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The Black Church and Sexuality: It's an Identity Crisis

As Nick entered the church's menacing doors, his hands trembled and his mind was in disarray. His thoughts were a mess of disorganized questions and hopes: "I know everything will be okay," "It's not a big deal," and "I think I'll be fine." As he gathered the courage to speak to his pastor, the doubts he had resurfaced. "This is the Church..." he thought to himself. He finally collapsed and announced his reason for meeting with the pastor. He came out of the closet. The pastor's reaction was delayed slightly, but then he authoritatively responded, "Satan often taints the youth's body and mind with unnatural desires." The pastor then instructed Nick to pray daily and assured Nick that the preceding exchange would remain confidential (Duplechan 150).

The above fictitious narrative, adapted from the African-American writer Larry Dupelchan's novel *Blackbird*, acts as a synecdochical account of the suppression of homosexuality within the black church. The exchange between Nick and his pastor reveals a deep, imbedded discontent with same-sex desire. When Nick reveals to his pastor that he is gay, instead of affirming his sexuality, the pastor rejects his desire as a sinful indulgence. This attitude is clearly inconsistent with the church's origin as a liberating community in which African-Americans have gained their independence and

freedom, as shown when the church provided a sanctuary during the period of slavery and acted as a springboard for the civil rights movement. In order for the black church to relegitimize itself as a liberating institution, it must reclaim that black body as the center of its sexual theology, freeing homosexual African-Americans from the oppression within the church.

Because I lack membership to any of the specific groups I am discussing, authorship and authority were both important issues I had to settle. I am not black or gay and I do not belong to the black church. I used this lack of attachment, however, as a prerogative for concise and well-argued research. Because I had no formal knowledge of any of the issues at hand, I had no presuppositions towards or against the black church as an institution that either liberates or subjugates its homosexual members. Prior to writing and researching this paper, I was familiar with the body of literature commonly referred to as “Queer Theory,” which focuses on gender and sexuality as it relates to society, language, and power. My subsequent interest in this area of study spurred my intention to write a paper examining the relation of social and cultural norms to power and sexuality. Furthermore, living in Los Angeles I was surrounded by gay men and women and, as such, was exposed to civil rights issues (such as same-sex marriage). Lastly, my best friend is both gay and black, and, while not a member of the black church, he deals with prejudice and intolerance on a daily basis, even at a primarily “liberal” university. As such, I became interested in the origin of this discrimination.

This paper will begin by examining the history and origin of the black church within the United States. Charyn D. Sutton defines what the phrase “black church” commonly connotes: “[T]here are many different black churches that serve African-

American communities. Generally the most influential churches in many black communities are Baptist, which are independent institutions affiliated with one or more of the major Baptist associations. However, black Methodists are also quite strong” (Sutton 1). After establishing the purpose of the black church (besides the obvious religious element), I will explore how and why the church strictly regulates sexuality. In turn, I will trace the suppression of homosexual desire within the church and critically examine the discourse and nature of the black church’s stance on sexual expression. Lastly, I will argue that for the church to relegitimize itself as a liberating institution, the church must, among other things, reclaim the black body as its core.

The black church in the United States first formed as a response to American slavery. As Africans were uprooted from their native countries and brought to colonial America for labor, they were disconnected almost completely from their tribal heritage. Stripped from their tribal history, representatives of various tribal groups found meaning in their religious lives, which promised salvation and spiritual security to everyone, regardless of status (McKinney 464). Christianity was the prevailing religion in colonial America, and slave owners willingly promoted it to their new “property,” viewing the religion as a way to numb resistance. However, the slaves often realized that the slave owners did not practice the same religion that they preached. This religious instruction was given as early as 1695, and by 1705, as many as 1000 slaves had been given religious training in the Colony of South Carolina. In other areas, like New York and Pennsylvania, there were communities in which slaves were accepted into Christian churches. By the time the Revolutionary War had come to an end, it was legally established that slaves could be converted to Christianity while still retaining their slave

status. The evangelization of black Christians accelerated throughout this period and continued into the 1800s (McKinney 456).

The black church's influence and power continued to increase until the 1830s, when many black communities were forbidden to hold religious services. This was primarily a result of the insurrection led by preacher Nat Turner in Virginia, which led to suspicions being cast on all black preachers and religious services. Through this "Dark Days" period, though, slaves held secret religious services, which they announced by singing spirituals (McKinney 458). Even when silenced by the authorities, the black church existed as an alternative space and continued to exert a strong influence over the black community. During the civil rights movement, the black church played a predominant role by creating networks of information and ideas.

The churches served as centers where black people could come and organize their efforts during the civil rights movement. Khari Brown and Ronald Brown describe how many southern churches served as movement centers: "Church members were often recruited to participate in voter education efforts and sit-ins, marches, boycotts, and other forms of civil disobedience. In many of these places of worship, informal networks served to strengthen and encourage people who engaged in civil disobedience" (Brown and Brown 620). The black church, therefore, has acted as a foundational institution for black freedom. By creating a network of participation, the black church helped foster and further the goals of the civil rights movement.

Today, the black church continues to hold the allegiance of large numbers of African-Americans and exerts great influence over their behavior. According to data collected from the University of Michigan's National Survey of Black Americans in the

1990s, 84% of African-American adults considered themselves to be religious, 80% considered it very important to send their children to church, 77% reported that the church was still very important, and nearly 70% were members of a church (Billingsley and Caldwell 428). Among the black population within the United States, it is clear that religion plays an important role within the lives of those individuals. Furthermore, the younger generation is heavily influenced by the church based on the statistic that shows 80% of adults considered it important to send their children to church.

The influence of the church is significantly seen when examining the church's view of sexuality. Sexuality has always been an issue that Christianity has addressed. Christian faith is grounded in the Incarnation, the belief that God took on flesh to redeem human beings. God, especially to black Christians, had battled impossible odds, and, as such, black Christians could take solace from a God that had faced the same evils they have faced. The fact that God could have overcome divine abandonment, religious persecution, and ethnic prejudice, "made the difference between black folk living and dying" (Dyson 91). The idea that the body of God is tied to Christian belief, however, constantly comes into conflict when the church has to grapple with the sexuality of its members. Michael Eric Dyson continues, "[The belief in the Incarnation] is constantly trumped by Christianity's quarrels with the body. Its needs. Its desires. Its sheer materiality. But especially its sexual identity" (Dyson 80). Consequently, the black church, while tied to the body, has difficulty addressing the sexual identity of its members.

This conflict can be explained by tracing the nature of the sexual theology of the black church, which formed in part as a result of the "psychological poison" that whites

used to keep blacks under control. Whites during the slavery period viewed black bodies as ugly, disgusting, and bestial. Whites went as far as comparing black bodies to cows and horses (Dyson 84). Dyson further states, “Black sexuality sat at the heart of such judgments. If black bodies were demeaned, black sexuality was demonized. Unless, of course, it was linked to breeding black babies for slavery, or, in the case of black women, satisfying the lust of white men” (Dyson 84). Blacks both relished and resisted the white beliefs about black sexuality. Some sought to prove that they were in fact “sexual outlaws.” Others disciplined their sexual urges in an attempt to erase the stereotypes of black sexuality.

The black church, though, provided a medium through which blacks could both absorb and reject the sexual values of white society. Dyson elaborates, “Black religion freed the black body from its imprisonment in crude, racist stereotypes. The black church combated as best it could the self-hatred and the hatred of other blacks that white supremacy encouraged with evil efficiency. It fought racist oppression by becoming the headquarters of militant social and political action in black communities” (Dyson 85). By standing in strong opposition to its white Christian counterpart, the black church began to practice what the white Christian church had historically taught but ignored in reality: strict sexual boundaries. The black church, then, has historically been important in defining sexual relations among the members of the black community.

This community, however, is exclusive and often prohibits participation from homosexual members. The term “black community” has various meanings, but this context almost always rests on the presumption of the exclusion of gays and lesbians.

Dwight McBride explains how the idea of the black community functions as a floating signifier,

[The phrase ‘black community’] is a term whose meaning shifts in accordance with the context in which it is articulated. But at the same time the phrase is also most often deployed in a manner which presumes a cultural specificity which works as much on a politics of exclusion as it does on a politics of inclusion. [...]
Rarely do any of these visions include lesbians and gay men, except perhaps as an afterthought. (McBride 366)

One explanation for this exclusion is the importance of “manhood” within the church. According to William H. Becker, “Manhood is an important term in the tradition of the independent black church ... and there can be no doubt that the models of black manhood provided by the black church constitute one of its most important contributions, over the years, to the cause of black liberation” (Becker 317). For example, the conference at the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816 was described as “The Convention of the friends of Manhood Christianity” (Becker 317). The black church created an independent hierarchy (between whites and blacks) that allowed blacks to realize their “heaven-created manhood” (Becker 320). The *ideal* African, the African that was a symbol for all Africans, was both a “man” and a “leader.” This African acted as an authoritative figure that could carry God’s words to those who did not already possess it.

Some may see this adoration of “manhood” simply as a step to a greater good, black liberation. However, the creation and worship of “manhood” directly contributes to the current subordination of homosexual desire and expression. This subordination occurs because “man” is defined as having one specific essence with its accompanying

characteristics. This stable subject (the “man”) disallows resistance and change, because any change is viewed as an abnormal reaction, not an acceptable transition. In turn, men (and women) are expected to act in certain ways, never deviating from the “normal.” In *The Trouble With Normal*, Michael Warner explains:

If you are born with male genitalia, the logic goes, you will behave in masculine ways, desire women, desire feminine women, desire them exclusively, have sex in what are thought to be normally active and insertive ways and within officially sanctioned contexts, think of yourself as heterosexual, identify with other heterosexuals, trust in the superiority of heterosexuality, no matter how tolerant you might wish to be, and never change any part of this package from childhood to senescence. (Warner 38-39)

Heterosexuality is that entire package of expectations and as a result, the sequence is fragile. In turn, heterosexuality is protected and reinforced as the norm within society.

Warner elaborates:

People are constantly encouraged to believe that heterosexual desire, dating, marriage, reproduction, childrearing, and home life are not only valuable to themselves, but the bedrock on which every other value in the world rests.

Heterosexual desire and romance are thought to be the very core of humanity. It is the threshold of maturity that separates the men from the boys (even though it is projected onto all boys and girls). (Warner 49)

Consequently, heterosexuality is the standard and any “deviation” (homosexual desire) is considered abnormal. This binary view of sexuality is primarily created and sustained through the discourse used to describe it. Judith Butler explicates,

These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender. (Butler 13)

By using the term “manhood” to describe the hero of black liberation, the black church discursively creates these limits, disallowing any opposition or action.

Within black culture, this suppression is taken to another level, where heteronormativity (the idea that heterosexuality is the rule or standard) is reinforced by the African-American’s response to white supremacy. As described earlier, whites from the colonial period through to the period of slavery described blacks as sexual deviants. Whites then explained that the reason for black oppression was their sexual deviancy. By explaining the oppression this way, whites conflated black identity with sexual deviancy, resulting in what EL Kornegay, Jr. calls the “archetypal Other” (Kornegay, Jr. 33). Kornegay concludes that the result of this otherness is a new “normal” pole that gives black identity value, “Black identity as an 'archetypal Other' has created the powerful phenomenon of black binarisms: black as a *condition* that is too flawed, too abnormal to be normal in and of itself; it must have a culturally prescribed normal pole to give it value” (Kornegay, Jr. 33). This culturally-prescribed pole, as shown above, is the idea of the African-American human as a sexual deviant. To combat the black identity being defined as unusual, another pole is formed that is normal: heterosexuality. This new standard of normality is important because it in turn requires a new “archetypal Other”: homosexuality. Homosexuality is created as “the Other” as a response to *all* black sexuality being viewed as “deviant” by slave-owning whites. In other words, African-

Americans respond to the definition of black identity as sexually unusual by creating a different form of sexual deviance, homosexuality.

This assignment of otherness is seen specifically within the church in several ways. The church typically addresses sexuality (albeit sparingly) within the context of heterosexual expression and the institution of marriage. Although many heterosexual members of the various church congregations engage in out-of-wedlock sex (if not other religiously-aborred sexual practices), the fact that the sex in which these members engage in is still *heterosexual* lessens or removes completely their admonition (Johnson 400-401). Furthermore, the church condemns homosexual expression. Patrick E. Johnson expands, “African-American gays are not afforded the same latitude in terms of expressing their sexuality (or spirituality) as their heterosexual counterparts. Though they might express ‘femininity’ ... African-American gay men are rarely if ever out of the closet” (Johnson 403). The fact that African-American men have a fear of coming out of the closet shows that homosexual expression within the church is viewed as a private matter that need not be addressed.

This oppression becomes further entrenched by heterosexual members of the church, who attempt to hide their own “sins of the flesh” by moving the focus to homosexuality as a sin. African-American gay critics and writers often depict the church as a place in which heterosexual members treat homosexuality as an illness (Johnson 404). This type of exchange can be seen in the introductory story (based on Larry Duplechan’s novel *Blackbird*) where the protagonist comes out to his pastor, who in turn dismisses the character’s confession as temptation by Satan and proceeds to lay his hands

on him. This example demonstrates the way in which church members continue to suppress “alternative” forms of sexuality.

The problem of homosexual oppression forms a cycle to the point that gays and lesbians suppress *themselves* as a result of the cultural and religious norms that surround them. For instance, as described in the preceding paragraphs, most church-attending gay congregation members have not come out of the closet. Like the anti-Semitic Jew or the homophobic gay, this self-hatred secures one’s legitimacy in the church by denouncing the group of which one is a member. Dyson explains the implication on the person: “Homophobic rituals of self-hatred alienate the gay or lesbian believer from his or her body in an ugly version of erotic Cartesianism: splitting the religious mind from the homosexual body as a condition of Christian identity” (Dyson 105). Inevitably, this leads to a cycle in which the oppressed become the oppressors themselves, almost without understanding the true impact and origin of the subjugation.

This cycle of oppression is inconsistent with the maxims of black Christianity. Black Christian spirituality is actually based on themes of deliverance and freedom. The Euro-American notion of freedom is that each individual has free choice or has freedom from the action or beliefs of others. In contrast, black Christians view freedom as an explicitly collective endeavor that allows for both spiritual deliverance into God’s kingdom and the worldly deliverance from the material reality of oppression (Pattillo-McCoy 770). Mary Pattillo-McCoy explains the energetic outcome from the call-and-response style between the preacher and the congregation, which brought together the people as one body, “The result is the ‘dynamic process of communion,’ ultimately rejuvenating a community gripped by psychic and economic depression” (Pattillo-McCoy

770). This element of spirituality and community, though, clearly conflicts with the current status of homosexuals within the church.

To the point where homosexuals are systematically excluded within an institution that promotes freedom and liberation, the legitimacy of that institution is undermined. By attempting to step forward and at the same time leaving one group behind, the black church's fundamental teachings outside of religion, those of equality, community, liberty, and deliverance, are called into question. These problems occur as a result of the continued entrenchment of oppressive norms that restrain sexual expression, in any form, within the church.

The church, however, has the ability to regain its legitimacy as a liberating institution because of its capability to understand human agency, both historically and theoretically. This is seen throughout history in the post-civil-rights and post-black-power-era church, where the growth and mobility of the middle class generated a rediscovery of black tradition. Furthermore, the celebration of Black History and the study of black theology within the academy brought about an enriching renewal and reinvention of the black church as a social and cultural center (Gilkes 109). Lastly, the church has acted in its historical role as "lyceum, conservatory, forum, social service center, political academy and financial institution, has been and is for Black America the mother of our culture, the champion of our freedom, the hallmark of our civilization" (Billingsley and Caldwell 428). The black church, therefore, has historically acted as a base for social change and liberation and as such, can be used as a base for internal change.

In addition to the historical foundation for internal change, the church possesses the normative and theoretical ability to rescript human agency. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes explains the theoretical foundation for the black church's ability to synthesize human agency:

Because churches are the sites for the working and reworking of tradition, they provide a unique opportunity for understanding human agency in the context of changing social forces and structures. The success of the civil rights movement, the new movements and consciousness it produced, the newly expanded middle class, and the changed institutional arrangements serve to make the black church a more complicated and conflicted context for human agency and creative spirituality. (Gilkes 115)

The historical movements that the black church has helped to facilitate, such as the civil rights movement, show that church has the foundation to assist and aid a change in social climate. A rediscovery of human sexuality, both gay and straight, within the church would be in line with this foundational apparatus. Thus, the black church has the ability as a cultural institution, more so than a religious one, to provide a medium through which individuals can change their social surroundings.

The best way that the church can relegitimize itself is by ending its strict conception of sexuality. To do this, the black church ought to first reclaim the black body as a celebration of black culture and worship. Even acknowledging non-essentialist conceptions of the black culture, colorful and creative uses of the body prevail in many African-American communities. These creative uses are seen in many popular and well-known members of the group: Johnny Cochran's purple suit, Dennis Rodman's exotic

hair styles and tattoos, Alicia Key's pop and classical music integration, Michael Jordan's gravity-contesting acrobatics, Janet Jackson's combination of street and jazz dance, and Denzel Washington's authoritative screen presence (Dyson 88). All of these expressions underscore the "improvisational uses of the black body" (Dyson 88). Furthermore, black religion and the black church have provided a sanctuary from past racial oppression, a way for African-Americans to overcome pain and prosper in spite of that pain. Dyson explains this connection to the black body, "The radical identification with Jesus' life and death, which happened, after all, in his body, has permitted black Christians to endure the absurd violence done to their bodies" (Dyson 90). By embracing the sensuality of the black body, the body becomes a metaphor for the passion of the sexual relations as well.

A "theology of eroticism," as Dyson explains, "include[s] protection against the harmful sexual *and* psychic viruses that drain life from our desire" (Dyson 93). By conceiving the black body as the center of the black church, sexuality no longer needs to be regulated; instead of the black sexual theology as a creation in opposition to white Christianity, black religion becomes its own theology, standing on its own, with the black body as its focal point. This "frees" the sexuality of African-Americans within the church by destroying the limits that were originally created and continuously reinforced.

A conception of sexuality as an emancipated practice void of one essence also provides the necessary foundation for a movement within the church to liberate same-sex desire. By viewing sexuality in this new light, the black church can then move towards a "theology of queerness," wherein the lack of sexual regulations, the lack of a "normal," allows for an open discourse on homosexuality. By examining the historical nature of black oppression, where African-Americans as an entire group were viewed "as queer, as

strange, as unnatural, and as evil,” a theology of homoeroticism can develop (Dyson 106). Dyson elucidates,

A theology of queerness uses the raw material of black social alienation to build bridges between gay and lesbian and straight black church members. The deeply entrenched cultural and theological bias against gays and lesbians contradicts the love ethic at the heart of black Christianity. (Dyson 106)

This theology of queerness can specifically be affirmed through an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of same-sex marriage. This is all achievable when viewing the church as an institution that seeks to facilitate an open understanding of human agency.

Because the black church originated as an institution set on helping its members, only by reclaiming the black body as its center and core can the church relegitimize itself in the face of its self-imposed sexual regulations. When examining the church from a historical perspective, its stake in liberation during the period of slavery and the civil rights movement demonstrates its ability to provide a network that facilitates deliverance. As such, the suppression of homosexual desire within the church is inconsistent with the church’s goals and aspirations. By moving towards a “theology of queerness,” homosexuality will no longer be viewed as the “archetypal Other,” and instead the church’s homosexual members will feel comfortable expressing themselves.

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