

Syracuse University

**Race, Religion, and Homosexuality:**  
Black Christians and Spiritual Transformation

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## Introduction

The history of the traditional black church is flooded with rituals and identities that are expected to be upheld by its Christian followers. As significant as it is to understand the relation of sexuality to power, it is also crucial to understand Christianity's role in giving sexuality such authoritative prominence in the criticism of particular peoples. The fact that homosexuality can be considered harmful to Black well-being is inextricably related to the sexual exploitation and denigration of Black people by White culture (*Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, Kelly Brown-Douglas). When Black church people approach human sexuality as a vessel of sin and evil – as they perceive it to be only about genitals and sexual activity and as they refuse to promote frank public discourse concerning sexuality – they betray their enslaved religious heritage in that they have adopted the dominant Western European and Euro-American tradition of spiritualistic dualism and pietism. This theory-based research initiative will connect three ideologies to begin to formulate how queer, black bodies fit into these strict religious spaces. Combining queer theology, womanist theology and black theology, I will strive to address the following questions:

- What does spiritual transformation mean for a queer person in the black religious community?
- What does it mean to be non-hetero in a homophobic environment?
- How is sexuality called to question in a religious setting?
- How can theological methods affect the way queer, religious individuals identify with their faith?

In addition to drawing from the readings of different theologians, I will also create a multi-media exhibition art installation to better illustrate my prescribed findings and to create an environment that reflects the perspective of a queer, black, religious individual. Using photography, art video and audio I aim to create a colorful and dynamic narrative that can address certain implications on the ideologies of the traditional black church. *Up for Air*, 2018.

## Important Terms

**Black theology:** Black theology, or Black liberation theology, refers to a theological perspective which originated among African American seminarians and scholars, and in some black churches in the United States and later in other parts of the world

**Womanist theology:** a religious conceptual framework which reconsiders and revises the traditions, practices, scriptures, and biblical interpretation with a special lens to empower and liberate African-American women in America

**Queer theology:** theology that purposefully opposes social and cultural norms regarding gender and sexuality. It seeks to unearth hidden voices or hidden perspectives that allows theology to be seen in a new light

**Spiritual transformation:** “change or renewal from a life that no longer conforms to the ways of the world to one that pleases God” (*Romans 12:2*)

## Background

There are three values that I focused on that are enforced in the Black Church. These values are important to consider because they are held as a standard and custom for congregations to abide by (The Gospel Coalition). The first being **reverence for God**; which places high value on the holiness and transcendence of God as a spiritual entity and superior. Rituals such as communion and baptism are executed in a manner that exudes supreme order and meticulous implementation. Children are discouraged from being on the pulpit, playing in church or touching any sacred materials in the church. Reverence for God is also seen in dressing accordingly to one's gender. We must keep in mind that within this space there are only two genders; male and female. It is discouraged for females to wear pants and ties and males are expected to dress in such attire. Any manipulation of this order is usually greeted by unacceptance or disapproval from "seasoned saints". Seasoned saints are those who have been invested in the church for longer than most and are usually the eldest in the congregation. These individuals are held towards the top of the church hierarchy and are often times called upon by the pastor to pray in certain situations.

The second value is **trusting God through pain**. This is by far one of the most instilled values of the Black Church. Beneath this understanding; it is seen as "healthy" to expect suffering and members are insisted to follow God without even considering reason. There is a stigma that we live in a fallen and fractured world and the greater days for Christians are ahead; so questioning negative outcomes is seen as defiance of God. This value is significant because the members of the Black Church were living for another world (Heaven) so they are prepared to remain hopeful in instances of severe suffering. "The African-American church is a miracle. My people clung to the same God my people were taught had made them less than human. The black church was birthed from a place of marginalization and hardship. From its foundations it has known dark times, but it

has also been given the privilege of experiencing God as strength and shield,” (*3 Things I Learned Growing up in the Black Church*, Shar Walker).

Lastly, the **importance of community** is highly valued. Church attendance, participation in church-related activities and adopting a family outside of your own is seen as a necessary factor in the validation of one’s spiritual and religious life. It is understood that God provides for God’s people *through* God’s people. The idea of a collective consciousness is uplifted. Saints open their homes to others in times of need, they attend the funerals of other families in the church and ultimately mourn together. It is God’s intention that God’s people need one another. One cannot walk in faith alone, but must walk with one another.

These three enforcing values will be addressed by the three ideologies aforementioned in an attempt to demonstrate the discrepancy a queer, religious body may face in comparison to their non-queer counterpart.

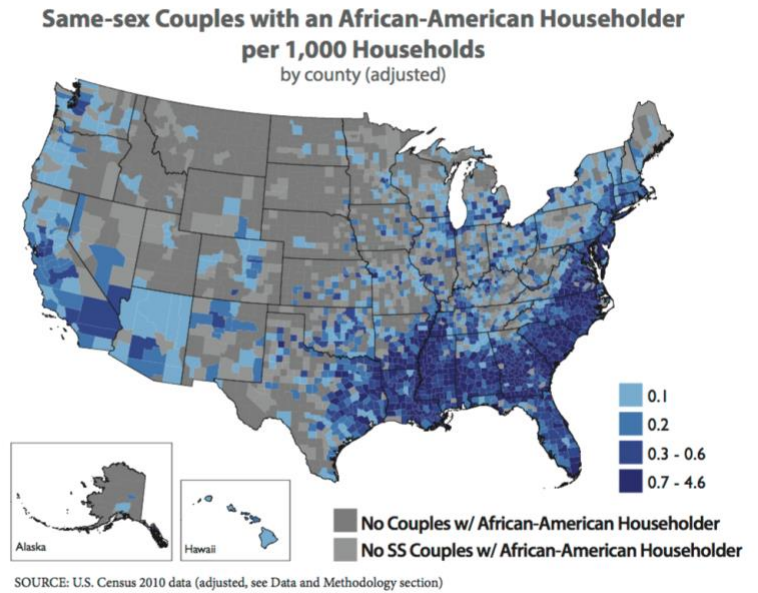
## Background

Queer black bodies make up a decent percent of black communities across the United States and are also represented in the religious community. According to a 2010 U.S. Census study; there are an estimated 1,018,700 LGBT African-American adults in the United States. Among this number, there are 84,000 African-American individuals in Same-sex couples in the country. The most startling statistic within this

data is that only 3.7% of African-American adults actually identify as LGBT. The incongruity in numbers implies that African-American bodies are more often “closeted” or do not openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (Figure A).

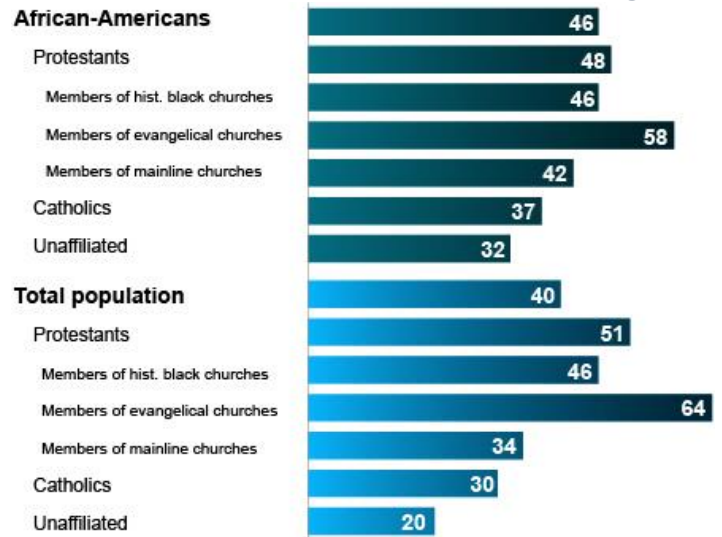
In another study, we will look closely at the strong opposition to homosexuality in African-American religious institutions (Figure B). Queer black lives make up a decent part of black religious communities but often times individuals who fall into this margin are either 1. not accepted or 2, not comfortable with their sexuality; making their religious experience different. Baptism for instance can hold a different significance for a queer black individual. A queer churchgoer may believe that baptism will further validate their religiosity and “renew” their soul and sexual preferences alike.

Figure A



## Opposition to Homosexuality

Figure A



Source: Pew Forum U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2007, released in 2008. Question wording: Now I'm going to read you a few pairs of statements. For each pair, tell me whether the FIRST statement or the SECOND statement comes closer to your own views, even if neither is exactly right. 1 - Homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society OR 2 - Homosexuality is a way of life that should be discouraged by society.

## Homosexuality as a Threat

Although there are many identities that fall into the LGBT spectrum, we will look closely at lesbianism and homosexuality amongst men and how they are deemed threats in the religious black tradition.

### **The Lesbian Threat**

In a society that grants privilege to white heterosexual males, black lesbians suffer under a tremendous burden within the society at large as well as in the black community. Barbara Smith opines that she thinks the reason black women are so homophobic deals with an attraction-repulsion complex: meaning they speak out against lesbianism because if they don't they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women. "By being sexually independent of men, lesbians, by their very existence, call into question society's definition of woman at its deepest levels," (Barbara Christian). Lesbians are often thought of as a betrayal of manhood by simple virtue of who they are.

### **Homosexuality: A Threat to Black Manhood**

Black homophobic arguments stress the importance of a male-dominated family model that is reflective of patriarchal/sexist norms. Manhood in the Black community is inextricably related to physical strength, independence, and dominance. This argument which is an indirect accusation against the Black Woman, is based on the false assumption that male homosexuality is equated with effeminate behavior. In the minds of black thinkers, homosexuality indicates a defect in the development of black masculinity and is an invasion of manhood.



## Recognizing Spiritual Transformation

There are 8 signs of an inner reality that happen in spiritual transformations within the Christian Faith.

1. Bible Engagement
2. Obeying God and Denying Self
3. Seeking God
4. Building Relationships
5. Serving God and Others
6. Sharing Christ
7. Exercising Faith
8. Being Unashamed

The two that stand as possible interruptions for queer people are “obeying God and denying self” and “being unashamed”. Spiritual transformation is a fundamental change in a person's sacred or spiritual life. For some religious people, they believe undergoing spiritual transformation will unleash God’s power to gradually change them to become more like Jesus. Transformation is not about rising above or transcending, it’s about moving through what is and a lot of what isn’t pleasant. In fact, it’s very difficult. It’s painful, and one can understand why so many avoid it in the first place (What is Spiritual Transformation?, Natasha Dern). This stage of the journey requires a leap of faith into uncharted territory — getting acquainted with the parts of you that you have forgotten, ignored or rejected. Since many around us are out of touch with their own depths and have never experienced the qualities of this Self, they can’t in any shape or form mirror that Self back to us. When a certain essential quality is not seen in us or as us, we tend to lose contact with it and are not even aware that it exists.

Queer individuals face the issue of feeling like their religious and spiritual lives are invalid because their sexuality conflicts with Christian ideals. LGBT People continue to go to congregations where they are spiritually fed and yet psychologically abused. Many sermons preach about the

immorality of homosexuality; and same sex activities are considered a more discriminatory offense than other sins. This leaves room for psychological dismay to obstruct the spiritual conscious of those who are marginalized. The question that many of these individuals face is, "If I am LGBT and black, which comes first?"

## Methodology

In order to answer the question: “What does spiritual transformation mean for a queer person in the black religious community?” I have formulated an approach using many ideas. First, I will closely look into the three theologies which all offer valid perspectives and opinions on LGBT and black peoples. Next, I will consider the values of Black Church, expansion of spiritual transformation and the representation of individual voices. And finally I will engage in a translation of these ideas formed into visual imagery. Together, I will use these research methods to illuminate what the spiritual transformation in the lives of queer, black lives appear as.

### Womanist Theology

*Spirituality and the Black Church*

Kelly Brown Douglas

The philosophies that governed the black church’s tradition in terms of sexuality were also intrinsically misogynistic and have reflected a patriarchal dualism. Patriarchal dualism is the idea that women are consistently associated with the body, passion and the irrational while men have been associated with the soul, reason and rationality. There is a strong implication that one cannot stand alone and not with the same sex in order to maintain a “balanced” spiritual and physical relationship – according to Christianity. In this sense, spiritualistic dualism is inherently sexist. The image represented (*Tied*) was made intentionally to break the stereotype of gendered attire. It directly confronts the value of reverence for God by placing a female figure in non-traditional and “male” clothing outside of a church.



*Tied, 2017*

## Black Theology

*Creative Exchange*

Victor Anderson

Manifesting the Beloved Community requires families and particularly the Black Church to “enlarge the personal wholeness of its members” (169) by becoming centers of creative exchange and truly attending to the basic human desire for fulfillment. Victor proposes that if the idea of “all-encompassing love” is actually embraced, the truth could set free



*Lean*, 2018

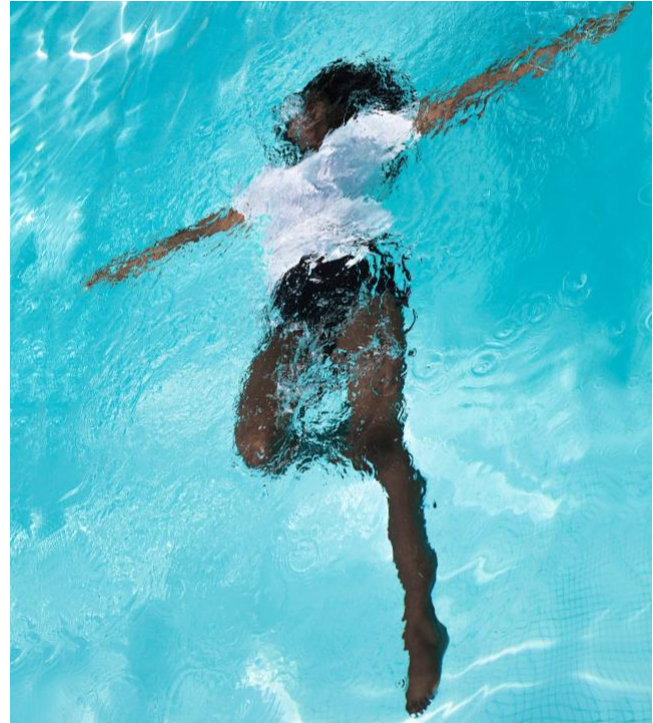
practical theologians and the clerical elites of the Black Church (as well as their students and congregants) from their dehumanizing and simultaneously self-aggrandizing and self-degrading, patriarchy and homophobia. He demonstrates a transparency and responsiveness that are greatly lacking in the Black Church and among African-American practical theologians, particularly with respect to the realities of women clergy and gays and lesbians. *Lean* is an image that represents the importance of sensibilities amongst men and how it does not imply “homosexuality” or a “fractured masculinity”.

## Queer Theology

### *The Erotic as Power*

Audre Lorde

Lorde surfaces the idea of the erotic frequently throughout the text in an attempt to address the inspiring sense of fulfillment, pleasure and completion, that can infiltrate every area of life, including the bedroom, allowing one to live a life of wholeness and profound satisfaction. The erotic is defined as a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply



female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling. “Lesbianism is a so called deviant sexuality, so the way most black women deal with it is to be just as rigid and closed about it as possible,” Barbara Smith. The Erotic is a soulful way of loving, engaging, reclaiming, honoring, embracing and living life and she discusses that the cost of the detachment of the erotic as a source of power and the effect its loss has on women’s existence. *Born Again* is an abstract image that plays on the idea of baptism from the perspective of a LGBT person. It forms the questions; am I being born again? Am I drowning? Or am I stuck beneath the surface? Does this ritual constitute as a type spiritual transformation or is it simply a motion that holds an unknown significance?

*Born Again*. 2017

## **Recognizing Spiritual Transformation**

*Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism*

Roger A. Sneed

This text explores implications of representing homosexuals as victims, problems, or plague and the ways that this interconnects with recent discourse on bullying and suicide among black youth. It also suggests a reframing of the religious discourse around the varieties of religious experiences described in Black gay literature. It does this in order to rethink the centrality of the Black church and to focus more on the sacramental nature of the everyday lives of Black gay men and the unresolved ambiguities which are present in all of life.

*Up for Air*



*Mary, 2017*



*Beyond the Alter, 2018*



*Untitled, 2017*



*Untitled, 2017*

### Discussion Points

- LGBT People continue to go to congregations where they are spiritually fed and yet psychologically abused
- LGBT People battle with whether or not their spirituality is valid according to the ideals and values of the Black Church
- Spiritual transformations for LGBT People are not parallel to their heterosexual counterparts
- The dismantling of homophobic and patriarchal views will help solve the problem of accepting all members of faith despite their sexuality



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