eluded many ethnographers. Conway-Long contends that those researchers whose theoretical framework is devoid of diversity fall prey to the following assumption: "when a man just doesn't fit, deviance becomes the stock framework for analysis" (pp. 61–62). It is imperative that black men expand their idea and expressions of black masculinity to black masculinities; moving from the singular to the plural.

bell hooks (2004) calls for a reconstruction of black masculinity. She argues that black masculinity has shifted from the patriarchal to the phallogentric because black men live in a capitalist society, which deprives them of their rights and exploits their labor. hooks (2004) contends that this has moved black men away from patriarchal power toward a masculine status that depends exclusively on their penis. hooks asserts that challenging this phallogentric expression would also entail combating the compulsory

heterosexuality that is embedded within it. She forwards that phallogentric masculinity undermines black solidarity. hooks (2004) adds, “If black men no longer embraced phallogentric masculinity, they would be empowered to explore their fear and hatred of other men, learning new ways to relate” (p. 87). Although hooks’ proposition of shifting from phallogentric masculinity is encouraging, I think it is more easily said than done. Part of the difficulty in achieving this shift is rooted in an inherent need based on our history as black people in the U. S.—to exclude homosexuality from discussions of black masculinity because to incorporate it would somehow diminish our perceived strength in the eyes of others.

I anticipate that a pluralistic approach to masculinity will be unsettling for most black men, particularly those who are rooted in their ideas about what is a “true . . . real” and/or “correct” masculine man (Akbar, 1991; Majors & Billson, 1992). For most black men masculinity is linked, explicitly and/or implicitly, to notions of black manhood. When engaging issues of homosexuality, such ideas seem to be automatically dismissed if dealt with at all. Difference in sexuality ultimately questions the very definition and “authenticity” of traditional masculinity (Harper, 1996).

The Development of Black Manhood

Black manhood and the manifestation of black masculinity in many ways have been subsumed by the ideas of American manhood (McBride, 2001). What complicates this further is that many black men, because of their unique historical circumstances, have been socialized to accept these ideals of manhood as their own, so much so that these ideas of manhood have become firmly entrenched as a part of how black men think

about manhood and how their masculinity is expressed. I contend that black gay men, including myself, should embrace as well as resist these hegemonic notions of manhood and provide reasons why we do. From my experiences, our society, through the use of ubiquitous stereotypes and attempts at humor, depicts the homosexual man as completely lacking masculine characteristics. It is by embracing hegemonic notions of manhood that we will break down these gender stereotypes, allowing for an unbiased, more complete understanding of gender. Sharing our ideas about masculinity and manhood will also serve to deconstruct how and why we think about manhood and masculinity the way that we do.

Keeping Our History in Mind

The historical factors of enslavement and oppression are critical to understanding how views of black masculinity and manhood have been shaped. Each phase of development as black men in America produced a different type of man (Williams, 1986). I offer the following examples, enslavement: “the stud”; freedom: “patriarchal man”; segregation: the “militant” versus the “assimilationist”; integration: “the accommodationist”; and postintegration: “the buppie” versus the “afrocentric, self-defined man.” As historical events occurred, they influenced the way in which black manhood was perceived. These events also altered the criterion for how black men defined manhood. The changes or influences are based initially in racial oppression, and later in political and economic constraints.

Forms of Black Manhood

One concept of manhood that evolved primarily during the Great Migration was known as the Race Man. Hazel Carby (1998) and St. Claire Drake and Horace Cayton (1945) note that this concept primarily served a dual purpose: (a) to serve in opposition to the white racist system that oppressed him; and (b) as a role model for other blacks. Attributes assigned to the race man were “the pursuit of race consciousness, race pride, and race solidarity” (Carby, 1998); all with the goal of “advancing The Race” (Drake & Cayton, 1993). Drake and Cayton make distinctions between the roles of the Race Leaders, The Race Man and The Race Hero; all figured prominently in the experiences of black people in the United States, and all in very different yet integral ways. “Race Leaders are expected to put up some sort of aggressive fight against the exclusion and subordination of Negroes” (Drake & Cayton, 1993, p. 393). But at the same time they are expected to “needle, cajole, and denounce Negroes themselves for inertia, diffidence, and lack of race pride” (Drake & Cayton, 1993, p. 393). According to Drake and Cayton, “The Race Man,” while in the white world, remains “proud of his race and always tries to uphold it whether it is good or bad, right or wrong,” because he sees “only the good points of the race” (Drake & Cayton, 1993, p. 395). The Race Hero is described as:

If a man ‘fights for The Race,’ if he seems to be ‘all for The Race,’ if he is ‘fearless in his approach to white people,’ he becomes a Race Hero. Similarly any Negro becomes a hero if he beats the white man at his own game or forces the white world to recognize his talent or service or achievement. (Drake & Cayton, 1993, p. 395)

A few emerging authors argue for a vision of black manhood that is self-defined (Akbar, 1991). Some of these black scholars make their point by saying that in order for the black man to understand himself he must understand the conditions and historical factors that have put him in this position, including racism and economic oppression (Akbar, 1991). The black man should also recognize African history as a means of redefining manhood in a way that is more reflective of his culture and heritage. These black authors, through their writings, are asserting that black men should develop their own criteria for what a man is and how he should act out his social responsibility (Madhubuti, 1990).

Na'im Akbar (1991) describes the development of black men as a process. Within this process he outlines three stages. They are maleness, boyhood and manhood. Akbar asserts that the transition from maleness which is based on biology—to boyhood is marked by “discipline” and “learning to exercise control over one’s self” (p. 12). He adds that the “force that transforms a person from a boy to becoming a man is knowledge” (p. 12). Through this process Akbar forwards a “self-defined” and self-maintained standard for and by black men that should be adhered to, to ensure black manhood. He states,

the process of educating our boys requires that we require of them to tackle real life problems and watch them find solutions. They should have early work responsibilities, management responsibilities, and social responsibilities. (p. 13)

These authors highlight the economic, racial and political factors that have contributed to the black man’s inability to be socially responsible in the eyes of the larger society. Even still, adjectives such as “real,” “true,” and “correct” are incorporated into

their definitions of man and manhood (Akbar, 1991; Madhubuti, 1990; Majors & Billson, 1992). By doing this these authors covertly create both an authentic black man, and an authentic notion of black manhood.

I argue for new definitions of black masculinity and manhood because the current definitions are limiting, prejudiced, and oppressive. The literature on black masculinity and manhood tends to assume that the men are heterosexual. Anything written to the contrary has been primarily if not exclusively by gays or lesbians. Why is this so? There seems to be an inherent need to connect one's sexuality with gender.

The research that I have conducted will perhaps clarify that a plurality of black masculinities, which includes homosexuality, does not signify a weakening of black masculinity or an ineffectual state of black manhood. Actually, it could be seen as a creative way of achieving black solidarity. This expanded view of masculinity avoids the pitfalls of "black essentialism" (Dyson, 2004; Harper, 1996).

An Absence of Sexuality

In much of the literature on black manhood, sexuality is alluded to within the context of procreation and male/female relationships. These references imply that the black men in question are heterosexual (Madhubuti, 1990; Majors & Billson, 1992). It would appear that mostly openly gay black authors produce literature exploring the relationship of homosexuality to black manhood, and their arguments are just as distinct. Beam (1986) asserts that,

As Black gay men we have always existed in the African-American community. We have been ministers, hairdressers, entertainers, sales clerks, civil rights activists, teachers, playwrights, trash collectors, dancers, government officials,

choir masters, and dishwashers. You name it; we've done it—most of them with scant recognition. We have mediated family disputes, cared for and reared our siblings, and housed our sick. We have performed many and varied important roles within our community. (p. 16)

Essex Hemphill expresses the rigidity of gender within the black community. He cites the following as an example from his personal experience:

“Only sissies cry.” When that was told to me, I said, “Fuck this. I’m not going to live like this.” Those stories or fictions of “real” masculinity are learned early in life and then be-come ways of toughening young boys. That sort of information isn’t useful to our community. I think there should be more of an investment in unlearning those codes, because they end in breeding a certain inhumanity. (Hemphill, as cited in Belton, 1995, p. 211)

Marlon Riggs, specifically through his two films *Tongues Untied* (1989) and *Black is/Black Ain't* (1994), brings the subject of homosexuality and black manhood to the forefront. He charges that black filmmakers have avoided dealing with homosexuality, opting instead, for “safe political subjects such as racism, discrimination, Afro-American history. . .” (as cited in Belton, 1995, p. 190). Riggs asserts that these black filmmakers act as if “the subject of homosexuality within the black community didn’t exist” (as cited in Belton, 1995, pp. 190–191). In *Black Is/Black Ain't*, Riggs builds on personal experiences as a black gay man by examining the historical notions of manhood. They range from the black man’s “code of silence” and the feeling that “vulnerability was associated with femininity” to the “black man trying to reclaim what he has not had, the need to rehabilitate the patriarchal model” (p. 66).

An assumption based on the argument above is that homosexuality is not a part of black manhood. This restricted debate on black manhood demonstrates how gender is

highly policed in keeping “difference” in line. How could a man be a man and homosexual? It is as if the two, homosexual and man, are incongruous.

Conflicts and Challenges with Black Masculinity: The Obama Effect

As sociologist Michael Kimmel (Kimmel et al., 2005) has noted, “From the founding of the country, presidents of the United States have seen the political arena as masculine testing ground” (p. 18). It is thus appropriate that the Orlando Sentinel presented the 2008 Presidential general election as a referendum on whether we wanted masculine leadership or feminine leadership. It read,

Now that the actual Presidential campaign is under way, we have the traditionally ‘masculine’ style, embodied by John McCain, emphasizing experience, toughness, feistiness, stubbornness, grit, exclusivity, etc. and the newly emergent ‘feminine’ managerial style practiced by Obama and emphasizing communication, consensus, collegiality and inclusivity. (“The Macho Factor,” p. A18)

Prior to that editorial, the New York Post ran an editorial suggesting that Obama would be “our first woman president.”

Obama was called feminine because of his restraint, calm demeanor, collaborative style, willingness to speak with enemies, and finely honed language (“Trading Places,” 2008). Those characteristics of Obama as feminine, while melodramatic, did seem to capture real difference between Obama and his opponents. The media has recognized that Obama has an unusual blend of traditionally masculine and feminine skills at work in him (Valdez, 2008). Further, there is reason to believe Obama’s feminization was conscious: “Barack Obama understands that real strength comes from a blending of masculine and feminine” (Valdez, 2008, p. 13).

The 2008 election gave us a chance to observe the processes of the social construction of the meanings of black masculinity and of femininity in action. Since the Presidency is a bully pulpit that influences how people think about themselves and others, I expect that Obama's election will influence people's expectations for performances of race and gender. In addition, we see both the multiplicity and hierarchy of masculinities in the different constraints (and privileges) placed on Obama because he is a black male. McCain could be angry, but Obama could not. (Chapman, 2008). Obama had to soften his approach or be deemed an angry black man. During the campaign, Valdez (2008) said that Obama was being called on to prove he was man enough for Presidency, but "without coming off as an angry black man." That stereotype may be related to the image of black men as overly masculine since anger is an extreme form of aggressiveness expected of men. Ironically, Obama status as a minority male may have given him more leeway to feminize himself than McCain because of the assumption that black men are already overly masculine (Kimmel et al., 2005).

How Will Obama Presidency Influence Perceptions of Black Masculinity?

In *The Daily Beast* online newspaper, African-American writer Toure' asserts that black men have believed that America closes her opportunities to them, but that Obama's election will make black men rethink their definitions of black masculinity: "This is a county in which a black man can become president and being a black man no longer needs to be about being angry with the country." ("Obama as President," 2008).

Last Father's Day, President Obama told African-American men that too many of them have "abandoned their responsibilities, acting like boys instead of men" and

weakening the foundations of the black community. In an interview with MTV just before the election he told young black guys to show some respect: “Brothers should pull up their pants. You are walking by your mother, your grandmother, your underwear is showing. What’s wrong with that? Come on.”

Jesse Lee Peterson, founder and president of Brotherhood Organization of a New Destiny, said remarks like this are true but don’t get at the problem: “They should pull their pants up. They should be responsible, but they’ve got to stop hating” (“Obama as President,” 2008).

Peterson doesn’t think that Obama’s election alone will make black men let go of their anger, noting that black men already have examples of success—Clarence Thomas for instance, a Yale graduate and Supreme Court Justice who grew up in poverty and without a father—but they have rejected them. “Real masculinity cannot come from another person,” he said. “You can’t get it by looking at some other person just because they are the president” (Peterson, as cited in “Obama as President,” 2008).

I think black male identity and masculinity as already been reconstructed by Obama’s success since it is now possible to imagine a black man as president. In addition to that opening up of images of black men, there may also be a shutting down of images. After Obama, many people’s dominant image of black men will be of calmness rather than anger. Those images will help to construct the future meanings of black masculinity. More importantly, I believe Obama’s ‘feminine’ leadership style of inclusiveness, i.e. pro-homosexuality and women rights on his stance on pro-abortion, will challenge the broader community perceptions in general and the black community perception in

specific. For black men, therefore, Obama stands as a redemptive figure for our attributed identities.

Conclusion

Black experiences regarding masculinity challenge more than they confirm some of the earlier mentioned constructs. Perhaps what is most revealing is the manner in which gay black men redefine the concept of masculinity to incorporate their sexuality. Another point to reflect upon is that change in ideas about masculinity comes from not only rejection of the standard” or hegemonic attributes of masculinity but also perhaps the lack of acceptance by individuals such as black gay men who exist on the margins and therefore redefine the “standard” for themselves.

What becomes clear is that the triangular socialization process that Franklin lays out, and that I have experienced by virtue of being a gay black man, is subsequently marginalized on each of these same levels. The fact that black gay men’s masculinity is undermined by stereotypes is marginalization on a more structural level which Franklin refers to as “mainstream.” Franklin suggests that the black male peer group serves as a vehicle to transmit, validate and confirm ideas about masculinity. This socialization and subsequent marginalization contributes to the complex and conflictive existence of black gay men. As noted by Franklin earlier, masculinities are constructed, but for black men specifically they are constructed under oppression. Just as Franklin suggests racism and hegemony oppress black males, so too are some black gay men oppressed by other blacks in terms of their masculinity through forms of internal policing and secondary marginalization.

Black gay men attempt to make meaning for themselves by reconciling what they have learned with what they know to be an equally important part of their lived experience, their gayness. The black gay men who outwardly reject this process risk being further alienated by others. This creates some level of turmoil and consternation for some black gay men. There is a seemingly intrinsic need to be accepted, particularly by one's own.

Lastly, Obama's success could remove some of the stigma from femininity. Men, who are clearly privileged as a group, sometimes feel dis-empowered as individuals (Kimmel et al., 2005). This creates tension in masculinity whereby masculinity is both something people expect you to demonstrate and something people might want to escape. This may be the genius of Obama's feminization: it allows us to have it both ways on masculinity. While Obama is hardly effeminate, he seems usually non-anxious about his masculinity. As *Ms. Magazine* recently put it on their cover, perhaps Obama is "what a feminist looks like" (2009, January). He certainly seems to be a man who is comfortable with the fact that he has a feminine side. As a result, the potential is there for Obama's example to allow all men greater movement along the gender continuum.

In the next chapter I will further the discussion of the social construction of black masculinity as it relates to sexuality, the black body and the black church. I will explore how the black church ignores conversations about the black body and sexuality. Moreover, I will explain how the black church embraces stereotypical constructions of masculinity and black self-expression to regulate and control the masculinity and sexual practices of gay men and thereby discourage all same-sex sexuality.

CHAPTER IV

THE BLACK CHURCH, SEXUALITY AND THE BLACK BODY

The internalization of dark skin as ugly and in need of lightening; coarse hair as bad and in need of straightening; writhing Black bodies as nasty and in need of saving; sexual attitudes as dirty and in need of purifying; Black sexual longings as uncontrollable evil and in need of taming; and sex talk as inappropriate and in need of silencing; have made it difficult for Black people to love their bodies. Members of the Black community find it difficult to embrace themselves as sexual beings. The understanding of their own physical selves and sexual expression is often viewed as nasty (Wirth, 2002). In this chapter, as a middle class gay African American Christian, I challenge the present assumptions that Black love is uniquely heterosexual and that heterosexuals are the only ones with the capacity to love their bodies. I explore the theological perspectives that shape the present “homosexuality as immoral” view, contributing to Black Christians’ mode of resistance to a different Christian understanding. I also offer a position located in the Black erotic, that loving sexual desire, in whatever form, enables the union of body and spirit, and becomes a religious undertaking, a Christian act, that allows one to feel the joy, life, wholeness, and liberation that come from God. I challenge leaders of the Black church not only to teach Black heterosexual Christian to love their bodies as they share with each other but to provide the care and empathy for Black gay Christians that will ultimately lead them to love their bodies and those with whom they share their bodies. In

such a community, heterosexuals will experience spiritual transformation on homosexuality and gays will find health from a loving community.

When Black film director Spike Lee popularized a common Black cultural understanding of sex as “doing the nasty,” few African Americans may have grasped the negative implications of shame and filth that come with such a reference, even when the reference is made in a humorous manner. Negative associations about Black sexuality are familiar to both Anglo and African Americans. Since the Atlantic slave trade and the post-Enlightenment’s racial classification of humans, Europeans have identified the sexuality of African peoples as debased, immoral, perverse, and generally grotesque. (Griffin, 2006) European Americans wielded their power to brand Black sexuality as everything having to do with badness: African peoples were understood to be oversexed, to have animalistic large genitals and to be characterized by predatory sexual behavior. For the past century, in the post slavery Americas and postcolonial Africa, African and African American scholars, like W. E. B. Dubois, along with political and religious leaders like E. Franklin Frazier and Dwight Hopkins have been engaged in a perpetual reaction to this past by adopting dualistic notions of sexuality and promoting conservative sexual mores in order to gain respectability from the mainstream white ruling class. (Wirth, 2002) On Black college campuses and in Black elite social clubs, Victorian sexual mores reigned supreme. Such reactions left African Americans with unresolved perspectives related to sexual thought and practice (Wirth, 2002).

While most African Americans could hardly be considered sexually repressed to the degree of that the educated Black bourgeoisie class has been. Historical

circumstances that demonized Black sexuality are largely responsible for African Americans' current prudishness or public silence about sexuality (Griffin, 2006). Although African Americans engage their sexual desires with the same sense of wonderment, intensity, and angst as the rest of humanity, they also experience some particular struggles around sexuality directly related to their difficult past. Being considered the "despised sexual other," which often caused black people hardship and loss of life, Black people learned all too well to remain publicly silent about sex (Battle, 2006). The outrage that most Black people felt toward Anita Hill and their refusal to show outrage after President Bill Clinton fired Black U. S. Surgeon General Jocelyn Elders (for her statement, in response to a citizen's question, that masturbation was a healthy sexual expression) stemmed from Hill's and Elder's uncovering of a painful history that appeared to validate white's assertions about Black sexual obsessions and proclivities.

Like heterosexuals who highlight and exaggerate the sexual misdeeds of the despised gay while ignoring heterosexual transgressions (often more common and gruesome), whites historically projected onto all Blacks the notion of being highly sexed and Black men as preying on and being sexually obsessed with white women (Hernton, 1966). This common reality reminds us that those in power have the privilege of using sex to demonize and punish the despised group while the powerful escapes ridicule and repercussion.

African American and Sexual Perversions

Since history largely determines the present, it is understandable that African Americans, in an effort to overcome sexual demonization, would be especially disturbed about and averse to any association with contemporary understandings of sexual perversion, including homosexuality. The power of sex to control, to silence, to instill discomfort, emerges in all too familiar, yet unfortunate ways, especially for Black lesbians and gay men. It is unfortunate because a negative understanding of homosexuality cause Black people to internalize another negative understanding about themselves, about their sexual longings, their lovemaking and their capacity to appreciate sexual intimacy and orgasm. Thus, heterosexual supremacy, like white supremacy, male supremacy and so forth, further imposes bondage upon Black people, a spiritual estrangement that prevents them from loving their Black bodies.

Homosexual Expression

Understanding and appreciating homosexuality as a legitimate sexual expression continues to be a challenge for many people, especially Africans Americans. Even amid the significant number of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in Black families and communities, the ever-growing number of openly gay and lesbian African Americans, like Black icon, Angela Davis; and the awareness of prominent and revered Black gay and lesbian Christians from the past such as George Washington Carver, James Cleveland, Barbara Jordan, Blacks continue to view homosexuality as negative, white aberration, and often dismissing its relevance to Black people (Sears, 1991).

It is difficult to determine exactly when Africans and African Americans integrated negative views about homosexual expression into their theology and espoused anti-homosexual pronouncements in Black religion and social communities. One of the first recorded accounts of a Black minister leading an organized protest against homosexuality and Black gays can be traced to the early twentieth century. In 1929, during the Harlem Renaissance a time which gave birth to a number of gay African American artists, including Richard Bruce Nugent, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Alain Locke, and Wallace Thurmond, the African American pastor, Adam Clayton Powell Sr., of the famous Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York “initiated a vigorous crusade against homosexuality” (Wirth, 2002). Powell’s “crusade” reflects a rather common response made by African American ministers regarding homosexuality and gay people.

As Black gays gain more visibility in the latter twentieth century and early twenty-first century, African American ministers continue to play an active role in condemning the love relationships of Black gays in their sermons, conversations, and political activism. African American ministers were some of the first voices to decry AIDS as “God’s punishment to homosexuals” and actively participated in supporting discrimination against Black gay citizens at the federal, state and local levels (Boykin, 1996).

While generally Black Church leaders and their denominational positions are not monolithic, on the issue of homosexuality, there is little variance. All of the Black denominations define homosexuality as sin to include the seven national black church

organizations I interrogate. For most Black Christians, viewing homosexuality as anything other than immoral, sinful, and a sexual expression contrary to God's will, would be considered eternal damnation. Many fear that believing homosexuality not to be a sin strays away from God's intention for humankind and that they will suffer God's punishment for their change of belief and practice. My experiences have been that most Black Christians believe that the Bible commands them to respond in such a manner, even when they fail to adhere to other passages alongside the few opposing homosexuality activity. This Christian position that identifies gay Black people as sinful because of their sexual difference and consequently deserving of the discrimination and oppression imposed on them by a heterosexual majority flies in the face of the claim that defines the Black church and more generally Black people, according to Black theologian Dwight Hopkins, as in the "spirit of liberation" (Hopkins, 1999). What causes many Black Christians to hold such an unbending and negative response to homosexual expression and ultimately to Black gay people? The answer lies in history. The apostle Paul is often blamed for the gender and sexual restrictions practiced in some form or another in every Christian denomination. While it is true that Paul's invoking a host of teachings about "sexual sin" contributes to the present difficulty in seeing other moral sexual responses, Paul's ambivalence is also present in scripture; he asserts that in Christ there is no male or female as he calls for women's subordination in church and family structures, for example. Whatever ambivalence can be attributed to Paul, "the Church Fathers in the first five centuries . . . were far less ambivalent about the sexual body . . . By and large, they were simply negative" (Nelson, 1978, pp. 82-83).

The stricter sexual positions of Paul and the mind-body dualisms of the Gnostics became standard within Christian teachings. In her important work, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, Christian Gudorf (1994) identifies why so many Christians approach sex and the body with an enormous amount of discomfort.

St. Augustine is often used to exemplify an understanding of sexual pleasure that was predominant in the early church. He saw sexual pleasure as dangerous because it is virtually irresistible. St. Jerome agreed, and one of his strongest arguments for virginity was that only those who have never experienced sexual pleasure can be freed of its dangerous tentacles. Pleasure which is irresistible causes loss of control over our activity, makes us irresponsible and, therefore, causes us to neglect our moral duties. Aquinas . . . maintained that sexual pleasure is something that humans have in common with animals. It is part of our lower animal nature, and not part of the higher rational nature which links us to the Almighty and which is characteristically good . . . [sex] is not a truly human good. (pp. 82-83)

Likewise, the enormous amount of disdain that church leaders expressed over the course of history regarding homosexuality, significantly contributes to the ongoing unease and outright disdain of many heterosexual Christians today. Augustine states that homosexual practices are transgressions of the command to love God and one's neighbors and declares that those shameful acts against nature, such as were committed in Sodom ought to be detested and punished, for example (Bailey, 1955). While Aquinas did not celebrate sex between men and women, he, nonetheless argues, "it is not evil, for it is part of our God-given nature" (Gudorf, 1994); he does not feel the same way about homosexual expression. In Aquinas' opinion, homosexuality is not only evil, but it is the "unnatural vice," the "gravest of all" vices, the worst abomination that a human can commit with another human being (Aquinas, translated by the fathers of the Dominican,

1932). In Europe and the Americas, Catholic and later Protestant missionaries and ministers followed suit, preaching sex negative views as they converted Africans into the Christian body. Puritans were no less committed to a theology of sexual sin than the church fathers, and they identified homosexuality as “wicked,” “disgusting,” “vile,” and “horrible” (Katz, 1983). Whatever their earlier beliefs might have been, Africans exposed to missionary teaching learned that homosexuality was to be feared. They discovered that European Americans would enact the ultimate punishment of death for homosexual practice. As early as 1646, an African American, Jan Creoli, “was sentenced to be ‘choked to death and then burned to ashes’ for a second sodomy offense” (Katz, 1983, p. 61). Although African American Christians usually rejected the white racist uses of the Bible, which commanded them to be obedient slaves, there is no evidence, especially regarding sexual theology about the body, that these Christians rejected other white Christian teachings (Douglas, 1999). Thus, African American Christians generally take on sexually restrictive and negative position, in large part due to sex negative teachings from the Catholic and Protestant missionaries and ministers who converted them during slavery.

Christian Denominational Issues

Throughout history, Christians differed on a number of issues while maintaining their claim of being Christian. Christians, for example, supported and opposed slavery using the same Bible. By the same token, being Christian, white, Black, or other, does not necessitate opposition to homoeroticism. To be sure, the dominant Christian position, from its origins, has identified sex generally as negative, dangerous, and sinful, but there

have also been Christian sects resisting these restrictive and oppressive responses to sexuality (Douglas, 1999).

During the nineteenth century, Christian groups like the Quakers and the Oneida community both stressed female and male equality with the later opposing the dominant Christian repressive sexual attitudes and practices. Even in nineteenth Mormonism, “in almost every instance Mormon leaders who served . . . were more tolerant of homoerotic behaviors than they were of every other non-marital sexual activity” (Quinn, 1996, p. 265). The increased anti-homosexual sentiments of today’s Mormon leaders, like those of African American church leaders and Black college administrators (demonstrated in their resistance to address homosexuality in progressive ways, if at all), perhaps is related to the long held desire to be viewed as morally fit by the dominant religious culture. Following slavery, many of the African American leaders received their own education about the body from “Puritan” New England missionaries (founders of the first Black colleges); later Black educators instilled in young Black minds negative messages about the sexual expression of Black bodies stressing that “it was only ‘common’ Negroes who engaged in premarital and unconventional sex relations . . .” (Frazier, 1957, p. 71). As famed Black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier notes in *Black Bourgeoisie*, Black educators on Black college campuses put forth this image of the “chaste” Black body as “proof of respectability in the eyes of the white man, who had constantly argued that the Negro’s ‘savage instincts’ prevented him from conforming to puritanical standards of sex behavior” (Frazier, 1957, p. 71).

Black feminist Paula Giddings correctly asserts that The Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearing was a reminder of African Americans that there is a price to be paid for being perceived by society as sexually deviant, perverse, and wanton. Thomas cleverly imposed the word “lynching,” helping everyone in the nation make the connection with a shameful racist history of sexually demonizing Blacks that “got black men lynched and black women raped” (Douglas, 1999, p. 48). Many African Americans watched the Thomas/Hill hearing with Emmett Till’s story seared in their memory, knowing that any sexual misstep, regardless of how small, could rain down sexual shame and even death to Black people (Douglas, 1999).

The internalizing of these experiences have had a major negative effect on Black people and can be seen in the ongoing devaluing of Black bodies as Black people impose violence and death upon Black women and men every day. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas (1999) argues in her groundbreaking work, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, that this internalized negativity related to Black bodies can still be observed in behavior expressed by Black church members such as the women covering their legs when sitting in the pew. While the Till case raised perhaps the greatest offense to white society (white heterosexual men), a Black man with a white woman, this cultural hostility toward Black men with white women is quite similar to its hostility toward love between two men or two women. In *Queering the Color Line*, Siobhan Somerville (2000) writes about the nineteenth-century race and sex categories that pathologized Blackness and homosexuality, “whereas previously two bodies, the mulatto and the invert, had been linked together in a visual economy, now two tabooed types of desire—interracial and

homosexual—became linked in sexological and psychological discourse through the model of abnormal sexual object choice” (p. 34).

African Americans strongly oppose homosexuality and lesbian and gay equality within churches and often dismiss the relevance of homosexuality and gay issues within Black settings by identifying same-sex love making as having been imposed on them by Europeans (Boykin, 1996). This perspective prevents not only gays and bisexuals from expressing their erotic feelings toward the same sex but inhibits heterosexual men in particular from being close or affectionate with other males or simply saying that another man is nice looking.

In their brilliant work, *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies of African Homosexualities*, anthropologists Stephen Murray and Will Roscoe (1998) simply refute the latter claim by stating that “although contact between African and non-Africans has sometimes influenced both groups sexual patterns, there is no evidence that one group ever ‘introduced’ homosexuality to another” (p. 267). Considering the prevalence of homosexual practices or homosexualities throughout time and space in nature and the world (see Arlene Swidler’s (1993) *Homosexuality and World Religions*), and since homosexuality is a part of human sexuality and nature, identified in various forms on all continents by anthropologists and sociologists, it is arguably a racist claim to state that Africans do not express themselves with same sex love or sexual activity like the rest of God’s creation (Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Despite Zimbabwean leader Robert Mugawbe’s and Temple University Africentric professor Molefi Asante’s position that the present anti-homosexual attitude of many Africans and African Americans in keeping

with their African tradition, there is no record that Africans castigated and killed African homosexuals, like their European counterparts, prior to the slave trade. In spite of their denial that homosexuality is authentically Black, history supports the notion that Africans, like other cultures throughout the world, engaged in homosexual expression (Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

The corresponding implication that homosexuality was widely accepted in Europe prior to the Atlantic slave trade is also inaccurate; most of Europe held rather negative views about homosexuality in any form. Ironically, Africans who, like some Native Americans, expressed themselves sexually with the same sex, frequently in transgendered homosexuality, actually experienced condemnation rather than a condoning or encouraging of their homosexual expression by European Christian missionaries (Williams, 1986). Early documents containing “African men’s own testimony also shows that they generally expected and often feared the stern disapproval of whites and sought, for that reason, to keep their homosexual practices secret” (Murray & Roscoe, 1998).

As African Americans become more informed about historical homosexualities in African cultures, one wonders why so many African Americans still resist the suggestion that there has been a homosexual presence in Africa. But in a world that continues to view Africans and African descendants as less developed, less moral and perhaps less human, and given the stigma of homosexuality as a sexual taboo, an immoral expression, the myth that homosexuality did not exist in Africa satisfies a Black cultural need for validation (Williams, 1986). Hence, the view that homosexuality is an outside aberration imposed on sacred African people. The lack of social power held by Blacks does not

prevent them from also demonizing white sexuality. Like whites who cast their own insatiable sexual desires and practices onto despised Blacks, this assertion, that homosexuality is a perverse sexual practice of Europeans imposed on Africans, is another example of the human tendency to attribute one's stigmatized sexual behavior onto the "sexuality of the despised other" (Williams, 1986).

Ultimately, it is irrelevant as to how Africans view or respond to homosexuality. Even if Africans uniformly opposed homosexuality (and it is clear that Africans are not monolithic in their views on this or any issue), African Americans do not adopt African cultural practices just because they are practiced by many Africans. African Americans tend not to become Islamic or a part of traditional African religions, do not practice polygamy and rightfully oppose the more common African practice of clitorrectomy. Many African Americans are using "Africa" in the same way they use the Bible: worthy of citing as a justification for their resistance to homosexuality and unjust treatment of Black gays, but something that they can ignore when it goes against their other views.

A number of gay African American Christian scholars and ministers such as Kelly Brown Douglas, Michael Dyson, Jeremiah Wright, and Dwight Hopkins are responding to African Americans using the Bible as justification for Black church homophobia and heterosexual supremacy. Hopkins (2002) agrees, "the Bible is brought into conversation as a justification to oppress lesbians and gays . . . as condemning homosexuals to hell without salvation unless they become heterosexuals" (p. 187). He further asserts that these Christians call for this theological response to gays while at the same time stating that "the [Biblical] stories are wrong when they call on slaves to obey your masters, and

Black heterosexual women argue that the passages proclaiming women should obey men are sinful” (Hopkins, 2002, p. ??). Although this point is not new, African Americans express much resistance to the slavery parallel. Hopkins and other heterosexual Christian allies recognize this paradox and argue that if Black Liberation Theology, and more importantly Black Christians, expect to maintain credibility when asserting that God sides with oppressed people and is opposed to unjust attitudes and practices enacted on any people, then there must be opposition to a Christianity that embraces the sin and evil of homophobia and heterosexual supremacy (Hopkins, 2002).

Why do so many Black Christians use the Bible frequently as an injunction against Black gays, Christians and otherwise, while entertaining a variety of Christian responses on other issues? Since African American Christians (like other Christians) demonstrate the ability to choose selectively parts of the Bible as authoritative while not adhering to other parts, it is becoming more and more difficult for Black ministers, seminarians, and scholars who advocate Black liberation theology for Black people to resist liberation in Black churches and communities for *all* Black people, including lesbians and gays.

Toward a True Liberation Theology: Affirming the Homoerotic and Lesbian and Gay Christians

As previously mentioned in Chapter II, more than 55 years after Adam Clayton Powell Sr. led his crusade against Black gays in New York City, another famous New York City church, the Riverside Church, Dr. Channing Phillips, an African American

heterosexual supremacist, had these demeaning words to say to gays and their love relationships on May 5, 1985 in his sermon, taken from the Gen. 1:27 passage:

Male and female God created them . . . it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that heterosexuality . . . is being lifted up as the model of human sexuality. . . . Those are hard words . . . that imply that deviation from the parable of heterosexual relationship ordained by marriage is contrary to God's will—is sin . . . And not theological or exegetical sleight of hand can erase that word of the Lord. (Nelson, 1992, p. 55)

Reminiscent of the time a century and a half earlier when Christians stood divided on whether to honor Biblical passages that validated slavery, many at the Riverside congregation, led by a heterosexual man, stood that Sunday in opposition to this use of the Bible to justify oppressive treatment of God's people and their relationships.

According to the progenitor of Black Liberation Theology, James Cone (1969), Black Liberation Theology

must take seriously the reality of Black people—their life of suffering and humiliation . . . When Black people affirm their freedom in God, they know that they cannot obey laws of oppression. [And in light of] the Biblical emphasis on the freedom of [humans], one cannot allow another to define his [or her] existence” (pp. 137-138)

If liberation is at the heart of the historical Black church as Cone and others claim and if it is to be consistent with Jesus' gospel mandate “to liberate the oppressed.” As in Luke 4:18-19:

The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty

them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of the lord. (The King James Version of The New Open Bible Nelson 1990, p. 1142)

Then, Black heterosexual Christians must ultimately work to end the immorality of laws that allow police in a number of states to arrest gays anytime they make love in the privacy of their homes; legal discrimination against and firing of gays in employment that permits the government to remove children against their will from the homes of their gay parents; and church teachings and practices that are demeaning to Black gays and contribute to their suffering and death.

Only a relatively few African American Christians presently concur with Hopkins and accept the ethic of Black Christian liberation and equality for gays and their relationships. Instead most African Americans are like Channings Phillips, selectively choosing parts of the Bible to support an anti-homosexual position and identifying gay lovemaking as nasty, filthy, disgusting, and an immoral expression outside of God's will. African Americans like Alveda King, gospel music artists Debbie and Angie Wynans, and misters Reggie White, Calvin Butts, and James Sykes go farther than local congregation of any social or religious effort to recognize gay oppression or validate gay sexual relationships as moral equivalents to heterosexual ones. They use the Bible as a tool for imposing oppression on gays, superimposing irrelevant hostile texts onto those with loving same sex sexual desires, expressions and relationships.

This is why no prominent African American heterosexual condemned the comments of Rick Santorum, on April 7, 2003. Responding to the Supreme Court case

that will abolish or uphold the criminalizing of gay lovemaking at the state level, Santorum asserted,

If the Supreme Court says that you have the right to consensual sex within your home, then you have the right to bigamy, you have the right to polygamy, you have the right to incest, you have the right to adultery. You have the right to anything. (Neff, 2003, p. 1)

Since African Americans have encountered similar discrimination based on religious or moral reasoning, one might question why they did not condemn Santorum's comments. The reason why there was no African Americans speaking out reflects a sad reality: most African American heterosexuals agree with Santorum.

While it is true slightly more Black heterosexuals than white heterosexuals support the civil rights of gays, that support should not be overstated (Boykin, 1996). Based on a study conducted by Dr. Robert Franklin, the majority of Black heterosexual Christians perceive homosexuality to be immoral (Franklin, 1997). White heterosexual Christians are more varied, with more white Christians than Black viewing homosexuality as moral. This different moral understanding and response can be observed by the implementing of nondiscrimination policy changes, theological statements, open and affirming congregations, gay-lesbian support groups, and anti-homophobia workshops, teaching and training in many white educational institutions, places of employment, theological seminaries, and some denominations throughout the country. The lack of similar progress in Black settings seriously challenges the claim put forth by some Blacks that Black heterosexuals may be more accepting of gays than their white counterparts.

Even when Black heterosexuals in theory should support civil rights for gay citizens, their understanding of homosexuality as immoral precludes such support and complicates their stand against oppression. Although most white heterosexuals, like Black heterosexuals, are homophobic and supremacist in their attitudes and practices, it is especially disturbing to find African American heterosexuals using arguments of morality similar to those used against them to oppress gays. There is no evidence that African American heterosexuals would accept discrimination against themselves and their sexual relationships. Such practices send forth a message, rightly or wrongly, that concern for oppression is only a concern when the oppression is against Black heterosexuals. It is indeed ironic that when it comes to issues of sexual justice and equality within the church, many of the proponents are white and many of the opponents are Black, with few Black heterosexuals advocating for gay equality in Black churches.

More than occasionally, I am struck by the fact that heterosexual Christians in general feel that when they are asked to change their understanding of homosexuality as immoral, they are being asked to do something that Christians in the past never had do: admit that a “Christian” view was wrong and change it. Christians today express difficulty in understanding that Christians in the past were just as convinced that slavery was a moral practice as they presently feel that homosexuality is an immoral practice. For the most part, it was not until whites experienced African Americans in a way that challenged and disproved long held racist views and theories that white pastoral persons were compelled to reconsider traditional understandings of scripture related to slavery and to the people they thought to be subhuman, African Americans. If slavery, which

after all can be supported biblically, nevertheless can also be opposed on the grounds that its oppressive nature is not out of the will of a just and liberating God, then it is impossible to justify another set of scriptures that imposes oppressive treatment onto a group, whether it be women or gays.

Nineteenth-century African American Christian leaders such as Daniel Payne, David Walker, Nathaniel Paul, and Sojourner Truth, declared that they were also Christian, while at the same time, as African American New Testament scholar Vincent Wimbush (2001) notes, “interpreted the Bible differently from those who introduced them to it” (p. 17). This point informs us that it is too simplistic to say that African Americans are Bible Christians. African American Christians have always resisted certain Bible passages and, as a result, already do what I have suggest they do in relation to passages related to homosexual activity: engage in a prayerful and critical reflection on those passages, resisting the oppressive nature of scripture that runs counter to the just and liberating God also testified in scripture. The rejection of these scriptures that defined God as accepting slavery by Howard Thurman’s grandmother, Nancy Ambrose, is just one example dispelling the myth that African Americans are bound to all scripture as authoritative (Thurman, 1949). While there are still references by some heterosexual Christians to non procreative heterosexual couples (through their choice or infertility) informs us that they can recognize that certain scriptures are limited and inapplicable. Black women church leaders as ministers in the Methodist and Pentecostal traditions and the contemporary reality for African American women cutting their hair without wearing

head coverings are other examples of ways in which African Americans are unencumbered by some portions of scripture.

In *Heterosexism: An Ethical Challenge*, Patricia Jung and Ralph Smith argue that Paul's writing in Romans 1:26-32, often cited to justify a common Christian condemnation of homosexuality, must be placed in context.

For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly, and receiving in themselves that recompense of their error which was meet. And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do these things which are convenient; Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, debate, deceit, malignity; whisperers, Backbiters, haters of God, despiteful, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, Without understanding, covenant-breakers, without natural affection, implacable, unmerciful: Who knowing the judgment of God, that they which commit such things are worthy of death, not only do the same, but have pleasure in them that do them. (The King James Version Of the Open Bible, Nelson 1990, p. 1265)

It is important to note that “Paul presupposed that all same-sex desires and behaviors among the Gentiles resulted from their insatiable lust for sexual variety, rooted intimately in their idolatry” (Jung & Smith, 1993). Given that there is no scriptural reference that addresses loving same sex sexual relationship characterized by long-term care and commitment, many argue with good reason that this is inappropriate to use the Bible, when responding to the very different reality of lesbians and gays within the twenty-first century world. In fact, in the first century world that Paul lived in, there was no understanding that someone's sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex might

be deeply ingrained, in the way that we imply today when we use the phrase “sexual orientation.” Jung and Smith (1993) argue,

Paul might well conclude that the fall results in both the sexual disordering of desires and behaviors and sexual disorienting of some of us. However, were he part of our world, it is also possible, and we think theologically consistent, for Paul to conclude that although sin has disordered everyone’s sexuality, it has disoriented no one’s. (p. 82)

This approach to Paul’s writing does not mean, however, that Black gay and heterosexual Christians disregard scripture altogether or refrain from judging right or wrong behaviors. Like other Christians, I understand sin as those behaviors that violate, destroy, and abuse our fellow human beings and our relationships with them. Homosexuality, in and of itself, does not belong in the category of sin anymore than heterosexuality, in and of itself. Abusive and destructive sexual relationships between two men or two women are just as wrong, but no more wrong, as abusive and destructive sexual relationships between a man and a woman. Loving heterosexual relationships that mutually value the body should be honored alongside loving mutual homosexual relationships that mutually value the body. The affirmation of gay relationships is in no way intended to disregard or diminish heterosexual relationships but rather broaden the concept of family in Black faith and social communities.

If Black heterosexual church leaders and Christians continue to resist changing their treatment of scripture and understanding of gays, however, they will continue fostering dishonesty among their gay relatives and fellow congregants. I encounter many Black gay men in particular who marry heterosexual women simply to avoid the harsh

condemnation they would experience as gay, or as a result of the coercion they receive to marry the opposite sex. Many of the heterosexuals condemn these gays for “living a lie” when it was heterosexuals’ homophobic attitudes that led these gays to marry in the first place.

Gay Christian Congregations

It is rare to find a Black church that affirms Black gays and their love relationships. The progress that has been made on gay equality is some predominantly white environments, including some Christian denominations, for example, the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church, leads many Black gays to such places. If Black heterosexuals are “less homophobic than whites,” as some suggest, it is indeed curious as to why a significant lower percentage of Black gays come out in Black settings and churches than their white counterparts.

While only “29 percent of Blacks surveyed said that homosexuals should remain in the closet, while 65 percent disagreed” many Blacks continue to argue that they “do not object to homosexuality [but] object to *open* [emphasis mine] expressions of it” (Boykin, 1996, p. 188). Such a position is necessarily contradictory. To say that a gay person is accepted as long as she/he does not demonstrate the very thing that makes her/him gay is no acceptance at all. This attitude is strikingly similar to that of white racists who feigned acceptance of Blacks as long as Blacks stayed in their place or exhibited behaviors that did not reflect Black cultural thoughts or practices. The expectation for gays to be visible, even when there is a simultaneous claim for them to be out of the closet, reflects the shame and embarrassment that African Americans harbor

about bodily expressions between the same sex. Given that no heterosexual is saying that heterosexuals should not be open about their heterosexuality, this reaction is more than cultural modesty of sexual relationships. Rather, this kind of silencing is a means of control over gays and, like all silencing, works toward the death of a people.

Historically, the Black Church has been a place attentive to the spiritual, political, social and emotional needs of Black people. It has sought to provide holistic ministry, affirming and offering liberation from society's definition of them as immoral and inferior. As Womanist scholars (Douglas, 1999; Gurdof, 1994; McClintock, 2001) have already pointed out, just as Black theology consistently identifies whites' oppressive action against Black people, it "must also unmask oppression or domination within its own tradition as well" (Andrews, 2002, p. 109). Church leaders should continue to embrace scriptures that offer life, love, and liberation. Jesus' command in Luke 6:31 that we "treat each other as we want to be treated" (Nelson, 1990, p. 1146) is a scripture that should be maintained in that it reminds us to be just and loving people of God. When we do this, we honor the gospel and the Black tradition of liberation.

There is no need to impose a theological view that unfairly and significantly harms gay Christians. As African Americans eventually spoke out and resisted the injustice, pain and suffering that racist whites in the church as well as society inflicted on them, Black gays and lesbians must also oppose oppression directed toward them by "coming out" and telling their stories of pain that heterosexuals constantly inflict on gays through heterosexuals' "theological construction of the imago Dei, that pervasively insist that lesbian and gay people are inferior and evil" (Graham 1997, p. 172). Gay Christians

must do this for their own survival and health. I agree with gay therapist Richard Isay (1996) that “any gay man or lesbian who does not oppose the prejudice and discrimination of organizations [and I would add churches] to which he or she may belong remains enslaved by the self-hatred such institutions engender” (p. 159).

The “coming out” and sharing of Black gay Christian narratives—stories that reflect a Christian witness and faith comparable to that of God’s people within scripture—will do two things: (a) demonstrate that “all human beings are capable of reflecting the imago Dei—when their concrete and everyday lives and relationships are truthful, loving, creative, just and diverse”; and consequently, (b) assist in transforming the understanding of many Black heterosexuals so they will come to recognize that Black gays and their loving sexual relationships are also moral. As Pastoral Theologian Larry Kent Graham (1997) notes, when this occurs, “the imago Dei becomes embodied communally within a web of just diverse and creative [Black] relationship characterized by honest and loving communion” (p. 172).

In light of Black Christians liberation and Black Christian resistance to oppressive scripture, there is no reason why Black heterosexual church leaders cannot move toward a true Black liberation theology that affirms all loving sexual relationships and commitments as reflecting God’s purpose in creation. Black pastoral persons can offer healing to lives that are broken by homophobia and reconcile those lives with family members, gay and heterosexual alike. The visibility of gays and of their relationships in Black church settings sheds more light into our capacity to see God’s love and presence in community in a variety of ways. Black church leaders must move toward celebrating

all loving sexual relationships within church communities, for it is in such relationships that we find intimacy, health, and wholeness. This embrace allows us not only to appreciate our sexuality, whether we express those sexual yearnings in a mutual way with persons of the same or opposite sex, but also to experience God's goodness within that sexual expression. In that this connection makes us whole beings, we can become better stewards, providing care in our communities and opposing the violence and injustice that seek to abuse and destroy us.

In the twenty-first century, we have an opportunity to love our bodies more than ever. We must bring the spirit and flesh together in healthy ways as opposed to seeing them in dualistic ways and a never-ending tension. History allows us to learn better ways of being and relating in the world. I agree with Douglas that as Black people, much of our present negative attitudes toward our bodies and many times, sex itself, stem from this country's Puritan past and Victorian influence and "the way Black sexuality has been impugned by white culture" (Douglas, 1999, p. 7). However, I hastened to add, along with Douglas, that

there is an individual and communal responsibility for violating the humanity of another and precluding her or him from full experiencing what it means to be create in the image of God . . . A Black sexual discourse of resistance is also constrained to make clear that homophobia and concomitant heterosexist structures and systems (those structures and systems that privilege heterosexuals while discriminating against non-heterosexuals) are sin . . . [Black and Womanist theologies] should reveal the basic contradiction between homophobia and the church's belief in a God of justice. (p. 7)

My challenge to African Americans is to engage seriously and critically the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality in the same faithful way that we have typically offered a critical engagement of Christianity and race.

As African American Christians, we now have an opportunity to reject the unfortunate sex negative messages, shedding the past about our sexuality as nasty and loving our bodies as God's gift to us. Our acceptance of lesbians and gays and their relationships, as we celebrate heterosexuals and their relationships, will welcome and affirm our sisters and brothers who, in their faithful commitment to their sexual gifts, allow us to appreciate the beauty of God's diverse creation. In doing this, in affirm the erotic in all of us, we will proclaim a true Black liberation theology, and in so doing, we will honor God.

There is a crucial challenge that awaits those of us who are teachers, students, ministers, and lay women and men; namely, to discover anew how best to help Black religious bodies establish beliefs and behaviors that celebrate and affirm the sacredness of Black embodiment—inclusive of race, gender, social location, sex, and sexuality—that will prove healing and empowering for our collective souls.

This next chapter will discuss the implications and possibilities for a sexual discourse of resistance in the Black church. I will explore ways the Black church can address Black sexuality without alienating its gay and Lesbians members. I will offer creative suggestions on how Black churches can begin to provide an atmosphere conducive to engaging in a sexual discourse of resistance.

CHAPTER V

HOMOPHOBIA AND THE HEALING OF SOCIETY

According to the 2000 U. S. Census, the United States population on April 1, 2000 was 281.4 million. Of the total, 36.4 million, or 12.9%, reported Black or African American (McKinnon, 2001). According to the Human Rights campaign, 601,209 total gay and lesbian families living in 99.3% of all counties in the United States were reported by the 2000 U. S. Census (Smith & Gates, 2001). Though the two communities have very different histories, as minorities in America both groups face some similar challenges. It has always seemed to me that we have much to learn from each other and much to gain from working together; however we must first learn how to talk to one other. Given the history of Civil Rights and Gay Rights in the United States both groups must share a common vision: a fulfillment of guaranteed rights of all citizens granted through the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. I believe the writing of this dissertation provided a platform for the beginnings of such needed conversation.

The experience of African Americans and the lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered community overlap in a number of areas; there are especially clear parallels between the oppression of blacks and gays. However, the interaction of racism, religion, heterosexism, and homophobia within and between the two communities complicates the groups' relationship. The issues have many faces. The following come to mind: (a) the

existence of a hierarchy of oppression, (b) the different forms of oppression that unites or divides the groups, and finally (c) the inclusion of the gay rights movement into the civil rights movement. The crisis is not in the issues facing the groups, but within the institutions that govern how individuals see the work of these groups within their own belief systems. The Black Church's Teaching that homosexuality is immoral has created a crisis for both groups. The chapters in this dissertation addressed many of such topics and I attempted to address them from a wide variety of perspectives.

In this final chapter, I consider healing of homophobia (in the African American communities) and the pastoral theological issues that surround the present moral discussion on homosexuality and African American gays in black churches and the implications for further research in this area.

I was empowered to minister the sacrament of One in whom there is no north or south, no black or white, no male or female, only the spirit of love and reconciliation drawing us all toward the goal of human wholeness.

—The Reverend Dr. Pauli Murray (as cited in Madigan, 2004, p. 398.)

A majority of Black Church Families live in conflict about the homosexuality of their loved ones. African American gays and heterosexuals typically either disagree about the morality of homosexuality or agree that homosexuality is an illness, a sinful behavior that must be removed from the family member's life. Few African American families in the church accept their lesbian or gay family members in the same way as they receive their heterosexual family members. In his groundbreaking work *One More River to*

Cross, Boykin (1996) offers a classic example of what the few openly gay African American Christians often encounter:

Malik . . . considers himself a good Christian. Malik's parents, however, have been so influenced by their minister that they have challenged his faith. "You cannot be homosexual and be a Christian," they told him. A few weeks after I met Malik, he began moving out of his parents' suburban Maryland home and into an apartment of his own in Washington, DC. During the first two trips to help him move his belongings, I met his mother, who greeted me graciously. By the time of the next trip, however, Malik had admitted to her that I, too, was gay. When I arrived the second time, I was banned from entering the house. I waited for thirty minutes outside in the car while Malik, inside, packed his belongings on his own and argued with his family. "God doesn't want homosexuals in his kingdom," Malik's mother insisted. (p. 155)

Unfortunately, Malik's story is more the rule and not the exception. Lesbian and gay family members bear the brunt of homophobia in families. Even though many families may truthfully claim that they are not battling like Malik and his mother, the false sense of peace is largely a result of many lesbians and gays remaining closeted in their families in order to avoid ridicule, ostracism, and psychic pain and fights such as Malik experienced. I think this is why so many of us remain in the closet for many years with our family and friends.

Church Ostracism

I have attended very few black churches that affirm black gays and their love relationships. If (black) heterosexuals are "less homophobic than whites," as some suggests, it is indeed curious as to why a significantly lower percentage of black gays come out in black settings and churches than their white counterparts. Although only "29 percent of blacks surveyed said that homosexuals should remain in the closet, while 65

percent disagreed,” many blacks continue to argue that they “do not object to homosexuality (but) object to *open* expressions of it [emphasis added] (Boykin 1996) Such a position points to mere toleration of gays or may even appear contradictory, in contrast with full acceptance afforded to heterosexuals. This attitude is strikingly is strikingly similar to that of white racists who feigned acceptance of blacks as long as blacks stayed in their place and exhibited behaviors that did not reflect black cultural expressions. The expectation that gays refrain from a visibility of their love relationships is a reflection of the shame, discomfort, and embarrassment that African Americans still harbor about same-sex affection. Given that no heterosexual is saying that heterosexuals should not be open about their heterosexuality, this reaction is more than cultural modesty about sexual relationships. I believe this kind of silencing is a means of control over gays and, like all silencing, works toward the death of a people.

The reported tolerance that many black church Christians and even gays claim about black churches is perhaps self-serving. Since it is generally known and accepted that gay men typically provide music ministry for black churches, an argument could be made that heterosexuals largely benefit from this gay-led ministry. Like other majority cultures reap benefits from a subordinate minority class, black heterosexuals perhaps realize that banishing gays from black churches would significantly diminish their church experience and the quality church worship.

Some heterosexuals may challenge the claim that gays experience oppression in black churches since gays do not experience “Jim Crow” discrimination, restricted to separate water fountains and segregated seating. Iris Marion Young’s (1990) discussion

of various discriminations helps us understand that African American lesbians and gays do experience unjust discrimination in their own churches:

Oppression is how the system is rigged against certain classification of people—women, homosexuals, working class people, people of color, people with disabilities, youth, the elderly, people with mental illnesses, etc.

While it may be generally true that presumed gays are not banned from black churches, lesbians and gays always have had to stay in their place. My experiences have been that heterosexuals allow stereotypical gays some levels of power in their liturgical leadership as musicians and even as clergy, heterosexuals in these same churches, however, make clear in their sermons or comments that they still find their sexual expression sinful or even evil.

This type of message led me to feel that I was not viewed equally with fellow heterosexuals, and if I were open about my sexuality I would receive neither affirmation of my relationship nor support in my struggles as homosexual.

Silence and Anger

For many years, I existed in my family unit with dread and fear. Why? Because I knew that at any given moment my family members could express offensive comments and/or fits of anger because of my homosexuality and I would give no to little response. It is often suggested individuals should seek advice from a counselor or pastor. What is typical in black congregations the pastor is leading the charge against homosexuality; therefore creating a chasm of disconnect for the congregant who needs emotional, spiritual and at times physical healing from their battle with sexual identity acceptance.

Black pastoral persons are in a position to help heterosexual church members look at their behavior toward gays as unnecessary and inconsistent with the gospel message to treat others as they desire to be treated. Considering the problem of anger and violent emotion over homosexuality often expressed by black family members and congregants, Christian theologian and ethicist Lewis Smedes raises some questions that pastors may use in helping heterosexual Christians reform such behavior. He asserts that it remains a curious phenomenon as to why

heterosexual people get as fevered as they do about homosexuality . . . What danger to [heterosexuals] is posed by homosexuals? Some say that they are a threat to the [black] family, but none tell us how. Some fear that they might abuse our children, but no facts have ever adduced to show that they are any more likely to do so than heterosexuals. Do homosexuals threaten to invade our homes, steal our property, rape our daughters? What we know is that homosexual men are murdered by heterosexual people just for being gay, what we also know is that there is no record of a heterosexual being murdered for not being gay. Why, then, I wonder in a world of violence, starving children, cruel tyrannies and natural disasters, are Christian people so steamed up about the harmless and often beneficent presence of gays and lesbians among us. (Smedes, 1999, p. 77)

Black pastors must begin talking about homosexuality in different ways in order to shift the conversation from simple condemnation to a thoughtful dialogue about the complexities of human sexuality and expressing gay sexuality in faithful and responsible ways. I believe this action is the first step in moving black families from rage and silence about homosexuality to a creative space for constructive dialogue.

Pastoral theologian Archie Smith (1997) has identified the denigrating black pastoral attitude toward lesbian and gay people as false consciousness, the unwillingness to critique the oppressive treatment of lesbians and gays in the same way African

American have critiqued racist oppression. Black liberation theology has the potential of assisting black pastoral caregivers in a way that helps gay and heterosexual family members.

Black Liberation Theology and Black Gay Christians

According to its progenitor, James Cone (1969), black liberation theology “must take seriously the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation. . . . When black people affirm their freedom in God, they know that they cannot obey laws of oppression. [And in light of] the biblical emphasis on the freedom of [humans], one cannot allow another to define his [or her] existence.” If liberation is at the heart of the historical black church as Cone claims and if it is to be consistent with Jesus’ gospel mandate to “liberate the oppressed”:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. To preach the acceptable year of The Lord. (Luke 4:18-19, The King James Version of the Open Bible, Nelson 1990)

Then black heterosexual Christians must work to end legal discrimination against gays in marriage, employment, and the military; legal discrimination that permits the government to remove children against their will from their homes of their lesbian and gay parents and denies lesbians and gays the right to adopt regardless of the quality of their parenting; and church teachings and practices that are demeaning to black gays and which contribute to their suffering and death. The continued opposition by black clergy toward marriage of African American lesbians and gays is the latest of many actions that

seriously challenge the validity of the claim that the black church is on the side of liberation of black people and others.

Dwight Hopkins (2002), an African American heterosexual theology professor specializing in black liberation theology at the University of Chicago, has argued that any teachings or practice that does not support the full equality of lesbians and gays is inconsistent with Christian black liberation theology. He suggests that “the Bible is brought into conversation as justification to oppress lesbians and gays . . . as condemning homosexuals to hell without salvation unless they become heterosexuals” (p. 187). He further asserts that these Christians call for this theological response to gays while at the same time stating that “the [biblical] stories are wrong when they call on slaves to obey your masters, and black heterosexual women argue that the passages proclaiming women should obey men are sinful” (p. 187).

Since the black church has been a place attentive to the spiritual, political, social, and emotional needs of black people, it should also be a space for black families in crisis over their lesbians or gay family member. In his work *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Andrews (2002) states that just as black theology consistently identifies whites’ oppressive actions against black people, it “must also unmask oppression or domination within its own tradition as well” (p. 109). Church leaders should continue to embrace scriptures that offer life, love, and liberation.

Reconciling and Healing for Lesbians and Gays

There is no need to impose a theological view that unfairly and significantly harms gay Christians. African Americans eventually spoke out and resisted the injustice,

pain, and suffering racist whites in the church and society inflicted on them. Black gays and lesbians must also resist oppression directed toward them by coming out and telling their stories of pain that heterosexuals constantly inflict on gays through heterosexuals' "theological constructions of the imago Dei, that pervasively insist that lesbian and gay people are inferior and evil." (Graham 1997) Gay Christians must do this for their own survival and health. I agree with gay therapist Richard Isay that "any gay man or lesbian who does not oppose the prejudice and discrimination of organizations to which he or she may belong, remains enslaved by the self-hatred such institutions engender." (Isay 1996)

The coming out and sharing of black gay Christian narratives—stories that reflect a Christian witness comparable to that of God's people within scripture—will demonstrate that "all human beings are capable of reflecting the imago Dei when their concrete and everyday lives and relationships are truthful, loving, creative, just, and diverse," and consequently will transform others to recognize that black gays and their loving sexual relationships are also moral. (Graham 1997, p. 169)

In light of black Christian liberation and black Christian resistance to oppressive scripture, there is no reason that black heterosexual church leaders cannot move toward a true black liberation theology that affirms all loving sexual relationships and commitments as reflecting God's purpose in creation. In his book *Using Scripture in Pastoral Counseling*, Wimberly points out that he has found scripture, "a particular helpful resource." (1994, p. 12) I am particularly interested in knowing how many gay clients he has had since I have an ambivalent relationship with the Bible because so many black pastors have used the Bible against me as a homosexual. Still, my black

inculturation perhaps gives me an appreciation of the Bible that is not as easily dismissed by me as it may be by members of other cultures. They may find their response to the Bible similar to responses to the slavery passages, rejecting anti-homosexual activity passages and appreciating others.

Wimberly finds that scripture can draw “readers and hearers into the story based on the story’s own narrative power. Biblical stories often contain an invitation to the reader to adopt the perspective, feelings, and attitudes of the character.” (1994). I agree that such a use of the scripture can inspire a person to take control of life and find God present in the midst of daily struggles. In addition the powerful example that Jesus provides as an estranged member of his community--overcoming suffering may resonate with black gay Christians as they find voice in an intimidating black community. It is important that such passages are raised for gays while others need to be avoided.

The way black pastors have often used the Bible regarding homosexuality is problematic for gays in black churches. In his helpful book *Pastoral Care of Gays, Lesbians, and Their Families*, pastoral theologian David Switzer (1999) notes that when counseling gays, pastors often provide an authentic and perhaps well-meaning response about homosexuality without recognizing its harmful effects. Having been indoctrinated in a homophobic church culture, many pastors generally believe that all homosexual expression is forbidden by God and that anything short of condemning such expressions will lead the parishioners deeper into a sinful spiral. Thus, it is the pastor’s job to straighten this homosexual’s life out. In this respect, black pastoral homophobia can be understood. What might occur if the pastor allows himself or herself to think that

homosexual relations are another loving expression but, like heterosexual practice, can be sinful acts if expressed in uncaring and hostile ways? This perspective could allow for the pastor to discuss the homosexual parishioner coming out and living within a committed sexual relationship of nurture, care, and devotion that can be celebrated by the Christian church. Switzer (1999) recognizes that while such an awareness and approval may take time,

if a pastor can be a trusted friend . . . relate to [gays] in such a way that [will] facilitate their exploration and talking about the advantages and disadvantages of coming out and assessing possible values to be gained over the risks of loss, them [such a pastor has] performed an act of mercy in the name of Christ. (p. 106)

In the pastoral relationship, I believe that black pastoral persons can offer healing to lives that are broken by homophobia and can help reconcile those lives with family members, gay, and heterosexual alike. The visibility of gays and their relationships in black church settings expands our capacity to see God's love and presence in community in a variety of ways. In the pastoral ministry of saving black families, black pastoral caregivers and leaders must move toward celebrating all loving sexual relationships in church communities. This bold act of leadership assists black people and all people in finding intimacy, health, and wholeness. This embrace allows us not only to appreciate our sexuality, whether with persons of the same or the opposite sex, but also to experience God's goodness within that sexual expression. This connection makes us whole beings so that we can become better stewards, providing care in our communities and opposing the violence and injustice that seek to abuse and destroy us.

Some African American pastors are reassessing their stance against lesbian and gay Christians. They are beginning to see that homophobia and heterosexual supremacy are oppressive and violate black liberation theology and the Christian gospel. At the heart of this transformation is learning a different response to passages that have been used for the condemnation of homosexuality. In his book *Whosoever Church*, Gary David Comstock (2001) shares a glimpse of what the black church can be for gays and their families. Numerous accounts show the prophetic Christian witness of black heterosexuals in particular as they take on the sinful homophobic tradition of black churches. This is an important resource for black church leaders as they begin the important work of dismantling homophobic and heterosexual supremacy in black faith communities.

The title, *A Whosoever Church*, comes out of the cultural vernacular, and while I heard this phrase almost every Sunday in several black churches, full participation of gays has yet to be realized. Rev. Edwin Sanders is one black pastor living the prophetic Christian witness of inclusion for his parishioners. Referring to his church as a “whosoever church,” Sanders asserts that his church tries “to be inclusive of all and alienating to none,” (as cited in Comstock, 2001) Sanders and other pastors offer hope for those committed to black church reform for liberation. As black pastoral persons engage family members and parishioners in other ways of understanding homosexuality, they also recognize the importance of responding to biblical passages used in the continuation of homophobia.

Rev. Dr. Arnold Thomas, an African American heterosexual conference UCC minister, states, “We read what we have been directed to read in scripture, and we don’t

look at the complicated nature of scripture.” He believes that “all you have to do is direct [congregants] to those passages and to the context in which they were given. And when that happens . . . another important journey in their faith journey has been accomplished.” (as cited in Comstock 2001, p. 51) As scriptures perpetuating slavery were eventually replaced with liberationist passages emphasizing freedom and oneness in Christ:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye all are one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3: 28-29 of The King James Version of the New Open Bible, Nelson 1990, p. 1324)

Pastors can respond with scriptures reflecting loving neighbor as self, treating all people in the same way as we desire to be treated and loving one another:

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets. (Matt. 7:12 of The King James Version of the New Open Bible, Nelson, 1990, p. 1440)

Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. And we have known and believe that the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. (1 John 4:7, 16 of The King James Version of the New Open Bible, Nelson, 1990, p. 1440)

In a prophetic voice within the second-oldest black denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Dr. Mozella Mitchell “speaks against those in the black community and black church who try to deny gay rights or discriminate against gay people” (Comstock, 2001, p. 151). Reflecting the animus that black gay pastors have toward treating gays as equal members of the community, her bishop tried to subpoena

her, but did not have the authority to do so. The gospel calls us to a response like Mitchell's an action celebrating all people in loving and nurturing relationships.

As we begin the twenty-first century, I suggest we called to bring the spirit and flesh together in healthy ways rather than seeing them in a dualistic ways and in a never-ending tension. History allows us to learn better ways of being and relating in the world. Kelly Brown Douglas (1999) argues that, for black people, many of our present negative attitudes toward our bodies and sex stem from this country's Puritan and Victorian past and "the way black sexuality has been impugned by white culture" (p. 7). However, I hasten to add Douglas's view that

There is an individual and communal responsibility for violating the humanity of another and precluding her or him from fully experiencing what it means to be created in the image of God . . . A black sexual discourse of resistance is also constrained to make clear that homophobia and concomitant heterosexist structures and systems (those structures and systems that privilege heterosexuals while discriminating against non-heterosexuals) are sin . . . [Black and womanist theologies] should reveal the basic contradiction between homophobia and the church's belief in a God of justice. (p. 7)

My challenge to African Americans is to critically engage the relationship between Christianity and homosexuality in the same faithful way that a crucial engagement of Christianity and race is offered. In the inheritance of the black church as the center of black people's lives, black pastors as heirs and keepers of this sacred canopy can lead others in dismantling its sin of homophobia and heterosexual supremacy.

African American Christians now have an opportunity to reject the sex-negative messages and instead love our bodies and sexuality as God's gift to us. These gifts of sexuality must be appreciated and honored within mutual spiritual relationships for the

community. Like heterosexuals, lesbians and gays do not need to deny their God given capacity for sexual sharing and wholeness, but rather should embrace this gift as life-giving.

The black pastoral response recognizes the struggle of those with a traditional use of scripture and invites them to look at the historical context of the writings. This response considers a variety of ways to educate and engage lesbians and gays and their heterosexual family members, fellow congregants, and leaders and members of communities. This movement that is occurring in black churches and communities is consistent with other Christian movements of change, including change that occurred after the 1950s in white churches regarding traditional racist attitudes and practices toward black people. A significant part of that change happened when whites observed other whites speaking out against racial injustice and dying for the cause of justice.

I don't think that many black heterosexuals have not heard the stories of the pain and discrimination that their own fellow black lesbians and gays experience because of black homophobia in church families. If there is any possible change to occur, that change must begin with the voices of black gays and their heterosexual allies. When this is realized in black houses of worship—whether in urban sanctuaries, storefronts of the North, the suburban mega-churches or rural one-room churches of the South—perhaps black heterosexual Christians will also hear the pain of gays and begin to claim the gospel in new and profound ways. In such a movement, black Christians will recognize that the mire of homosexuality debates threaten our measure to be faithful Christians for the poor, the infirm, the imprisoned, and those suffering from violence.

The black church has stood as a model of the gospel, opposing slavery and emphasizing black liberation. If Christians today in the black church ever plan to live into this historical witness as a Christian body committed to black people's liberation and the liberation of all oppressed people, I believe they must ultimately stand with lesbians and gays as equal members in God's church and world. Homosexuality is part of human sexuality, just as African Americans are part of the human race. Thus, there will always be African American lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgendered persons within and outside our faith communities. The question then becomes whether African American heterosexuals are going to do justice toward their sons and daughters, sisters, and brothers, mothers, and fathers, and other relatives, friends, colleagues, and fellow Christians who are lesbian and gay.

Our acceptance and celebration of lesbians and gays and their relationships with those of heterosexuals will allow us to appreciate the beauty of God's diverse creation. In doing this, in affirming the erotic in all of us, we will proclaim a true black liberation theology, and in so doing, we will honor God.

Implications for Further Research

In this final chapter, I consider issues that surround the present moral discussion on homosexuality and African American gays in black churches. While many grieving black families remain convinced that they gay male relatives contracted AIDS as God's punishment for their homosexuality, others pray that they gay family member will become heterosexual. Numerous gays remain silent in their black families, living in a silent agony about their life and relationships unknown to their heterosexual family

members. In this landscape, some prophetic heterosexual black church leaders are beginning to lead their congregations in becoming open and affirming houses of worship for gay congregants. It is here that black churches have the greatest potential for being true to their claim as well as being faithful to the gospel message of love, liberation and inclusion.

This implies several questions for further research:

1. What does this new presence of open gay African American lesbian and gay Christians offer the larger black Christian Church?
2. How can mainline black church leaders learn from the ministry of openly gay and lesbian black Christians?
3. How can black church organizations align their doctrine with social justice teachings to transform not just black communities but all communities?
4. What is the historical significance of black church leadership and the Civil Rights movement impact on how policies regarding healthcare and sexual education; particularly in public schools?

EPILOGUE

Homosexuality is in and of itself not pathological; like heterosexuality, it is a complex expression of multiple personal and historical meanings. For me, growing up gay meant being ostracized, shamed, ridiculed and subsequently hidden. Because of these actions by I developed a negative self-esteem. After thirty five years . . . and with the help of a therapist for eight years . . . did I begin to learn how to “manage” my homosexuality and grow into some kind of acceptable me!

Not being a “queer, or a faggot” is still a central, organizing principle in our cultures. It was also the central, defining force in the world of my gay childhood, puberty, adolescence and adulthood. Every young boy, who later identifies himself as gay, begins his life within a reality that speaks, “something is wrong with me.” It has potent implications for the development of his-own sexual identity; and it offers some explanation for today’s seemingly never-ending epidemic of gay youth-suicides.

As a black gay man, I had complete awareness of being “different” from fairly early on in my life . . . well before puberty . . . as early as when I was five-years-of-age. Looking back, I can appreciate and tie this feeling into my currently differentiated and formed gay identity. But, I have, only now, begun to grasp the nature of my childhood experiences. Many more complex processes, within me, were also going on in more subtle, less conscious ways. One such process was the lack of any mirrored responses to my early, emerging, sexual and affectionate expressions. It was my same-sex, erotic

fantasies and dreams, centering solely upon the male form, that initially made me feel so different and reprehensible.

Every genetically-designed gay boy . . . as I was . . . has some dawning awareness of being different, from an early age. To varying degrees, he begins to connect this different-ness with something forbidden, terrible and unthinkable. This may come in a momentary flash or it may be a continual fear; it can be conscious or unconscious. The hatred and hostility, which people around him manifest when using words like faggot, sissy or queer . . . whether directed at him or at others . . . coupled with his own undeveloped, distorted understanding of these terms, is unique. Unlike just being black, the gay child is both alone with his different-ness and is often confused, conflicted and horrified by “it.” Unlike the black child, whose parents are typically also black, the gay child not only doesn’t have gay parents, but also doesn’t even know what “gay” is, except as something dreadful about him, very nebulous and very negative. His “gayness” might remain unobvious to the outside world and he might try to manage it internally alone . . . as I did . . . with varying degrees of consciousness and unconsciousness. Alternatively, it might become obvious to the external world and be met with intense disapproval and ridicule; further increasing his shame and fear. Whatever his development, all of this must be handled alone. Unable to react emotionally or thoughtfully to the traumatic events of his early life, he is forced to keep the presence of his gayness undigested, but still powerfully influential, albeit outside of his consciousness.

In my case, there was no sympathetic person, with whom I could share my feelings; and I had no ability to appreciate the injustice of my situation. The numerous

injuries, overt or covert, that happened to me on a daily basis, were to be suffered by me in silence. That was God's will for me, I thought. Whether I was overtly ridiculed, or whether I covertly endured ridicule and rejection for being different in the way I suspected and feared I might be, or if I tried to prove to myself that I wasn't different, these were all injuries that I was called to suffer alone and in silence. Sometimes, my suffering was conscious, but more often than not it was unconscious. I could never voice my tormenting secret . . . not even to my (trusted) pastor or closest friend. Certainly, as a child, my deadly secret was a secret only unto myself. It remained poorly understood, dimly realized, fearfully avoided, rationalized and reacted against by me. Even my private emotional reactions were often aborted; never could I experience the luxury of tears, rage, blowing off steam or thoughts of revenge. As a black gay male, I never knew whether I could repair my injury or whether I should just accept it. So, I just accepted it . . . with about as much success as any other deformed boy ever accepts his deformity!

I didn't begin to learn, not until I was in my thirties, that I might be able to correct my memory of humiliation by appreciating my own worth. Appreciating my own worth required very complex and highly developed healing-capabilities . . . clearly beyond my capacities as a five-year-old. I had no ability to empathize with myself or appreciate that the world's rejection and ridicule was wrong, unfair and unjust. Hence, I never experienced tears of sympathy or rage, or the joy of maintaining a consistent and reliable sense of my own self-esteem: after all, who could expect a five-year-old to accomplish this, without enormous external support? As a result of my inability to react, these traumatic events then become the cause of a splitting or disassociation between my public

and private personae. They are still deep within me, as unconscious, yet powerfully influential, memory-traces, reactivated much later in my life: I mean, if they are not, why am I still thinking and writing about them, today, at thirty nine-years-of-age?

My sense of being “different” was difficult enough; but, when I sensed intuitively, at a very early age, that it was related to some of the most taboo, frightening and despised images in my culture, as well as in my family and . . . heaven help me . . . in my beloved Black National Baptist Church, then this was all too emotionally overwhelming and confusing for me, the young, black gay boy. Any boy . . . even a boy who feels generally valued and approved of by his family . . . who hears his parents decrying sissies, or faggots, receives in-articulated trauma that becomes internally structured. How much more, then, can a black gay boy, like me, become a suicidal, gay adolescent and disaffected adult, later on in life.

“Coming-out” . . . the process of beginning to identify myself as gay, to slowly accepting myself as gay and disclosing this identity to others . . . was, for me, an enormously complex process that touched and hurt me to the core. Not for me a series of discrete events leading to increasing self-disclosure as gay, leading to reduced isolation and emergent support!

The sophisticated gay adult within a large urban gay community, who is “out” to himself and others, has a very rich developmental history. But still, he has laid down internal structures that do not easily vanish or change, even with the more overt support from his community. And overt support from his family of origin does not always completely make up for early deprivation . . . but, it sure does help.

But, for me, the total opposite of overt support from my family of origin . . . in fact, the heightened discrimination against me by both my father, mother and paternal grandmother and the covert, yet intensely unwelcoming, disapproval from most of my siblings . . . made my desire for acceptance of exactly who I am, from those whom I loved and, therefore, whose approval I sought, a completely futile exercise. This treatment ironically caused me to run to the church for refuge and acceptance; only to find more discrimination and oppression. But FINALLY—an acceptance of myself by myself, a lifelong struggle! I can say this, now, with no resentment, just with acknowledgment of my reality. For me, resentment has always been the most damaging of all the emotions, with which I have any experience.

In other words, I still have much internal work to do: I have found that the emotional segues from a lifetime of discrimination, isolation and humiliation, do not resolve themselves through social interventions, alone. Only now, am I beginning to heal and hope . . . and that healing hope has only really taken hold of me after God's loving and totally accepting intervention into my life, mostly through attending church outside of my cultural tradition and interpreting the Bible differently. For that intervention alone, I shall say daily, for the rest of my life: "Thank you, God!"

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