

***Inner Dictum: A Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm*<sup>1</sup>**  
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If there has been any African American woman who has suffered the challenges of understanding and accepting one's sexual identity in a world where heterosexuality defines normalcy, it was Pauli Murray.

Murray's papers and photos stored within the Schlesinger Library archives at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University, chronicle not only the important role she took advancing the cause for women's justice against what she termed as "Jane Crow"; they also give insight into her troubled story of living in a body she believed was not heterosexual or homosexual but *intersexed*. Writes Rosalind Rosenberg, Professor of Women's History at Barnard College, regarding Murray,

*"Ashamed to be thought a lesbian, she reasoned that her attraction to 'very feminine and heterosexual women' was an indication that she was biologically male. To be classified as a Negro, a woman, and a homosexual was to be triply despised in American culture. But it also gave her an unusually broad sense of the arbitrariness of classification and the psychological burdens of discrimination."*<sup>2</sup>

Racial pride motivated Murray to great accomplishments: becoming the first African American woman to receive a law doctorate from Yale, working to dismantle Jim Crow laws, one of the founding members of the National Organization for Women and becoming the first ordained African American female Episcopal priest. It is disconcerting to think that one who bore such pride might have to ponder her sexuality as shameful and despised by the very culture she worked so hard to protect and uplift.

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<sup>1</sup> This presentation is an edited excerpt from a larger project which I hope to have published at some future point.

<sup>2</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, "The Conjunction of Race and Gender," in *Indiana University Press*, vol.14 No.2 (Summer 2002), 68-73.

Murray's story rings true in the lives of many African American QLGBT folk. Considering Murray's challenges and my own experiences as a queer, ordained clergy and scholar, and even the most recent comment of African American comedian Wanda Sykes, that is, that it is "easier being black than being gay,"<sup>3</sup> I have wondered, "When can anyone queer 'come out' in the African American community and find the sense of communal support similar to our historic resistance to oppression?"

These are the guiding concerns, which I use to explore what it means to be queer specifically though not exclusively in the Black Church and Community. First, using the metaphor of "coming out" I articulate why queer theology and specifically why queering Womanist Theology is a helpful discourse to mark a break with the heterosexual privileging so deeply embedded within American culture and concomitantly the Black community. By doing so, I am declaring a Queer Womanist departure from Anglo-American queer studies and instead rooting my analysis within the context of the African American community (and – generally speaking – Christian African Americans). Secondly, I counter the prevailing demonization of the dissident movement of "out" African American queer and LGBT persons by doing an insider's ecclesiological critique of hegemonic Black religiosity. I am interested in the individual struggle of being a *divided house* – loving the church but hating the homophobic teaching – that often happens not only in the Black church but also the Black community. Lastly, I will offer what "woman love" – to use a term by Alice Walker – can do, for African American women as well as other oppressed groups.

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<sup>3</sup> During televised interview with Joy Behar on *The Joy Behar Show* HLN, 10/29/2009.

Advocates of queer theology and theory, challenge the prevailing assumptions of gender and sexual identity. During this new era of gender politics, persons such as post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler critique normative discourse on gender and reasons that gender is not naturalized but is “a kind of a doing,” wherein “one is always ‘doing’ with or for another.”<sup>4</sup> Though queer theorists, such as Butler, do not “oppose all gender assignments or cast doubt on the desire of those who wish such assignments...”<sup>5</sup> the crucial concern for the movement is protesting those “norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate the conditions” that allow persons “to breath, to desire, to love and to live.”<sup>6</sup>

Underscoring the complexity of articulating a precise/universal definition for gender, the contemporary usage of the term “queer” is problematic to quite a few persons not only because of its former usage but also its ambiguous quality with regards to naming gender. To say that one is “queer” is often unacceptable for persons who seek definitive demarcations of sexuality on the basis of perceived demonstrations of gender performance (such as femininity and masculinity). As a consequence to my own self-identification as queer, there is an utter inability of some and resistance of other members of the Black community to comprehend this linguistic approach to articulating my sexual identity I can almost hear the pseudo-mythical Cousin Pookie’s response: “Wha’ da hell you mean ‘queer’? Shiiit dat muthafucka jus’ funny!”

Yet in most recent days, the story of the fastest 800-meter runner in the world, South African, Caster Semenya has not only demonstrated the limitations of *norming* sex and gender but Semenya’s story gives credence to the theory that concluding whether the

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. (NY: Routledge, 2004), p.199.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 8.

Other is “female” or “woman”, according to Butler, is really a matter of interpreting those significations that the individual may or may not perform.<sup>7</sup>

Winning gold, pictures of Semenya with perfectly sculptured body especially six pack abs crossing the finish line pounding her fist on her chest, flexing her biceps, the subsequent make-over pictures of her gaily smiling while wearing a dress and the invasion of Semenya’s medical privacy to “determine” her true sex were not events neatly tied under the subject of gender but included race, economics and politics as well. Experts interviewed on national television insisted that proving Semenya’s gender would be a complex matter. But complex for who?

Rather than be subject to passively living within these frail and faulty notions of binary genders and sex, queers are now *rejecting rejection* and the pejorative connotation to which queer has been historically associated. Specifically, this means not seeing ourselves through the veil of societal expectation and constructions of what presents as “normal” but instead seeing ourselves as part of the creative work that God called “good.”

This is particularly important in the lives of queer African American women. For – and here’s a distinction from white queer feminists - we are gender nonconformists who protest the injustice not of tripartite but quadripartite oppression. We share a historic struggle against racism with all African Americans yet are frequently told that for the good of the race we need to get over homophobia and “go some where, sit down and be quiet.” Failing to see the intersectionality of systems of oppression<sup>8</sup> - as Patricia Hill Collins’ work has helped identify - proponents of this incredulous strategy refuse to hear

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<sup>7</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.192.

<sup>8</sup> Argument of Patricia Hill Collins.

matters related to QLGBT rights, declaring, “Black folk have bigger issues than that!” Ironically, this ranking of “issues” undermines the ultimate and long fought for goals of justice and equality which African Americans have so longed for.

There is a nexus between the oppressions called racism, sexism and homophobia and “queer” hasn’t really began to be “funny” until we look at the multilayered dramedy taking place in the lives of queer African American women.

A symbolic embodying of the melancholic DuBoisian refrain, “Why did God make me an outcast in mine own house?”<sup>9</sup> the queer Black woman *survives* despite the destructive resolve of those supposedly on her side demanding that she “straighten up and act, think, do and screw right!” I have come to the point of not calling this homophobia but *bhomophobia*<sup>10</sup>.

Bhomophobia – or black homophobia - is a more malignant strand of homophobia in that its H1N1-like symptoms include 1) the irrational *fevered* sense that fellow African Americans who self-identify as nonheterosexual are race traitors who put the preservation of the entire race in jeopardy by colluding with white queers, a subgroup of our mortal enemy 2) a *chilling* sense that white queers are less than trailer trash and the sort that not even “good white folk” would associate with 3) a non-productive hacking which presents a deceiving self-diagnosis that at least heterosexual African Americans are better than African American queers and 4) a *rapid onset* of being stuffed full of diarrhetic *boo-boo* from the family values lobbyist whenever marriage rights are mention but feeling *malnourished* on matters such as affordable housing, gun control and healthcare reform.

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<sup>9</sup> W.E.B.DuBois, *Souls of Black Folk*.

<sup>10</sup> *Bhomophobia* is the term I coin to identify and articulate the distinct aspects of homophobia within African American culture. Although I generally treat it as a psychosis characterizing it metaphorically with H1N1 flu adds artistic depth to the presentation.

Take for instance these remarks made by an African American during the 2004 presidential campaign:

“If the KKK opposes gay marriage I would ride with them,” said the Rev. Gregory Daniels of Chicago.<sup>11</sup>

Nowhere is the presence of bhomophobia so infectious than in the Black Church. Here the attack is so insidious as to have made Black clergy like Daniels blind to the time, talent, gifts and prayers of the many nonheterosexual folk, especially queer and lesbian women, who have helped build the Black Church and - from an ecclesiological perspective – are needed to help it progressively become the Church God created it to be. I like how my colleague, pastoral theology professor James Poling describes such a church as the “community of bodies and spirits with the following marks: inclusive love, loving justice, nonviolent resistance to evil, multiplicity and unity, ambiguity and goodness.”<sup>12</sup>

Though the Black Church and its leaders set a powerful example of loving justice and nonviolence during the civil rights era, it is most disconcerting that the very church that had been so involved in the struggle for justice and equal rights has now gone into the proverbial “closet” in recent years and is now *passing* as a right wing fundamentalist evangelical Church aligned with the same roots of oppression that the early independent Black Church and churches of the civil rights movement fought to overcome. Will the Black Church allow its true marks as a prophetic instrument of social justice guide it or the histrionic fits of some miscreant bully-pulpit Black preachers who while slinging spit

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<sup>11</sup> NY Times article, *Both Sides Court Black Churches in the Debate Over Gay Marriage*, by Lynette Clemetson, 3/1/2004.

<sup>12</sup> **Here I am most thankful to be able to quote the work of my colleague James Poling with whom I am co-teaching a pastoral theology class this semester called *Evil and Aggression*.**

and foaming at the mouth go well beyond rebuke to abuse! Are we willing to accept using the bible in such destructive ways that we ignore as biblical scholar, Dr. Randall Bailey puts it, “the far more numerous commands to pursue justice and mercy for all, especially the oppressed”?<sup>13</sup> At this moment in time, we Black Christian queer folk ask: “What shall the Black Church be if it gains the whole right white world and loses its soul?”

Will an idolatry of both Western Christian theology and the American white populous make the Black Church become as nothing more than a mass group of *closeted Christians*? I for one have grown lachrymose watching the Black Church take its cue from more than a few “angry white men” and women who are uncomfortable and frightened by change because it threatens their self-perception as being the chosen – translated *privileged* – body of “believers”.

I offer that until the Black Church “comes out” and really loves its blackness – that spiritual DNA commitment to the liberation of all oppressed - it cannot love God, itself, nor its many diverse members as it ought. Its bhomophobia will only be exorcised when it has a healthy love of self versus the narcissism it has presently succumb to in its fear of the ambiguity of life. For “perfect love casteth out all fear” including bhomophobia.

I hope to begin to stir a public discussion not about the normalcy or passion of queer sex nor whether or not same gender loving sex is the *crème de la crème* – no pun intended - of all sexual encounters. Rather, I celebrate the Womanist space and the theological frameworks to develop our fully “out” voice and to explore the full

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<sup>13</sup> Dr. Randall Bailey, *Sanctified Hatred: Why Amending the Constitution to Ban Same-Sex Marriage Is Wrong*, June 5, 2006. Center for American Progress, Internet accessed, <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2006/06/b1731447.html>

implications of “women who love other women sexually and nonsexually.” It seems to me that Black queer women can provide a healing witness to the world; loving yourself and rightly loving those who despitely abuse you. Let we who are Womanist not be separatists or exceptionalists. Let us be black, beautifully black; interlocutors capable of bringing all the colors to the reconciling table of God.

Finally, it is an all too easy technique to solely blame the Black Church and community for the woes of the African American QLGBT community when the real elephant in the room has to do with how the act of nonheterosexual sex is perceived by the general public and how African American sex has been historically perceived by white America. Visions of ass-splitting, cunt eating, and pussy bumping erotic sex has dominated the conversation and helped sell more than a few African American lesbigay publications. Visualizing what is considered taboo only has value if it helps us get at the heart of any loving relationship: the freedom to just be your *for real tho'* self.

What might it feel like to love another woman who not only loves God and themselves but loves you with all your imperfections? Loves you with your thickness, your roundness, your big breast, your flat chest, your lopsided one breast bigger than the other breast self. Loves you with your nappy hair, your straight hair, your bald self. Loves you when you actin' all stank, or stanking all up the place. Loves you when you got it all together or got it all wrong. When your money is funny and your credit is sad. Loves you...beautiful you. Blacker than blue you. Finer than wine you. Junk in your trunk you. But most of all, knows how to *do* you. To make it do what it do for you. To do it and not be told how to get to it, for you. For real tho' – understands your period, your visitor, your you on the rag and in the red, and your swoll' up, back jacked up self.

Really knows all your secrets..... that's a little somethin' of what a woman can do for another woman. And if that ain't lovin' you, "grits ain't grocery, eggs ain't poultry and Mona Lisa was a man!" Well, on second thought... maybe she was.