PIMPS AND SISSIES:
GAY MEN, THE BLACK CHURCH, AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Setting the Stage: The Introduction

To attend a worship service at a Black church is to witness a spectacular event. Every week Black churches across the country execute elaborate and exuberant productions. The size of the stage and performance hall vary from church to church, and some churches have more sophisticated equipment and set design than others, but the spirit of performance is constant across all of them. There is an expected cast of characters, such as the charming cisgender male pastor along with his elegant cisgender female wife and well-mannered children. In addition to their unique roles, all cast members have assigned costumes (i.e. suits for men, modest dresses for women, robes for the choir and/or pastor, hats for the Mothers, white uniforms for ushers) and a script that includes singing, dancing, crying, laughing, and yelling. For several decades, Black folks have flocked to houses of worship to experience and assume their role in the grandiosity of Black worship. However, if one of the characters alters the script in some way, appears on set in the wrong costume, or assumes a role that is not their own, they are typically met with strong opposition.

While the animation of Black church is exciting and enjoyable, it also provides congregants liberation, catharsis, and healing. Historically, the church is where Black folks can be, if but only temporarily, free from the oppression of this world and long for eternal freedom with God in heaven. It is at church where Black people can release the pains and pressure they endured during the week. The standards of appropriate conduct imposed by the dominant, White society do not always apply during Black worship, as men are free to cry and women can allow their bodies to move and swing in
rhythmic motion. Furthermore, many Black preachers adopt a theology of liberation that expressly condemns racism and has a hermeneutic that generally understands God as a just deliverer who cares for and will avenge the oppressed. At church, one is not a “nigger” but a beloved child of God.

The Black church worship experience is all about freedom, however, the approved script of the Black church drama often proves more constraining for women and queer folks. Heterosexual men are the stars of the production, often occupying the leading roles of pastor, clergy, or board member, whereas women and LGBTQ+ persons are supporting actors who assume roles in the choir, the usher board, or the church administrative staff. If the heterosexual man goes off script slightly—say, for instance, he has an extramarital affair—the church is more likely to extend grace than if a woman is caught in adultery or if a steamy scandal breaks out between two parishioners of the same gender. Victor Anderson explicates how, in most cases, the church is encouraged not to allow the man’s “moment of weakness” to upstage his work in ministry. He draws a parallel to the Biblical figure David who committed adultery and attempted to cover up his indiscretion with murder. Anderson explains,

All this seems just fine so long as we are talking about exceptional, heroic male figures within the history of salvation. After all, whatever creeping these biblical figures did, whether their incest and rapes or their adultery and fornications, all are sublimated and taken up into God’s providential plans. Yes, even the sexual indiscretions of men of faith—accompanied by lying, cheating, and manipulation […]—are put to divine uses and purposes.¹

The man’s venture off script is redeemed and treated as (perhaps divine) improvisation, whereas a woman or queer person who deviates from the prescribed order would halt the entire production, and thus, such persons are to be excused from the theater. The latter are not afforded the same grace as their heterosexual male counterparts, and they are dubbed “whores,” “sluts,” “sissies,” or “faggots” as opposed to being considered beloved children of God.

This discourse will briefly explore the reasons why gay black men in particular are not afforded the same grace as straight men in the faith community. It explains how the performance of Black church celebrates and consumes aspects of queerness without ever fully affirming the personhood of gay Black men. It is my contention that the Black church is guilty of exploiting, or “pimping,” the gay men in the community for their many gifts and even for their bodies. Countless gay Black men serve their churches faithfully and feverously, and while the congregation is pleased by their service, they simultaneously discard gay men as dirty demons headed toward destruction and damnation. The only semblance of redemption for the gay man in the Black church is to know his place of servitude. This project will illustrate how the treatment of gays is antithetical to the gospel of liberation preached in Black congregations, and more closely resembles the rhetoric of oppression Whites used to justify oppression against the Black community.

Since there is no single Black church, I deem it necessary to define the term within the context of this paper. I put forth Juan Floyd-Thomas’ understanding of the Black church as a dynamic faith tradition that spans a wide range of experiences. In the
course *Introduction to Black Church Studies*, Floyd-Thomas defines the Black church as having any one of three primary expressions:

“a) independent Black Baptist and Methodist denominations including the Church of God in Christ (COGIC); b) Black congregations and fellowship in predominantly white denominations (Roman Catholic, United Methodist Church, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, Lutheran, etc.); [or,] c) more recently, non-denominational Christian churches that have multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic membership but the ministerial leadership and core culture is African-American in nature.”

Here, the Black church is not necessarily defined by denominational affiliation or worship style, but rather it is marked by the unique shared experiences of its congregants and/or leadership as people of color.

This project uses the language of “pimp” or “pimping” to describe exploitation of gay men’s gifts and sexuality by the Black church. The use of such a controversial and sexually charged term is intentional. The word “pimp” suggests someone of the male gender who exerts power over individuals who embody the feminine. The pimp, however, is permitted to queer gender lines to a certain degree, sometimes with permed hair, flashy garments, or a high-pitched voice. I make this parallel to the Black church, which is controlled by the male gender and exerts its superiority over women and gay men whom it views as embodying effeminate traits. Also, the Black church is permitted to embrace particular elements of queerness it finds enjoyable, while never accepting a queer identity. Just as pimps derive pleasure from either directly engaging with their “employees” or from the revenue they generate, the church gets off on the performance.

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of gay Black men in the church, performances that undoubtedly keep the collection plates full each Sunday.

I also use the term “gay” to refer to cisgender men who are not heterosexual, which would include bisexual and queer men. As an individual who identifies as bisexual, I understand that there are distinctions between the experiences of gay and bisexual men, and I dare not attempt a treatise in bi-erasure. I have chosen to use only the signifier “gay” to accommodate the limitations of the Black Church’s understanding of sexuality. I do not think the Black church would make a distinction between gay and bisexual men, as their views of sexuality most likely correspond with the gay/straight binary. Deriving inspiration from E. Patrick Johnson’s *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South*, I occasionally use the term “sissy” or “church sissy” to both express the pejorative toward gay men, but also to highlight how gay men have subverted the traditional definition and reclaimed the term as an identity to be celebrated. This discourse specifically examines the experiences of gay Black men in Black churches. This is not to discredit the experiences of women, lesbians, trans* people, or other queer folks who also occupy these spaces. I have chosen to focus on this one particular subgroup because I do not feel as qualified to speak to the experiences of women, lesbians, and trans* individuals. Furthermore, I believe it would not be possible to address the issues all LGBTQ+ persons face in Black congregations within the confines of this academic work, nor do I believe such an endeavor would do the community justice.
Casting the Characters: The Role of Gay Men in the Black Church

While the issue of homophobia is certainly not unique to Black churches, the conversation, however, takes on a particular nuance when considered in historical context. Black people living in America have endured centuries of physical, mental, and emotional violence, and much of that abuse has been sexual in nature. It was not uncommon for slave holders to have sexual relations with slaves in order to exert power and instill fear. For example, a White male slave owner would rape female slaves in order to emasculate the Black male slaves by suggesting that they were incapable of protecting their Black female kin. If a Black male slave were to try and intervene, he too might be sexually assaulted.  

Slaves were often treated like cattle or livestock in that they were forced to breed with one another (sometimes with their own relatives) in order to ensure a strong labor force for the plantation owners, and thus denying them the opportunity to establish stable family structures. Additionally, Blacks were considered sexual deviants, with Black men depicted as dangerous rapists of White women and Black women seen as sensual seductresses.

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3 Again, this is not to discredit the trauma female slaves endured, but to uncover another complexity of the sexual abuse of enslaved Africans.


Historically, Black people have sought to expose the hypocrisy of White America that tries to depict Blacks as immoral and unintelligent by affirming that Blacks are fully capable of intellectual excellence, and that it was White people who were cruel and immoral. For example, in response to lynching, bombings, and police brutality, leaders of the Civil Rights Movement called for nonviolent forms of resistance, not only to depict themselves as upstanding citizens, but to draw even more attention to the egregiously violent nature of their opponents. In the same fashion, Blacks sought to subvert the dominant narrative that depicted them as sexual savages by adopting what Kelly Brown Douglas terms a “hyperproper” attitude toward sexuality, or what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham would later call respectability politics. That is, in response to polemics that painted Black people as overly sexual, Blacks embraced staunch conservative views on sexuality. Black people aimed to transform the Christian morals and societal values of White people and create a new form of consciousness rooted in freedom and equality, but unfortunately, they also inherited the poisonous pangs of patriarchy and heterosexism inherent in the religious and moral views of White people.


7 “Respectability politics” refers to the ways in which Black women of the Baptist church living during the era of Jim Crow “equated public behavior with individual self-respect and with the advancement of African Americans as a group. They felt certain that ‘respectable’ behavior in public would earn their people a measure of esteem from white America,” and as a result, implored Black folks (especially women) to observe “temperance, industriousness, thrift, refined manners, and Victorian sexual mores.” Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993) 14.
Although European colonists described their transatlantic journey “as the exodus of a New Israel from bondage in Egypt to the Promised Land of milk and honey,” Black people adopted the biblical Exodus story as the foundation for Black Christianity and liberation theology. But this liberation only applied in terms of race and was not fully extended to women and LGBTQ+ persons, which Rev. Irene Monroe explains is the result of “racial essentialism” and “Black Nationalism.”

Racial essentialism purports that there is a monolithic “black experience,” and therefore it views women, queers, and their sexualities as inauthentic representations of the race. Black Nationalism puts “the race” or “the nation” above individual gender and sexual identities; therefore, it views feminists, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people as counterrevolutionary to the cause of Black liberation for all people. Additionally, Monroe highlights the fact that the Moses figure in the Black liberation exodus account must be male, evidenced in that “the abolitionist movement, the Garvey movement, the civil rights movement, and the Black theology movement...have all showcased male leadership.”

As such, Black churches typically envision male leadership, and there are prescriptions and proscriptions to what masculinity looks like. The majority of Black churches are male-led, with mostly male pastors, deacons, elders, and trustees, despite the fact that women tend to make up about 70 percent of the Black church population.

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10 Ibid., 126.

These men are usually reserved in their demeanor, excepting when they are encouraging another one of their brethren who is praying or preaching, or when they themselves are seized by the Spirit. They are to be visible. The pastor is typically seated in the pulpit, or else he is seated on the first pew next to his wife. There may be a handful of other ministers seated next to the pastor, along with the pastor’s assistant or “armor bearer,”\textsuperscript{12} who is usually male. Deacons often have reserved seating near the front of the church, which allows for easy access to the stage for their portion of the production—namely, the devotional period, the offering, and the altar call.

The idealization of male leadership in the Black Church hinges upon toxic perceptions of masculinity. There is a strong expectation of male leaders to exude “power” and “strength,” and the other men of the church are to model themselves likewise. Churches and religious organizations typically hold men’s conferences that reinforce notions of what it means to be a “real man,” calling for men to “take their place” as the head of their homes, their communities, and the church. Even the titles of these men’s conferences communicate strength, such as Bishop T.D. Jakes’ annual \textit{ManPower} conference. At these conferences men are permitted to express emotion and show affection toward one another, but even still there are caveats. Firstly, this is an all-male space, so they need not worry about appearing weak in front of their female counterparts, as presenting any sign of weakness in the presence of women would be

\textsuperscript{12} Reminiscent of ancient warfare, the armor bearer in the Black Church is one who accompanies the pastor to carry their “armor” (the robe or priestly garments) as well as their “sword” (the Bible). The role of armor bearer requires the highest level of trustworthiness, as this person will be privy to confidential and highly sensitive information. The armor bearer is also charged with being the pastor’s confidant, able to minister to the pastor when they are despondent, and to discern and divert spiritual and physical attacks launched against the pastor.
an affront to their masculinity. Also, these conferences are expressly framed as completely masculine spaces (similar to prefacing a statement or action that could be perceived as less than masculine by saying, “no homo!”), so there is an understanding among participants that they will not be judged for showing emotion. Finally, the expression of affection between the men follows a particular script, that is, it is typically expressed aggressively. For example, consider how Black men usually hug one another. They usually precede with a forceful clasping of hands that emits a loud clap on impact, signaling to any spectators that a masculine phenomenon is about to occur. Subsequently, they draw each other in quickly and with a great deal of strength, and then proceed to strike each other repeatedly on the back with either a fist or open hand, so that in case an onlooker missed the initiation of the embrace, they could recognize the repetitive audible thuds as indication of a purely masculine event. For Black men, even in the church, to be masculine is to be aggressive, even when they are (supposedly) showing affection. In male-only spaces, men are allowed to be slightly vulnerable, because there is an egalitarian relationship and mutual understanding that no one will exert power over another; there is an understanding that “we’re all men here.” But in mixed gender settings, men must assume the position of power (over women and children), and thus cannot allow themselves to possibly be seen as weak.

Gay men problematize the common portrayal of the Black man as strong and powerful. First, there is the stereotype of gay men as feminine (e.g., one who walks with an exaggerated swaying of hips; wears clothing that is usually form-fitting and accessories resembling that of a woman; and speaks with a light, high-pitched voice),
which is deemed antithetical to masculinity (that is, walking with his back straight and taking long strides; wearing a suit that is distinctly designed for men, or in extreme cases, incredibly baggy; and speaking in a deep, booming tone). Additionally, the imagining of gay male sex troubles the common characterization of the man as sexual conqueror of his submissive female mate, as it assumes that at least one of the male participants in homosexual coitus must assume a submissive role—that a man will allow himself to be dominated by another man. This is especially problematic for the Black man for whom, given the history of slavery and physical violence against Black men in this country, his freedom (and ultimately his manhood) is defined by his ability to defend himself from being dominated by anyone. Patriarchy assumes that it is women who desire to be (sexually and otherwise) dominated by men, therefore a man desiring to be sexually subjugated by another man embodies an inherently feminine trait. Consequently, homophobia among (presumably) straight men arises out of a fear that they will be associated with weakness and submissiveness, or a fear that they themselves may somehow be sexually dominated by another man, thus creating a need to separate themselves from gay men.


14 I do not suppose toxic masculinity to be an issue unique to the Black community. Not only would such a claim be extremely reductionist and, frankly, inaccurate, it would also perpetuate the stereotype of Black men as dangerous brutes. Rather this discourse highlights the nuances of Black masculinity, positive and negative, in light of the centuries of abuse and intentional (figurative and literal) emasculation of Black men, and how it relates to the Black Church’s understanding of freedom and manhood.
In this light, the emasculated gay man cannot hold positions of power in the Black Church. Since he does not embody the “strong” man who sexually conquers women, he cannot assume the role of pastor, elder, or deacon. Instead, he is type casted in more feminine roles of hospitality or the arts; that is, he is tolerated on the Usher’s Board, the kitchen staff, the music ministry, or the dance team.\textsuperscript{15} Perhaps gay men assuming roles of servitude as ushers and cooks in the Church is accepted because it is somehow seen as penance for their sinful lifestyle, but even still, neither of these roles constitute the same level of glamour and stardom as the pastor or deacons. The arts, particularly the ministry of music, is unique in that it allows an acceptable venue for gay men to be visible in the overall performance of Black church. Within the bounds of music ministry, gay men (or those who are believed to be gay) are generally permitted to be as flamboyant as they wish, because while they are on stage they are merely playing a role, and as long as they provide a quality performance, the studio audience is likely to be receptive. “Homophobic or not, [Black] church folk will give you your props.”\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{15} Consider the creation of the male chorus or men’s choir, which serves as an alternative to the “regular” choir. In the Black Church, men might be more likely to join a male chorus than another choral group for fear of being associated with the sissies in the other church choirs. I was on the music staff for a congregation that had a regionally-acclaimed male chorus of about 30 voices. At most, only two of these men sang in the church’s mass choir. Some of these men openly expressed their reasoning for shunning the church’s other ensembles, citing their discomfort with the minister of music, music director, and a few of the men in their tenor section whom they presume to be gay. Furthermore, the male chorus sound, generally speaking, tends to be incredibly aggressive, with its participants enacting what would more appropriately be considered synchronized yelling than actual singing.

Ironically enough, several of the men interviewed in Johnson’s *Sweet Tea*, when asked why they believed so many gay men sing in the choir in Black churches, described the singing in the choir as performative and theatrical. For instance, Anthony “First Lady” Hardaway, one of the interviewees in *Sweet Tea*, views the choir as the only feasible outlet for gay men to express themselves in the Black Church:

So I believe that’s one of the reasons why so many of us, it gives us the opportunity to express ourselves in the church a little bit more than if you were in any other auxiliary of the church, if you know what I mean. If you’re an usher, you can’t do a whole lot, you just usher. If you’re a Sunday school teacher, you just teach. If you’re a minister, you still have to be poised and refined. But in that choir stand, I can get away with some stuff. I can see what I need to see. I can do what I need to do. And that’s the truth what I’m saying. So it’s all right to be in the choir because, first of all, this robe allows me to sometimes fantasize about some things. It can be a gown; it can be whatever. I remember doing that. I remember doing—this robe made me, I was able to flow. If I did certain things, maybe I wouldn’t be ostracized, if I twirled a little bit and hit this note, because that was like a Sam Cooke to them, that was like a James Brown movement to them, so they could identify with that, and I can get away with it, because this robe is really going to hide this twist I got. So I believe that’s one of the reasons why the choir has always been the glamour, to a point, of the church, to me.17

I quote Hardaway at length because I believe his response highlights an important point, that of mutual necessity. In those moments of musical performance, the church needs the gay male performer because music is a critical component of the Black worship experience; but the gay male performer also needs that space to express himself in ways that are comfortable, and to be able to do so without judgment. The performer can be whomever his imagination conceives, while the audience can simultaneously perceive the actor in whatever light they wish, allowing all who are present to enjoy themselves without actually having to acknowledge the non-heterosexuality of the performer.

17 Ibid., 216.
However, there is an element of tragedy at play here. Gay Black men operate in roles of service to their congregations to ensure a pleasurable worship experience for all who are present, but are, generally speaking, still not completely affirmed in their churches, if at all. Anderson cites Michael Eric Dyson’s work that calls attention to the incongruity of Black preachers who at times call upon gay members of the church “to play music and sing songs that will set the stage for his [...] delivery and his […] hortatory ejaculations or climax,”18 and then “[a]t the close of the sermon, a soloist, who everybody knows is gay, will rise to perform a moving number, as the preacher extends an invitation to visitors to join the church.” This is illustrative of the Black Church’s continued use of gay men for their many talents while refusing to fully recognize them as children of God, and also points to the hypocrisy of the Black church in its claims to be liberationist and social justice driven while “[refusing] to unlock the oppressive closet for gays.”19

It would be fallacious to suggest that there are no gay or same-gender-loving men who hold positions of leadership in the Black Church.20 In fact, a substantial number of the clergy who pontificate antigay rhetoric secretly have relations with persons of the same gender, as in the case of Bishop Eddie Long who openly

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20 Here, I make the distinction between “gay” and “same-gender-loving” to distinguish between men who would self-identify as gay or bisexual, and those who have sexual relations with other men but still identify as straight (otherwise known as men on the “Down Low” or “DL brothaz”).
condemned homosexuality, yet was later accused of sexually assaulting and having otherwise inappropriate sexual relations with young men in his congregation.21 But in order to maintain their position as pastors, elders, or deacons, gay and same-gender-loving men must adhere to the character descriptions for these roles, that is, they must present themselves as masculine and heterosexual as possible. (Bishop Long would deliver sermons while wearing form-fitting, short-sleeved shirts to accentuate his muscular physique.) Gay church leaders are not afforded the same leeway to be flamboyant as the men in the choir. And while some musicians and singers in the church may be openly gay, it would be virtually impossible for a male pastor, elder, or deacon to be open about his homosexual or bisexual identity.

Reviewing the Script: The Role of the Bible in Discussing Sexuality in the Black Church

As with its White counterparts, the Black Church uses the Bible as its fundamental rationale for the exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from membership or leadership within the church. For centuries, churches have debated over what the scriptures actually say concerning human sexuality and have yet to reach a consensus. Those with more conservative views typically turn to the handful of “clobber

passages” as proof that homosexuality is not only sinful, but especially egregious in the sight of God. This discourse will not endeavor to argue biblical interpretation in support or in condemnation of homosexual relations. Rather, it will examine the ways in which readers of the Bible, particularly those in the Black Church, employ biblical hermeneutics across a variety of social issues, highlighting the Black Church’s inconsistency in its extension of grace to LGBTQ persons.

In order to understand the traditional position of the church that believes homosexuality is, according to the Bible, inherently sinful, one must examine the impact biblical scripture has on the church’s general sexual ethic. New Testament letters, particularly those to the Galatians and Romans, depict a dichotomy of flesh and spirit, placing the two in continual conflict with one another. Reminiscent of Platonic thought, many Christians perceive a dualism between body and spirit, suggesting that in order to attain (and maintain) salvation, one must overcome their flesh, which is believed to be the source of sinful behavior. The Pauline author wrote,

For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not subject to the law. Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.... By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.\textsuperscript{23} (Emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{22} The term “clobber passages” refers to the six or seven biblical excerpts that some suggest condemn homosexual practice. These include: Genesis 1:27 (God created males and females); Genesis 19 (the story of Sodom and Gomorrah); Leviticus 18:22 (it is “an abomination” for men to sleep with men); Deuteronomy 23:17-18 (Israelites are not to participate in prostitute cults); Romans 1:26-27 (Paul’s condemnation of women and men “giving up their natural desire” for the opposite gender); I Corinthians 6:9 & Timothy 1:10 (seem to suggest that homosexual persons will not inherit the kingdom of Heaven).

\textsuperscript{23} Galatians 5:17-21a, 22-23a (New Revised Standard Version)
The aforementioned biblical passage lists a number of fleshly desires, but like most of the other vice lists delineated in the Christian scriptures, the first item on the list refers to sexual activity. This could perhaps denote a certain level of seriousness for sexual transgressions, and could also explain why over time, the terms “lust” and “flesh,” or the combination of these terms (“lusts of the flesh”), have become synonymous with sex.

The body-spirit dualistic view paves the way for individuals and congregations to internalize sexual shame. Karen McClintock’s *Sexual Shame: An Urgent Call to Healing* explains that “[p]eople who feel ashamed sexually split their ‘good’ selves from their ‘bad’ selves,” believing that sexual desire is the ultimate manifestation of fleshly evil, and that one’s sexuality is not intrinsically linked to identity. McClintock’s book offers two key characteristics about sexual shame: firstly, it avoids conversations about sex and sexuality, even (and perhaps especially) in cases of sexual abuse and misconduct; and secondly, many people inherit issues from previous generations that contribute to sexual shame. This creates a vicious and unending cycle of shame. “The more you don’t talk about it, the more the secrets are passed down, producing more unspoken shame.”

African Americans have a unique history of sexual shame as the result of the centuries of abuse against Black bodies. Additionally, the common depiction of Black

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25 Ibid., 311.
people as overly sexual individuals (perhaps slave owners used this to justify sexually assaulting slaves—suggesting “they were asking for it”) continued long after slavery. Black men were depicted as dangerous sexual savages, and a particular threat to white women. Recall the demise of young Emmett Till, who was murdered by the husband and brother of a white woman who claimed Till flirted with her. Black bodies in this country have always been subject to the gaze, use, and abuse of White people. As such, the “hyperproper” sexual ethic Douglas describes was a survival tactic for African Americans.

The history of abuse of Black bodies combined with an overly conservative interpretation of scripture makes sexual shame in the Black church that much more multidimensional. For African Americans, concerns for sexual purity are about reclaiming their identity as individuals and as a people, attempting to define their sexuality in their own terms apart from the ascriptions of White folks. But another unfortunate symptom of sexual shame is, rather than dealing with their own shame, individuals or congregations will place shame on other groups or categories of people. This diversion strategy only causes more damage and further perpetuates cycles of shame. In the Black Church, shame is typically cast toward unwed mothers and non-heterosexual persons; they are publicly condemned for their perceived misdeeds and depicted as having fallen short of being the ideal Christian. However, the Black Church

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is more likely to extend grace to a mother who is unmarried than to a gay person. The woman’s “mistake” is redeemed by the birth of the child and considered to be part of God’s divine purpose. No such redemption is afforded to gay people; their reward is divine judgment—HIV/AIDS, death, and eternal damnation. The shaming of the unwed mother is likely temporary, whereas the shaming of the gay individual extends to perpetuity.

Instead of confronting sexual shame, the church will maintain that its discrimination toward gay people is justified by scripture. However, biblical hermeneutics connotes a choice to interpret scripture in a particular way. For decades, the Black Church has adopted a theology of liberation, that is, it chooses to view scriptures through a lens of freedom and justice. Horace Griffin points out, “[t]here 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 injunctions on slavery.”28 Black Christians seem to find their ability to engage in biblical exegesis in this case, often arguing the translation of the Greek to be “servant” and not “slave,” or insisting that the slavery Paul discusses in his letters starkly contrasts with the chattel slavery of Africans in America. Some, as Griffin indicated, will not even entertain the passages in question that reference slavery and simply write them off as antiquated or irrelevant. Black women who advocate for the full inclusion of women into the life of the Black church will appeal to scriptures such as Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17, which says that God will pour God’s spirit on all flesh, enabling both sons and daughters

with the gift of prophecy. When it comes to the texts that forbid women from speaking (1 Corinthians 14:34), teaching, and holding positions of leadership (1 Timothy 2:12), they will encourage readers to examine the historical context for these prescriptions, concluding that these passages are no longer applicable for today’s context. So, issues of slavery and sexism present instances where can we see the Black church’s willingness to adopt a hermeneutic that sides with liberation and inclusion. However, on the subject of homosexuality, Black churches will claim, “the Bible is clear!” and refuse to offer the same critical engagement with scripture as they may be inclined to do with slavery and the affirmation of women.

Actually, much of the rhetoric used to condemn gay folks closely resembles the rhetoric used to justify slavery. Whites also appealed to the scriptures, arguing that slavery was condoned in the Bible as part of God’s divine and natural order. As such, manumission of African slaves was antithetical to Christian scripture and borderline atheistic.29 Undoubtedly a symptom of sexual shame, miscegenation was deemed especially egregious and “unnatural,” referencing Levitical law which prohibited Hebrews from marrying Canaanites or other non-Jewish peoples. Slave owners and white supremacists would even point to biblical directives against the mixed breeding of animals and plants as proof that interracial sexual relationships were unnatural. In the same token, the Black Church uses the bible as their foundation for condemning homosexual individuals, claiming that same-sex relations subvert God’s intended order

for humankind, that is, for men and women to marry and produce offspring. Some will argue that sex between persons of the same gender is unnatural (using the language of Paul), often asserting that homosexual relations do not occur between other animal species (which is false). Others make more crude arguments, saying that same same-sex relations are unnatural because, simply, “the parts don’t fit together.” It appears the Black Church has internalized the oppression they have endured along with the sexual shame they have carried for centuries, and fallen victim to a cycle of abuse. The oppressed become the oppressor, and the abused becomes an abuser.

In many cases, young gay boys, or even those who exhibit what one might consider homosexual tendencies (e.g., speaking with a high-pitched voice or a lisp, liking dolls and fashion more than trucks, preferring the performing arts over sports), are abused verbally, physically, and/or sexually. If and when they choose (or are forced) to disclose their sexual orientation, many of them are ridiculed, ostracized from their families, or banished from their churches. Even if they maintain church membership, they run the risk of being spiritually abused week after week as they are depicted as immoral deviants in need of deliverance. Using Richard Troiden’s four stage theory of sexual identity development, sociologist Richard Pitt suggests four ways in which gay men reconcile their sexual orientation and religious identity: they may reject their homosexual identity (in which they might attempt to “pray the gay away,” or they might even “accept” the fact that they are gay but still consider their homosexuality to be sinful); they can reject their religious identity (which could include transitioning to another faith tradition, refusing to attend worship services, or becoming
they may compartmentalize their sexual and religious identities (where they may strive to “pass” as heterosexual at church while engaging in same-sex relations outside of church); or they can integrate their sexual and religious identities (realizing the possibility of being both gay and Christian). In any case, they must do the work of deciding how to reconcile sexuality and spirituality, which is no easy task.

Homophobia is damaging not only for gay men, but it adversely affects the entire community. Consider the mother who feels as though she must choose between her remaining steadfast in her faith or loving her gay or bisexual son. Consider the father who feels as though he is a failure because he did not raise a “real man.” Homophobia prevents powerfully anointed gay and bisexual men from being able to minister to their fullest potential, and the body of Christ suffers as a result. No one truly benefits from the oppression of gay men in African American churches. The Black Church has its roots in freedom and justice and is founded upon a theology that bends toward inclusion. Thus, homophobia is incompatible with the Black Church’s theology of liberation, and it stands in opposition to the church’s ontology. The Black Church can—and must—choose to embrace a hermeneutic that moves beyond abuse toward acceptance and affirmation.

Showtime!: Reimagining Masculinity and Affirming Gay Men in the Black Church

The performance of the Black Church is essential to its identity. The theater known as the Black Church is a space where people can be the best version of themselves. The church is where the sinner becomes the beloved of God. For enslaved Africans, the church afforded a space where they could temporarily escape the harsh reality of chattel slavery and see themselves as God’s chosen people. For Blacks living in the era of Jim Crow, the church was a venue in which they could counteract the dominant (White) narrative that considered them subhuman. The pure, raw emotion of the Black Church is a response to centuries of beatings, lynching, rape, name-calling, systematic oppression, and systemic injustice. Folks put on their best clothing for Sunday worship as a reminder of their worth, regardless of what labels society tries to impress upon them. The point of the performance is to bring out the best in a person, not for them to create a false identity.

This discourse reclaims the identity of gay men and church sissies as beloved children of God. Gay men should not be forced to conceal or reject their homosexual or bisexual identity, nor should they be limited to the typecast roles of musician, choir member, usher, or chef. We must challenge toxic masculinity and reimage what it means to be a Black man. There is much talk in the African American community about the need for “strong Black men” or “Black kings” to “rise up and take their place” in the community. A Google image search for the term “strong Black man” (see Figure 1) yields pictures of mostly shirtless men with oiled and defined muscles, very few of whom are smiling. There are also a few paintings of Black men dressed as warriors or as
the “head” of their family, and one such painting depicts a Black man holding what appears to be the world on his shoulders. Just below the search bar, there are suggestions for other similar search terms that include words like warrior, muscle, athletic, gigantic, powerful, and tough. These are the words that have become synonymous with the image of a strong Black man. Black men are conditioned to be aggressive and to never express emotion (notice the image of a Black man crying is the 44th result, and only four of the 46 images show any resemblance of a smile), as this would indicate the antithesis of strength.

But we must expand our definition of strength and our perception of what it means to be a strong Black man. Strength is not indicated by one’s power over others, but rather their exertion of power over themselves. A strong Black man chooses to live into his own destiny, to discover his worth and spend his entire life trying to become the best version of himself. As such, he does not need to exalt himself over another group of people he perceives as inferior (i.e. women and gay men) in order to display his strength, nor does he need to devalue them in order to make himself valuable. Homosexuality and bisexuality are not signs of weakness, but of strength; the church sissies are arguably some of the strongest men in the church. Gay and bisexual men who choose to live fully into their identities exhibit the strength to control their own narrative, to live as they believe God created them to live.

In order to overcome the sexual shame, we must begin to have authentic conversations about sex and sexuality, even within church contexts. I do not propose a complete rejection of moral standards when it comes to sexuality; however, we must
not portray sex as inherently immoral. When done safely and consensually, sex is a beautiful and enjoyable encounter between individuals. Sex is also incredibly powerful. Just as one’s spirituality reflects their most intimate connection with the Divine, one’s sexuality reflects how they connect most deeply with other individuals, suggesting a parallel between the two rather than an opposing dichotomy. Sexuality is more than coitus or genital contact, but it also includes desire and deep emotional connections between individuals. A common objection to homosexuality includes not understanding the mechanics of sexual intercourse between individuals of the same gender. Some say things like I just can’t imagine two guys doing that, or who’s the guy and who’s the girl? Not only are these comments extremely invasive, they are reductionist. Gay men are more than how or with whom they have sex. To begin to overcome sexual shame, we must recognize sexuality as a part of one’s identity and as inextricably linked to one’s spiritual being.

The Black Church must also reexamine its biblical hermeneutics. As Griffin indicates, the Black church has the ability to embrace hermeneutics that include rather than exclude. We cannot continue to discriminate against gay men based on archaic laws to which Christians were never bound, laws that we only conveniently reference when criticizing someone else. The Bible was written in a particular time period for a specific audience with an intended purpose. A different time period and a different audience calls for a different interpretation. The significance of the life of Jesus Christ was that he did not abolish the existing laws, but rather demonstrated a new interpretation of those laws that would prove liberating for more people. Jesus affirmed
the humanity of all and prioritized a person’s wellbeing over prescribed societal norms, and so should the church of today.

What does the Black Church lose by becoming inclusive of gay men? Will the salvation of heterosexual persons become null and void if gays are allowed full fellowship with the body of Christ? Are there a limited number of seats in Heaven, so that if gay folks are allowed entrance, they may take that opportunity away from a deserving heterosexual individual? There is no benefit to homophobia in the Black Church other than to retain a fallacious power structure that allows straight, cisgender men to feel dominant, but actually causes harm to the entire community. Homophobia damages the self-esteem of gay men, destroys families that have queer relatives, and devastates congregations as they wrestle with questions of inclusion for gay men in the church while carrying their own sexual shame. It is possible that churches who move toward inclusion would lose the support and membership of some individuals who believe homosexuality is immoral. But one must weigh the urgency of a disgruntled church member in relation to the spiritual and emotional health of a gay man who is already oppressed and has a predisposition to homelessness and attempted suicide. The church loses nothing in choosing to accept and affirm gay folks, except maybe a few homophobic church members.

There is much at stake. A 2007 study indicates Black LGB people are more likely to attempt suicide, and the rate is even higher for those under the age of 20. This data is striking particularly because there is a lower rate of suicide among Blacks than Whites in general (meaning that Black people in general are not as prone to suicide unless they
are LGB). Furthermore, the study indicates lower rates of depression or other mental disorders among Black LGB persons than their White counterparts. The researchers hypothesize the high suicide rate among Black LGB folks is not caused by widespread depression or mental illness, but instead suppose it is the result of external stressors such as abuse and homelessness.\textsuperscript{31} About 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT.\textsuperscript{32} Blacks are more likely to experience homelessness than other ethnic groups; the risk is greater if they are gay, and more so if they are young (under age 25).\textsuperscript{33} In addition to physical death and alienation, many gay Black men dissolve their relationship with the church and religion because they feel as though they do not have a place in communities of faith, marking, to some degree, spiritual death.

The Black Church is obligated to acknowledge and work to dissolve its complicity in the systems of oppression that force its gay siblings into homelessness or drive them to attempt suicide. It must also abandon homophobic doctrine and hateful rhetoric that drives and keeps away some of the most vulnerable members of our community. The church should be prepared to work as mediators when a family is struggling with their loved one’s disclosure of a homosexual or bisexual orientation, encouraging them to love and affirm their gay relative regardless of theological...


convictions. It should be ready and willing to shelter the young boy who is ejected from his home by parents who refuse to accept their gay son. It is imperative that we advocate for our gay siblings and denounce any acts of violence against them. Furthermore, the Black Church must be willing to not simply tolerate gay men, but to celebrate them. Just as we observe Black History Month and Women’s History Month, we should begin to celebrate Pride Month and Transgender Day of Remembrance. It is fine if a gay man desires to exercise his gifts of music or to serve as an usher or chef, but we must also accept those who do not fit this role. We must be willing to affirm gay men in their roles as minister, deacon, trustee, and pastor.

Liberation is the theological foundation of the Black Church, and it is imperative that the Black Church work toward the full inclusion and liberation for gay parishioners. African American churches around the world, regardless of whether they will admit to such, rely heavily upon the gifts of gay men in order to maintain the excitement and masterful execution of the Black Church production. However, the Black Church’s unofficial “don’t ask don’t tell” policies, along with its willingness to overlook homosexual identity in order to continue soliciting gay men’s services, is antithetical to the theology of liberation it claims, and is utterly immoral. I call for the Black Church to stop pimping gay men and treating them as “sidepieces” (both figuratively and literally), to look at them in the image of God, and to begin affirming gay men in whatever role in which they are divinely cast. Whether they are an usher in the theater, have the leading role of pastor, or are part of the studio audience, gay men and the church sissies are an integral part of the Black Church production. Black Church
worship is to be a liberating experience for all who attend, where everyone, including the gays, can present themselves as beloved children of God.
Appendix

Figure 1
Bibliography


