

Queer theories african american homosexual

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Trapped: The Dilemma of the African American Homosexual Colin Chastain

April 1, 2013 Dr. Wayne Brekhus Sociology 3300: Queer Theories Introduction

When someone hears the word “ gay” or “ queer”, they most often think of the middle class, Caucasian gay male. For my research proposal, I plan on studying what is very often overlooked in queer identity: the struggle of queer identity in the African American gay male. I am interested in studying this because I grew up knowing I was gay in a small, middle class town in rural America.

I wish to argue how gay African Americans are restricted by Black stereotypes, gay stereotypes, acceptance with stipulations in the gay community and black community, racism in the gay community, homophobia in the Black community, perceptions of blackness and masculinity attitudes toward homosexuality and their effect on gay Black men living openly, homosexuality and religion (the black church), and media perceptions of Black homosexuality. The majority of the black community stated they wished to live restriction free lives. They are not able to fully be themselves in their daily lives and often have to assimilate to be accepted.

While much research has been conducted on white gay males, there is very little study on African Americans who identify with the queer identity. African Americans already have to struggle with the racism and stereotypes of being “ black” as an extremely masculinized and heterosexual environment while struggling with the internal conflict of being gay, which makes their experience unique. “ Because African? Americans have already encountered a very traumatic experience with oppression, one could safely assume that

African? Americans would be more sensitive to socially oppressive practices such as being gay so most decide to conceal it.

Sadly, African? American homosexual males are largely viewed by Black heterosexuals as: not really Black, deviant, a disgrace, an embarrassment and, worse yet, an agent of genocide aimed against their own race” (Alexander, 2004: 76, 78). Racism within the Gay Community It is sad to see that racism is still prevalent even within the gay community; a community that is oppressed almost as much as African Americans. The relationship between the gay community and Black community has been one of association and disassociation. The gay community throughout history has likened their struggle to that of Blacks in America.

The Black community has had little interaction with the gay community and has attempted to distance itself from being compared to the gay community. Keith Boykin, author of *One More River to Cross*, often speaks to the dissensions between the Gay community and the Black community. He analyzes both the gay community and Black community’s relationship to each other and gay Black men. Boykin states, “ The dirty little secret about the homosexual population is that white gay people are just as racist as white straight people” (Boykin, 1996: 234). To be “ gay” has taken on a white face as well as white experiences” (Boykin, 1996: 235).

Homophobia within the Black Community One thing I never realized is how many African Americans feel they have to choose between “ being Black” or “ being gay” based on homophobic pressures within the Black community. In her book, *The Truth that Never Hurts*, Smith dedicates a chapter specifically to this issue. . Smith states, “ The underlying assumption is that I should

prioritize one of my identities because one of them is actually more important than the rest or that I must arbitrarily choose one of them over the others for the sake of acceptance in one particular community” (Smith, 1998; 125-132).

This is an issue gay Black men face as they have “loyalties” to each of their respective communities. Smith acknowledges the double consciousness that many gay Black men face in choosing between the gay community and the Black community. In my experience, being a Caucasian gay male, I never had to go through this since being gay, like Boykin states, has taken on a white face as the most researched and highlighted community of gay men. Gay Black Men and Issues of Masculinity and Homosexuality Afrocentricity: a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominant.

In terms of action and behavior, it is a devotion to the idea that what is in the best interest of African consciousness is at the heart of ethical behavior (Asante, 1998; 2). It seeks to highlight the idea that to be black is to be against all forms of oppression, racism, classism, homophobia, patriarchy, child abuse, pedophilia, and white racial domination. According to Asante, one cannot be afrocentric and gay. With this being said, afrocentrism recognizes homophobia’s existence, but cannot condone homosexuality to be accepted as good to further the national development of a strong people.

This is what most Black men struggle with yet again. To choose to embrace their black heritage and furthering an oppressed race over embracing their sexuality. It’s almost as if Black men are “trapped” between conflicting interests of different communities. Perceptions of Homosexuality leading to

Risky, Dangerous, and Rash Behaviors Studies have also been conducted which look at the Black gay community and riskier sexual behavior leading to AIDS. Previous research has shown a link between riskier sexual behavior and beliefs regarding homosexuality in the Black community (Peterson, 1992).

This link this creates an added barrier for Black gays when compared to white gays. Previous research has also shown that gay Blacks do not seek refuge primarily within the LGBT community and tend to be less involved than gay whites (Stokes, 1996). In fact, as Lewis points out in his study, gay Blacks experience racism in interactions with white gays (Battle, 2002). Attitudinal differences are important to understand as we attempt to uncover those obstacles gay Black men view as restricting their life chances. Self-destructive behaviors directly related to a negative self-concept are also the result of internalizing heterosexual ideology. High incidence of substance abuse, increasing rates of suicide, and risky sexual behaviors are the most common self-destructive behaviors exhibited by homosexuals. This is even more prevalent among Black gay men because the way they perceive themselves correlates to W. E. B. DuBois double consciousness. Gay Black men research often feel torn between the gay community, the Black community, and being a man in society.

Having to combat stereotypes makes it difficult for these gay Black men to find a home in either community (Alexander, 2004). Acceptance with Stipulations in the Gay Community and Black Community While gay Black men did feel accepted at times within the gay community and the Black community... that acceptance often came with a stipulation. Stipulations in

the gay community were assimilation and/or sexual interest. The participants stated that if they demonstrated traits that were similar to the white community, they were often accepted into the community without any problems.

Some participants even stated that they felt more accepted in the gay community when they muted their “ Blackness. ” The participants also stated that if the whites had an interest in gay Black men, then they also were accepted into the community. Stipulations in the Black community were usually silence (vocally and visibly) and explanations of what it means to be homosexual. Black gays often felt that they were accepted into the Black community as long as they did not speak about their lifestyle or demonstrate their lifestyle (i. e. holding hands with another man, kissing another man, being flamboyant or effeminate, etc. . Many Black gays claim to feel accepted in the Black community once they get a chance to talk to a Black individual one on one to show them that not all gay people are what the media has portrayed. Ultimately, Black gays, like many gays, have to act “ straight” and not reveal any inclination that they were homosexual.

Homosexuality and Religion (The Black Church) The understanding of homosexuality within the realm of religion is also important to consider because religion has been a primary aspect of Black liberation for centuries.

Homosexuality remains a major taboo in religious talk which has prompted many researchers to analyze why homophobic attitudes exist. In Delroy Constantine-Simms text, *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*, the question is asked whether or not homosexuality is the greatest taboo? Constantine-Simms, E. Patrick Johnson, and Horace Griffin all

provide articles that analyze the relationship between homosexuality and religion (specifically the Black church). All authors agree that the bible has been co-opted by the religious right wings placing a greater emphasis on separation rather than integration.

The authors all compare the homophobia that revolves around religion to the racism and sexism that still today clouds religion. Constantine-Simms states, “ With the interpretive grid provided by a critique of domination, we are able to filter out the sexism, patriarchalism, violence, and homophobia that are very much a part of the Bible, thus liberating it to reveal to us in fresh ways the in breaking, in our time, of God’s domination-free order” (Constantine-Simms, 2000: 87).

In Keith Boykin’s book *One More River to Cross*, he speaks of several ministers he’s interviewed regarding homosexuality and religion. The majority of reverends interviewed agreed that homosexuality is a sin often quoting the Bible to reinforce their opinion. Boykin highlights one reverend in particular who has targeted the gay community as sinners. Boykin cites the Reverend James Sykes as one of best known opponents of homosexuality in the Black church. Boykin quotes Sykes defending a Klu Klux Klan meeting, “ If I like pork chops and the Klan likes pork chops, nobody has nothing to say.

But because the Klan agrees that homosexuality is wrong, and I agree that homosexuality is wrong, then all the sudden I’m sleeping with the Klan” (Boykin, 1996: 127-128). This attitude toward homosexuality is appalling considering Sykes is the pastor of a four hundred plus member church. Boykin, along with several other scholars, assert that the language of religion has been corrupted by right wing moralists who want nothing more than to

eradicate homosexuality from the church. Media Perceptions of Black Homosexuality Images of Black homosexuality have been predominately negative in popular culture today.

Across the board all individuals who have researched this topic agree that gay Black men are represented negatively in popular culture. Gay Black men have been portrayed as void of masculinity, hyper-sexual, sassy, and flamboyant. Marlon T. Riggs, author of *Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen*, discusses his anger towards the straight men of the Black community. Riggs states that he expected the obstacles in life from the White community because of his race, but never expected obstacles from his own brothers regarding his sexuality.

Riggs believes that they should understand what it is like to be oppressed, and therefore should reject any notion of oppression since they have to face a form of it every day as well. Riggs cites several Black men who have done nothing but participate in the degradation of the gay Black male. His best example lies in a comedy show that used to air entitled *In Living Color*, in which two straight Black men portrayed gay Black men to review movies from a “man’s point of view.” Riggs also brings the discussion up again regarding the “trap” of being gay and Black. I am a Negro Faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be Black. A strong, proud, “Afrocentric” Black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual.” (Riggs, 1991: 389-394) Various video productions have been produced that attempt to acknowledge the difficulties of being both gay and Black. Films such as *Tongues Untied* intimately

deconstruct the experience of the gay Black male. *Tongues Untied* is directed and produced by Marlon Riggs.

The film addresses the struggle gay Black men face silenced and torn between both the gay and Black communities. Riggs video encapsulates the pain, fear, and hatred gay Black men deal with negotiating their identities within a community that does not recognize their race and a community that rejects their sexuality. The film presents a positive message for gay Black men to love not only themselves but their Black brethren. *Tongues Untied* presents the best visual representation of what it means to be Black and gay in America.

Current media is attempting to expand cultural stereotypes. While some of those negative stereotypes that have been reinforced by popular media still exist, these new forms are seeking to eliminate those past stereotypes and show the world that there isn't just one image of the African American gay man. Attitudes toward Homosexuality and their effect on Gay Black Men Living Openly White and Black attitudes toward homosexuality have directly affected gay Black men to a greater degree than gay White men. Previous studies have yielded an array of mixed results.

Levitt and Klassen (1974) found in their research that whites significantly maintain more negative attitudes toward homosexuality than Blacks. Years later Hudson and Ricketts (1980) and Schneider and Lewis (1984) found the opposite. The most common results regarding Blacks and whites and their attitudes toward homosexuality displayed that Blacks were more likely to support anti-discrimination laws but Whites were typically more accepting of the homosexual lifestyle. Gregory Lewis (2003) conducted research that

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measures Black-white differences in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights.

His article uses responses from almost seven thousand Blacks and forty-three thousand whites in 31 surveys conducted since 1973 to give more definitive answers on Black-white attitudinal differences and their demographic roots. Lewis's findings correlate with the research of the past displaying Blacks as "percentage points more likely than whites to condemn homosexual relations as "always wrong" and percentage points more likely to see them warranting "God's punishment" in the form of AIDS, but no more like to favor criminalizing gay sex" (Lewis, 2003: 63).

Lewis also found that while Black's attitudes regarding homosexuality were predominantly negative; Blacks are percentage points more likely than whites to support laws prohibiting antigay job discrimination. Difference in attitudes matter because as Lewis states, "First, Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals (LGBs) may rely on same-race heterosexuals for acceptance even more than white LGBs do (Icard, 1986)" (Lewis, 2003: 61). Those same researchers concluded that Blacks attracted to their own gender often experience more pressure than whites to hide their homosexual behavior, have children, or marry (Icard, 1986).

This fear of "coming out" represents a problem within the gay Black community and they become trapped which prevents them from living the lives they feel they ought to be living. Conclusion The Black gay male struggle certainly is a rough one. Compared to my experiences with homosexuality, it seems that Black gay males have much more pressure on them to conform to the heterosexual social sanctions of society, their own

black community, and racism. I can definitely relate to the substance abuse and acting straight (such as pushing the thoughts out of my mind).

The way society views all homosexuality needs to change, and is slowly changing. Black gay males should be paid a little more attention to in the media, research, and other forms of communication so that the weight of these pressures may be lifted off of their shoulder. Even other minorities such as Hispanic, Asian, or Indian should be more looked upon to open the nation's eyes to the diversity and struggle of all homosexuals, not just the white gay male. With this being said, I feel we are taking great strides with the LGBTQ community to further the goal to include all who are struggling.

We just need to find a way to eliminate any prejudices that make it even harder for Black gay males or any ethnicity/orientation to find happiness and acceptance. Works Cited Alexander, William H. (2004) " Homosexual and Racial Identity Conflicts and Depression Among African? American Gay Males," Trotter Review: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 8. Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol16/iss1/8 Bailey, Robert W. (1999) Gay Politics, Urban Politics: Identity and Economics in the Urban Setting. Chichester - West Sussex, New York: Columbia University Press.

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