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Integrative Communality as Liberative Praxis of Christian Sexual Ethics: A Black Queer Ethic

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Abstract

Black queer persons, as sources for moral and ethical reflection, offer strategies and ways of being to Christian sexual ethics that counter the disintegrating norms of Christian ethical traditionalism and the liberative ethics that center whiteness. Disintegration refers to the internal fragmentation that occurs as persons who do not reflect prescribed gender and sexual religious norms are forced to compartmentalize their sexuality, repress their desire, and practice relational patterns that may be more reflective of culture and social standards than of God's love-based desire for humanity. Disintegration also refers to the fracturing that happens to communities when persons who disrupt cis- and heteronormativity are harmed physically and mentally, ostracized and expelled from faith communities and homes, and even killed in the name of upholding "Christian values." This dissertation utilizes the particular contexts of black sexual and gender non-conformist communities in 1920s Harlem—blues environs, rent parties, and the Hamilton Lodge Ball— to signal counter-patterns of integration for all: communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited flesh/enfleshed spirit, and shared thriving. It also builds upon a tradition of black queer critique in religion that notes the particularity of sexuality at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Black queerness is of particular import to this project because of the challenges it poses to restrictive and essentialized norms, both gendered and sexual, as well as those centered in whiteness, that have long disintegrated persons from themselves, their God, and their communities. Emphases on both personal and social wellbeing mark a shift from Christian sexual ethics that are more rules-based, toward a communal relations-based ethics—a *communosexual* ethic. This black queer ethic responds to the call of a God who invites humanity to engage justice love through liberative wholeness and being in the love of God, self, and community.

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Introduction: The Problem and Possibility Within a Christian Sexual Ethic

The self may know the harmonious wholeness of experiencing integration as well as the dissonant fracture of disintegration. Communities of faith that value integration seek to embody a sense of relationality and mutuality that honors each person and holistically, peaceably supports community members in the journey toward some collectively desired end.[1] Others embody disintegrative values that prevent the vulnerability, space for becoming, and authenticity that makes for communality. For those who ascribe to the Christian faith and believe in a God whose ultimate desire for humanity is love of the self, God, nature, and one another, disintegration of the self and community contradicts the reconciled wholeness that love seeks to enable. For this reason, sexual disintegration and integration warrant exploration in the formulation of a new liberative Christian sexual ethic.

The experience of disintegration, as a normal part of human existence, does not solely take place within the realm of sexuality. However, the focus of this dissertation addresses this increasingly significant, though under-addressed concern of sexual disintegration within a Christian framework.[2] Drawing from Christian ethicist James B. Nelson, I understand sexuality to be "who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion—human and

[1] My use of the term "community" most frequently refers to Christian faith communities as organized bodies of people pursuing right-relatedness. The communities' individual members of communities informed by one another and grant one another permission to explore, challenge or reify norms. I have in mind not the institutional setting, but the people themselves.

[2] While the focus of this dissertation and its ethic is sexual, implications for gender are also explored. I do not conflate gender and sexuality, but this dissertation recognizes the ways one's gender becomes a significant part of one's embodiment of sexual identity.

divine."[3] Sexuality is about relationality, and subsequently, the values—integrative or disintegrative—that shape our ways of relating rightly as sexual beings. For the purposes of this dissertation, we must first examine disintegration and integration as concepts as it relates to sexuality, before examining its unique expression within Christian sexual ethics. I recognize a sexual ethic can be integrative in some ways and disintegrative in others, and that an integrative sexual ethic can exist where other types of ethics are disintegrative. However, I find the distinct categorizations useful for exploring the value of integration as a constructive possibility in envisioning black queer sexual ethics. This ethic encapsulates key moral and spiritual dimensions of how human and communal becoming is enabled, thwarted, and how it continues to thrive amidst disintegration in various forms and spaces.

Probing Sexual Disintegration and Integration

Sexual disintegration exists where ethical norms create fissures in adherents' wholeness and the individual and communal wellness that often accompanies this wholeness. Disintegration connotes states of fragmentation and the subsequent actions that may result from living in such states. It may be described as a disjuncture, a sense of knowing that occurs within a body that does not allow the free existence of this knowing. Like an incomplete puzzle, pieces of the self or community may be missing or broken beyond recognition, lost, or discarded. We can observe that disintegration must be taken seriously in our shared communal moral life, as it could lead to shame, unhappiness,

[3] James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1978), 18.

depression, or self-harm. [4] It may lead to actions that harm others, such as dishonesty toward partners or lashing out against those who reflect the integration one so desperately desires to embody. In disintegrative existence, one's sexual and gender journey is not one of exploration, but of proscribed, dogmatic limitations. Often, established knowledge, no matter how disintegrating, is accepted as true because it reflects established familial, cultural, social, and religious norms. Persons are often wedded to the disintegrative narrative even when it is not beneficial to their being and becoming or that of their communities.

The process of disintegration takes place when communities hold disintegrative values. Communities are especially significant because of the meaning-making power they hold. In a community is the power to shape knowledge and subjugate knowledge, to confer social rewards where the desired, normative behaviors are practiced and to withhold rewards. This conferral of benefits leads to the reification of harmful established knowledges at worse, and at best, can reinforce effective community-building practices. In a community that holds disintegrative values, often there is little space for new knowledge or for authentic flourishing. Identities are perceived as static, and dynamism tends to warrant subduing and "fixing" via the prescribed rules. Language tends to be

[4] For example, the Religious Institute, quoting from the publication *Faith Matters: Teenagers, Religion, and Sexuality* (2003), indicates the difference that integrative and disintegrative communality makes for LGBTQ youth: "Those [youth] who were able to be open in their faith-based communities were also less likely to have considered suicide than other non-heterosexual teens. Those who are in faith-based institutions where there are negative views toward homosexuality and bisexuality rarely are open about their orientation. Those teens live with a very painful silence." "Fact Sheet on LGBT Youth," Religious Institute, accessed May 8, 2019, http://religiousinstitute.org/resources/fact-sheet-lgbt-youth/.

non-expansive and exploration limited as the community seeks to establish itself through the status quo. Such environments enforce the denial of an evolving sense of self and teach repression as the only faithful response to desire, identities, and expressions beyond the norm. The resulting rigidity leads to a reluctance to revisit understandings of sexuality and gender that have proven harmful.

Disintegrative patterns are identifiable wherever the believer receives codified proscriptions that limit authenticity of expression, and the community utilizes power to force normativity so that uniformity may be maintained. It is not merely that the community holds ethical standards; this is needful for communities that intend to act in accordance with what they believe to be God-ordained ethical principles. It is, rather, that the community has an ideal and will not abide deviation, which leads to its fracturing and its loss of a thriving diversity that makes the community whole. Disintegration is evidenced by its outcomes, or its fruit. In this sense, disintegration existed in Christian community when women were denied ordained Christian leadership and flourished instead as women mystics, as much as when black people in the antebellum U.S. south were taught by enslavers and missionaries that their captivity was an act of God. Likewise, disintegration plagues an LGBTQ person when they are forced to keep their orientation secret under the threat of punishment or when teenagers are taught solely abstinence as their Christian sex education while many end up practicing their sexuality in secret (and often less safe) ways.

On the other hand, integration can reflect a sense of accord, growth, and healing. Individuals who seek to embody integrative values can experience an internal sense of well-being resulting from one's actions aligning with one's sense of what should be; that

is, when one's *doing* aligns with one's *being*. To illustrate, a trans woman who understands herself to be pansexual,[5] by finding the language and space to live into these self-understandings challenges the internal conflict that can arise when countering the social messages that one must keep the gender they were assigned at birth and should solely be attracted to persons of the binary opposite sex. On the other hand, persons who, for instance, are polyamorous,[6] but are socialized through cultural and familial customs to replicate the monogamous, heterosexist paradigm may experience a sense of disintegration because they have learned such an expression is lascivious, and therefore, reject their desire. Living into an integrated existence does not indicate an undisturbed state; fracturing former narratives, as well as social norms and their benefits, can be alluring. Still, valuing integration with an accompanying supporting ethic yields a liberative reality that can serve as a base to which one may return when disintegration threatens.

Embodying integration reflects a counter way of being which centers wholeness through healing from disintegration. In pursuit of healing and wholeness, sexual integration resists disintegrative effects on the self and within society present namely through systems of heterosexism, sexism, genderism, classism, and racism. Fluidity in expression (including sexual and gender), rather than hegemonic rigidity, is embraced

[5] A pansexual may be defined as someone who experiences sexual attraction to all genders, derived from the Greek *pan* meaning "all."

[6] Polyamory may be defined as a consensual, non-monogamous relationship pattern, from *poly* meaning "many" and the Latin *amor* meaning love. Polyamory is also referred to as ethical non-monogamy because of the commitments to more than one person at the same time and to open, honest communication in the relationship configurations. It is a way of romantically relating, not a sexual orientation. A person may be polyamorous even while only being romantically involved with one person for a time.

rather than curtailed. A thoroughly embodied integrative praxis is inevitably fluid, as the self is ever-evolving. Further, a hallmark of integrative practices is the willingness to change without shame. Whatever is discovered through exploration is not resisted or forbidden, but incorporated as part of one's journey of becoming. The self that strives toward integration is able to explore their own self-understanding as a vital part of a dynamic and transformative community that depends on every member's integration for the sake of its communal integration. This leads to a more just society as integrative norms are pursued by inspired communities.

Communal integration is manifested where values that reflect liberative communal understandings of the good are demonstrated. While communities strive to hold integrative values, these communities are not purist or self-righteous, as trial and error are as natural to the community's existence as they are to the community's flourishing. Such communities are seeking communities, willing to transform and expand its language, its boundaries, its vision for humanity. As individuals who value integration espouse an ethic of resistance, so do communities, through integrative commitments, resist systematic oppression and intentionally subvert destructive gender and sexual norms. Subsequently, space is created for authentic becoming, while the community demonstrates accountability to their integrated ideal.

Integrative values do not necessarily connote a sense of unity and togetherness at any cost. Church communities that devalue integrative values often prioritize unity above the honoring of each individual member, and in the process, the most vulnerable are harmed. Where there is a commitment to integration, the ultimate value is not unity, particularly where staying together would cause harm. Communities that value

integration have the capacity to recreate themselves and redraw their lines of commitment in order to ensure a faithful reflection of their values. Here, bodies and difference are celebrated, and the community learns from the moral agency at the margins rather than the center. Communities that espouse integrative values are not a monolith, but they are liberative in praxis and belief. Integrative Christian sexual ethics finds its deepest expression through the liberative framework of justice love—an essential value of both integrated and Christian existence.

Integration, Disintegration, and Christian Sexual Ethics

A Christian sexual ethic exists as a moral system that seeks to shape human ways of relating within diverse social contexts that define sexual identity, expression, desire, norms, and politics, informed by Christian theo-ethical values and beliefs of communities. At various times throughout Christian history and contemporarily, the sexual ethics espoused within Christian spaces have not reflected individual and communal integrative values. This dissertation serves as an alternative to disintegrative ethics (elaborated below) by exploring liberative Christian sexual ethics through a black queer ethical lens. Queer, in this dissertation, connotes a sexual politics that allows for the multiplicity and fullness of sexual and gender expression, and that subverts both heteronormativity and homonormativity.[7] It reflects both a politic and a positionality. In

[7] Homonormativity may be defined as normative ideas that shape an ideal imaginary as it relates to lesbian and gay identity. The ideal imaginary mirrors heteronormativity (including its whiteness, reproductive impulse, gender roles, able-bodiedness, and socioeconomic status), but within homosexual relationships. Social and cultural theorist Lisa Duggan defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption." Lisa Duggan, *The*

the tradition of liberative Christian ethics, this dissertation also values queer persons, whose experiences and existences are often marginalized and diminished in ecclesial and academic Christian settings and in U.S. society, as sources for moral reflection and as a foundation for liberative method. Through mining the experiences of black queer people, a liberative Christian ethic is developed that disrupts the disintegration of the self and communities that tends to arise through U.S. Christian traditionalism's centering and service of white, heteropatriarchal normativity and even liberative Christianity's erasure of marginalized intersectional identities, namely as it relates to race, as well as gender.

As a black queer woman constructing a black queer ethic, my ethic presupposes black queer experiences contribute constructively to liberative gender and sexual practices of integrative communal right relations centered in justice love. Black queer ethics demonstrates the liberative potential of centering community, which by definition must be integrative. Integration within the self and with the community yields gender and sexual acts and ways of being that are ethically sound, and reflective of the values of love of God, self, and neighbor toward which Christian people of faith should strive: communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited bodies/embodied spirits, and shared thriving. An ethic rooted in black queerness responds to the call of a God who invites humanity to liberative wholeness—integrated being and belonging.

In the pursuit of this end, it is important that we center the proposed black queer ethic in a value that is indisputably at the core of Christian morality. As identified in each

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Twilight of Equality?: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

of the canonical gospels and affirmed through centuries of Christian theology and ethics, the highest value in Christian ethics is love of self, God, and neighbor. While "love" can be a rather nebulous term and is often utilized to disguise a number of atrocities (e.g., expelling people who are LGBTQ from their congregations and their homes, domestic violence), a love for oneself, for God, and one's neighbor creates a useful foundation from which an ethic might spring forth that yields individual and communal integration; namely, if that love is just.

In *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, Christian ethicist Margaret A. Farley contends "only a sexuality formed and shaped with love has the possibility for integration into the whole of the human personality."[8] Sexuality that is grounded in love has the capacity to allow for a more integrated existence. The same can be said for gender because it, too, is a part of what makes up the human personality. In this dissertation, I extend Farley's argument further by noting that only a sexual ethic based in justness/justice and love holds the possibility for likewise integrating communities that have been fragmented by disintegrative individual and communal practices. Additionally, while Farley's research notes diversity across the world in sexual ethics, with particular attention to various religions and ethnicities (i.e., the Hindu Kamasutra, "African Cultures", Islam), my research notes a diversity within the United States context that can exist in a sexual ethic when the ethic is attentive to race and various genders, and the potential contributions of black people and of queer people to the formulation of a U.S.-based Christian sexual ethics. To Farley's gendered

[8] Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum Books, 2006), 173.

embodiment analysis, I incorporate race, gender expression, and sexual orientation and situate that particularity historically. The "whole of human personality" necessarily incorporates the particularities of positionality and is contextualized in order to determine the values and limits of love with justice.

Farley's just love seeks to demystify love and disallows its application to any and every desired action. Love is just, or "accurate," according to Farley, when it attends to "the concrete reality of the beloved." She further elaborates that love is just

> (1) when it does not falsify or "miss" the reality of the person loved (either as human or as unique individual), (2) when it does not falsify or "miss" the reality of the one loving, and (3) when it does not violate, distort, or ignore the nature of the relationship between them.[9]

In this way, just love is attentive to the concrete relationship between those who would love, a notion Farley primarily locates in the realm of romance and friendship. Yet, this black queer ethic does not stop at accuracy and interpersonal relationality. As I draw from liberative ethicist Marvin Ellison's notions of sexuality rooted in justice that creates communality, equitability in power and resources, and thriving,[10] I utilize his phrase (conceptually combined with Farley's just love), justice love, to connote right relationship to God, oneself, one's neighbor and community as a means of dismantling disintegrative power relations that often exist where there is an unreflective practice of love and abuse of power. Thus, a Christian sexual ethic rooted in justice love can aid in integrating both individuals and communities of all sexual orientations and genders through establishing a broad range of right relationships.

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[9] Ibid., 200, 202.
[10] Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 2.

Justice love is best explained by elaborating how justice love is lived. Justice love reflects a valuing and honoring of another and oneself. As society develops further in its understanding of what it means to value and honor another, the practice of love evolves to more readily reflect growing understandings. Justice love, committed to another's sense of belonging, could look like embracing the unfolding of a neighbor's identities and expressions. Justice love, expressed as a desire for one's own flourishing, could mean an exodus from that which does not allow for the being whom God loves to come forth freely. Further, if God intends love to extend to neighbors, then God has called humanity to loving community. The loving community is a just community— right relationships exist between neighbors.[11] In other words, living into justice love looks like integrated existence, personally and communally.

While it can be argued that justice love, and subsequently integration, reflects the aims of a love-based Christian morality and no less a Christian sexual ethic, disintegration often occurs in spaces of hegemonic Christian moral meaning-making. Christian traditions, from their ancient expressions to modern traditions, have codified disintegrating sexual ethics as sacred through its doctrine, official statements, sermons, and its social rewards conferred upon those who undertake this socialization in Christian piety. A look at sexuality within Western Christian history offers some indication of how disintegration has gained such a firm footing in the Christian tradition through its suppression of desire and pleasure, its alienation from the body, its focus on the sin of sex

[11] Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections," in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (New York: Beacon Press, 1986),
128.

acts rather than the good of sexuality's pleasures and relationality, its rigid commitment to self-denial as a primary paradigm of sexual goodness, as well as its collusion in centuries of practices upon enslaved black people that included rape and sexual humiliation.

Foundations of Disintegration in Christian Moral Thought

In order to examine present-day manifestations of disintegrative Christian sexual ethics, it is important to study its early origins. For this reason, I begin with two of the most significant contributors to the construction of sexual ethics in the Christian Church and who continue to be principal sources for 21st century Christians. With these glimpses into Christian history, I seek not to merely fault these early Christian thinkers for the disintegrative legacy that was shaped by their context and that has developed from their understandings. Additionally, I do not seek to discount the richness of their contributions to the Christian story. Rather, I want to shed light on the disintegrative understandings that persist in the present day, based on the values, norms, and constraints of a previous time period.

Disintegration has manifested itself in a variety of ways over the past two millennia within Christianity. Because Augustine of Hippo (354-430 CE) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) are two key figures in the development and doctrine of Western Christianity that persists in the religious imagination to the present, we look to these figures in identifying key themes of disintegration. Augustine's extensive writings, namely on sexuality, gender, and the body, have shaped Western Christianity's sexual ethics since the fourth century. Augustine's powerful role within the Roman Empire's Christianity combined with the extensive written teachings with which Augustine left his

successors to build upon contributed to his long-term influence. Centuries later, because of the prominent theologian, philosopher, and "Doctor of the Church" that Thomas became, the standing of Augustine's sexual moral views was further reinforced, and even received a Medieval revision as Thomas built upon considerable portions of his thought. Thomas's engagement with Aristotelian philosophy, the embracing of his viewpoints by the Catholic Church, as well as his influence in Western thought (including but not limited to Christianity) also make his ethical analysis of gender and sex worth examining for disintegrative foundations in Christian thought. When we look to sexuality and gender in the thought of Augustine and Thomas, we are able to identify the following disintegrative values: devaluation of the body and its desires, sin-oriented sexual ethics, ideal gender roles and sexual expressions, and hegemonic power to make meaning.

One of the most significant means of devaluing the body came by way of dualism. It provided a lasting foundation for a disintegrative Christian ethic by creating tension through fragmenting the self into disparate parts, by framing the spirit and rationality as inherently good and the body with its passions as evil, and by projecting this dis/embodied evil onto all of humanity. Inasmuch as Augustine spent nine years of his young adult life as a Manichean[12] auditor, dualism became a significant part of his

[12] In dualist fashion, Manicheans believed in the inherent evilness of the body, and of the inherent good of the soul. Though, in several of his writings, Augustine opposed the Manicheans' harsh rejection of the body (See On the Morals of the Manicheans (388), On the Morals of the Catholic Church (late 380s), Confessions (397-400), and On Genesis, Against the Manicheans (398)), it is important to note this influence particularly seen in his doctrines concerning original sin and the dangers of bodily desire (Further, In *Holy Virginity* (401) and *On Continence* (412), Augustine set apart virginity as the Christian ideal that was a gift from God,[12] a virtue achieved only through faith, not mere will.) For example, in his earlier formulations of Genesis 1-3, before debating the Pelagians who argued against the fallenness of humanity in Eden and for the human capacity to choose good, Augustine could not conceive of sexual desire in the Garden of Eden. Later, he

fundamental understandings of sex and the body. Both Augustine and Thomas believed that original sin sullied human sexuality by making it irrational.[13] For Thomas, who aligned reason with the greatest good (which is God), juxtaposing "venereal pleasure" with reason aided in creating a dichotomy not only between the body and reason, but the body and God. He even likened sexual pleasure to an animalistic trait humans possessed, and saw it as "not a truly human good."[14] Thomas does not damn the body, seeing it as within the realm of God's grace as much as the soul,[15] yet his arguments that de-rationalize the body's desires create a dichotomy that at the least diminish the body, and at most can create a rejection of an essential part of the self.

The impact of this dualism not only transformed theological formulations, but also social realities. In *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, theologian Kelly Brown Douglas expounds on the influence of Platonic, Neo-Platonic, and Stoic "spiritualistic dualism" which splintered the vilified body and the soul.[16] In this way, Christians were taught to devalue their body (and subsequently, that of others) in order to value their souls. This may be evidenced in the sexist deprecation of women in

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argued that Adam and Eve would have ideally procreated in a fully rational and controlled fashion, unhurried by the lust of copulation.[12] In *Epistle 6* (421), under fire from Pelagian critics, (1) he distinguishes between a lawful concupiscence in marriage and the "concupiscence of the flesh" and (2) he concedes that there *might* have been a sinless sexual desire in Eden if the Fall had not occurred. His reasoning followed that any true follower of God would want to have controlled sex for procreation and that no one should desire lustful sex. Eventually, in *Against Julian* (421-422), he concedes that there *may* have been a sinless sexual desire in Eden.

[13] Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 82.

[14] Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 83. For more on *luxuria*, which diminishes human reason, according to Thomas Aquinas, see Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 86-87.

[15] Farley, *Just Love*, 131.

[16] Ibid., 25.

Christian history as the embodied antithesis to the rational soul of man, as well as, according to Douglas, Western Christianity's reproduction of racism and the subsequent rejection of the body that enabled "the compatibility of Christianity and slavery."[17] Where whiteness represented rationality and virtue in the form of purity, blackness reflected irrationality and inherent immorality, a defect worthy of the status of inferiority and its accompanying burdens.[18]

It was Augustine that significantly oriented Christian doctrine toward bodily denial, not because he saw the body as inherently evil, but because he felt it was worthy of suspicion for how it could lead the unvigilant to sin.[19] One of Augustine's most significant contributions, *Confessions* (397-400), revealed a man struggling over the course of his life with what he considered to be an insatiable sexual desire and a fear of the body's power. Augustine's constant return to this argument reflects the extent to which he felt sin lurked in every sexual act. According to feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, when Augustine did conceive of sex beyond its utilitarian value within marriage, it was sinful. He, along with many who followed him in instructing the church, framed "sex [as] either sinfully masturbatory (intent on one's own sexual pleasure) or sinlessly and impersonally instrumental (using the other for pleasure or procreation)."[20]

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[17] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 122.

[18] For examples of the ways enslaved people effectively challenged, rejected, and signified upon the distorted interpretations of Christianity given them, see Riggins R. Earl, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, And Community in The Slave Mind* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2003).

[19] For instance, one point of departure from Augustine was that Thomas was not suspicious of the body. Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 107.

[20] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Misogynism and Virginal Feminism in the Fathers of the Church," in *Religion and Sexism: Images of Woman in the Jewish and Christian*

As Virginia Burrus, Mark Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick argued, the hauntedness of sexuality by sin and shame reveals the volatility inherent in Augustine's viewpoint.[21] Likewise, Thomas went to great lengths to delineate the levels of sinfulness that accompanied sex acts. He named lust as one of few capital vices and referred to "unnatural vice" (e.g., incest, fornication) and "vices against nature" (e.g., "sodomy", masturbation) which contributed to the focusing of sexuality on actions that were not to be undertaken, as opposed to ways of engaging that would reflect godly love and relationality. Though Thomas's rigor on the subject was not out of the ordinary for its time,[22] and his work (within and beyond sexual ethics) eventually led to allowances for spiritual love and pleasure in sexual relations in Christian theology,[23] the focus on the sin of sex based upon some of his perspectives continues to direct many discussions of sexual ethics. This focus has turned out especially unwell for women.

Christian tradition and western philosophy have long held misogynist ideals that diminish women and solely place men within the realm of the godly. Augustine and Thomas's ideals of gender and sexuality also relied upon such a binary. This inferiority was not only a matter of earthly existence, but also reflected in spiritual realities. Only the male body could bare the image of God in Augustine's estimation, and Thomas rendered women (also known as "misbegotten males") incomplete in their reflection of God's image.[24] Within this understanding, the spiritual identities of women and men were

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Traditions, ed. Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), 161-166.

[21] Virginia Burrus, Mark D. Jordan, and Karmen MacKendrick, *Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 2.

[22] Farley, *Just Love*, 43.

[23] Ibid., 45.

[24] Ibid., 139. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 3

defined within certain essential limits that could never be transcended, simply because of how they were gendered. Thomas' understandings of gender derived primarily from natural law, that is, those principles to which humans would arrive to given the proper exercise of rationality. For example, observing anatomy and the function of sexual organs led Thomas to his "procreative norm,"[25] which forms the foundation for asserting procreation as the acceptable reason for sex and subsequently, diminishing any other value that might be available for exploring as valid. Natural law itself is rooted in ideals toward which rationality is supposed to draw persons— irrefutable evidence of what is true by "nature" that reinforced hierarchies and hegemonic power as part of God's design.

While there were some divergences in Western Christian traditions from the extoling of virginity or monogamous, heterosexual, patriarchal, procreative sex as virtuous sexual behavior,[26] this view of sexual normativity remained the dominant one espoused by the church fathers in the seats of power. Augustine was an African bishop within the Roman imperial church, and his writings on sexuality are widely considered the most impactful among the Patristic writers. The clarity, breadth, and depth of Thomas's doctrinal and theological scholasticism caused church and society to take notice. For centuries, western theologians and philosophers have built upon his work offering minimal departures from its sexist biases and analyses of whether the ethics served the ends of an evolving church, with the exception of interventions made by

[25] Farley, *Just Love*, 44.
[26] See John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

feminist and other liberative theologians. What happens when the power to shape the community and its values rests in the hands of a few powerful men, and does not arise from the reflections of the broader community? How are sexual ethics impacted when they are formulated primarily by institution-builders rather than community-crafters? Such questions inform current, inherited church politics (and to an extent, reflect the concerns of Protestant reformers) in a time when these sorts of practices do not reflect the values of inclusivity, equitable human worth and value, and concern for those relegated to the sidelines of power.

The above examples highlight the significant role that the history of focusing on the sinfulness of the body and sex, and that strict, purportedly God-ordained parameters around gender and sex played in shaping contemporary ethics. They also illumine the ways that the past can provide present-day moral agents with helpful frameworks for ethical reflection, values that align with communal aims, and strategies for navigating contemporary contexts.

Exploring Integration in 1920s Black Queer Harlem

An integrative black queer ethic begins its unfolding with a historical analysis of people who have both flourished despite, and suffered because of, racism, sexism, genderism, heterosexism, and classism. Nevertheless, they constructed liberative ways of being. My construction of ethics highlights how black queer community has resisted fragmenting patterns of traditionalism in Christian sexual ethics and offers insight toward an integrative Christian ethics. I discover black queerness in multiple expressions as I explore the historically, geographically, and politically distinct context of 1920s black queer Harlem.

This dissertation draws from the experience of black queer Harlemites through their communal spaces of blues environs, rent parties, and Hamilton Lodge Balls. These communal spaces frequently acted as alternatives to institutional religious life. The underground and informal gatherings of black queer people in Harlem demonstrate the dynamic ethos needed for holistic communal becoming to develop. I utilize "secular space"[27] and nonreligious experiences because they often have less constraints than (or, intentionally throw off the constraints of) black religiosity and respectability where black queerness was hard-pressed to thrive.

Harlem's black queer communities posed clear challenges to essentialized gender, class, race, and sexual norms in ways that allowed for individuals to create their own self-understandings, while challenging intraracial and white supremacist forms of hegemony, as well as gender and sexual normativity. These black queer communities had to act beyond and against institutional Christian constructions of rightness in order to enable individual and communal thriving. The intention of this dissertation is to draw from the moral fecundity of their ways of being and becoming in order to construct Christian sexual ethics that incorporate the sociocultural situatedness of individual sexual moral agents within and as a part of a community of moral reflection (namely, Christian community). Black queer visions of moral and ontological imagination offer insight into an integrated understanding of sexual identity, while for this Christian ethical project, expanding notions of goodness in Christian sexual ethics.

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[27] While the spaces of black queer belonging may have not been institutionally religious, they were no less sacred in the power the space held for transcendence and flourishing. For insight into this sacredness, particularly as created by the blues—a musical tradition carried by the black (queer) Harlemites, see James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

Black Queer Method in Christian Sexual Ethics

Black queer ethics that forwards an integrative sexual ethic is informed by a rich, yet underexplored experience that is generative for Christian ethics—that of black queer people. While Christian sexual ethics tends to depend heavily upon tradition, this dissertation examines what it might look like to seek communal strategies beyond solely the Christian paradigm. Further, it locates useful traditions among the people who have developed meanings of gender and sexuality in explorative, expansive ways, rather than from among the higher rungs of (often celibate) ecclesial, elite leadership and later others who upheld hegemonic, patriarchal traditionalism. For this reason, I see the unexplored traditions of 1920s black queer Harlem as a fruitful source for the conception of a black queer ethic.

Black queer histories point to helpful strategies for integrative communal ways of being that counter the disintegrating power of traditionalism within Christian sexual ethics. The stories of black people in Harlem whose sexualities and gender expressions challenged the normativity of this Black Mecca, its politics of respectability, and class hierarchies offer Christian sexual ethics a context for exploring racism, sexism, classism, and sexuality-based discrimination. Their conceptions of goodness shape an ethics that allowed for the type of thriving that creates right relationship between community members, as opposed to the disintegration many Christian communities encounter today. Exploring black queer Harlem's histories through their blues environs, their rent parties, and balls—as liberative sexual and gender spaces—form the foundation for my construction of a black queer ethic.

In addition to these histories, I incorporate the voices of religious and non-religious scholars of black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer experience and liberative ethical approaches, which contributes to the interdisciplinary focus of this project. Scholarship at the nexus of race, gender, and sexuality contribute to my centering of black queerness. Christian ethics, as a discipline, often does not center blackness, even as liberative ethics often considers the ways that whiteness and racism limit the effectiveness and relevance of a Christian sexual ethic. Liberative ethicists have done so by ascribing moral value to women, black women, Latinx women, gay and lesbian persons, LGBTQ Asian Pacific Islanders, and Latinx people. As an analytical tool, such liberative methods allow for a centering of people who have been marginalized because it "allows for the consideration of multiple layers of subjugating assumptions related to gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sexuality."[28] This dissertation responds to an underdeveloped niche, which centers black queerness, while challenging the normative racial constructions that have pervaded traditionalism Christian morality and Christian academia. With these sources, I employ a dialogical method wherein these interwoven perspectives inform a black queer ethic of sexuality. This method is further explicated in chapter four.

Interdisciplinary Pursuits: Exploring Scholarly Convergences

In order to respond effectively to the call toward integration that comes by way of justice love, Christianity must rethink its approaches to formulating ethics. Christian traditions have often worked against the progress that the broader society has made

[28] Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), xvi.

toward just, equitable, affirming, exploratory, and expansive relations to gender and sexual selves.[29] The sciences and marginalized people's experiences, for example, have served as key interventions in formulating more relevant, useable ethics for contemporary Christians. Subsequently, Christian sexual ethics as an academic discipline warrants the incorporation of other disciplines dedicated to exploring gender and sexuality because of the ways rigid ideals related to gender and sexuality have dominated Christian discourse (and often, U.S. public discourse influenced by Christianity, namely conservative forms). This is not to say that Christian tradition should be discarded, but along with (Catholic) Christian sexual ethicist Christine E. Gudorf, I agree that "the anti-sexual attitude of the Christian West permeates the theological and Christian philosophical traditions as well as much of the New Testament, and a related misogyny winds through these three and the Old Testament as well."[30] For this reason, this dissertation depends significantly on the work of scholars from various disciplines who engage in gender and sexuality studies.

A black queer ethic's centering of black gender and sexual nonconformists, alongside its intersectional analysis (race, sex, gender, class), makes the scholarly voices of black queer ethicists, womanists, and feminists who contribute to nuancing our understandings of sexual identities in religious scholarship of prime importance. Among other black queer scholars of religion, I build upon the scholarship of womanist

[29] This is not to say that U.S. society has been steadily progressive. For example, on May 7, 2019, Brian Kemp, the Governor of Georgia, "signed controversial legislation Tuesday that bans abortions in the state as soon as a heartbeat is detectable, which typically occurs about six weeks into a pregnancy — before many women know they're pregnant." This took place nearly 45 years after Roe v. Wade which declared the unconstitutionality of restricting access to abortions. Vanessa Romo, "Georgia's Governor Signs 'Fetal Heartbeat' Abortion Law," National Public Radio, May 7, 2019, accessed May 10, 2019, https://www.npr.org/2019/05/07/721028329/georgias-governor-signs-fetal-heartbeat-law.
[30] Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure,* 6.

theologian Pamela Lightsey and black queer ethicist Thelathia Nikki Young who theorize the experiences of black non-heterosexual, particularly femme, persons and address communal flourishing and thriving of black queer people. Their scholarship encompasses more than the problems of heterosexism and homophobia to incorporate the good that black queer people propose for theology and ethics. Each scholar understands their subjects as an integral part of a communal whole and provides a vital foundation for considering how best persons might relate to others in light of (not in the erasure of) their embodied sexual and gendered realities.

Pamela Lightsey argues from the perspective of the gifts of LGBTQ sexual expression,[31] a concept that frames my integrative model. While Lightsey turns to terms like "bhomophobia" to highlight black communities' disintegration as it relates to sexual selves,[32] I want to highlight the broader Christian community's disintegration and the integrative gifts offered through an ethics rooted in black queerness. The approach of Thelathia Nikki Young, who frames "black" and "queer" as particular subjectivities,[33] informs my dissertation with her emphasis on black queer communal thriving. Young theorizes relationality among queer folks as moral agents. In like manner, I look to black queer people— their strategies of resistance, ways of being and becoming, and ideas of the good— as insufficiently explored sources of knowledge about moral agency that is

[31] Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 6-7.
[32] Pamela Lightsey, "Inner Dictum: A Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm," *Black Theology* 10, no. 3 (Nov 2011): 339-349.
[33] Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 12.

needed for broadening our vision of liberative community and integrative gender and sexual existence across all Christian communities.

Feminist and womanist theologians and ethicists have contributed invaluably to the construction of theological perspectives and Christian sexual ethics that provide alternatives to patriarchal and hegemonic traditions, while deconstructing misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia. Many womanists have already laid the groundwork for a race-conscious attentiveness to embodied experience but have infrequently taken up black theologian Renee Hill's decades old critique. Hill, in "'Who Are We For Each Other?:' Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology" (1993), provided an early challenge to womanists who claimed rootedness in black women's experience but neglected black lesbians' subjectivity. Hill conceives of black lesbians as theological and ethical moral agents and emphasizes the kinship that women of all sexual orientations share. I build on her understandings of friendship, sisterhood, and romantic relations between women, and examine a broader view of Christian community which includes more than the chosen kinship that Hill proposes. Kelly Brown Douglas was among the first to comprehensively answer Hill's challenge by giving attention to the experiences of black lesbians and gay men within "the Black Church."[34] Douglas frames black sexuality as acted upon and subsequently shaped by whiteness in the religious and social imagination; I continue this critique, as well as focus on black sexuality that subverts black sexual politics of respectability, patriarchy, and heteronormativity. Douglas's work is pioneering as it calls black institutions to task for their neglect of gay and lesbian

[34] See Kelly Brown Douglas, "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community," in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999).

persons and their concerns, and counts black homosexuals as integral to black communality. However, I propose queer-centered Christian community, that does not seek inclusion but celebrates and affirms black queerness.

Among the first to theorize about black sexuality and sexual orientations from a theological perspective, Elias Farajajé-Jones's (Ibrahim Abdurrahman Farajajé) "in-the-life theology of liberation […] grows out of the experiences, lives, and struggles against oppression and dehumanization of those in-the-life."[35] His liberative, intersectional lens, as well as the naming of the corporal danger of homophobia and biphobia for black queer people, inform my own understanding of integration and disintegration, respectively. Both Farajajé-Jones and black pastoral theologian Horace Griffin interrogate the limits of black churches' constructions of justice and blackness, and illustrate the churches' disintegrating patterns—grounding my exploration of black queer persons' choosing of alternative spaces for the spiritual, mental, and physical wellbeing.[36] Griffin assesses the internal harm of the institutional demonization of gay and lesbian persons, and challenges black heterosexuals to live into the call of black liberation theology to liberate the oppressed among the black community. I, however, identify black queer liberation through their own subversive ways of being that does not rely upon a source outside of themselves. I arrive to this conclusion informed by Roger A. Sneed, and his desire to

[35] Elias Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence: Towards an In-the-Life Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (Volume Two: 1980-1992)*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 140. "In-the-life" is a term that has long been used by African Americans "to connote a broad spectrum of identities and behaviors" sexually.

[36] Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Eugene, OR: Cleveland, Pilgrim Press: 2006).

forward a black queer subjectivity that is not rooted in victimhood, but in black queer potentiality.[37]

This emphasis on the experiences of marginalized people also relies upon additional pioneering liberative Christian ethics interlocutors. My use of Beverly Harrison and Marvin M. Ellison's analysis of unjust power relations and emphasis on communal right-relatedness[38] in sexual ethics enables a scrutiny of the power dynamics at play in sexual ethics historically. It also orients the ethic I construct toward community and relationality, rather than individual's sex acts and gender expressions. This dissertation will build on Harrison's dismantling of the anti-body ethos within misogynist and homophobic Christian understandings of sexuality and Ellison's liberating ethic rooted in justice. Harrison's focus on women's experience and the body as a site of moral knowledge[39] posed a formidable critique to disembodied ethics that problematized the sexual self. Therefore, her interrogation of the Christian tradition's anti-body ethos creates space for my construction of a black queer communosexual ethic that centers black bodies. Also, I build on Ellison's liberative method and the good of sex and sexuality as integral part of our lives together, which emphasizes the sexual as communal.

The perspectives of black queer scholarship through their understandings of sexual identity and the politics that shape identities and community are of particular import through scholars such as Cathy Cohen and E. Patrick Johnson. Social histories of

[37] See Roger A. Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[38] Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 3.
[39] West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 42.

black queer 1920s Harlem, including primary sources like the black press and blues women's song lyrics and biographies, alongside historical and secondary studies of Harlem life. George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (1994) reveals the ethos of Harlem that created space for its development as a gay enclave for black people, as well as white people who sought to experience (or, fetishize) a more edgy space than Greenwich Village. James F. Wilson's *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (2010) theorizes at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual blurring in 1920s and 1930s Harlem. His focus on the social world is important for my studies of the creation of a community, namely within a space that was hostile to black communal existence. Wilson's monograph is also significant in framing how the enclave becomes an alluring alternative to the broader social world.

Following the Voices: Sequence of Chapters

In chapter one, "Christian Sexual Ethics and the Integrative-Disintegrative Paradigm," I explore the early contributions of signal Christian ethicists who sought to offer ethics that were attentive to Christian communal concerns, primarily during an era of sexual revolution, gay rights, and increased concern about ecclesial teaching and practice that disembodied and hegemonized sexuality. I argued for the good of a community-centered sexual ethic that sought to integrate selves and communities by examining the opening for such a framework through the pioneering scholarship of Beverly Harrison, Margaret Farley, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Christine Gudorf and Marvin Ellison—significant feminist and liberative ethicists who transformed the study of Christian sexual ethics. In chapter two, in seeking a setting in which I might identify the

communal values to inform such an ethic, I look to 1920s black queer Harlem and the subversive spaces of blues environs, rent parties, and the Hamilton Lodge Balls that acted as subaltern counterpublics to the (counter)public of black Harlem (as well as the wider New York City) with which the black queers sometimes found themselves at odds. The chapter, "A Historical Site of Integrative Inquiry: Black Queer 1920s Harlem," provides a deeper look into glimpses of integration that were not practiced perfectly in black queer Harlem, but hints toward a liberative, integrative values. Chapter three, "Black Queering of Religious Discourse," examines black queer religious discourse's approaches to transforming existent dialogues in Christian theology and ethics in order to push its limits and reorient its values, namely through the five themes that have shaped the discourse since the early 1990s: inclusion, identity and black queer subjectivity, resistance and difference, the black queer body, and power. The chapter serves as an impetus for my own integrative and communal black queer approach to Christian sexual ethics. Finally, chapter four, "Constructing a Black Queer Ethic of Sexuality" presents a liberative Christian *communosexual* ethic based on integrative values I locate amongst the black sexual and gender nonconformists of 1920s Harlem and black gay, lesbian, and queer Christian scholarship: communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited bodies/embodied spirits, and shared thriving. This Christian sexual ethic formulates liberative constructions of sexuality and gender that reflect the liberative aims of justice love that root both integration and Christianity.

Chapter 1: Christian Sexual Ethics and the Integrative-Disintegrative Paradigm

The task of formulating modern Christian sexual ethics has primarily been undertaken by Christian moral theologians (Catholic) and ethicists seeking faithful engagement with sex and sexuality in a rapidly changing world. This seeking has opened the door for questioning the sources, aims, and methods of an ethics of sexuality and how these factors shape ethical action. While the tradition has offered ethics that have progressed with increased scientific and social understandings of humanity, it is still at times challenged to adapt, evolve, and consider non-normative subjectivities. Catholic Christian ethicist Christine E. Gudorf critiques the traditionalism within Christian sexual ethics that "[has used] scripture and theological tradition as supports for a code of behavior which developed out of mistaken, pre-scientific understandings of human anatomy, physiology, and reproduction, as well as out of now abandoned and discredited models of the human person and human relationships."[40] In short, integrative ethical values have been overlooked in favor of disintegrative ones. By *disintegrative*, I mean those values that produced fissures in adherents' wholeness and the individual and communal wellness that often accompanies this wholeness. Whereas, *integrative* reflects wholeness and a resistance to disintegrative dissonance that impacts communities and societies. Ultimately, new understandings call for new approaches and new ethics.

Contemporary Christian ethicists have undertaken the all-important task of identifying and developing a usable, liberative ethics of sexuality out of responsible necessity particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. The 2000s and beyond reflect an

[40] Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 2.

increasingly robust articulation of liberative Christian sexual ethics. Conveying the significance of critically examining sexuality and ethics for Christian discourse, Cahill states, "despite its pitfalls, the task of analysis may not be avoided. For humans, 'sexuality' is 'morality.'"[41] Because, according to Cahill, sexuality occupies such a significant place in common understandings of morality, this topic warrants our curiosity and interrogation. Since the 1980s, Protestant theologians and ethicists, whose scholarship reflects liberative methods, have contributed invaluably to the construction of theological perspectives and Christian sexual ethics that provide alternatives to traditionalism—patriarchal, body-denying, and hegemonic understandings— while dismantling misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia in varying ways.

Because of the key, pioneering contributions that arose within Christian theology and ethics during the 1970s-1990s, a brief overview of the landscape is delineated here. It is important for the development of my black queer ethic that we analyze the liberative foundations that inform my approaches and how the paradigm of integration-disintegration— a move toward ethics that affirm wholeness within the self, interpersonal relationships, and communities from those that consistently compromise these relations— is articulated. I treat theology and ethics together because of the ways that the disciplines overlap, though the goal of this chapter is to analyze scholars who identify as Christian ethicists as I describe pioneering developments in the theorizing of sexual ethics. While it is evident that scholarship will always have shortcomings, it is also true that scholars are shaped by their biases and are products of their context. In like manner, denominational

[41] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 2.

and professional standards shape the discourse because both affirmations and potential threats to livelihood strongly influenced what could and could not be safely said.[42] Additionally, as feminist theologians Carter Hayward and Mary Hunt name in the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* article, "Roundtable Discussion: Lesbianism and Feminist Theology," even embarrassment about centering women's pleasure in feminist theology can serve as a deterrent to theorizing about sexuality, and that of women particularly, in light of "heterosexist patriarchy's pervasive obsession with women's bodies and sexualities."[43] The limitations warrant both our critique and understanding.

Christian feminist critiques in theology emerged in the 1960s and 1970s amidst U.S. movements for sexual and gay liberation and a second wave of feminism, which supported forthcoming investigations of the construction of sexuality in Christianity. For example, Mary Daly, then a feminist Catholic theologian, in *The Church and the Second Sex* (1968) and *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (1973) analyzed patriarchy within church doctrine, theology and practices. Though the books did not directly or comprehensively shape a theology of sexuality, Daly put forth a women's liberationist voice that challenged theological method to consider the experiences of women, and arguably (as Harrison later makes the correlation between

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[42] In light of greater visibility for and affirmation of lesbian and gay people, Christian pastoral resources were offered such as *Sex in the Parish* (1991) by Karen Lebacqz, with a UCC minister Ronald G. Barton. It offered a practical and theoretical approach to professional sexual ethics among pastors with a chapter "In the Closet and Out: Gay and Lesbian Pastors," signaling the existence of gay and lesbian pastors and their need for resources, just as any other pastor. Given most mainline denominations were not affirming at the time, such an acknowledgment was a bold proclamation about gay and lesbian personhood.

[43] Carter Heyward, Mary E. Hunt, Delores S. Williams, Claire B. Fisher, Evelyn Torton Beck, and Bernadette Brooten, "Lesbianism and Feminist Theology: Roundtable Discussion," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 2, no. 2 (Winter 1986-87), 99.

patriarchy and heterosexism) other marginalized voices subjugated by patriarchy.[44] She also laid a foundation for later comprehensive articulations of feminist theology and ethics.

A crucial intervention in the development of sexual ethics was made by Christian ethicist James B. Nelson's *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (1978). He offers to sexual ethicists an integrative definition of sexuality that informs my own approach as he discusses sexuality as more than individual sex acts, but part of the totality of who humans are as individuals and in community as bodyselves.[45] Contributing an early affirmation of gay and lesbian persons, feminist theologian Virginia Ramey Mollenkott with Letha Dawson Scanzoni co-authored *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? Another Christian View* (1978),[46] which boldly claimed a Christian voice in offering a counter-discourse to anti-homosexual Christian perspectives. Since the 1960s, Mollenkott wrote, namely as an evangelical feminist, troubling the boundaries of gender (for women and later for omnigender persons) and challenging dominant evangelical Christian narratives. Additionally, elaborated in depth below, Christian ethicists Beverly Harrison and Margaret Farley made their scholarly contributions in this era at the intersections of gender, sexuality, and Christian ethics. These approaches contribute to the field and the underpinnings of primarily white feminist theology and ethics that

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[44] Daly's contributions came about alongside Latin American Liberation Theology and Black Theology, which also called for valuing to the experiences of marginalized peoples as sources for theological reflection.

[45] James B. Nelson, *Embodiment: An Approach to Sexuality and Christian Theology* (Fortress Press, 1978), 18. His perspective on sexuality significantly influenced liberative thinking about sexuality in Christian theology and ethics, including that of feminist ethicist Marvin M. Ellison and womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas.

[46] The title later included the subline, *A Positive Christian View,* in the 1994 revised edition.

would, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, notably deconstruct the ideologies of traditionalism that shaped sexual ethics. Examples of these radical articulations of feminist theology came first through Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (1983), in addition to other notable contributions like Japanese American feminist Rita Nakashima Brock's *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (1988) and lesbian feminist Carter Heyward's *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (1989).[47]

The *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* founded in 1985, is an interdisciplinary and interreligious academic journal that provided a crucial space for deeper exploration of gender and sexuality in religion. Two such examples that help map the fields outlined here are "Roundtable Discussion: Lesbianism and Feminist Theology" (1986) and "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective"[48] (1989). Both articles addressed the question of the lesbian presence in feminist theological and womanist discourses, respectively.[49] In the feminist theology roundtable, Heyward and Hunt argue that feminist theologians "must begin to see the significance of our sexualities as a locus of theological meaning."[50] They noted the heterosexist privilege found within feminist theological scholarship and spoke to the need

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[47] See also Susan Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God: Christian Feminism in Black and White* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989). This text included a rare and significant treatment of race by a white feminist theologian.
[48] Heyward, et al., "Lesbianism," and Cheryl J. Sanders, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, M. Shawn Copeland and bell hooks, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 83-112.
[49] Delores S. Williams, a founding voice in womanism, acted as a respondent in the feminist theology roundtable and cautioned against a feminism that is exclusivist by centering lesbians.
[50] Heyward, et.al., "Lesbianism," 96.

to "affirm the goodness of female sexuality."[51] They also argued feminist theorists of religion "have learned not to generalize from our experience, but to lift up particularity" and are "making room for increasing diversity as we go."[52] Yet, it is out of this place of deficiency that womanism was founded, like black feminism within the feminist movement. In the womanism article, one of Cheryl J. Sanders's critiques of womanism as she understands it is found in its ambivalence about the value of heterosexual, monogamous relationships in black community and its relationship to lesbianism, via Alice Walker's definition. Womanist theo-ethicist Katie G. Cannon responded by invoking a relational model centered in "sacred power and benevolent cohumanity" and asserted black women's justice-seeking agency, also affirmed by womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes's call for partnership and inclusivity in relating.[53] To raise these questions and responses about sexuality and gender within a theoretical context that centers black community black churches marked a significant moment in black religious dialogue.

The environments out of which more radical Christian theologies and ethics of sexuality grew in the early 1990s included the peak of AIDS-related deaths and the development of gay and lesbian studies, as well as queer theory as fields of study. Out of this era came three extended articulations of gay and lesbian theologies: Michael J. Clark's *A Place to Start: Toward an Unapologetic Gay Liberation Theology* (1989), Robert E. Goss's *Jesus Acted Up: A Gay and Lesbian Manifesto (*1993), and *Gay Theology without Apology* (1993) by Gary David Comstock. Edited volumes also helped

[51] Ibid., 96, 98.
[52] Ibid., 95.
[53] Sanders, et al., "Christian Ethics," 93, 97.

to move disciplinary conversations about Christianity and sexuality forward throughout the 1990s, with a particular interest in lesbian, gay, and bisexual experience.[54] *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume 2: 1980-1992* (1993),[55] edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, included articulations of an "in-the-life theology" from black queer theologian Elias Farajajé-Jones and a criticism of the ignored lesbian voice in womanism by black lesbian theologian, Renee L. Hill (both of these contributions are elaborated in-depth in chapter 3).[56] Both thinkers strengthened their marginalized positions as bisexual/queer and lesbian people by confronting theologies that claimed to validate their voices as a black person and a black woman, respectively. Their critiques were determinative of future directions black and womanist theology would be forced to contend with. This volume is among the earliest liberative volumes to analyze sexuality at its intersections with Christian reflection and race.

Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection (1994), edited by James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, brought together various scholars of

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[54] For instance, a lesser known volume, *Christian Perspectives on Sexuality and Gender* (1996), edited by Elizabeth Stuart and Adrian Thatcher, continued to broaden the discourse in Christian religion as it addressed sexual orientation, sexual violence, embodiment, marriage, and family, though absent in its engagement with race.

[55] In retrospect, it is notable that *Volume 1: 1966-1979* featured "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View" (1978) by Episcopal priest, lawyer, and activist Pauli Murray, who has posthumously been described as trans, and Alice Walker, who in *Alice Walker: Beauty in Truth* (2013), identified her sexual orientation in the following way: "I'm not lesbian, I'm not bisexual, I'm not straight. I'm curious. If you're really alive, how can you be in one place your whole time? For me that doesn't work."

[56] See Elias Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence: Towards an In-the-Life Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (Volume Two: 1980-1992)*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 139-159. Also, Renee L. Hill, "Who Are We For Each Other?: Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (Volume Two: 1980-1992)*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 345-354.

Christianity to address the growing dialogue around gender, sexuality, and theology and ethics.[57] A noteworthy contribution came from feminist theologian Mary E. Hunt. Her chapter, "Lovingly Lesbian: Toward a Feminist Theology of Friendship," extends the definition of lesbian to include all women who love themselves and other women with the intent of emphasizing communality and social transformation, and de-centering sexual relationship as a measure of a good life. While Hunt identifies as a feminist theologian, she made invaluable contributions to Christian (namely Catholic) ethics as she innovatively theorized from her positionality as a feminist lesbian nearly a decade before a significant gay and lesbian lens developed in Christian religious discourse.[58] Also, feminist Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether's "Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Pastoral Practice" (1994) explicitly names the connectivity between the oppression of women and the oppression of gays and lesbians, and locates healing by way of wholeness and mutuality in Christian community. As a foremost voice in feminist theology, Ruether's attentiveness to this dialogue aided in establishing a supportive relationship between feminist and gay and lesbian studies, and validated gay and lesbian scholarship.

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[57] To the question of womanists engaging sexuality, see Toinette M. Eugene "While Love is Unfashionable: Ethical Implications of Black Spirituality and Sexuality" (1994) in this volume. A second volume of *Sexuality and the Sacred* was published in 2010 and edited by Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas

[58] For early ethical contributions from Hunt, see Mary Hunt, "Transforming Moral Theology: A Feminist Ethical Challenge," in *Women: Invisible in Church and Theology*, eds. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Mary Collins (Edinburgh: Clark, 1985), 84–90 and "Loving Well Means Doing Justice," in *A Faith of One's Own: Explorations by Catholic Lesbians* (Trumansburg, New York: Crossing Press, 1986), 114-124. Hunt later edited with Patricia Beattie Jung and Rahdika Balakrishnan, *Good Sex: Feminist Perspectives from the World's Religions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press). She continues to articulate ethics through her leadership as co-founder and co-director of the non-profit educational center Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER).

Finally, in the mid-late 1990s, theologians and ethicists continued to hone in on significant questions of the day related to gender roles, family, women's reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS, and heterosexism and homophobia. Some of the scholars will be elaborated in chapters three and four, as this period marked an especially meaningful moment for black theological and ethical dialogues in sexuality. A key example, for the ways it engaged gender, sexuality, and included a strong critique of whiteness, was Kelly Brown Douglas's answer to Hill's critique to womanism that interrogated heterosexism and homophobia within black Christian religious space in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective*, namely the chapter "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community."

Each of the previously named productions prior to the 2000s paved the way for signal works in the following decades that center LGBTQ experience like *A Whosoever Church* (2001) by Gary David Comstock, *Their Own Receive Them Not* (2006) by Horace Griffin, robust queer of color critiques via Patrick Cheng, Jennifer Leath, Pamela Lightsey, Emilie Townes, and Nikki Young, and deeper articulations by some of the pioneering ethicists elaborated below. Additionally, transgender perspectives within religion were articulated by Mollenkott, who authored *Omnigender: A Trans-Religious Approach* (2001) and co-authored *Transgender Journeys* with Vanessa Sheridan (2003). These monographs were among the first to deconstruct gender binaries by theorizing from a non-binary gender space and Mollenkott's own positionality as an omnigender Christian. A robust, liberative Christian sexual ethical dialogue in the academy was able

to develop as it did because of the strides made in Christian theology and ethics (as well as biblical studies),[59] in addition to the ecclesial and national discourses.

In this chapter, I will probe pioneering contributions of Beverly Wildung Harrison, Margaret Farley, Christine E. Gudorf, Lisa Sowle Cahill, and Marvin Ellison for the ways that they reflect early articulations of contemporary sexual ethics that, in distinct ways, reflect calls to integration and communality. They are body positive, sex positive, gender-equitable (interpersonally and socially), and/or social justice-focused. Because of the state of Christian ethics related to sexuality as a field, my interlocutors here are all white feminists. I have chosen to utilize scholars who self-identify as ethicists and note their sustained contributions to the field as I explore their pioneering work. Their scholarly contributions prompted a turning point for new voices that reshaped the field of Christian sexual ethics.

I highlight key themes that distinguish these scholarly contributions. I ask: What are their sources for Christian ethics? In what ways do they frame the goods of sexuality, the body, and sex? How do their frameworks reflect (or not) my integrative-

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[59] Other helpful examples of contributions to the development of sexual ethics after these pioneering foundations in the early 2000s, for the ways they addressed the Bible, ecclesial spaces, various queernesses in sexuality (e.g., celibacy, disability), include Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), Anthony B. Pinn and Dwight N. Hopkins, eds., *Loving the Black Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger, and Mark Larrimore, eds., *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), Marvin M. Ellison and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Heterosexism in Contemporary World Religion: Problem and Prospect* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2007), and Traci C. West, "Leadership: Dissenting Leaders and Heterosexism," in Disruptive Christian Ethics: *When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Some include portions of the text that focused specifically on LGBTQ experience and included LGBTQ scholars engaging a variety of pertinent topics on sexuality and gender in Christian disciplines.

disintegrative paradigm—of individual and communal wholeness-fragmentation? I will explore the ways that each scholar identifies the problems of and offers counterpoints to traditionalism in Christian sexual ethics—sexual ethics that inflexibly reflect the disintegrative values found in the Christian tradition—and a distinct vision of a differentiated ethic. I intend to show the ways that each scholar engaged notions of integration and disintegration, though often with alternative terminology than I have chosen. I will offer a critique, particularly of the whiteness and gender normativity embedded in their approaches. Drawing from their interventions, I frame the need that they pointed toward that contributes to the construction of a black queer communosexual ethic.

Contemporary Christian Sexual Ethics and the Countering of Disintegrative Values

The scholars outlined here represented a departure from traditionalism in sexual ethics. The black queer ethic developed in this dissertation reflects a building upon and sometimes departure from their conceptions of the ethics of sexuality. Beverly Wildung Harrison, a Protestant Christian social ethicist, was among the first feminist ethicists to critique the Christian tradition attentive to its shortcomings toward women, as well as lesbian and gay people, and to put forth an ethic of mutuality. Margaret Farley, a feminist philosophical ethicist and Sister of Mercy in the Roman Catholic Church, long engaged questions of both virtue and applied social ethics through her scholarship and justice work with HIV/AIDS, abortion, and other topics related to sexuality that make her a stalwart voice in Catholic moral theology. Lisa Sowle Cahill, also a Catholic feminist ethicist, both affirmed and challenged the stances of the Catholic Church and argued in favor of more traditionally moral goods that many feminist religious scholars rejected,

like procreation, and against the prioritization of freedom as an ultimate end for sexual ethics. Christine E. Gudorf represented a feminist voice akin to Harrison's (perhaps, as her former student at Union Theological Seminary) in that she likewise utilized a social lens and had a progressive voice as it related to women's roles and embodiment. Lastly, Marvin Ellison, also a student of Harrison's and a Protestant scholar-activist, adopted a feminist and social ethical approach to sexual ethics, framing it as a matter of justice. Here, we examine the unique contributions of each scholar, and the ways that their perspectives interact with the paradigm of integration-disintegration.

Beverly Wildung Harrison

Feminist Christian social ethicist Beverly Wildung Harrison was a lesbian[60] scholar impacted by and contributing to the gay liberation and women's movements of the 1970s. As an initial voice among Christian ethicists articulating this bridge between gender and sexual orientation, Harrison challenged academia and church to rethink its articulations of the body, sexuality and gender toward more just ways of relating. Harrison forwards the Christian feminist values of mutuality and reciprocity, and critiques the homophobia stemming from compulsory heterosexuality (borrowing from lesbian feminist Adrienne Rich) within Christian approaches to sexuality. She critiques conservative and liberal ideologies, and compellingly opens Christian sexual ethics toward a more integrated approach that neither negates the body nor the feminine.

Harrison contributed significantly to developments within sexual ethics in the late 1970s and the 1980s through three essays explored here: "Sexuality and Social Policy"

[60] Though Harrison did not explicitly state her sexual orientation in these earlier Christian ethical works, she later affirmed her longtime relationship with feminist theologian Carter Heyward.

(1978), which examined the role that Christian ethics must play in a pluralistic social discourse; "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice" (1981) where Harrison (with Shirley Cloyes) argued in favor of women's reproductive rights based in dignity, bodyright, and respect for human life; and "Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections" (1981/82), where Harrison argued that harmful attitudes toward gay and lesbian people are rooted in compulsory heterosexuality, which has long oppressed women in society and is consistently reinforced by the church. While contemporary concerns within sexual ethics, like abortion, are not treated as applied ethics in this dissertation, Harrison's perspectives within this debate, as a Christian feminist ethical forerunner, are worth mentioning, even as they reflect values found within her Christian ethics more broadly.

Harrison primarily analyzed disintegration through the "anti-body ethos" that she located within Christian sexual ethical traditionalism. Where the body is feared, it is placed in antagonistic relationship to the spirit and rejected. Harrison argued that such a rejection is rooted in misogyny and homophobia. By affirming women and the body, she countered the homophobia interconnected with the control of sexuality through compulsory heterosexuality.[61] Further, her focus on women's experience and the body as a site of moral knowledge[62] posed a formidable critique to disembodied ethics that problematized the sexual self.

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[61] Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia: The Unexplored Connections" (1981), in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 136.

[62] Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 42. For more on Harrison's method, see Melissa Snarr, "Beverly Harrison and Radical Sociality," in *Social Selves and Political Reforms: Five Visions in Contemporary Christian Ethics* (New York: T &

The dualism Harrison critiqued diminishes both women and the body because in rationalist thought, women came to represent the body and men the mind. Harrison argued,

> we are conditioned by religious and philosophical orthodoxy, or the official doctrines of the elites, to view the body and bodily needs as "lower," "animal" modalities of existence that have to be tamed or in some way overcome and transcended by a higher and loftier power that is "really" rational and spiritual […] the "transcendence" of spirit over nature, is often held to be the essence of religious conviction.[63]

The dichotomy between spirit and a "lower" nature reflects a disintegrative ethos that causes persons to expect and sometimes enact a hostile relationship between one part of the self and another.[64] Harrison integrated sexuality with the entire self by affirming bodily experience and noting that "sexuality is a foundational aspect of our total, integrated bodily well-being."[65]

In affirming bodily experience, Harrison claimed pleasure as a moral good, which reflected an integrative value by not treating the desire for pleasure as foreign to the self. Harrison located this value within social discourse, with the help of feminism as a discursive movement:

> The affirmation of our capacity for giving and receiving pleasure and for appropriating our self-worth in and through our bodies has also begun to lead to an important demystification of our sexuality. The ancient idea that sexuality itself is an irrational, alien, even evil power, deeply foreign to our personal integrity and outside the range of our self-direction, is giving

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T Clark, 2007), 71-88. Significantly for my own method, Snarr noted, "Harrison argues that Christian ethics should concern itself with analyzing the formation of the social self in the midst of specific social and cultural histories and relationships." Snarr, "Beverly Harrison," 71.

[63] Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia," 135.

[64] Such a perspective was also reinforced by Christian scripture (e.g., Galatians 5:17, Romans 7: 14-25).

[65] Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia," 145.

> way to new integrations of psychosexual identity with socially fulfilling action.[66]

Here Harrison argued for the integration that takes place within the self and community when pleasure is embraced and sexuality is more deeply understood. While Harrison did not perceive the secular attitudes toward sexuality as ideal, as pleasure is often distorted in public discourse, she determined the pursuit of this good within secular society could act as a means for Christians and faith communities to enact wholeness and integration.

Harrison deconstructed the idea that male dominance over women's bodies and being as a natural part of the ordering of human creation. Further, she challenged the Christian ethical emphasis on self-sacrifice as a primary signifier of Christian love often resulted in women being harmed by hegemonic power and limited in claiming their own power as moral agents.[67] In offering an alternative framework to a patriarchal sexual ethics, which relies on ownership, Harrison emphasized a radical mutuality, which created space for the synergy found in reciprocity. In this way, she critiqued dominance itself as a just way of relating. Ultimately, at the center of Harrison's formulation of Christian sexual ethics was justice, that is, right relations.[68] Right relations pertain not only to interpersonal relationships, but to social justice.

According to Harrison, both conservative and liberal ideologies were responsible for shaping the inattentiveness to justice in sexual ethics. She named "the conservative who longs for clear and precise normative rules about the rights and wrongs of sexual

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[66] Harrison, "Sexuality and Social Policy" (1978), in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 113.
[67] Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia," 176, 179.
[68] Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Theology and Morality of Procreative Choice" (1981), in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 128.

acts" on the one hand, and "theological liberals or radicals [who] put concern for the justice of social institutions squarely at the center of their religious commitment" to the neglect of interpersonal ethical values. For Harrison, theological liberals and radicals perceived sexual ethics as a "personal issue and a matter of relative indifference compared with the 'grave' issues of social justice."[69] She critiqued each group's dichotomizing of the personal and the political and framed the need for a conscientious response to such a dichotomy.[70] It is at this impasse that Harrison asserted values related to sexuality that were attentive to both dimensions of sexual reality. She posited, without regard to the social dimension and hegemonic power differentials, "no sexual ethic will be adequate."[71]

Through her emphasis on social justice, her affirmation of women and "homosexuals," the moral value she ascribed to the body and pleasure, and her centering of mutuality and equity in relationships, Harrison sought the inclusion of sexuality in the total understanding of Christian moral goods. Harrison's contributions, among a first foray into liberative sexual ethical discourse, reminds us that the body is not a burden; instead, the body is a source of moral knowledge and its desires can be morally good. She also led the way in the call for a clear ethics of sexuality that must transcend rules of right and wrong, and become a reflective practice attentive to the personal and communal dimensions of engaging sexuality without a resorting to abuses of power, but in reciprocity and justice. Each of these emphases asserted the value of wholeness in the

[69] Harrison, "Social Policy," 83.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 90

Christian life—a wholeness that is not only spiritual, but that extends to interpersonal relationships and the social world. She stated,

> We Christians must come to recognize that our sexuality is a foundational aspect of our total, integrated bodily well-being. It is the root of our personal integrity and it must be integrated holistically into our lifestyles and value commitments if we are to possess a deep capacity for intimacy, for powerful communication and rich interaction with others.[72]

Harrison's urgency in calling for a fuller expression of sexual ethics laid the groundwork for further feminist emphases on the body and justice, and a sexual ethics that aims toward wholeness for selves and communities.

Lisa Sowle Cahill

Lisa Sowle Cahill, as a Catholic and feminist Christian sexual ethicist, provided a moderate feminist approach that sought to prevent feminism from dismissing the good of existing Catholic teachings on relationality and sexuality. To this end, she offered evaluative criteria for Christian ethical relationships to include commitment and procreative responsibility. On the other hand, she challenged Roman Catholic teaching to expand its more rigid ideas related to same-sex relationships and the subordinate conceptions of women, while arguing for gender complementarity. She offered an appreciation of the body, while pushing back against a centering of pleasure and sexual freedom. Additionally, Cahill contributed an analysis of the sources of ethics and their usefulness. She valued the communal nature of sexuality as well as moral reflection on sexuality.

Cahill's first text related to sexual ethics was *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (1985), which provided the groundwork for her later,

[72] Harrison, "Misogyny and Homophobia," 145-146.

more comprehensive examination of sexual ethics, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (1996). *Between the Sexes* provided an analysis of the viable sources of Christian sexual ethics and expanded on her approach to the task of ethics (which she briefly practices in the final chapter). Akin to the resources of various theologians and to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, Cahill identified

> four complementary reference points for Christian ethics: the foundational texts or 'scriptures' of the faith community—the Bible; the community's 'tradition' of faith, theology, and practice; philosophical accounts of essential or ideal humanity ('normative' accounts of the human); and descriptions of what actually is and has been the case in human lives and societies ('descriptive' accounts of the human).[73]

She explored these four sources (particularly the Bible) and how they offered guidance regarding gender and sexuality, though these sources are not absolute. In citing these four, Cahill hoped to open the door to a variety of sources that could be useful in articulating Christian sexual ethics.[74] Other resources, like black women's literature and the experiences of marginalized people (as in this dissertation), are just two examples of sources that became critical to the formulation of Christian ethics even before Cahill's affirmation of the usefulness of alternative sources.

Further, Cahill proposed that the critical evaluative criteria for Christian ethics ought to be, as it has been in the past, "commitment and procreative responsibility." Her emphases on these criteria were a starting point for further conversations on what reflected morality in sexuality.[75] In both texts, as is explicated further below, Cahill promoted some ideals that buttress traditionalism in her consideration of procreation and

[73] Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 5.
[74] Ibid., 11.
[75] Ibid, 11, 152.

family, while arguing for the morality (or perhaps, non-immorality) of homosexuality. She stated, "while I would judge that the biblical literature points toward heterosexual, monogamous, lifelong, and procreative marriage as the normative or ideal institutionalization of sexual activity, I would not say that the biblical texts represent preoccupation with, or indeed much interest in, the justification or exclusion of other sexual expressions."[76] Cahill offered an inclusive approach to varying sexual expressions at a time of social and ecclesial rejection of gay and lesbian people.[77]

A point of significance, which was also identifiable in Cahill's latter work, is sexuality as a communal aspect of human existence. She articulated this communality primarily within the framing of procreativity.[78] Cahill even offered a critique of liberalism for its individualism and relativism, as well as its "legitimacy of any liaisons, sexual or otherwise, between consenting adults, so long as they do not harm others," to the neglect of a couple's "primary contribution" within community as sexual beings:

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[76] Ibid., 8.

[77] For alternative, radically inclusive views of biblically based perspectives on sexuality published during this same period, see Michael J. Clark, *A Place to Start: Toward an Unapologetic Gay Liberation Theology* (Dallas: Monument Press, 1989) and Gary David Comstock, *Gay Theology without Apology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1993). See also Dale B. Martin, *Sex and the Single Savior: Gender and Sexuality in Biblical Interpretation*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006). Regarding Catholic views on "homosexuality," the 1992 Catholic Catechism stated, "Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. […] They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved." However, "men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies" […] "must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part 3: Life in Christ, Section 2: The Ten Commandments, Chapter Two "You Shall Love Your Neighbor as yourself," Article 6: The Sixth Commandment, 2357, 2358, accessed April 2, 2019, www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a6.htm

[78] Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 139.

procreation.[79] In so doing, Cahill prioritized procreative coupling and diminished nonprocreative coupling (including that of lesbian and gay people, and in a way, couples who for medical reasons cannot or as a matter of preference will not procreate). She also limited communality by valuing it quantitatively (on the basis of reproduction), and not by the qualitative contributions coupling brings to the common good within faith communities and society.[80]

Community, for Cahill, was not only a site of commitment-centered and procreative goods, but of the process of continuous moral reflection. Likewise, moral reflection was not solely a task for those in power or for individuals, but was the work of every morally attuned Christian.[81] For example, she proposed that a process of communal reflection should be undertaken among Christians in challenging established norms like heterosexual monogamous marriage.[82] Focusing on community, a traditional emphasis that Cahill argues is consistent with New Testament teaching, enables communities to shift from "preoccupation, even obsession" with particular moral acts and toward a focus

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[79] Ibid., 141.

[80] On the other hand, Cahill argued that there were other important aspects of a sexual couple's lives together. For instance, she stated, "This is not to say that fulfillment of the sexual couple, and the depth of the relationship to which they give sexual expression, is of negligible importance, or even an inappropriate focus for Christian sexual ethics. It does imply, however, that the submergence of the communal by the interpersonal represents a distinct departure, not only from biblical and Christian views of marriage but also from those that have undergirded the institutionalization of sexuality in most human societies." Ibid., 142. Additionally, Cahill's later work *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (2000) critiqued socio-religious models of the family, evangelical-conservative and mainline-feminist, in order to expand ideas of legitimate familial forms. In the end, her proposed model incorporated same-gender relationships more emphatically than *Between the Sexes*, as well as non-kin adoptions. Further, she took race into account by appealing to black churches as sites of moral knowledge about family.

[81] Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 152.

[82] Ibid., 148.

on the entirety of the Christian life—a life that is not solely the sum of "moral acts" but more concerned with relationality with God.[83] This focus on communal moral knowledge and a shift from a rules-based to relations-based ethic is consistent with integrative values that join selves and communities together in more meaningful connections as a body of believers.[84]

In *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (1996), Cahill identified themes within Christian ethics that she felt were inadequate for the task of confronting the concerns, challenges, and oppressions that could occur in sexual relationships— themes that she felt would not be able to shape a "positive" ethic. She identified these themes as "the sexual body as pleasure-giving, the interpersonal meanings of sex, the priority of equality and freedom in defining sexual morality."[85] This critique was framed in response to the chief scholarly interventions, namely that of theologians James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow, who, according to Cahill, prioritize pleasure to the neglect of the importance of procreation, continuing her concern about the displacement of the good of procreation.[86] Arguing for a more integrated approach to sexual discourse, Cahill desired an ethic with the sexual self as a social self—namely as a parent and relational body. She notes, "It is the reproductive, economic and kin-oriented contributions of sexual partnerships, as well as social control over them, which are the major practical dimensions of the human sexual experience cross-culturally and historically."[87] Such a

[83] Ibid., 142.
[84] Ibid., 152.
[85] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 10.
[86] Ibid., 74.
[87] Ibid., 10.

perspective shows the value of a communosexual ethic, but stops short of the social self as a participant in the doing of justice or injustice. These goods of parenthood and kinship were based on traditional roles for men and women despite her suspicions around gender roles, which again hierarchized the roles that persons choose to play in society by sacralizing traditional relationships.[88] In so doing, she inadvertently, desacralized nontraditional expressions of gender and sexuality.

Cahill further critiqued "autonomous and decontextualized freedom" in sexual choice that diminished the freedom that one actually seeks is prioritizing freedom, according to Cahill, by confining one to self-centered choices. What Cahill called a feminist "selective deconstruction and adoption of universals" (like freedom, for instance) required a "critical realism" as articulated in the Aristotelian-Thomistic ethical tradition.[89] Examinations of gender and reproductive roles were needed so that choice for choice's sake would not become a guiding principle. Ultimately, she sought accountability and responsibility to Christian community and in making pleasure and freedom of choice primary themes in contemporary sexual ethics.[90]

For Cahill, all ethics are embodied ethics because the actions of ethics are through the body.[91] Cahill named the meanings of the sexual body as pleasure, reproduction, and physical intimacy. [92] While her attention to the body yielded a non-dualistic ethic related to body-spirit, this is not the case as it related to female-male bodies. Furthering her

[88] Cahill also warned against "moralities which take for granted a physical body which can 'determine' social roles as norm and rule preceding them." Cahill, *Sex, Gender*, 76.
[89] Cahill, *Sex, Gender*, 1-2.
[90] Ibid., 10-11.
[91] Ibid., 73.
[92] Ibid., 111.

critique of selective feminist deconstructions, Cahill argued, "[Gender] should not become the quick casualty of an overly zealous politics of equality-as-sameness." There is a difference between men and women, and those differences (e.g., reproductive capacity) have been a source of bonding for women that should not be discarded. [93] Because, for Cahill, gender resides in the body, the conceptions of woman and man that she forwarded are essentialist. This is partly a function of the evolving understandings of gender that were shifting in the mid-1990s but also Cahill's commitment to gender complementarity. Integration of the body with "reflection, emotions, choice, and social relations" (prime aspects of human life) carried with it a clear commitment to the order culturally prescribed by procreative gender roles.[94] Subsequently, Cahill argued that bodies must be held in balance with how culture shapes their actions.[95] Various cultures and subcultures shape bodies and their roles; still, the moral agent, in one way or another, *chooses* to which culture it will accede (which she noted postmodernists like Judith Butler do within a postmodernist culture).[96] Often this choosing reflects the ethos of the dominant culture within one's context, which may or may not be in accordance with integration, or the balance for which Cahill argued.

Along with reproduction, family was a primary outcome of sexual relationships in Cahill's ethic.[97] Family, for Cahill, is constructed through reproduction, and as stated above, she centered the types of sexual relationships that result in children. Cahill saw value in an ethic that utilized important modern values like affection and personal

[93] Ibid., 87.
[94] Ibid., 90.
[95] Ibid., 76,
[96] Ibid., 27.
[97] Ibid., 10

fulfillment in familial relationships within various cultures.[98] Cahill aimed for the consideration of a cross-cultural integration through ethical universals. The starting point of family within a sexual ethic is significant because family, in the traditional sense, is germane to humankind across the ages,[99] but her focus is inadvertently exclusive. Though Cahill wanted to focus attention on those "most excluded" from social goods as a Christian principle, the integrative value of this approach was undermined through her reliance upon too rigidly constructed notions of gender, family, and sexual partnership.

Cahill's contributions to Christian sexual ethics were especially important because of both the caution and flexibility she practiced in modifying traditions with relationships and the church in mind. Her desire was to recover what she perceived to be the best of the Catholic tradition, and to honor some ways of relating that have evolved over time. Additionally, Cahill challenged the Catholic and Protestant academy and church to shift understandings of sexuality as that which manifests not only as personal acts but communal, and that this communality is not only an approach to relationship, but a site for moral reflection.

Margaret Farley

Margaret Farley is a philosophical ethicist and a Catholic religious sister with the Sisters of Mercy, an order who commits to serve the needs of marginalized people. Her scholarly approaches to sexuality were both in dialogue with and in opposition to the religious understandings of the Catholic church. Subsequently, she engaged matters

[98] Ibid., 13.
[99] Ibid., 110.

pertinent to the evolving foci of the church: marital relationships, family, divorce, remarriage, and later same-sex relationships. She embraced the body and identified certain feminist values as normative for sexual justice, like mutuality and gender equity. In her philosophical approach to ethics, Farley sought to identify universal principles that could even act as a corrective to Christian principles.

Two of Farley's books, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (1986) and *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (2006) are worth considering in examining Farley as a sexual ethicist. Though *Just Love* is published beyond the 1999 cap for pioneering works examined in this chapter, it was necessary to include because it was a continuation of a concept first presented by Farley in 1986, just love, and frames just love relative to sexuality. In the former text, Farley fleshed out her concept of "just love" within the larger conversation about commitments and the associated duties that a person might encounter in a variety of relationships throughout their lives. *Commitments* examined just love deontologically, explored the criteria for release from commitments, and responded to the tension of when commitments clash. In the end, Farley examines these principles of commitment in light of religious tradition and faith. Because *Commitments* only partially engaged ideals that inform her sexual ethics, it is important to analyze alongside *Just Love.*

Farley elaborated what is meant by "just" in both texts, defining it as a measure for the suitableness of particular expressions in varying relationships.[100] To be just is

[100] Margaret A. Farley, *Personal Commitments: Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1986), 82.

simply to "[render] what is 'due'," what is right and fitting.[101] A just love considers the multiplicity of a person's positionality, locatedness, humanity, potentiality—their "concrete reality"— in order to affirm it.[102] This recognition and affirmation was a principle, though not an ideal,[103] in which justice and love were intertwined in their expression: "a framework that is not justice and love, but justice in loving and in the actions which flow from that love."[104] In *Just Love*, she mentioned that justice "is not a cold notion apart from love; it is what guides, protects, nourishes, and forms love, and what makes love just and true. It concerns our loves and our actions; it concerns the sort of persons we want to be."[105] In the latter text, Farley offered a distinct perspective that attempted to garner insight from various religious and cultural traditions while conceiving of what is just in interpersonal and political terms. She probed these various cultural traditions, as well as both interpersonal and social realms of existence because of her philosophical approach to seeking universally applicable principles.

Farley set her principle for sexual ethics and tests them by exploring just sex in the following relationship structures: marriage and family, same-sex relationships (and the respect of them), divorce, and remarriage.[106] In other words, the institution of marriage and things associated therewith. Farley, akin to Cahill, ideated the social in

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[101] Ibid. Interestingly, rendering what is due appears situational rather than universal, an aim that Farley sought as a philosophical ethicist.
[102] Ibid., 81.
[103] Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 209, 200 (n45).
[104] Ibid., 207.
[105] Ibid., 311.
[106] Ibid., 245-310, Farley argued, "same sex oriented persons as well as their activities can and should be respected whether or not they have a choice to be otherwise." This challenged discourse that is centered on the question of whether (or on the conditional affirmation that) persons are born with same gender desire. Ibid., 295.

sexuality as fundamentally intertwined with institutional family. Farley also identified seven norms of sexual justice: do no unjust harm, free consent of partners, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness (which was an alternative discourse to procreativity), in addition to social justice.[107] Though social justice was mentioned, Farley's commitments further reflected her conception of justice in love as not comprehensively attuned to systemic concerns as to interpersonal concerns.

For instance, in drawing a comparison of sexuality with pressing social concerns, Farley stated,

> the sexual has threatened to take over the moral focus of whole generations of persons. […] All of this is to the detriment of concerns about economic injustice, the oppression of whole peoples, political dishonesty, even theft and the taking of life… Despite the risk, then, of escalating the moral significance of sex, the need for a sexual ethic cannot be completely dismissed."[108]

Such a juxtaposition speaks to the disintegration that exists where privilege and power prevail, even within Farley's own argument. If, as Nelson posits, sexuality is ingratiated and is inseparable from who we are as humans and there are injustices grounded in sexuality, then its moral significance cannot be overestimated. If sexuality is a part of the "oppression of whole peoples" and often interlocked with "concerns about economic justice," then sexuality cannot be extracted and treated independently of the other intersecting, sometimes oppressive, aspects of the human experience. This instance marks the need for the experiences of the marginalized to be centered for the accessibility of an ethic to the whole of the community by considering the concerns of those most wholly impacted by oppressions.

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[107] Ibid., 231.
[108] Ibid., 12-13.

On the other hand, Farley argued that sexual ethics must include an analysis of power, particularly with attention to history that marks patterns of inequity, like the fact of "the unrelenting sexual abuse of women."[109] A study of history certainly reveals harmful patterns, but also allows us to examine power in a former context in order to find helpful patterns, strategies, and differing lenses that shaped people groups' pursuit of the good. As Foucault notes, "'sex' and 'sexuality' are historical constructs, dependent on a particular configuration of power in a specific historical context. Hence, any insight into sex must come out of historical study."[110] Such a view of the significance of history and of power illumined the necessity for a historical analysis of particular marginalized people's experiences (which Farley examined with attention to women and persons in same-sex relationships) and alternative lenses for constructing ethics. This attentiveness to history can foster a sense of integration in a cross-generational sense of enduring communities in pursuit of the good for their gender and sexual selves.

Farley spoke directly to the problem of spirit-body dualism through her notion of "transcendent embodiment," which she explored through the common terms utilized by other theologians "embodied spirits" and "inspirited bodies."[111] Even her use of both terms employing a forward slash so that there was the sense that neither the body nor the spirit should be hierarchized. This framework, for Farley, is "the basis for a comprehensive approach to human flourishing."[112] With an orientation toward flourishing, Farley warned of disunity—"lack of internal unity between body and spirit"

[109] Ibid., 23.
[110] Quoted in Ibid., 19.
[111] Ibid., 116.
[112] Ibid., 118.

wherein bodies are viewed as "burdens, limits, adversaries." Bodies, according to Farley, are often viewed in an antagonistic manner because they experience "(1) profound suffering, (2) objectification, (3) aging and dying, and (4) […] what we often call a 'divided self.'"[113] While suffering and deterioration of the body are recognized parts of the human experience and objectification is an injustice, it is the fourth source of disunity that is particularly compelling and most astutely reflects a disintegrative trait of life ,[114] namely if the division is unaddressed.

Farley defined the "divided self" as an occurrence when the body and the spirit's desires exist at cross purposes.[115] I would like to distinguish her sense of dis/unity from my idea of disintegration and integration. Farley's concept was rooted in addressing dualism through "one-ness" between body and spirit, a response to the problem of duality identified within Western philosophical discourse.[116] The concept of integration goes beyond the individual's relationship to one's self and the oneness of the individual, yet it is inclusive of this much needed bridging of the dualist divide. The social structures that yield divided selves and communal inspirited bodies/embodied spirits warrant analysis and have a need for integrative values as much as individual selves in relationship to these structures. I locate "integration" in terms of striving toward wholeness and healing that not only enables integrates within the self, but also with the community, all of nature, and the Divine.

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[113] Ibid., 119-120.
[114] Objectification does not need to be internalized, and could indicate disintegration within the community without reflecting the state of the recipient.
[115] Farley, *Just Love*, 126.
[116] Ibid., 116-117.

Farley introduced the need to explicitly couple that which is just with love, and in the process, dynamized what had been considered the static category of love. Her ethic pushed beyond romanticism and unaccountable love, toward a just love that sought to affirm and possesses within it a deep sense of responsibility. Further, she poignantly argued for the integration of body and spirit that did not conceive of one without the other, and the aspects of the self worked together. Farley's understanding of embodiment spoke to the harmony of self that is inherent in the human experience, including community.

Christine E. Gudorf

As a Catholic feminist ethicist, Christine E. Gudorf, approached a variety of issues related to social justice and human rights, women's bodily autonomy, and patriarchy within the church and its teachings. Like Cahill, Gudorf analyzed the sources of ethics, particularly as it related to valuing experience and the sciences and devaluing the primacy of tradition. She continued the liberative critique of dualism and the demonization of sexual pleasure. Gudorf offered a relations-centered ethic over what she termed as an "acts-centered" ethics (which may be aptly described as ruled-based), and like the other liberative scholars, valued community as a significant aspect of the self.

In *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (1994), Gudorf observed that the contemporary sexual ethic at work in Christian discourse was "unworkable" because it was "not readily intelligible to the general Christian public."[117] Gudorf approached this problem within sexual ethics by interrogating its resources and

[117] Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 1.

the weight allotted to them in contemporary Christian scholarly and ecclesial discourse. This argument grew out of a critique of Cahill's *Between the Sexes* and the "disproportionate weight" Gudorf believed Cahill placed on theological tradition, despite its "antisexual attitudes."[118]

The ethos found in traditionalism and evident through outdated and sexist sexual codes required revisiting. Gudorf argued, "We are still teaching a sexual code based in fear of the body and of sexuality, in understandings of sexual virtue as the repression of bodily desires by the force of the rational will, on physicality, especially sexuality, as an obstacle to spirituality, and on women as lacking reason and only possessing the image of God through connection to men."[119] While she critiqued the sexual code within Catholic doctrine, such sexism, disembodiment, dualism, and repression extended to Protestant Christian sexual ethics more broadly. Cahill's resources, Gudorf argued, are insufficient in countering the anti-sexual and misogynist biases imbedded within the four sources.[120] Instead, what Gudorf considered effective is an ethic that regarded science and experience alongside the primary tenets of the gospel.[121] In explicating the outcomes of holding values contrary to the gospel, Gudorf described communal disintegration and the harm it causes individuals and communities as sexual ethics "diverge from […] its life-affirming source [central Judaic and Christian affirmations of creation, life, and an incarnate messiah], [and] become responsible for innumerable deaths, the stunting of

[118] Ibid., 5. Gudorf identified Cahill's four sources as "scripture, theological tradition, philosophical accounts of the human, and descriptive accounts of the lived reality of persons and societies." They are likewise identified: Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 5.
[119] Gudorf, *Body, Sex*, 2-3.
[120] Ibid., 6.
[121] Ibid., 1.

souls, the destruction of relationships, and the distortion of human communities."[122] This harm warranted a shift found in Gudorf's approach to resources which rested on her methodological presupposition that sexual ethics must not begin with the tradition, but with sexuality—in the sciences and especially human experience.[123]

The intervention was a crucial one as it began with experience as a means of rejecting harmful parts of the tradition. Gudorf suggested that when tradition acted as a limit to embracing more integrative values in ethics, tradition was worth looking beyond and perhaps dismissing in favor of values that more fully reflected the ethical aims of a Christian community. Gudorf proposed reshaping the Christian sexual tradition toward "integrat[ing] our sexual experiences into our broader human experience, which is our principal resource for discerning who God is and how God works in our world." To distance ourselves from our experience as sexual beings is to risk distorting our discernment related to God. Gudorf's alternative starting point aimed to aid in the revision of primary doctrines in order to shift Christian sexual tradition at its very foundations.[124]

It is not only the role of tradition, but also scripture, that Gudorf interrogated. She noted that while many Christians perceived scripture as "revealed truth," this resource for Christian moral reflection could sometimes be "counter-revelatory" and required critical engagement if it is to be useful within Christian sexual ethics.[125] Like Cahill's, Gudorf's approach welcomed communal reflection, and subsequently an evolving relationship to

[122] Ibid., 2.
[123] Ibid., 3.
[124] Ibid., 24.
[125] Ibid., 8-9.

scripture. Her critique extended to ethics that could be identified as rooted in traditionalism for their "legalistic, apologetic approach"[126] to Christian moral framings of sex and sexuality. She proposed, very practically, the need "to connect contradictory texts to the conflicting acts they legitimate in order to demonstrate the necessity for choosing between the meanings of texts."[127] This demonstration of communal moral agency encouraged deeper engagement with sacred texts, even dismissing those scriptures which yielded acts that countered chosen ethical aims. The answer to a problematic text was not another text or a counter-argument via scripture, but experience—namely, positive ones.[128] For Gudorf, the challenge was not the resources themselves, but how the resources interacted as they pertain to particular sexual ethical concerns. Her approach enabled a consideration of differing resources for ethics and additional sources that reflected more holistically how ethics are informed.

As briefly noted above, an urgent task of contemporary Christian sexual ethics was the reclaiming of the body and of pleasure as goods in alignment with the feminist thrust led by Harrison. To negate the embodied experience, including that of pleasure, was to diminish an essential part of what it was to be human and to deny a good through which many other goods were experienced. We laugh and work and play in our bodies, and we often experience pleasure through them. Yet, when it comes to analyzing the evil of sex and sexuality, many perspectives committed to traditionalism locate evil within sexual pleasure.[129] Conversely, Gudorf framed pleasure as a premoral good— "good,

[126] Ibid., 2.
[127] Ibid., 8-9.
[128] Ibid., 13.
[129] Ibid., 81.

before we morally evaluate its role in any particular situation"[130]—and believed this to be a step that Christian morality must take.[131] She noted the slippery slope in defining pleasure as a good when it seems at times that one person's pleasure is another person's pain. According to Gudorf, it was, in fact, the evil stimuli,[132] the evil purposes that tainted these acts, not the need for pleasure itself that was not good.

Further, the body and its rights to personhood and moral agency were essential to Gudorf's construction. The body, particularly that of women, has a right to be free from the violence, patriarchy, and thingification[133] that has led to isolation from and a fractured relationship to the self and community. For Gudorf, the answer to these disintegrative factors was embodiment, asserting that

> 1) bodily experience can reveal the divine, 2) affectivity is as essential as rationality to true Christian love, 3) Christian love exists not to bind autonomous selves, but as the proper form of connection between beings who become human persons in relation, and 4) the experience of body pleasure is important in creating the ability to trust and love others, including God.[134]

For Gudorf, the body was not a hindrance to the good of the self, the community, or the Divine, but rather, was an impetus and conduit for the good in Christian life.

Like Harrison, Gudorf recognized how Christianity's traditionalism via dualism not only fragmented body and spirit, but in so doing, compromised bodyright. Gudorf drew a direct correlation between the diminished recognition of bodily autonomy and patriarchy. Children, women, and men in the military, namely those at the intersections of

[130] Ibid., 114.
[131] Ibid., 89, 90.
[132] Ibid., 91.
[133] Ibid., 161, 163, 204.
[134] Ibid., 218.

race and class, are most negatively impacted by this violation of the body.[135] According to Gudorf, this right to autonomy should have belonged to all "ordinarily competent individuals," but not for the sake of holding independence as an end, but rather, connectivity with other humans and the world.[136] This focus on interconnectedness extended to the political realm. Also, like Harrison, Gudorf was attentive to public policy in thinking of the relevance of a useful sexual ethic from a Christian lens, namely so that Christianity could provide relevant moral insights to the broader public discourse and practices.[137] Such an approach spoke to integration for its consideration of the social nature of sexuality, as well as of the community beyond Christians. Instead, it was attentive to our pluralist society.

Gudorf explicated disintegration within the self as disintegration of community. She claimed, "the lack of connection in society—the lack of community—has already diminished the self by diminishing its relations; practices of self-denial can accelerate that diminishment."[138] Gudorf linked this disintegration to the sorts of sexual ethics that are rooted in the denial of pleasure and desire—a "sexual moral minimalism" based in self-denial that often reflected the "do not" of sexual ethics rather than the "how to." [139] Such approaches located sexuality merely in sex acts and in control of the sexual self, rather than in terms of connectivity and communal relationality. Gudorf argued instead for a virtue-centered ethic. This ethical move toward a more "'relation-centered' and not

[135] Ibid., 162.
[136] Ibid., 201.
[137] Ibid., 1.
[138] Ibid., 99.
[139] Ibid., 15.

an 'act-centered'" or rules-based ethic acted in juxtaposition to Christian sexual ethics that focused on proscribed behaviors to define morality.[140]

Gudorf challenged Christian ethics to adopt approaches to sexuality that were able to have impacts in the lives of adherents to Christianity. She desired an ethic that was understandable and relatable because it would connect at the level of experience. Gudorf also valued the advances made in scientific study as resources for communal moral reflection. Her approach welcomed various sources for moral reflection, and disrupted normative ways of ethical knowing. Consequently, the challenge that Gudorf posed was for communities to adopt ethics that would not be directive, but welcome deeper discernment for the formulation of ethics that equip and are useful for the whole self and Christian communities.

Marvin M. Ellison

As a Protestant Christian social ethicist and publicly gay man, Marvin M. Ellison made an intervention in Christian sexual ethics by theorizing sexual and embodied right-relatedness in a variety of connections as erotic justice.[141] In this way, his ethics were attentive to power relations and what it meant to do justice. To this end, he offered erotic justice as a counter to the sex-negativity, heterocentricism, compulsory heterosexuality, and sexual violence and coercion found within contemporary sexual ethics. His critique extended to traditionalist, libertarian, and liberal political factions, as well as to Christian liberalism.

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[140] Ibid., 14.

[141] Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 3, 15.

Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality (1996) conceptualized justice through right-relating and, in liberative fashion, analyzed power imbalances while arguing for the centering of people groups that have been marginalized. Ellison's analysis signaled the ways that one's personal sexuality and understanding of the self were impacted by social injustice, which created disintegration among individuals and communities because these social oppressions distorted human sexuality.[142] Traditionalist Christian sexual ethics tended to frame such confusion and distortion as personal problems remedied by conforming to interpretations of biblical norms. In contrast, Ellison was careful to locate the ethical concern within the system that produced it, rather than "blaming the victim." As an early contributor to gay and lesbian interventions in Christian ethics and theology, Ellison brought attention to the cries of gay and lesbian communities through his critique of heterosexism. He also highlighted sexism, racism, and the plight of transgender people within his understanding of sexual and gender discrimination. Ellison's ethic encouraged "listening to, and learning from, those struggling on the margins to survive on the underside of history"[143] and bringing their histories to the fore. Though Ellison acknowledged how lesbian, gay and bisexual people have deemed bodies sacred through their authentic embodiment,[144] it is a challenge in this text to see the moral agency of the people groups experiencing sexual marginalization (particularly people of color), not only as resisters to oppression, but as communities with strategies toward integrated wellness and thriving.

[142] Ibid., 1, 2.
[143] Ibid., 11.
[144] Ibid., 120.

Ellison offered a justice-centered vision in arguing for a more "integrated way of thinking about sexuality" as a response to liberalism's dichotomy of the personal and social,[145] identifying his own contribution as a "post-liberal Christian sexual ethic."[146] Like Cahill, Ellison's ethic sought to respond to a theological liberalism that had a "soft love ethic" and placed sexuality outside of the realm of the political by creating a dichotomy between the personal and the social, thinking and feeling, the self and the other.[147] Outside of a theological analysis, Ellison also critiqued traditionalist,[148] liberal, and libertarian approaches to sexuality that largely directed contemporary social moral discourse. Ellison argued, each faction proposes "competing messages about good and bad sex, but each voice reflects fear about sexuality and seeks control directly (traditionalists), in reaction to (libertarians), or because of ambivalence about sex (liberal)."[149]

According to Ellison, traditionalists, akin to what Gudorf says of conservatives, longed for identification of clear norms aimed at curbing sexual urges via heteropatriarchal and procreation-centered sex acts.[150] These values were often found among "the right" or religious conservatives who "culturally [reassert] white, affluent, male hegemony as the necessary social mechanism for preserving both the family (read 'male dominated, affluent families') and the capitalist social order" and considerably

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[145] Ibid., 2, 12.
[146] Ibid., 12.
[147] Ibid., 7-8.
[148] My understanding of a traditionalism is systemic and reflects an individual- and rules-based approaches to sexual ethics, while Ellison framed traditionalist as "the right" or religious conservatives. By his definitions, I would argue the traditionalists, liberals, and libertarians in considerable ways hold disintegrative values.
[149] Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 19.
[150] Ibid., 20.

shaped the social moral discourse of the 1990s.[151] As this traditionalist view was not limited to solely Christian discourse, it was a category wherein we saw the racist, sexist, and classist implications of sexual injustice as it informs the sociopolitical realm. Liberalism stood in contrast to traditionalist rules while reifying some of the same sex-negativity, sexism, and heterosexism that derived from a fear of sexual nonconformity and suspicion of the body and sexuality.[152] Libertarians "argue for unrestricted sexual freedom and the easing of institutional regulations about sex" and "sexuality magically freed from social consequences, and therefore, exempt from moral evaluation." With Gudorf, Ellison also critiqued sexual moral minimalism, which he locates among libertarians, that "fits neatly with patriarchal antieroticism" [and] "personal inadequacy" narratives.[153] These groups all reflect an ethic that limits accountability within community because of its individualistic focus.

Like Cahill and Gudorf before him, Ellison was careful to challenge the binary fallacy of an autonomous sexuality, which does not impact and is not impacted by others. His understanding of justice love called us to lean into the relationality of the sexual self and to pursue an ethics of relationality that was attentive to our relationship to our own bodies, as well as to the relationship of multiple bodies in society. He argued, in the embodying of justice love we move toward "an intimate co-mingling of our longing for personal well-being in our bodies and right-relatedness with others throughout the social order."[154] Such integrative values sought to foster connectivity as each member pursued

[151] Ibid., 12.
[152] Ibid., 20-21.
[153] Ibid., 20, 80.
[154] Ibid., 115.

the good for themselves and the broader community. For Ellison, doing justice was an embodied way of being that is intimately connected in a loving holistic ecology with God, neighbor, and the earth.[155]

Those areas in need of justice, Ellison identified as sex-negativity, heterocentrism and compulsory heterosexuality, and sexual violence and coercion. These concerns cause disintegration within the self, interpersonal relationships, and communities primarily because they hinge upon hegemonic power and dualism (of gender and body). Gender dualism, in which men are hierarchically in relationship to women, is framed as the "proper gender order"[156] and was translated within the Protestant framework to make this hegemonic relationship between men and women "complementary." Complementarity equated to women's chastity in the service of marriage to men, and as illuminated through the analysis of Cahill's commitment to this ideology, is essentialist in its treatment of gender to the detriment of women. Heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality suggest the containment of sexual desire through marriage, and again through the control of women's sexuality and bodies. Like Harrison, Ellison drew the correlations between the oppression of gay and lesbian people and women of all sexual orientations socially conditioned to maintain the norm of man-centered, hetero-supremacy. Erotic justice countered these oppressive norms by honoring embodiment and difference, and opening the doors for empowerment and equality.[157] The vision that Ellison offered of erotic justice challenged models of sexual ethics that exclude an analysis of *how* relationships are enacted and cause alienation of any kind. The

[155] Ibid., 14.
[156] Ibid., 25.
[157] Ibid., 28-29.

implications of neglecting erotic justice are further disintegrative outcomes that "violate the earth and/or people's bodies, offend the human spirit, and block authentic community."[158]

Ellison further elaborated the integrative qualities of erotic justice by linking justice and sexual pleasure. Like Gudorf, Ellison critiqued acts of self-denial that construct a sexual ethic "upon human suffering and body alienation."[159] Pleasure may act as an ethical guide, a "[crucial] component of Christian moral formation,"[160] not a danger. Such traditionalism in Christian sexual ethics throughout the history of Christianity yielded a people who "do not trust themselves or their feelings," and internalized hatred. He argued instead for "a liberation ethic [which] rejects the assumption that delight and pleasure are morally frivolous and fraught with danger."[161] It rejected possessive and controlling relationships that hinder "authentic pleasure" and allowed for persons to "belong securely to themselves as persons in their own right [so that] they then relate to others out of strength and personal integrity, rather than from an inner emptiness."[162] The disintegration that is the rejection of pleasure and the subsequent inability to relate with erotic equality negates community.[163]

Through his critiques of the various ideological camps engaging sexuality-talk delineated above, Ellison sought to bridge dichotomies that fracture and compartmentalize human sexuality in relation to the self and the communities to which

[158] Ibid., 3.
[159] Ibid., 78.
[160] Ibid., 77.
[161] Ibid., 80.
[162] Ibid., 84-85.
[163] Ibid., 77.

the selves belong. Ellison also takes the relationship between that which is just/justice and love a step further by considering the implications of sexual norms when imposed particularly upon marginalized bodies. He called Christian sexual ethics to *do* justice and invited ethicists and Christian communities to ask what racism, heterosexism, sexism, classism and other oppressions, as well as their alternatives, might look like in constructions of moral sexuality.

Integration and Community-Centered Ethics

As Cahill stated in *Between the Sexes*, "every sexual ethics presupposes a social vision of some sort, which accounts, at least in part, for the coloring sexuality receives."[164] The visions that Harrison, Cahill, Farley, Gudorf, and Ellison proposed differed in a variety of ways, but also together reflected significant shifts in the themes of Christian sexual ethics. A central problem of sexual ethics grounded in traditionalism was dualism of the body and gender. The focus on embodiment, including bodyright and reexamining the good of pleasure, opposed ethics that hierarchized the spirit over the body. Conceptions of gender shaped by traditionalism were challenged through the feminist emphases on equality of the sexes and the socially constructed understandings of gender, as well as the conception of healthy relationships as those reflecting relational reciprocity, equity, and mutuality. While Harrison, Gudorf, and Ellison largely critiqued the Christian sexual tradition, Cahill recalled the traditional goodness of procreation, commitment, and of family (arguably, primarily heterosexual). Farley likewise affirmed commitment, while pointing to the value of fruitfulness as a resulting good of relationship. Each scholar raised questions of the authority of sources for Christian sexual

[164] Cahill, *Between the Sexes*, 140.

ethics, and considered the communal implications of sexuality as responsibility, accountability, and space of continued reflection. Farley and Ellison offered thorough analyses of justice, but from differing lenses as a philosophical ethicist and social ethicist, respectively. Finally, each solidified the importance of historical analysis as both an analytical context and an established resource for contemporary ethics.

In exploring these shared themes, the movements in ethics toward an integrative model that centers justice and community are typified. Integration, justice, and community all orient sexual ethics within the realm of the social. The pioneering Christian sexual ethicists presented ethics as a social enterprise, because ethics addresses the question of how humans ought to relate to one another. Some expressions of communal ethics have fallen prey to the social evils of racism, sexism, cis-sexism, classism, and ableism, as well as other abuses of power. Even in these critical interventions by Harrison, Cahill, Farley, Gudorf, and Ellison that center community and seeks to embrace the margins, whiteness and gender essentialism limit the expansiveness of being communal and of like integrative values.

The problem of whiteness and its correlative anti-blackness in Christian sexual ethics is especially challenging because of the hyper-focus on black bodies in the U.S. white fantastic hegemonic imagination[165] and consciousness that shows up as racism both in lived experience and in the disciplinary conversations. Black bodies have always mattered in the U.S. as a site of contestation, hypersexualization, exploitation, and more that has most wholly led to the fragmentation and disintegration of black individuals and

[165] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 17.

communities, as well as those proximate to blackness. Yet, within the bastions of meaning making and intellectual exploration, in realms that desire an exploration of justice and Christian commitments thereunto, in spaces that consider the sacredness of bodies, anti-blackness prevailed. This un-being in the search for morally sound practices of sexual being compounds the disintegration. Still, besides the problems that whiteness has caused black bodies, they remain sites of creativity, resistance, thriving, and moral fecundity that have been absent with the exception of the notable contributions named here and have a place in theorizing Christian sexual ethics, particularly those black bodies that are further de-moralized by their queerness. Their absences speak to the need for a black queer ethic of sexuality that values the experiences of black queer people and gathers the effects of fragmentation toward a more integrative ethic.

In particular, it was the experiences of white cis-gender women (many named above) that largely directed the Christian sexual and gender discourse[166] and created a void in dialogue about community and listening to the margins. While Ellison named racism frequently as a tool of sexual injustice, even within "racist patriarchal Christianity,"[167] there was an inattentiveness to the implications of race in formulating a sexual ethic and a lack of particularity in elucidating the potentiality of justice love on black, as well as Latinx, Asian, Native American and more people (chapter three will explore black theologians and ethicists attentive to race and sexuality in the 1990s and

[166] Though Farley's chapter in *Just Love* included a chapter on cross-cultural engagement, and Cahill also named the importance of considering other cultures in the construction of ethics, in thinking of the U.S. context, it is a notable absence that the voices of lesbian and gay people of color, both within and outside of religion, were not extensively included in their analyses.
[167] Ellison, *Erotic Justice*, 114.

beyond). Additionally, despite emphases on inclusion of lesbian and gay people, most of the foundational contemporary Christian sexual ethical conceptions explored above centered in on narrow conceptions of family and procreative norms that were inaccessible for gay and lesbian Christians. Additionally, though plausible given the era, these pioneering sources largely constructed ethics within the realms of gender conformity and normativity. Though gender studies have developed considerably since their time of writing, and continues to rapidly evolve, the shortcoming is worth mentioning for the gay and lesbian gender nonconformists and transgender identities openly present in U.S. society since the 1960s.[168] Without constant interrogation, even liberative sexual ethics can become oppressive.

At the center of the black queer Christian sexual ethic that I propose is the notion of community. By community I do not merely mean a group of people in close proximity to one another, whether geographically or ideologically. While geographic and ideological similitude aids in the formulation of community, what holds greater significance is the willingness of persons to see one another and to address injustice that harms one another, to acknowledge one another's humanity and create space for one another's flourishing. Community may happen amongst members of churches or other religious gathering places; it may also exist in a nightclub or in a neighborhood, like 1920s black queer Harlem, New York that became a haven (sometimes safe, sometimes

[168] Ellison's later work takes a more critical view toward relational normativity, with considerable room for exploration as it relates to transgender identities. See Marvin M. Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), in addition to his various edited volumes.

not) where, at its best, persons could develop a sense of responsibility and accountability to one another and could be held in loving space by other members of the community.

When the conceptualization of sexual ethics sets its sights on regulating the behavior of individual persons, without regard to the wholeness of the community to which these individuals belong, it undermines the ways that individual sexual practices have communal implications; arguably, such an undermining is an aim of traditionalism. Communities consist of various subjectivities, and ethics must be attentive to that fact by examining power dynamics related to race, class, gender, sexual orientation (and more) in order for the ethics to aim toward the good in a more comprehensive way. Exclusive emphasis on the individual yields an incomplete good that may lead to pious behaviors, while lacking the spirit of justice love that only arises from relationality.

Even when an ethic is rooted in a particular marginal community's experience, it offers valuable principals and framings for the diversity of entire communities, even those who practice marginalizing others. Such an approach to ethics breaks down othering, hegemonic delineations and enables communal reflections from all parties as a communal resource for human thriving and just relations. Ellison noted the import of an ethic that seeks to address injustices within the places of power and that is rooted in connectivity with the "other," enabling those who benefit from harmful ethics "to see how injustice is present in their own experience and diminishes their humanity."[169] Therefore, the ethic I propose is not an ethic solely for a counter-community of black queer people. Rather it is an ethic that is grounded in the experiences of black queer

[169] Ibid., 11.

people but holds transformative potential for communal relations in the broader society as Christians seek to form integrative modes of being and becoming in community.

Chapter 2: A Historical Site of Integrative Inquiry: 1920s Black Queer Harlem

"It is by listening to those voices that are not being heard that we begin to see what moral complacency and conventional wisdom cannot yet see."[170]

- Beverly Wildung Harrison

What does it mean to theorize ethics from amongst those deemed immoral by the traditionalism of Christian ethical framings and those largely absent from liberative ethical conceptualizations? I intend to signify "meaning" not only in the philosophical sense. More particularly, I wonder about the meaning that is made when communities are deepened, expanded, and troubled and personal piety is not made the *telos*, but rather when the process of communal becoming is prioritized. I wonder about the meanings to be found when whiteness and sexual and gender conformity are not centered. Integrated communality offers both a striving toward wholeness and right relationality as the Christian sexual ethicists elaborated in chapter one affirmed. Those pioneering insights provide support for the exploration of integration as a helpful means of constructing approaches to a thriving and flourishing communosexual ethic. Because a black queer ethic is based upon communal relations, it is appropriate to further explore integration through the lens of a particular community.

Through a black queering of Christian sexual ethics, I choose to locate this integrative communosexual ethic among the abject, from the experiences of those pushed to the margins. As Young affirmed, "the irruption of black queers as moral agents not only troubles the category of 'moral' (since the intersection of racial and sexual

[170] Beverly Wildung Harrison, "Doing Christian Ethics," in *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics*, eds. Elizabeth Bounds, Pamela Brubaker, Jane E. Hicks, Marilyn J. Legge, Rebecca Todd Peters, and Traci C. West (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 36.

subjugation has generally rendered the black queer subject as morally reprobate), but it also provides us a new moral lens through which to critique norms" (particularly related to family for her inquiry; particularly related to Christian community for mine).[171] Critiquing these dominant norms creates space for liberative strategies of wellbeing and resistance. Further, utilizing Black queer Harlem as both an instance of an integrative ethics at work and as a means of "inform[ing] and alter[ing]" Christian sexual ethics, serves as a challenge to both Christian and scholarly white supremacy.[172] This is a strategic discursive, political, and theo-ethical move intended to call forth the value of black queer life, and to highlight the disintegrative values that are found in Christianity's dominant sexual ethical frameworks.

Black queer Harlem in the 1920s serves as an unstable (queer) site of both fecund exploration and of error. It was not an ethical utopia, and does not need to be in order to reflect integrative values and useful, redefined meanings of the good. This chapter holds spaces of black queerness in Harlem— blues environs, rent parties, and Hamilton Lodge Balls— as counterpublics. The spaces themselves are explored to reveal the integrative strategies and ways of being black queer community with the understanding that the spaces communities create are not intelligible apart from the community members. To speak of the space is to speak of the community itself. Understanding these settings as counterpublics within which a particular black queer community developed integrative values enables an examination of black queer community as a counter locus of power to

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[171] Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 60.
[172] Traci C. West, "Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2004): 46.

disintegrative norms through its own power to name and make itself.[173] As performance theorist, Shane Vogel noted, "Historians have excavated 1920s Harlem as a space of gay and lesbian subcultural formation, tracing the extensive social networks of drag balls, 'pansy parades,' buffet flats, and rent parties that provided […] spectacles of racialized sexual deviance and knowledge production."[174] As a race, gender, and sexual counterpublic, black queer Harlem offers unconventional discourse that casts a pursuit-worthy alternative vision.

In this chapter, I will elaborate the meta-setting of 1920s black Harlem, which shaped black queer resistance and sometimes countered black queer values, but also of which black queer Harlem was an integral part. Much of what took place in black queer Harlem, in terms of community-making, was because of and in spite of its relationship to the larger public. I offer an overview of the social and political factors that converged in Harlem to make it such a significant setting among black people in the U.S., followed by an examination of black queer Harlem as a subaltern counterpublic. I elaborate the three primary settings in which black queer people created community, while formulating creative responses to the conditions imposed upon them and with which they interacted to create possibility for themselves.

Setting the Context of Black Harlem

In the 1920s, a neighborhood located within arguably the most prominent metropolis in the United States became a bastion of Black social activism and political

[173] As a counterpublic, black queer Harlem's spaces stood in juxtaposition to the "private sphere" where sexuality was often relegated in Western society and in Christian understandings beholden to traditionalism, including 1920s Harlem in both instances.
[174] Shane Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 18-19.

leadership, a center for the creation of black intellectual, cultural and artistic expression, and a burgeoning "Black Mecca."[175] At the same time, Harlem also became a prime space for queer becoming—pushing the boundaries of gender and sexuality in subtle and not so subtle ways. Yet, this becoming was incremental and not without resistance.

The factors, both within and outside of Harlem, that created the need for Black Harlemites' activism, leadership, and communality were often harsh ones. According to historian Jill Watts, "despite the booming war industry and the glitter of Harlem, the vast majority of blacks in Harlem lived in destitution."[176] Still, they created and established multiple means of addressing the racism and economic disparity that challenged their community, while wielding their social and political agency. Even aspects of what some considered the "private life" (within the realms of sex and sexuality) would not escape the winds of change. For many in Harlem, the 1920s became an era of living and organizing in creative and tested ways, which established the neighborhood as a renowned center for civic and social modes of Black resistance to and survival within

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[175] Harlem was frequently referred to as a Mecca for black people. The phrase gained popularity in the 1920s, connoting a city to which people flocked in large droves with religious-like devotion (i.e., as a pious Muslim would to the holy city, Mecca, Saudi Arabia). Harlem Renaissance novelist Wallace Thurman referred to Harlem as "the Mecca of the New Negro" in his *Negro Life in New York's Harlem* (1927). Harlem Renaissance intellect and activist James Weldon Johnson, also said of Harlem, "[it] is indeed the great Mecca for the sight-seer, the pleasure-seeker, the curious, the adventurous, the enterprising, the ambitious, and the talented of the whole Negro world." James Weldon Johnson, "Harlem: The Culture Capital," in *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 21. In "The New Frontage on American Life" (1925), Charles Spurgeon Johnson's essay, he refers to the neighborhood as "the Mecca of Negroes the country over." Charles Spurgeon Johnson, "The Negro Frontage on American Life," *The New Negro,* ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone,1992), 15-16.

[176] Jill Watts, *God, Harlem, USA: The Father Divine Story,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 43.

disenfranchising space. The vitality of the political and intellectual movements that arose in Harlem nurtured an ethos for communality that actively challenged racial, economic, gender and sexual norms.

The Making of a Black Mecca

The Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s saw an explosion in its black population, though the seeds began to foment since the turn of the century. Exploitation in the housing market and violent racial clashes (with civilians and police) during the race riots of 1900[177] and 1905[178] led Black inhabitants of Manhattan to move uptown, from the Tenderloin and San Juan Hill areas below Central Park, concentrating in this relatively small but increasingly accessible area north of the park. Inevitably, this relocation caused many White (primarily Italian and Jewish) Harlemites to follow suit, evacuating the neighborhood with haste. Prominent families of White legislators, businessmen, and other well-to-do families[179] left Harlem behind. Further, what began as a plan to create

[177] "Black New Yorkers' violent encounters with civilian and police violence during the race riot of 1900, as well as entrenched overcrowding and landlord exploitation in the Tenderloin and then San Juan Hill, engendered the migration to Harlem." The "race riot" took place in the Tenderloin district, beginning with an incident at West 41st St. and 8th Ave., when a black man attempting to protect his partner from a solicitation arrest by a plainclothes cop killed the cop, and a "white mob—comprised of civilians and police officers" responded days later by attacking "black pedestrians from thirty-fourth street to forty-second street along Broadway, seventh, and Eighth Avenues." Shannon King, *Whose Harlem Is This, Anyway?: Community Politics and Grassroots Activism during the New Negro Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), *2*.

[178] Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem: A Cultural Portrait, 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), 45. An upstate New York newspaper read, "'San Juan Hill' […] was the scene Friday night [of] a fierce race riot which required the reserves of no less than 17 police precincts, numbering more than 250 men, to quell after many shots had been fired and several persons had been seriously injured." "Race Riot in New York," *Springville Journal* (Jul 20 1905), 8.

[179] Gilbert Osofsky, *Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto; Negro New York, 1890-1930* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 79.

more rental property for white people was foiled by the inaccessibility of the neighborhood to public transportation. In the excess of housing, black real-estate businessman, Phillip Payton, seized upon the opportunity by industriously approaching white landlords and suggesting that they rent to colored tenants, and later founding the Afro-American Renting Company in order to lease to black people who would ordinarily experience discrimination.[180] Journalist and biographer Jervis Anderson notes the large scale of this geographical upward mobility of black people, as individuals, families, and institutions:

> Between 1911 and 1922, almost all the major Black churches moved to Harlem. So did social and theatrical clubs; college fraternities and sororities; the Black Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A.; Black Democratic and Republican politicians and their clubhouses; and Black branches of such fraternal organizations as the Masons, the Elks, the Pythians, and the Oddfellows […] The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, and Socialist and Black-nationalist organizations opened offices in Harlem.[181]

The 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library (which in 1980 became the renowned Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture) and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) were also key additions to the neighborhood. With the addition of distinguished Black intellectuals, entertainers, and artists, a strong Black press, a host of middle-class professionals and persons of lesser economic means, what some previous residents of Harlem called the "Negro 'invasion'" was complete.[182]

The move to Harlem also had national motivations. Within the broader context of the United States, limited European immigration due to World War I and industrialization

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[180] James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York: Da Capo Press, Inc., 1930), 147-48.
[181] Anderson, *This Was Harlem*, 62.
[182] Osofsky, *The Making of a Ghetto*, 105.

led to a migration of black people to the urban north. Many travelled from the south in pursuit of economic opportunity, and in flight from Jim Crow discrimination and lynching to cities like New York City, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Buffalo, Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.[183] Black immigrants also came in droves from the Caribbean. From 1910 to 1920, New York alone saw a 66.3 percent increase in its black population.[184] As black people concentrated in Harlem, they organized and employed well-known strategies of racial uplift and economic self-sufficiency—two distinct but, often interdependent agendas—for the empowerment of Blacks in a society that sought to quell black advancement.

Because of the convergence of racism and inequalities in a variety of arenas of American life (i.e., education, employment, housing, healthcare) and organizations that sought the communal wellbeing of Black Americans particularly in the face of racism and economic inequity, an explosion of activism was almost inevitable.[185] According to historian Julie A. Gallagher, "Depression-era and later wartime struggles for safe and affordable housing, decent jobs, community safety, and political leadership in cities like Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, and most dramatically in Harlem, were foundational elements in what has become known as the Northern civil rights movement."[186] Harlem's leaders made distinct contribution to movements for Black civil rights in the north. They were exemplified by the presence of intellectual and political voices of change and their

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[183] Julie A. Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics in New York City* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 15.
[184] Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 122.
[185] Mark D. Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004), xvii.
[186] Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics*, 49.

primary communities of support, such as that of Cecelia Cabaniss Saunders (Harlem, New York Young Women's Christian Association), W.E.B. DuBois (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. and Jr. (Abyssinian Baptist Church) to name a few. This led to the generation of a vital cultural ethos unmatched in nearly any other U.S. city during the era. Effective organizing and impactful leadership developed among the people as they studied, strategized, and struggled to make their home one where race and economics were not barriers, but markers of dignity and self-sufficiency.

While the dominant sociopolitical agendas in Harlem sought to address issues of race and economics, within the subculture of black queer Harlem, gender and sexuality in public social space was becoming re-determined. Alternative understandings about social roles and expressions blurred the lines of normative embodiment in public (and presumably private) space. Quite distinctly, the formation of counterpublics for gender and sexual liberation challenged a significant politic that was a part of the black elite and middle-class uplift ideology during the beginnings of the 20th century, in Harlem and beyond: respectability politics.[187]

For many who chose or earned the mantle of Black leadership during the 1920s in Harlem, racial uplift through respectability was a key strategy, particularly as it related to prescribed notions of morality. Some black women, primarily the middle-class shaped by respectability politics through their schools, families, churches and women's clubs, focused on racial uplift in an effort to combat racism and its effects through their multiple

[187] Frederick C. Harris, "The Rise of Respectability Politics," *Dissent* 61, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 33.

spheres of influence--outside of their homes, in the public square.[188] This moral agenda seemed to be concentrated predominantly in the realm of sexuality and its expressions through women's organizations, like the Young Women's Christian Association of Harlem for instance, that sought to teach proper behavior to young women (namely those of lesser economic means and those migrating from the south); black preachers, like Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. described below, who sought to spread piety throughout Harlem; and Harlem's black intelligentsia, who possessed hopes of earning rights and dignity for blacks frequently through the modification of black people's behavior. Political scientist James F. Wilson notes that throughout the latter 1920s, "black clergy and bourgeoisie" of Harlem made a concerted effort to rid their neighborhood of "filth," alongside the police, mayor, and governor of New York, targeting the theaters, nightclubs and speakeasies where "impropriety" made itself at home.[189]

In one stark example, one of Harlem's leading pastors, Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. of Abyssinian Baptist Church, on a few occasions crusaded against what he castigated as the degenerate behaviors of gender and sexual nonconformists and the sullied deeds that took place in buffet flats throughout Harlem.[190] In a 1929 issue of the *New York Age,* the headline read "Dr. A.C. Powell Scores Pulpit Evils," with a subheading "In Sermon Sunday Morning, Dr. A. Clayton Powell Denounces Degeneracy and Sex-Perverts."

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[188] Gallagher, *Black Women and Politics*, 12, 13.
[189] James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2011), 8. For more on religion in the Harlem of the 1920s, namely through the lens of literature in the New Negro Renaissance, see Josef Sorett, "The Church and the Negro Spirit," in *Spirit in the Dark: A Religious History of Racial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 19-54.
[190] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 254.

While preaching to thousands of members of Abyssinian Baptist Church, he railed against preachers across the nation practicing "vicious immoralities" beyond, but to include, sexual vice and specifically preached about women among whom "homo-sexuality and sex-perversion […] has grown into one of the most horrible, debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization."[191] The following week, again on its cover, the newspaper printed several commendations of Powell's sermon from significant figures (clergy and lay, from the Baptist tradition and the editor of *The Age*), and claimed to receive "hundreds of personal expressions" of approval.[192] Wilson notes that the next week, Powell preached on the danger of such a vice that causes "men to leave their wives for other men, and women to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying." Such ideas about the threat to the family also were reinforced in the popular culture.[193] The Prohibition Era reflected a social desire among some to shun many forms of sensual vice (i.e., booze drinking, dancing). It existed intertwined with the need for black people to appear exceptionally moral in order to uplift the race.

It is not the case, however, that moral respectability was the sole focus of Abyssinian Baptist Church or most others in Harlem. Rather, African American religious studies scholar, Wallace Best, identifies in New York City, and vibrantly in Harlem, "a liberal theology rooted in rationalism, biblical criticism, the historical method, and a

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[191] "Dr. A. C. Powell Scores Pulpit Evils," *New York Age* (New York, NY), November 16, 1929.
[192] "Dr. Powell's Crusade against Abnormal Vice Is Approved: Pastors and Laity Endorse Dr. Powell's Denunciation of Degeneracy in the Pulpit: Chorus of Commendation Is Heard as Eminent Men Express Approval and Give Promises of Their Support," *New York Age* (New York, NY), November 23, 1929.
[193] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies*, 37.

religious culture given to issues of social concern."[194] There was a desire among mainline black churches like St. Philip's Protestant Episcopal, Salem Methodist Episcopal, Abyssinian Baptist, Metropolitan Baptist, Mother AME Zion and Harlem Community Church (led by Rev. Ethelred Brown, a Socialist pioneer of black Universalism and Humanism), to name the most prominent religious institutions, to engage in social justice activities and respond to the material needs of their community.[195] Both Christian ethicist Gary Dorrien and Best recognize the Social Gospel Movement—a movement centered in Christian commitments to social change, as opposed to individual salvation— at work in Harlem through ministers like Reverdy Ransom and Powell, Sr., challenging the notion of the Social Gospel roots as primarily white.[196] In a space like Harlem, a church that ignored the material needs of its parishioners risked irrelevance. St. Philips Protestant Episcopal Church served as a poignant example of a socially engaged church, but also one with significant resources to be especially impactful. Its pastor during the 1920s, Hutchens Chew Bishop, partnered with the NAACP and the National League for the Protection of Colored Women, in addition to having established a social work department at his church in 1924, led by a social worker, Mrs. Mabel Bickford Jenkins.[197] Though most of the churches in disadvantaged areas lacked the resources to continually provide for Harlemites in need of food and other resources, such as access to employment,[198] a

[194] Wallace D. Best, *Langston's Salvation: American Religion and the Bard of Harlem* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 60.
[195] Ibid.
[196] Ibid., 61.
[197] Ibid., 60-61.
[198] Robert Weisbrot, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 38.

variety of churches—from storefronts to "middle-class mainstream black churches"—organized toward the ends of socioeconomic advancement.[199]

While the greatest majority of religious Black Harlemites were Christians, religion took on diverse forms in Harlem. Religious practices outside of Protestant Christianity (namely Baptist and Black Methodist traditions) stood in contrast to the dominant narrative of Black religiosity. The outcry of some intellectuals and of people in the throes of the Depression, in critique of the churches led by and supported by Blacks in Harlem, was well-articulated by James Weldon Johnson in his 1934 book, *Negro Americans, What Now?:* "The church must as nearly as it can abolish hypnotic religion, that religion which excites visions of the delights of life in the world to come, while it gives us no insight into the conditions we encounter in the world in which we now live."[200] The critique was of an other-worldly religion unconcerned with (by way of inactivity) or impotent in confronting the hardships experienced by the masses of Black people—particularly religious adherents. Such critiques preceded the Depression, and took shape in the beginnings of black Harlem. At the same time, alternative forms of religion sprang up, Christian and otherwise, which offered an answer to the critique of ineffectual religion. Historian Robert Weisbrot noted most sects flourished during the post-World War I years as a result of the resurgence of racism and subsequent ghettoization of cities.[201] The alternative religious sects offered space for seekers who

[199] Best, *Langston's Salvation*, 59.
[200] Qtd. in Jon Michael Spencer, "The Black Church and the Harlem Renaissance," *African American Review* 30, no. 3 (Autumn 1996), 455.
[201] Weisbrot, *Father Divine*, 195.

found traditional modes irrelevant or inadequate to meet their needs, particularly their material needs.

In the decade following the period within the scope of this chapter, but offering some of the better-known examples of alternative socially-conscious faith traditions, Pentecostal faith leader Mother Rosa Horn and later Father Divine through his Peace Missions led two such alternative religious (Christian) sects that focused on material wellness for adherents and for the leaders themselves.[202] But, prior to this, black people explored nontraditional forms of faith that spoke uniquely to their positionality. For instance, some West Indian, working-class people and women[203] found their footing among Harlem's black Jews, a sect committed to black racial and economic uplift.[204] While historian David Levering Lewis pejoratively identified the Black Jews as a cult that "attracted the socially marginal and spiritually dispossessed," and referred to one community of black Jews as having "horrified Harlem"[205] by their very presence,

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[202] In his study of the economic and racial campaigns of Father Divine and the Harlem Peace Missions, *Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (1983)**,** Robert Weisbrot argued, what could and has been written off as a cult of deceived followers was actually "the largest, most cohesive movement in the northern ghettos" and became a formidable force in the pursuit of racial and economic justice—a much more sympathetic view of Divine than many scholars offer. Weisbrot further stated, "Rather than bask, immobile, in the adulation of his followers, [Father Divine] redirected their devotion outward, in support of the reform causes he valued: integration, equal rights, and economic cooperation." Such a perspective contrasts sharply with significant historians, such as Lewis, who dismissed Divine as a symbol of Harlem's Depression-era "religious hysteria." See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 44.

[203] Roberta S. Gold, "The Black Jews of Harlem: Representation, Identity, and Race, 1920-1939," *American Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (June 2003): 184-85.

[204] Ibid., 210.

[205] Lewis, *Harlem Was in Vogue*, 222, 223. The acts of one leader, Elder Warren Robinson, were horrifying: sexual exploitation of women members and the accumulation of a personal fortune stolen from members. There is no evidence that the community of people deceived by him, and that existed beyond his leadership, were at all a horror to

historian Roberta S. Gold painted a different picture of the Black people identifying themselves as Jews. She explored the Black Jews as a group who ultimately posed a challenge to the social, religious, economic, and racial establishment in the ways that they claimed for themselves an identity socially considered not their own, and met one another's needs in community. This example illustrates the unconventional nature of black religiosity in Harlem, and the need for Harlemites to explore various responses to the dire conditions in their community.

The aim, for these religious leaders and communities, as well as other black uplift institutions, was to show black people worthy of respect and rights, though in this process of proving, many black people were sacrificed, publicly reproved, and excoriated for the sake of the race. As political scientist Fredrick C. Harris affirms, "For more than half of the twentieth century, the concept of the 'Talented Tenth' commanded black elites to 'lift as we climb,' or to prove to white America that blacks were worthy of full citizenship rights by getting the untalented nine-tenths to rid themselves of bad customs and habits."[206] What qualified as "bad customs and habits" often left black queer Harlemites as outsiders. For those on the margins of gender and sexual normativity, the multiplicity of Harlem as a space of communal uplift, activism, and leadership acted both in their favor and as a limitation. For black queer people facing racism and economic disparity, in need of everyday welfare and community, the support that could be found in many institutions of black Harlem was a gain. Yet, socially subversive persons often did not serve the aims of the black elite and middle class, allegedly acting as a foil to their

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their neighbors, but rather, evidence exists that they were simply devout practitioners of faith.

[206] Harris, "Rise of Respectability," 33.

politics of respectability.[207] It was rare, even in light of these challenges black queer Harlem posed to heteronormativity and patriarchy, for anyone to identify as strictly non-heterosexual,[208] and many lived "underground" where they "hid behind veils of respectability and within the ghettos of large urban centers."[209] Yet, in their own spaces, in their counterpublics, sometimes with boldness and at other times plagued by shame (and likely sometimes feeling both ways and others in between), sexual and gender non-conformists through their ways of being and becoming countered disintegrating norms, and as a result, led others to do the same.

Gender, Sexuality, and the Formulation of Counterpublics

Black queer Harlem was a subaltern counterpublic within the wider public of Harlem. Though it is also true that black Harlem was a counterpublic within the larger publics of New York City and even the United States, for the purposes of this chapter it is expedient to examine black queer Harlem in relationship to the black Harlem public of which it was still a part, even if sometimes in a counter-relationship. The space and the circumstances that converged to necessitate such a counterpublic, aid in illuminating the strategies at work that moved the black queer Harlem community toward integrative, liberative values. More specifically, black queer Harlem as a subaltern counterpublic— a space of marginality and alternative meaning-making— contributes to my own constructive, liberative understandings of a black queer ethic.

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[207] The subversion was not only related to sexuality and gender. As many migrated to the north from the south, bringing with them their southern, often rural, culture, many struggled to acclimate to life in the big city. See Isabel Wilkerson, "The Kinder Mistress," in *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).
[208] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies*, 30.
[209] Ibid., 39.

Feminist critical theorist Nancy Fraser, in her description of the Habermasian public sphere, described a public as "an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction."[210] The community of 1920s black Harlem's institutional discourse through social and political organizations and through its expression as a collective body (or its aesthetic)[211] functioned as a type of public, as did black queer Harlem in the latter ways. In becoming a public, black Harlem's hopes for racial uplift, cultural autonomy, political authority, and economic stability became essential to a Harlemite identity as it meant the survival of a neighborhood and of a people.[212] While this was expedient for communal relationality, such foci neglected essential aspects of communal identities: gender and sexuality. Black queer gender and sexual microhistories— experiences of resistance and visibility that have been decentered in the meta-history of Harlem's black modernism and the retelling of the era of "the New Negro"—are needed in order to understand the subversive potentiality of black queer Harlem. As womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes noted, microhistories (1) create counter-memory which "[forces] a reconsideration of flawed (incomplete or vastly circumscribed) histories," and (2) subvert the dominant narrative.[213] Exploring the microhistories of black queer Harlem's rent parties, the alternative spaces created through the music of blues women, and the Hamilton Lodge

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[210] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990), 57.
[211] For more on the "discourse of the body," see Terry Eagleton, "The Ideology of the Aesthetic," in *The Rhetoric of Interpretation and the Interpretation of Rhetoric* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1989), 75-86.
[212] This is not to say that everyone in black Harlem was politically active or aware, but that communal identity was present and was influential throughout the city, the United States, and even the world.
[213] Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 8.

Balls—the oft ignored contributions that black queer people made to the thriving and becoming of Harlem as a powerful social and cultural force—adds greater dimensionality to the memory and impact of 1920s Harlem. It may also offer evidence for the ways black queer Harlem became a powerful social and cultural force in and for itself.

As a space of alternative discourse to that of black Harlem, black queer Harlem created a differing set of values and ways of being community that yielded an ethos of integration as it relates to the sexual and gender self.[214] This integration created space for the "bulldykers" and "fairies," "sissies" and women who "talk to the gals just like any old man" that made up the counterpublic of black queer Harlem. According to queer theorist Michael Warner, a counterpublic often acts in a disparate relationship with the public with which it associates, and finds within itself divergent conceptions of its lived reality and way of relating to its members.[215] Such a relationship creates possibility that may be unwelcome or impossible within the larger public, but has the capacity to create a welcome home for gender and sexual difference. That is not to say that such possibilities or counterpublics are without their own oppressions. However, as a counterpublic, with a counter locus of power and lesser discursive restraints, this study of black queer Harlem attempts to show how increased agency, imagination, and embodied resistances can offer opportunity to radically challenge the status quo, and for that challenge to establish the counterpublic's existence as a viable space for constructive queer possibility. Warner,

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[214] I recognize that understandings of gender, as it is currently understood by some scholars as performative and constructed, were unknown in black queer Harlem. But, the particular deconstruction of gender norms present in black queer Harlem cannot be ignored, and their intentionality must be noted.

[215] Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics (abbreviated version)," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (November 2002), 423-4.

like black feminist political scientist Cathy Cohen, argued that it is exactly the "indecorousness" or "deviance" that gives the alternative public its power.[216] As "outsiders," counterpublics play a role in shaping the public, directly and indirectly.

Fraser drew a distinction between a counterpublic and a subaltern counterpublic, terms I utilize interchangeably throughout this chapter. For Fraser, a distinctive marker of the subaltern counterpublic lies in communal self-understanding. That is, the power of subaltern counterpublics is discovered in its meaning-making, including its ability to make, or define, itself. This making requires the proliferation of a counter-discourse that allows members "to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[217] Additionally, for Fraser, the primary purpose of counterpublics are support and training: "they function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment […] they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics."[218] This is not to say that through rent parties, blues environs, or even the Hamilton Lodge Balls that the intention was to purposefully transform the public through a strategic campaign. Yet, through the existence of the counterpublic as an expression of transformative potential, the public was agitated and at the very least, moved to respond, and in some cases to join this emergent counterpublic which it often viewed with disdain. One example lies in the attitudes with which the *New York Age*, one of Harlem's foremost newspapers, covered the Hamilton Lodge Balls over the years, shifting from ridicule to celebration, particularly when a black person won (and in the 1930s back

[216] Ibid., 424. Cathy Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *Du Bois Review* 1, no. 1 (2004), 27–45.
[217] Fraser, "Rethinking Sphere," 67.
[218] Ibid., 68.

again to ridicule).[219] As a counterpublic, black queer Harlem invites us to sift through counter-memories of 1920s black Harlem and counter-discourses (verbal and embodied) toward integrative, liberative values for a sexual ethics.

Exploring the Subaltern Counterpublic for Liberative Praxis: Queering Space, Sexual Subversion and Gender Nonconformity

Black queer people in the 1920s Harlem created for themselves subaltern counterpublics in which they practiced ways of being sexual and gendered beings that confronted established norms of patriarchy and heteronormativity, as well as the shamefulness ascribed to black sexuality by whiteness. In challenging normativity, while orienting themselves toward community-making, these black gender and sexual nonconformists confronted racism and economic stratification, as well as sexism and heterosexism. Their practices affirmed their gendered and sexual existence in their black bodies. The presence of black queerness where their music of choice, the blues, transgressed the boundaries of "respectable" communal space and gender roles by celebrating sex, bodies, same-gender desire, and other aspects of romantic relationship typically relegated to private space; their rent parties where funds were raised as black bodies came together out of economic and relational necessity, and frequently aroused sexual desire; and the Hamilton Lodge Ball where black (and other races') queerness was

[219] For instance, in a March 4, 1933 excerpt from the "Carrying the Torch" gossip column of *New York Age*, the attendees of the Hamilton Lodge Ball were referred to as "sex perverts […] with sex perverted minds." Later issues of the newspaper primarily reported on arrests, and named those arrested for crimes like soliciting sex. This was quite a shift from coverage in the 1920s, that celebrated the extravagance of the evening's events and the "keen […] competition" among the participants as well as the large numbers present. See "Hamilton Lodge Ball: An Unusual Spectacle," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 6, 1926 and "Hamilton Lodge, No. 710 in Annual Masquerade and Civic Ball," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 5, 1927; The Flying Cavalier, "Carrying the Torch," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 4, 1933.

performed and celebrated by thousands from around the world, meant that everyday persons embodying similar expressions could have examples from among themselves toward which they might aspire and models for challenging the status quo in a variety of spaces.

Though members of Harlem's black literati, for instance, certainly serve as well-known examples of the significance of black queerness to the fabric of black Harlem (even if the details were shrouded in varying levels of secrecy), this chapter looks to the communal settings created and inhabited by the rank-and-file population of Harlem, namely those who lived at less socially acceptable interstices for this ethic rooted in community. As previously mentioned, to speak of the settings is to speak of the people who make up the settings, and vice versa. This focus does not discount the struggles or contributions of these more well-known individuals, nor does it exclude them from these spaces of which they were no doubt a part; yet, in formulating an ethic that gives primacy to communities and builds upon integrative values, communal thriving and resistance, it seems important to look to everyday black queerness. These spaces provide for us a starting point for reflection toward an ethic that centers the marginalized and is inclusive of the entire self in the process of community-becoming.

Blues Environs

In 1920s Harlem, the blues provided a soundtrack for black life, describing the heartache and harmony of love, the hardship of economic uncertainty, and many other of the facets that made up black existence. What came to be known as the "classical blues"

found its way to the cities of the north from the country towns of the south.[220] It gave voice to an ambiguous post-emancipation experience fraught with the challenges of being newly free and the responsibility of agency,[221] namely of the sexual kind. Like never before, through the blues many Black people in the U.S. were able to articulate a "freely chosen sexual love [that became] a mediator between historical disappointment and the new social realities of an evolving African-American community."[222] The blues signified a deep claiming of the body that had been rejected, and a sexuality that had long been used to serve others in actuality and in the public imagination. As Angela Y. Davis noted,

> It was the status of their personal relationships that was revolutionized […] Sexuality thus was one of the most tangible domains in which emancipation was acted upon and through which meanings were expressed. Sovereignty in sexual matters marked an important divide between life during slavery and life after emancipation.[223]

For a people who had long not chosen their sexual practices, the blues was more than music, but also a means of asserting bodily autonomy and personal dignity.

Sexual and gender nonconformists could find themselves in the words sang by Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, Ethel Waters, and other blues women. While men also sang the blues, the contributions of women, for the ways they transcended gender and sexual norms in song and sometimes in their sexual and gender performance, are useful for this chapter. Though the blues was not specifically or solely a

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[220] Kelly Brown Douglas, *Black Bodies and the Black Church: A Blues Slant* (New York, Palgrave Macmillan: 2014), 32.
[221] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 141.
[222] Ibid., 10.
[223] Ibid., 4.

product of Harlem's cultural life, [224] it is explored here as a means of conveying the manner in which as counterpublics, spaces where the blues sung by women had a strong listening public created new discourses (of words and of the body, as noted above) in a Harlem that was ripe for such a paradigm shift.

Further, examining spaces where the blues lived articulates black queerness, not exclusively but substantively. The blues environs as counterpublics in which queer Harlemites could see themselves, as well as participate in alternative possibilities point toward a subversive model of sexual and gender being. This study of the space created by blues women through their lyrics does not argue that the lyrics or expressions themselves are necessarily ethical, nor that they need to be. I am signaling the significance of these lyrics within their context to grant permission of expression to black queer Harlemites as they read their own experiences and desires through these words that pulsed through their prized spaces.

For black theologian James H. Cone, the blues represented an important connection to the spirituals, songs that were both a product of enslavement and emancipation. The spirituals, known for their bold engagement with experiences of suffering and hard-won triumph, spoke to truths of black American experiences in the deep south, much like the blues. Though, according to womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, the blues were perceived as "the Devil's music" and the spirituals as belonging

[224] Alain Locke describes the blues as an expression of black people's "emotion, folk-wit and musical inventiveness." Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (New York: J.B. Lyon Press, 1936), 28. For a history of the blues, particularly as a southern phenomenon, see Giles Oakley, *The Devil's Music: A History of the Blues* (Cambridge, MA: DaCapo Press, 1983).

to God within "the black church,"[225] the delineation between the two genres, as she argued, was not so staunch. Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (1972) drew from Black experience in song, both religious and secular as found in the songs of the enslaved and recently emancipated (spirituals) and the blues. His analysis blurred the supposed line between the sacred and secular to reveal the ways that both genres reflected black suffering and black hope. While historian Lawrence W. Levine noted the blues threatened the religious sphere because it enabled expression and the release of burdens (as one is often invited to do in church) [226] and Davis located the threat in terms of the blues' drawing upon and use of "sacred consciousness," [227] it seems the blues were considerably threatening to black Christianity for the ways that they freed the body and sexuality from repressive norms. Both the blues and the freedom they offered countered strategies of racial uplift, [228] communal propriety, and what Douglas called a black Christian "narrative of civility." A particular politic of respectability employed by the Black Church, as Douglas defines it, the narrative of civility sought to establish black people as morally sound and acceptable to white people, sacrificing black bodies in the process of exalting a "body-denying ethic" and "the whiteness of God."[229] In this way, the blues not only challenged Christian religiosity, but also countered the strategies of racial uplift forwarded by middle-class blacks in the north in the public realm.

Because of the gravitas of the blues as a musical genre and as a vital part of the Prohibition Era urban black experience (as well as the southern black experience), it

[225] Douglas, *Black Bodies*, 20, 63.
[226] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 9.
[227] Ibid., 8.
[228] Ibid., 153.
[229] Douglas, *Black Bodies*, 170.

created an important space of contention as it related to class, culture, and race. Many black people found the need to disassociate with the blues, as well as jazz, so as to not "perpetuate the idea prevalent among whites that blacks were lascivious and primitive."[230] This disavowal was especially prevalent among Christians, the middle class, and the black intelligentsia. In fact, during the years of the Harlem Renaissance, many artists and intellectuals sought to establish a black aesthetic without the blues.[231] One notable instance is that of W.E.B. DuBois, an influential and key proponent of racial uplift who struggled to offer credence to the blues and other black musical expressions found in speakeasies, while electing instead to be in favor of the literature and spirituals of the era.[232] This illumines one of the ways that the blues was relegated to the working class, and how it intervened in the prevailing sociopolitical discourse of Harlem.

Davis argued this socioeconomic point further in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (1999) as she looks to three blues women—Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday— for the ways that they signaled the feminist tradition among working class women.[233] For example, Bessie Smith was known for having performed in the same manner no matter the race of the audience, never changing her impassioned delivery or her public airing of "private" matters. It seems likely, that as Elaine Feinstein

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[230] Alwyn Williams, "Jazz and the New Negro: Harlem's Intellectuals Wrestle with the Art of the Age," *Australasian Journal of American Studies* 21, No. 1 (July 2002), 1.
[231] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 123. Davis refers to the blues as an "indelicate stepchild" of many Harlem Renaissance luminaries, with the exception of Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes. There is a periodization debate as it relates to the actual years of the Harlem Renaissance, with all agreeing the 1920s were significant years for such a cultural, intellectual, artistic, and sociopolitical "rebirth." For more on the debate, see Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey, *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), xxv-xxvii.
[232] Williams, "Jazz and the New Negro," 1.
[233] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, xi.

argued, that the blues and particularly blues women reminded "successful blacks" of an existence "they wanted to forget."[234] The controversy surrounding the blues among black people highlighted a tension between black middle-class and working-class, black Christians and the supposed "irreligious" blues folks, northerners and southern migrants, as well as between sexual and gender conformists and nonconformists.

As mentioned above, blues environs gained their influence through both the performativity and lyrics of blues women. Gladys Bentley and Ethel Waters provided prominent examples of blues women who dressed in masculine attire, while they, Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey all possessed a reputation for engaging in same gender relationships.[235] Their expression of gender in their performances served as both an example to and a reflection of black queerness. The women who sang the blues spoke boldly of sexual pleasure, non-monogamous relationships, domestic violence,[236] desire for men and women, and subsequently "introduced a new, different model of black women—more assertive, sexy sexually aware, independent, realistic, complex, alive."[237] Through their example, aesthetic, and artistry, they created and enabled the places where

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[234] Elaine Feinstein, *Bessie Smith: Empress of the Blues* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 30-31.

[235] Barnet stated, in an anecdote featuring Rainey and her sexual expression, "[apparently] Ma [Rainey], who was openly homosexual, had been jailed one night for partying with naked girls." Andrea Barnet, *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004), 174. She also noted Ethel Waters' "homoerotic leanings." Barnet, *All Night Party*, 207.

[236] The performances of the classic blues women—especially Bessie Smith—were one of the few cultural spaces in which a tradition of public discourse on male violence was established in the 1920s. Davis, *Blues Legacies*, page 5 of insert.

[237] Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 111.

their music was played to produce an air of freedom of expression wherein sexual and gender norms could be toppled and sociocultural respectability transgressed.

The songs of the blues women, which often filled the aural space of rent parties, buffet flats, speakeasies, house parties, and other transgressive locations, were themselves representations of and invitations to encounter sexual and gender nonconformity. For example, in "Prove It on Me Blues" (1928), written and sung most notably by Ma Rainey, she sang,

> I looked up, to my surprise,
> The gal I was with was gone.
> Where she went, I don't know,
> I mean to follow everywhere she goes;
> […]
> Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,
> They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.
> It's true I wear a collar and a tie
> […]
> Wear my clothes just like a fan,
> Talk to the gals just like any old man;
> 'Cause they say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,
> Sure got to prove it on me.[238]

This song provided one of the most explicit examples of same-gender attraction, as well as gender subversion, in the blues genre. After speaking of her desire for a woman, Rainey slyly boasted of her capacity to challenge standard masculinity both by embodying it ("I wear a collar and a tie […] Talk to the gals just like any old man") and by rejecting it's normative bearers ("'cause I don't like no men"). Recognizing that these sorts of practices are not necessarily commonplace, but queer or outside of the norm,

[238] Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, *Double Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, eds. Venetria K. Patton and Maureen Honey (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 607.

Rainey teases, "ain't nobody caught me, sure got to prove it on me." For people in Harlem who clandestinely engaged in queerness, such lyrics found resonance.

In another example of gender and sexual subversion sung by Rainey and composed by Thomas Dorsey (one who later became known as "the father of Gospel music"), "Sissy Blues" (1926) proclaimed,

> Woke up and found my man in a sissy's arms
> […]
> My man's got a sissy, his name is Miss Kate
> He shook that thing like jelly on a plate.[239]

"Sissy" in this song, without qualifiers or additional commentary that framed the person as any more distasteful as anyone else, seemed to reflect the normalcy of the presence of feminine men in certain social circles. For the writer, the term seemed to carry a shared common understanding of "sissy," as Rainey's tone throughout the song continues to reflect the hurt of having been left, not necessarily that her "man" has "got a sissy." Masculine women and feminine men were a part of the fabric of black queerness.

Conversely, in a song composed and sang by Bessie Smith, "Foolish Man Blues" (1927)

> There's two things got me puzzled, there's two things I can't understand
> That's a mannish actin' woman and skippin', twistin', woman actin' man[240]

Smith, as a woman who in an "open secret" had sexual relationships with women, curiously frames a "mannish actin' woman" and a "skippin', twistin', woman actin' man" as unintelligible. It is not clear whether these lyrics reflect a commitment to rigid gender

[239] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 41. It is worth noting that while it seems sissy could have carried a pejorative connotation, the song itself does not uphold the disapproving nature of the term.
[240] Ibid., 280.

roles, a phobia toward non-normative expressions of gender, or a simple desire to sing the song as it is written that may resonate with the listening audience. While the lyrics reify the presence of gender queerness in blues-affirming spaces, Smith's offered an uncharacteristic gender variance intolerance.

In Ma Rainey's "Black Bottom" was presented a view of someone that stood in contrast to the modesty desired by black elites in Harlem and that was imposed most frequently upon women's bodies of the era. Rainey took on the voice of a genderless speaker seeking to see Rainey's "black bottom."

> All the boys in the neighborhood
> They say your black bottom is really good
> Come on and show me your black bottom
> I want to learn that dance.[241]

With this double entendre, Ma Rainey and her listeners invited a gaze by way of their reclamation and proclamation of their bodies and rejected limiting norms of respectability.

As a final example, Smith often exemplified gender role subversion (particularly submissive, sexually modest roles of women), and particularly so in "I'm Wild about that Thing" (1929).

> Do it easy, honey, don't get rough
> From you, papa, I can't get enough
> I'm wild about that thing
> Sweet joy it always brings
> Everybody knows it, I'm wild about that thing
>
> Please don't hold it, baby, when I cry
> Gimme every bit of it, else I'll die
> I'm wild about that thing
> Sha-da-jing-jing-jing

[241] Ibid., 231.

All the time I'm cryin', I'm wild about that thing[242]

Presenting the black woman in the blues as "assertive, sexy, sexually aware, [and] independent" (as noted above) the way that Smith did in this song and others was a hallmark of the blues era that categorically "redefined women's 'place'."[243] Though many of the songs, including the one explored here, were penned by men, this song and others held the integrity, passion, and authenticity of the singer which, according to Harrison, produced a "distinctly female interpretation."[244] These songs were sung by women and because of the singer's positionality as a woman, catered particularly to women. Likewise, the songs were sung by gender and sexual nonconformists, and performed for an audience comprised of the same.

Rent Parties

Directly related to the blues was a primary setting in which the blues found its footing in black queer Harlem: rent parties. Though a source of entertainment, the gatherings offered much more through the experiences of sexual, gender, economic, social, and political freedom.[245] These, along with buffet flats and speakeasies briefly elaborated below, aided in the popularization of the blues among working-class black people in Harlem, including black queer people. As a matter of practicality, the former is in part because the working class were the people who needed rent parties.[246] Rent parties

[242] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 296. Composed by Spencer Williams.
[243] Ibid.
[244] Harrison, *Black Pearls*, 111.
[245] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 18.
[246] Rent parties over time changed in function. According to Wilson, "rent parties, in particular, included a preponderance of the working class in Harlem, and while these parties were originally staged from economic necessity for Harlem residents, they became quite marketable for entrepreneurial residents and shadowy underworld figures." Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 12.

developed as a necessity for persons unable to maintain housing with the increasing rents, brought on by the greed of landlords during the migration of black people from the south, and the lower wages afforded them by racist employers.[247] One Bermudan immigrant, Bernice Gore, decried, "with a sixty-dollar-a-month apartment on my hands, and no job, I soon learned, like everyone else, to rent my rooms out and throw these Saturday get-togethers."[248] Through these parties, persons challenged by the burden of high rents "raised money […] by charging guests a few cents for admission to their apartment and providing food, liquor, live music, and uninhibited dancing in a highly sexually charged, unrestrained environment."[249] By providing economic empowerment to those of lesser socioeconomic means,[250] the parties stood in opposition to the capitalist framework that prized independence over community as Harlemites turned to communal support for their wellbeing. The parties also became a subaltern counterpublic for "lesbians and gay men [who] relied on private parties as spaces safe from potential personal and professional scandal and from prosecution."[251] While I would argue that the rent parties, because many of the invitations were extended broadly,[252] are not definitively private, the parties

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[247] Ibid., 16.
[248] Qtd. in Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 15.
[249] Stephen Robertson, Shane White, Stephen Garton, and Graham White, "Disorderly Houses: Residences, Privacy, and the Surveillance of Sexuality in 1920s Harlem," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21, No. 3 (September 2012), 461.
[250] Rent parties, according to historian David Levering Lewis, would have been open to "formally dressed society folks from downtown, policemen, painters, carpenters, mechanics, truckmen in their workingmen's clothes, gamblers, lesbians, and entertainers of all kinds." Lewis, *When Harlem,* 107–8.
[251] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 9.
[252] In describing the extension of invitations to rent parties, a journalist for the *New York Age* wrote, "The more business-like souls, who like to do things with due formality, usually resort to the nearest printer to have a hundred or so circulars struck off, bidding the public in general to attend the party on such an evening. The more exclusive individuals give verbal or telephonic invitations to their acquaintances, whose rent parties

being held in apartments did mean attendees could exercise greater discernment with regard to when they might be seen and therefore, had the option of some degree of safety. As a communal counterpublic, it also provided space for relaxation and enjoyment, a reprieve from the hegemonic powers of racism and classism.

Similar to rent parties and worth noting were buffet flats. Like a rent party, a buffet flat was a house party "combining celebratory music with sexual activities of all sorts" while serving as "a major component of the black gay subculture."[253] Though buffet flats constituted black queer spaces that incorporated many of the same qualities of rent parties, they are not explored deeply in this chapter because they were private spaces,[254] as opposed to the counterpublics I highlight here. Speakeasies also would have been spaces that provided the free-for-all revelries akin to rent parties, in addition to all manner of illicit activities; however, because the primary interest of the space was anti-Prohibition and was open to all types of people (not primarily a subaltern population) it is not included here. In fact, historian Eric Garber argued, gay people were expected to "hide their preferences" and "blend in" with heterosexuals in such settings.[255] Therefore, speakeasies are also not extensively studied here.

Held in the renters' apartments featuring illicit liquor and soon-to-be-well-known musicians, rent parties provided a setting through which sexual and gender

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they have recently attended and upon whom they may depend for a reciprocation of patronage." "Rent Party Tragedy," *New York Age*.

[253] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 133.

[254] Robertson et al., "Disorderly Houses," 461.

[255] Eric Garber, "A Spectacle in Color: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem," in *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past*, eds. Martin B. Duberman, Martha Vicinus, and George Chauncey (New York: Penguin Group, 1989), 323.

nonconformity modeled sexual liberation. A more intimate level of engagement was available in these counterpublic spaces "infused" with "sexual energy."[256] Wilson notes that these house parties were critical to the development of a lesbian and gay subculture in Harlem and beyond through their increased visibility of one another, and in a progressive way, crossed racial and class boundaries.[257] He aptly identified this period of increased visibility and identity formation as a "queer renaissance."[258] Lesbian activist and dancer during the 1920s, Mabel Hampton, described the scene at a Harlem rent party, namely the ones for women which she attended:

> The bulldykers would come and bring their women with them. And you wasn't supposed to jive with them, you know. They danced up a breeze. They did the Charleston, they did a little bit of everything. They were all colored women. Sometimes we ran into someone who had a white woman with them. But me, I'd venture out with any of them. I just had a ball.[259]

Hampton's statements provided insight into the sexual liberation that the rent parties provided, as well as the tensions that could exist along the lines of sexual expression and race. Rent parties, like the Hamilton Lodge Balls elaborated in the next section, troubled the color line by becoming a space of queer subversion, even in terms of integration.[260] Hampton also illumines the presence of the growing black-centered communities in Harlem that thrived through parties, away from the intrusive police presence.[261] However,

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[256] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 20.
[257] Ibid., 28, 29.
[258] Ibid., 28-29.
[259] Qtd. in Joan Nestle, "'I Lift My Eyes to the Hill': The Life of Mabel Hampton as Told by a White Woman," in *A Fragile Union: New and Selected Writings by Joan Nestle* (San Francisco: Cleiss Press, 1998), 36.
[260] Similar racial integration took place in the primarily white Greenwich Village among the bohemian camp. See Andrea Barnet, *All-Night Party: The Women of Bohemian Greenwich Village and Harlem, 1913-1930* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004).
[261] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 40.

this black queer counterpublic carried risk. One instance in particular involved "the combination of bad gin, jealous women [two women vying for the attention of another woman], a carving knife and a rent party" which ended in the *New York Age* that claimed this mix of events and people to be "dangerous to the health of all concerned."[262] This only added fuel to the fire where rent parties were already looked down upon socially and politically.

The increase in black queer visibility in Harlem and all of New York City led to stricter policing and the application of sodomy and decency laws,[263] greater hostility from moralists, and public discourse that disfavored sexual and gender nonconformists. This time period, for both black and white sexual and gender nonconformists, meant personal and communal attacks through the criminal justice system.[264] In *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, performance theorist James F. Wilson tells the story of the instance where the editor of *New York Age* and the pastor of a Harlem church enlisted the help of the police commissioner in the task of preserving black respectability by tending to the growth of rent parties wherein "all manner of debauchery was engaged."[265] Wilson argues it was not the public nature of homosexuality that troubled the masses, but the fact that the gay and lesbian presence was not ghettoized, but enmeshed throughout New York City made it "frightful."[266] While the inability to ascertain when and where one might find the gender and sexual nonconformists may have added to the fright, Wilson's

[262] "A Rent Party Tragedy," *The New York Age* (New York, NY), December 11, 1926.
[263] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 31.
[264] Garber, "A Spectacle in Color," 320-21.
[265] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 40.
[266] Ibid., 38.

argument seems to downplay the visceral homophobic response evoked merely by existence and visibility itself, especially among black institutional moralists.

The rent parties declined as subversive counterpublics as they grew in popularity and became an outlet for those who were not in financial dire straits, but who instead sought profits. They also faltered in tandem with the black queer subculture that "quickly declined following the stock market crash of 1929, and the repeal of Prohibition, soon becoming only a shadow of its earlier self."[267] Still, for the contributions to black life in 1920s Harlem, rent parties were celebrated by Langston Hughes as "the one authentic black social event that was unspoiled by white tourism."[268]

Hamilton Lodge Balls

The Hamilton Lodge Ball was held annually at various venues in the heart of Harlem, hosted by the Oddfellows Society.[269] Though there were other smaller balls held in the neighborhood and others held across the country, the most well-known, which drew crowds in the thousands, was the Hamilton Lodge Ball. Beginning in 1869 as the "Masquerade and Civic Ball," it developed into a drag competition in 1923 and became referred to as "The Fairies Ball," "The Dance of the Fairies," or the "Faggots Ball."[270] For years, this event brought together an amalgam of people as it related to socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and (as was quite infrequent across the U.S.,

[267] Garber, "A Spectacle in Color," 318.
[268] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 18.
[269] Ibid., 82. Locations included the Rockland Palace, previously known as Manhattan Casino (West 155th St. and 8th Ave.) and the Renaissance Casino (West 138th St. and 7th Ave.).
[270] John L. Fell and Terkild Vinding, *Stride! Fats, Jimmy, Lion, Lamb, and All the Other Ticklers* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 64.

and no less in New York City) even race.[271] The balls could draw upwards of 1500 spectators each. Throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, the balls grew in popularity. One reporter noted in 1932 that lesbian women and gay men from nearly twenty-five states arrived to witness the annual ball, citing it as an "institution" rather than a hidden aberration,[272] and nearly 6000 attendees were recorded at the Ball the following year.[273] Local attendees, like white visitors from the Bohemian Greenwich Village, often participated in the Balls in large numbers, joining the number of participants "in their gorgeous evening gowns, wigs and powdered faces."[274]

In an article from the *New York Age*, under the headline "Hamilton Lodge Ball: An Unusual Spectacle" (March 6, 1926), the writer reported, "Although Hamilton Lodge is a colored organization, there were many white people present and they danced with and among the colored people. Many people who attend dances generally declare that the masquerade and civic ball was the most unusual spectacle they ever witnessed." It is unclear whether it was the racial mixing that seems to be the most unusual aspect of the evening, or solely the men who "mask[ed] as women for [the] affair."[275] Reporting a year later, the article went into deeper description of the contestants:

> From the garb of a biblical virgin, by way of the historic costumes of the early centuries, down to the very sparse attire only seen on the burlesque stage of today, accentuated with the feminine gesture and lingue [sic], to say nothing of the contortions of the hip, formed the make-up of these

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[271] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 86.
[272] Floyd G. Snelson, "Strange 'Third' Sex Flooding Nation, Writer Reveals," *Pittsburgh Courier* (March 19, 1932), 6.
[273] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 85.
[274] "Hamilton Lodge Ball an Unusual Spectacle," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 6, 1926.
[275] Ibid.

> male masqueraders. Color prejudice was thrown to the winds, as the Nordic contestants mixed freely with their darkskinned [sic] brethren.[276]

Again, the relations across race are presented almost in utopic fashion as "color prejudice was thrown to the winds."

Despite its popularity, the reception of the ball and its participants by Harlemites was variant. Like the rent parties and the blues women, the Balls highlighted a class conflict among black people that did not hinge solely upon income, but on socially acceptable behavior. At once a spectacle for some and an aversion for others, Wilson noted the way participants, namely the "fairies," were received among middle-class black people as "'low class' in morality and social standing," and therefore, "outside the boundaries of respectability."[277] This low class in morality could have been a matter of gender performance or sexual deviance, or in an era of establishing a black Harlem, even possibly a critique of racial miscegenation. In any event, the Hamilton Lodge Ball was a site of controversy, and one that people wanted to talk about.

That the annual article in the *New York Age* reporting on the Ball more readily shared the details of the evenings throughout the 1920s seems no small feat. The Balls often received agreeable coverage in the *New York Age,* but by the early 1930s, this view seemed to change. One article, from a March 1933 issue, focused mostly on the police presence and arrests for disorderly conduct that took place and referred to attendees as "males and females and the variety of she-males and he-females."[278] In the same issue of

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[276] "Hamilton Lodge, No. 710 in Annual Masquerade and Civic Ball," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 5, 1927.
[277] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 99.
[278] "Third Sex Hold Sway at Rockland When Hamilton Lodge Holds 65th Masquerade Ball and Dance; Police Arrest Two," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 4 1933.

the newspaper, a sharp-witted gossip column entitled, "Carrying the Torch," spoke of the event like never before as "an abomination" and the participants as "sex perverted." Attendees were also called "fagot [sic] supporters," "suckers" and "morons." The writer, called The Flying Cavalier, went on to speak of attendance at the event as a feeding on "one's baser appetites" and accused a local Baptist deacon of a "prominent church" of being "she-ish" at the event and zinged, "Will he burn in hellfire or will he burn?"[279] Likewise, the annual article in 1938 focused on the arrests for those "offering to commit lewd acts" at the Ball, and even went as far as to include not only names (which was also in the former article about arrests), but also addresses and races.[280] This was troubling, particularly considering most of the black people named were from Harlem. Also, it marked a shift from reports in the 1920s that focused on those present from across the country, the winners, the racial harmony, and the grandeur of those gathered. As Wilson reported, the *Amsterdam News* shared like sentiments, referring to "the virus of the perverted," insinuating the ability for sexual and gender nonconformists to infect others with their deviant ways, while *Atlantic World* invoked the same language of perversion.[281]

The liminality of the Hamilton Lodge Ball allowed for expression of same-sex attraction in a semi-public space[282] and provided the basis for its examination in this chapter as a subaltern counterpublic. This counterpublic is subaltern because, though it was open to white participants and welcomed famous white and black elites, it functioned

[279] "Carrying the Torch," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 4, 1933.
[280] Ebenezer Ray, "Fifteen Arrested by Police as 'Fairies' Turn 'Em On: Oops My Dear, Fairies Stomp at Rockland," *New York Age* (New York, NY), March 5, 1938.
[281] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies*, 89.
[282] Ibid., 87.

as a space wherein black drag queens, as well as other gay and lesbian folks could openly (albeit momentarily) celebrate their identities in their own neighborhood.[283] Further, though the performance of gender variance (via drag) created the liminality—in that this expression was not welcome or celebrated in everyday life, but the spectacle provided opportunity for a temporary, celebratory alternate reality— black queer participants, as performers and onlookers, established power that was counter to normative expressions generally celebrated among black and white people alike. The power of the counterpublic lay in the fact that it shifted the perceptions of society, if only for an evening, to allow space for and to celebrate that which was labelled abject—sexual and gender deviation. Further, as the space was experienced differently by the subaltern than by those who did not belong to the marginalized group, black queer people formulated and participated in a concurrent counter discourse that transcended the performative competition to create bonds of commonality across black queerness.

This celebration of gender subversion met its untimely end by the beginning of the 1940s when "homosexuals" became more widely associated in the national psyche with "sex crimes," and the social understanding of their identity shifted "from silly oddities and sexual degenerates to dangerous psychopaths."[284] Yet, various balls continued in their legacy across the United States in major metropolises, where black and brown participants continued to formulate communal space for their belonging, expression, entertainment, and talent.

[283] Ibid., 42.
[284] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 359.

Conclusion

Through the blues environs, rent parties, and the Hamilton Lodge Balls, black queer Harlem developed a greater sense of communal identity notwithstanding the Harlem public and wider public with which it was sometimes in conflict. They created space for alternative, integrative forms of "uplift" that celebrated their bodily flourishing as black sexual and gender nonconformists, innovated spiritual and creative expression, and attended to their socioeconomic wellbeing and need for connectivity, which enabled them to exhibit a flourishing communality. These black queer subaltern counterpublics further served as sites of integration because they uniquely allowed for the incorporation of the gendered and sexual self into what it was to be a black Harlemite. Even when places of black queer thriving were perceived as counters to sociopolitical uplift strategies of politics of respectability, black queer Harlem continued to establish its place in its community, and in turn, created their own.

Harlem's sexual and gender nonconformists embraced their deviance from normativity to help shape their Harlem as a space with the capacity to hold gender and sexual difference, and in the process fostered an ethos beyond solely survival. Though, as Vogel notes, it is clear that "spaces of sexual dissidence" existed among renowned writers, entertainers, socialites, and intellectuals of the age,[285] the everyday people of Harlem fashioned (and sometimes shared with these renowned citizens of Harlem)

[285] Vogel, *The Scene of Harlem Cabaret,* 19. The cultural and literary Renaissance featured artists who utilized their platforms to offer insights into black gay and lesbian life. Harlem's princess, A'Lelia Walker (daughter of Madam C.J. Walker), held parties with as much sexual and gender abandon as the rent parties that welcomed queer sexual expression, and other parts of Manhattan allowed for sexual and gender nonconformity, like Manhattan.

counterpublics that enabled them to imagine and cultivate vibrancy and beauty through their being and becoming together. In a notable way, black queer Harlem cared for the spirit that longed for relationality and belonging, the body that sought authenticity and expression, and communities seeking liberative practices amidst racial, economic, gender- and sexuality-based oppressions. In the following chapter, we continue to examine integrative communality as the foundation of this black queer ethic rooted in black queerness by mining black gay, lesbian, and queer scholarly resources for Christian theological and ethical reflection.

CHAPTER 3: Black Queering of Religious Discourse

Black queer ethics is a communal approach to the ethics of sexuality, and is rooted methodologically in the ethic it proposes. That is, it depends on theological and ethical reflection by the community of scholars that make up black queer discourse as interlocutors that provide foundations, upon which to build and to depart, for the innovative communality Christian ethics proposed in chapter four. In this chapter, I assess the innovations and limitation of black queer discourse. In order to identify the most pertinent concerns amongst these scholars as it relates to religion, sexuality, and black queer lives, I perform a thematic analysis of a black queer critique that will inform the values I center in the following, concluding chapter's black queer ethic. The scholars' commitments to integrative values that seek the wholeness of entire persons, communities, and society, as well as the tradition of black queering explored here foregrounds communal reflection alongside the processes of determining collective goods with a diversity of voices that are integral to a communosexual black queer ethic.

Throughout the 1990s to the present, black openly gay, lesbian, and queer scholars and others have contributed to the liberative tradition by asserting black queer presence in and import to Christian academic and ecclesial spaces and beyond—in families, in the struggle for affirming black lives, as part of black written archives. During the last nearly quarter of a century, black queer scholarship demanded that people with HIV/AIDS be seen and their lives be cared for in a time when some black churches called (and some continue to call) the ailment God's judgment upon gay communities. Black queer discourse critiqued homophobia, heterosexism, and the diminishment of the black queer body. It confronted both black churches and black theologies, imploring them

to acknowledge, and even dare to celebrate, the black queer among them, and proposed means of black queer thriving beyond these spaces.

The scholars explored in this chapter self-identify as black and gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer.[286] They utilized their own positionality as a starting point for theological and ethical reflection that is not disinterested or detached from its subjects. These scholars risked being written off as non-objective[287] in order to assert the value of black queer experience to the development of Christian reflection, black Christian communities, and black (e.g., nontheistic, Afro-Diasporic) communities more broadly. Nomenclature referring to sexual and gender nonconformists has transformed since the early 1990s and there are periods of overlap where particular terms are employed. For instance, "homosexual" was employed by some as appropriate and affirming, but was later rejected by others when "homosexual" was fading from use in the broader U.S. society. Additionally, terms like "gay" or "queer" were utilized alongside of one another. Though the use of particular terms was not always consistent or linear, I attempt to employ the terms homosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBT, LGBTQ, and queer in alignment with the ways that the scholar whose perspective I am discussing might refer to this population at the time of their writing. I employ the term "black queer" in this chapter to refer to black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer-centered discourses and populations, not necessarily as a self-proclaimed identity or politic, for the sake of clarity and cohesiveness. While there is overlap over the themes of inclusion,

[286] While there are two resources that theorize with transgender people in mind, there is not a scholar that I have located in black queer religious discourse that self-identifies as transgender or along the trans spectrum.
[287] Roger A. Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 8.

identity and black queer subjectivity, resistance and difference, the black queer body, and power, I mine each topic independently for the profound ways black queering shows up in theology and ethics. Black queer voices have defined and actively forwarded these core notions at the intersections of sexuality, gender, Christianity, and race. This chapter seeks to affirm these contributions and explore where the discourse could expand its notion of integration, justice love, and community—values I center in a black queer ethic, and which are examined more deeply in the constructive, final chapter.

Inclusion

As black lesbian, bisexual, and gay scholars of Christian theology and ethics articulated concerns of significance to them, each engaged in an assessment of the relationship of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to black churches and black communities, as well as to black academia in the forms of black liberation theology and womanist theology and ethics. Of particular concern was the issue of inclusion. In my analysis, I recognize the import of the transformation of attitudes toward inclusion, therefore, this section is chronological, though I attempt to identify each thinker's earlier and later work with attention to the particular evolution of their arguments.

Concurrently, in 1993 Elias Farajajé-Jones and Renee Hill interrogated the foundational assertions of black theologies that aim to center the experiences of black people, but exclude bisexual, gay, and lesbian persons in their construction of blackness. In the same year, Horace Griffin approached the question of inclusion differently by challenging pastoral theologians who formulated constructions of family to include lesbian and gay persons in their research and practices. In these ways, each scholar contributed a foundational assertion of the presence and value of lesbian, gay, and

bisexual people to (black) Christian academic discourse. As they questioned the silences and lacunas, they invited black religious academia to contend with the bodies and lives that it erased.

Elias Farajajé-Jones, "an avowed gay-identified, bisexual Black theologian,"[288] in "Breaking the Silence: Towards an In-the-Life Theology" (1993), began his essay with an excerpt from a signal volume on black gay men's experiences, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, edited by black writer and AIDS activist Joseph Beam. The fictional narrative, albeit keenly representative nonfiction during the peak of the AIDS crisis in which it was written, was aptly entitled "Cut off From Among Their People," wherein Craig G.J. Harris told the story of a preacher who utilized a eulogy as an opportunity to declare AIDS as a just punishment for those who practice "abominations."[289] Utilizing black gay men's literature and his own experience as an AIDS activist, Farajajé-Jones expands the resources of theological reflection and the epistemological potential within black liberation theology.

Farajajé-Jones proposed "an African-centered, womanist, in-the-life theology of liberation" that is integrative and inclusive in that it connects the struggles of those in-the-life with the oppressed peoples of the world and is concerned with the wellness of communities (a womanist claim), though he specifically centered black gay and bisexual

[288] Elias Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence: Towards an In-the-Life Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (Volume Two: 1980-1992)*, eds. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 139. It is worth noting that Farajajé-Jones identifies himself in this manner in the notes on the first page of his essay featured in this signal volume. He was one of two openly queer voices at the time of publication.
[289] Ibid.

men because of his own positionality.[290] He notes the AIDSphobia, homophobia, and biphobia within African American communities and churches in the wake of the ravages of AIDS on (namely) gay and bisexual communities, and the ways they have othered black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.[291] His call for inclusion extended to African American communities because, as he argued, AIDS is interconnected with the various oppressions (e.g., affordable housing, social services, or education) impacting black people; therefore, black people should be concerned as a matter of communal commitment.

The inclusion for which Farajajé-Jones argued was not a minimalist one, one that existed only in form not substance. It constituted an urgent call to African American community to care for itself more fully. Farajajé-Jones presented a distinct "in-the-life" framework that honored the dignity and the queerness of black bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, and queer people without apology. He concomitantly sought the inclusion of persons "in-the-life" in the African American community, not because they have not always been in the community, but because of the mechanisms in place that keep those "in-the-life" as outsiders, which at times could lead to their demise.[292] He confronted black churches, as institutional powerhouses in African American communities, challenging them to produce a prophetic black theology so that they would become safer

[290] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking Silence," 141. "In-the-life," according to Farajajé-Jones, has traditionally been utilized in African American communities to indicate a variety of sexualities. He utilizes it, as opposed to queer or gay, because of its inclusivity and "because of the rich spiritual connotations of the word 'life,' especially for a people continually confronted with suffering and death." Farajajé-Jones, 140.
[291] Ibid., 143.
[292] The many men who have sex with men of all races who died during the beginnings of AIDS crisis in the United States serve as an example of how outsiders meet untimely fates without transformative intervention from those in power because they are outsiders.

spaces and would take on heteropatriarchy for the sake of not only gay, lesbian, and bisexuals, but also heterosexuals' liberation.[293] Farajajé-Jones's theology was decidedly queer/"in-the-life" and rejected the compulsion to uphold the sexual status quo in theology, in churches, and in the African American community. Such a bold assertion of black bisexual, gay, and lesbian presence, particularly those impacted by AIDS, provides an important intervention in so-called respectable discourse, revealing its limitations and the subjects that are sacrificed when scholarship portrays subjectivity too narrowly or essentialized. Farajajé-Jones's theology pushes a black queer ethic to consider those who are marginalized on the basis of gender nonconformity and the importance of amplifying queer suffering, even if it may risk the aligning of queerness with illness, tragedy, and oppressions. Doing so presents a more nuanced and holistically human picture of black queer people.

Renee L. Hill, a "self-identified lesbian,"[294] likewise sought inclusion through the dismantling of heterosexism and homophobia within Christian womanist discourse, concerns that Hill argued were treated as "nonissues."[295] Her signal contribution to womanist dialogue, "'Who Are We For Each Other?:' Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology," began with an analysis of Alice Walker's coining of the term "womanist," which notably included women who love women, both romantically and non-

[293] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 158.
[294] Renee L. Hill, "'Who Are We For Each Other?:' Sexism, Sexuality, and Womanist Theology," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History (Volume Two: 1980-1992)*, eds. by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 345. It is worth noting that Hill names herself in this manner in the notes on the first page of her essay featured in this signal volume. She is one of two openly queer scholars featured at the time of publishing.
[295] Ibid., 346.

romantically. It was curious for Hill that all other aspects of Walker's definition had been engaged with this one exception. Black women in relationship to other black women— in order to celebrate one another and community, as well as to shape community— formed the foundation of what womanism is all about, Hill argues.[296] No aspect of these relationships between women should be excluded. As a matter of justice, Hill claimed womanism must listen to lesbian voices, which could open the door more widely to a variety of significant justice issues impacting women related to gender and sexuality, specifically within black communities (not only as a result of white oppression).[297] This focus on the interconnections between spirituality, sexuality (including but not limited to sexual orientation), and justice was particularly forward-thinking as a just engagement with sexuality remains a topic in need of greater exploration within black religious scholarship and evolution in line with contemporary concerns.[298] While Hill's analysis of womanism could have included greater attentiveness to the systemic (racist, sexist, heterosexist) academic and ecclesial forces that prevented the inclusive expansion of

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[296] Ibid.

[297] Ibid., 349-350. According to Hill, "Christian womanists, like their male counterparts, focus for the most part on the impact of racism on the black community." Ibid., 346. However, womanism increasingly focused on concerns at the intersection of race and gender from its inception to the present. Hill does not name scholars like Jacquelyn Grant and Katie G. Cannon who brought a definitive gender lens to their explorations of race prior to the writing of her essay.

[298] Foundational womanist theologian Delores Williams's integration of womanhood and sexual identity in her scholarship prompts Traci C. West's own reflective hopes and critiques for womanism in its failure to engage heteropatriarchy. See Traci C. West, "Visions of Womanhood: Beyond Idolizing Heteropatriarchy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, nos. 3 and 4 (2004): 132. A recent contribution to womanist discourse focused on sexuality, including lesbian identity, is the womanist sexual ethics proposed by Monique Moultrie. See Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

womanist discourse in its time, the critique's conclusion stands as a crucial intervention in black theological and ethical thought.

The Christian black queer desire for inclusion in the early 1990s existed alongside parallel calls for inclusion: white lesbians in both religious and secular feminist discourse (as early as the 1980s), and gay scholars.[299] In these instances, and in that of Farajajé-Jones and Hill, the scholars were seeking inclusion within an existing entity that claimed to reflect their identities. Therefore, the expectation for inclusion was a well-grounded one. Hill and Farajajé-Jones sought inclusion in the theological, ecclesial, and social environments in which they had been shaped and presumably in which they saw a part of themselves, even if sexuality was held beyond the delineations of acceptable topics.

Also, in 1993, pastoral theologian Horace L. Griffin, who wrote from his positionality as a "middle-class, African American, gay Christian man," argued for the inclusion of African American gays and lesbians within the definition of family and within pastoral care practices that validate their family forms.[300] He is a key figure because he offered one of the most extensive discussions advocating ecclesial and pastoral inclusion of black gay and lesbian people in pastoral theology.

In his later work, Griffin's desire for inclusion remained, as well as affirmation. He framed inclusion as applying to all sexualities, and argued that the community of liberation was not only made up of or was not exclusively for gender and sexual nonconformists, but all who would actively resist the bonds of homophobia,

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[299] See chapter one which gives insight into the other important, gay- and lesbian-centered scholarly contributions to Christian theology.
[300] Horace L. Griffin, "Giving New Birth: Lesbians, Gays, and 'The Family': A Pastoral Care Perspective," *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 3, no. 84 (1993), 88.

heterosexism, racist standards of sexual purity, discriminatory biblical interpretation, and other oppressions related to gender and sexuality.[301] I wholeheartedly agree with this point through a black queer ethic, and find that formulating this ethic solely for black queer people does little to combat the disintegrative values so prevalent within the wider religious communities and the society of which black queer people are a part. Delineating for whom this ethic may be helpful also limits the reach of justice love and integration, and ignores that all persons would benefit from these foci in sexual ethics. It is an audacious move, for Griffin then and a black queer ethic now, to argue that even the heterosexual, who had been bestowed with superior sexual morality simply by virtue of their sexual orientation, had room for liberative transformation of their sexual selves.

Griffin poignantly argued that accepting, affirming, and celebrating people of all sexualities would create space for "our sisters and brothers who, in their faithful commitment to their sexual gifts, allows us to appreciate the beauty of God's diverse creation."[302] For black theology in particular to take on this approach to gay and lesbian people would have been to "take seriously the reality of Black people—their life of suffering and humiliation" and would extend liberation to all oppressed, as Jesus sought to do.[303] Inclusion, argued Griffin, of all erotic selves was the way to "proclaim a *true* Black liberation theology, and in so doing, […] honor God" (emphasis mine)—one that holds space for the multiplicity of black identity.[304] Inclusion, then, meant (namely, for

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[301] Horace L. Griffin, "Toward a True Black Liberation Theology: Affirming Homoeroticism, Black Gay Christians, and Their Love Relationships," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, eds. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 139, 145-46.
[302] Ibid., 150.
[303] Ibid., 143.
[304] Ibid., 151.

black theology) delving more particularly into the sufferings, and I would say, as well as the joys, delights, and power of being queerly black.

Inclusion also meant that heterosexuals work in church and society for gay rights and affirmation, and that pastoral care givers "uphold all covenanted loving relationships as normative."[305] However, centering on covenanted relationships (and subsequently, marginalizing others of, for example, relationships that exist for temporary, mutual enjoyment) in part could act as a means to sanitize being a sexual non-conformist, and could proscribe limits in the name of normalizing queer expression, which presents a further burden to LGBTQ persons by heroizing them, according to Roger A. Sneed, and subjecting them to a normativizing process, in the manner Thelathia Nikki Young describes. This approach to inclusion strives toward Christian heteronormativity through Christian homonormativity, as well as an innate/"born this way" homosexuality that ought not be necessary in order for LGBTQ persons to be included.[306] When used by Griffin, this sanitization of queerness reifies heteronormativity and the hegemony of the dominant discourses that demonize black (queer) sexuality.[307] When Griffin made these rhetorical and theological moves that can be read as sanitizing and promoting respectability, I surmise he was attempting to dispel Christian myths about

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[305] Ibid., 142; Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 218.
[306] For more on choice in sexual nonconformity, see Laurel C. Schneider. "What If It is A Choice?: Some Implications for the Homosexuality Debates for Theology," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection, Second Edition*, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas, 297-304. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010). See also Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "Not Born that Way," in *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2004).
[307] Roger A. Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 94.

homosexuality. He began by addressing the pejorative assertions being argued in 1993 by major white Christian evangelical figures like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.[308] He also may have written with the din of the incessant black antigay critics in mind like Alveda King (niece of Martin Luther King Jr.) and singers Debbie and Angie Winans, as well as others spreading panic about homosexuals making their children gay and other purported gay pathologies.[309] This explains his apologetic stance that sought to pave the way for gay and lesbian inclusion by countering every excuse for exclusion.[310]

Victor Anderson addressed the inclusion of "the curious body of the homosexual" by interrogating the paradigm of a public/private dichotomy that existed among black churches and leadership. According to this paradigm, as argued namely by social theorist Michael Eric Dyson and Christian social ethicist Robert M. Franklin, many black churches have elected to espouse "conservative/preservative" views as it related to sexuality—"private matters of marriage, the family and sex"— and more "liberal/progressive" in matters of social justice.[311] For Anderson, the exclusion was not paradoxical because he did not accept the idea that the black churches and their clergy were necessarily as justice-driven as some Christian theorists had suggested. Ultimately,

[308] Griffin, "Giving New Birth," 91.
[309] Sneed, *Representations*, 89.
[310] Griffin was not alone in his apologetic approach. Pamela Lightsey identifies other apologists in the same era, as she celebrates what she perceives to be Kelly Brown Douglas' non-apologetic posture, though arguing she doesn't say enough to celebrate the gift of queer sexuality. Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 6. Sneed calls Griffin's stance "near apologetic." Sneed, *Representations*, 94. I remove the preposition.
[311] Victor Anderson, "The Black Church and the Curious Body of the Black Homosexual," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic,* eds. Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 297.

Anderson proposed a more nuanced view was needed to examine black churches' commitments, rather than an assumed positioning in the liberal camp.[312]

Further, Anderson also constructs inclusionist arguments for gay and lesbian people by asserting black gay and lesbian presence as faithful members of the Black Church/es and Christians.[313] Many black gay and lesbian persons do not leave the churches in which they grew in faith for this very reason—they have not allowed homoantagonism in the church to force their acquiescence. Anderson's argument invited greater clarity around the term inclusion because it challenged the notion of who has the power to include and exclude. Though in some cases, that power to say who literally can and cannot be present as their fullest selves lies with vehemently anti-LGBTQ parties, at other times, the distribution of power is not as clear or need not be permanent. This, then, goes a step beyond a notion of inclusion to what could be considered a "let live" ethos, based on a God-given right to be a part of the church that is Christ's body and to participate in its ministry as one's full self. Yet, Anderson, speaking as "one Black gay believer," does not go much farther than "let live"—not requiring, the advocacy of gay and lesbian sexual freedom by the black church, but simply asking, "that [the Black Church] not hate us when we advocate for ourselves [*sic*] sexual liberty."[314] The distinction lies in the quelling of one's repressive scrutiny of the homosexual and an openness to the expansive diversity existent within the body of Christ.

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[312] Ibid., 304-05. Roger Sneed likewise rejects that such a dichotomy necessarily exists and that black churches have been bastions of justice. See "Introduction," in *Representations of Homosexuality: Black Liberation Theology and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[313] Anderson, "Curious Body," 310.
[314] Ibid., 311.

For some black queer theorists, inclusion in settings that do not fully affirm black queer people in presence and ministry was tantamount to self-betrayal. Arguing against Griffin and Anderson, Roger A. Sneed was one of the few black religious scholars (with the exception of Farajajé-Jones and Dorinda G. Henry) to name black queer presence in homophobic settings as acquiescence and approval of the discrimination.[315] While this could be perceived as victim blaming, it seemed that Sneed's aim was to reframe sexual difference apart from the status of victimhood,[316] and to assert black queer dignity. These could not be sacrificed for the sake of inclusion. He poignantly stated,

> Black queer experience is real and in need of serious attention. The desire for attention echoes a desire for belonging. The desire for belonging may be read as desire for reconciliation with the larger Black community. However, this reconciliation cannot happen if Black queer experience is merely tolerated and addressed only in the service of fighting white supremacy, for Black queer life is far more than an endless, heroic struggle against the forces of white racism.[317]

The parallel concerns of hyper focus on liberation from white racism's effects and an erasure of homo/sexuality was a significant theme for Sneed.[318] Such an approach does

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[315] Roger A. Sneed, "Like Fire Shut Up in Our Bones: Religion and Spirituality in Black Gay Men's Literature," *Black Theology* 6, no. 2 (2008), 245; Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 146; Dorinda G. Henry, "'I, Too, Sing Songs of Freedom': A Theo-Sociological Praxis toward an Emancipatory Ethic for the Black Church and its Trans-Same-and-Both-Gender-Loving Members," in *The Black Church Studies Reader*, eds. Alton B. Pollard, III and Carol B. Duncan (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 288. Henry identifies as an "African American woman and lesbian." (280).

[316] Sneed, *Representations*, 14.

[317] Sneed, "Like Fire," 247.

[318] The racialized focus in Black liberation theology excludes sexuality because the primary agenda is fighting white supremacy, though the second wave of black theologians and womanists, as well as Black cultural critics of the 1990s disrupt this narrative. Still, Sneed uncritically makes the argument that "this implied linkage of homosexuality with womanist ethics feminizes and marginalizes black gay men."[318] It is not clear that womanist concern for community feminizes the community or that the gender of an author imposes that gender characterization on the subject. As black men's liberation theorizing about lesbians would not masculinize lesbian women, hypothetically

well in practicing a more communal, integrated approach to sexuality as it invites greater mindfulness of the various aspects of human and communal existence, beyond any one identity marker.

Pamela R. Lightsey, "African American queer lesbian womanist scholar," argued that inclusion was necessary for the sake of the soul of the Black Church even as she affirmed the church's "blackness—that spiritual DNA commitment to the liberation of all oppressed."[319] While I caution against locating the myth of such a DNA within the church's blackness because it hinges upon an ontological blackness and is debatable, I concur that the souls of black church/es (and any exclusive space) is compromised by exclusion and those attitudes that inform the exclusion. On this wise, Lightsey further argued that collusion with white "right-wing fundamentalist [evangelicalism]," to the exclusion of queer people, endangered the integrity of the Black Church.[320]

For Lightsey, inclusivity was also a matter of research method as she gave considerable attention to queer lived experience including and beyond those categories that speak to her positionality, an important practice for any theology or ethic that claims to be liberative. She drew from transgender persons like Monica Roberts, Georgia Black and Pauli Murray as she elaborated the aims and influences of queer womanist

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speaking, it is challenging to understand Sneed's critique of the "relegation" of gay and lesbian concerns "to a subset of womanist ethics" as a loss. Perhaps, the answer is in his critique that when sexuality is mentioned, it is as "a problem to be solved" (e.g., homophobia, HIV/AIDS stigma), not as a means of celebrating difference, diversity, or queer life, or that womanists do not allow black gay men's experience to speak for itself. Sneed makes this argument before there is an openly queer voice in womanism explicating black queer experience. Sneed, *Representations*, 13, 53.

[319] Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), xix; Pamela R. Lightsey, "Inner Dictum: A Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm," *Black Theology* 10, no. 3 (Nov 2011), 345, 340.

[320] Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 345.

theologians.[321] Accordingly, Lightsey argued, queer womanist theology was a theology of wholeness and bodily freedom, which affirmed the expansive inclusion of entire selves in community, church, and academy and liberation from racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, war, and the rigid hegemony that upholds the status quo.[322] Yet, the particular task, she asserts, of queer womanist scholarship is the inclusion of LGBTQ lives in the communal conception of black lives.[323]

Part of the problem of inclusion lay in the ideological basis of the exclusion. Analyzing the ideology matters because responses to exclusion might more effectively address the problem of exclusion if the bases are known. Hill argued that womanists did not want to be associated with lesbians by telling their stories because to do so would also align with a feminism that in some people's imaginations excluded men, or womanists may have been accused of airing dirty laundry of black communities, or they would risk being labelled a lesbian.[324] AparthAIDS (discrimination on the basis of an AIDS diagnosis) and AIDSphobia, as presented by Farajajé-Jones, led to stigmatization, AIDS's correlation with homosexuality—naming it, according to many in the 1980s and early 1990s, the "gay man's disease"[325]—and the subsequent erasure of the harm and

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[321] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 71-72. Lightsey describes Pauli Murray as living in an "intersexed [sic]" body in the 2011 article, and as transgender in Our Lives Matter. In "Inner Dictum," she quotes women's historian Rosalind Rosenberg who says of Murray "Ashamed to be thought a lesbian, [Murray] reasoned that her attraction to 'very feminine and heterosexual women' was an indication that she was biologically male." Though anachronistic, according to this description, Murray could be considered transgender. "Inner Dictum," 340.
[322] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 99.
[323] Ibid.
[324] Hill, "Who Are We," 346.
[325] "Young People and the History of the Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program" Health Resources and Services Administration: Ryan White and Global HIV/AIDS Programs, accessed April 14, 2019, https://hab.hrsa.gov/livinghistory/issues/youth_1.htm.

communities impacted. For Lightsey, "bhomophobia"[326] was the basis of exclusion because it hinged upon a desire to be accepted "by oppressors" (presumably right-wing Christians permeated by the whiteness that has diminished black sexuality for centuries) and to receive the benefits of heterosexual superiority. Griffin found the wide-spread argument of homosexuality as a sexual orientation not practiced in Africa until it was proposed by white Europeans to be racist in itself, because it assumed that Africans do not engage sexuality in the way that the rest of humanity does.[327] He claimed some African American Christians duplicitously invoke Africa when it is convenient, much like their use of the Bible.[328] This then also pointed to the use of the Bible as a disingenuous means of preventing the inclusion of lesbian and gay persons.

There was not much desire to argue against harmful biblical interpretations, but to argue instead for a God who is on the side of the oppressed and to assert God's creativity. Sneed, particularly when referring to Griffin's scholarship, noted that there was little to be said about who God is and why God is supportive of gay and lesbian folks. This argument could extend to nearly all of the black queer theologians I explore in this chapter, who typically depend on the liberationist vision of God found in black theology. A construction of God does not play a particularly large role in Young or Leath. If it was

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[326] "Bhomophobia" is a distinctly African American form of homophobia that identifies queer people as race traitors, that diminishes white queer people, a hegemonic relationship between black heterosexual and black queers, and a one-sided relationship with the "family-values lobbyist" with whom they can connect on matters of marriage, but they cannot expect support for concerns impacting black communities. "Inner Dictum," 344.

[327] Griffin, "Toward a True," 140. Griffin further states, "Many African Americans are using 'Africa,' in the same way that they use the Bible: worthy of citing as a justification for their resistance to homosexuality and unjust treatment of Black gays, but something that they can ignore when it goes against their other views." "Toward a True," 141.

[328] Ibid., 141.

the construction of God and of "God's word" that prevented the inclusion of LGBTQ persons in a discourse or in black communities, then Sneed addressed the root cause of the problem by removing it and replacing it with a humanist ethic of openness. While there were alternatives like explicating what pastoral care providers must do with what are used as anti-LGBTQ texts or offering a more robust interpretation of God who includes LGBTQ persons without contradiction, there was also the alternative of offering a different starting point for theological and ethical reflection— the subjects themselves—and constructing from there. Each scholar in their own way possessed a shared commitment to inclusion and the task of communality that depends on the inclusion of varying and sometimes divergent voices. These approaches to inclusion also reflect the ethos that black queer discourse possesses toward an integrative tapestry of black queer academic communality.

Black Queer Subjectivity and Identity

As openly black queer scholars wrote from their positionality in conversation with black theology, womanist theology, and white-centered gay and lesbian theologies, as well as ecclesial dialogue about gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer personhood, they contended with others' framings of blackness and queerness and offered their own subjectivity and identity. Their scholarship explicitly or implicitly makes a declaration about who queer people are, centering the particularity of being simultaneously and non-hegemonically black and queer. For black queer scholars to assert the black queer self is an act of dignity and defiance. As Christian ethicist Jennifer Leath argued, without the willingness and space to proclaim particularity, those who are

not subjects remain in a subjugated position.[329] Identity politics, alterity, self-naming, claiming the term "queer" and queerness all signify the particularity of black queerness, and are explored below.

Like feminists (particularly black feminists), womanists, and queer theorists of color have argued, identities exist at various intersections. Inattentiveness to this reality by institutions, communities, and even interpersonally often caused people with marginalized identities to choose an identity with which to align, or conversely, to conceive of the self in a new way—perhaps, as equitably possessing more than one identity at a time. When Farajajé-Jones stated, "While we do not place our sexuality before our Blackness, we do live out our sexualities within the context of our blackness,"[330] he spoke to how identities inform one another's expression. No identity supersedes or is subordinate to another, as Lightsey stated, but they are simultaneously so at all times.[331] The erasure of aspects of the self warranted responses in postmodernist Christian scholarship. For some scholars who were both Christian and concerned with women's experience, this convergence of identities led to feminist scholarship. For Christian theologians and ethicists who were both black and women this desire for integrated identities led to the founding of Christian womanism. For scholars who are black and queer, the interventions explored here presented a new black queer hermeneutic and subject-hood.

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[329] Jennifer Leath, "(Out of) Places, Please! Demystifying Opposition to Procreative Choice in Afro-Diasporic Communities in the United States," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no.1 (Spring 2014), 160.
[330] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 153.
[331] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 16.

By and large, the black queer Christian person's experience was, and remains for many, one of alterity. For black men in-the-life, Farajajé-Jones said, "in our experience of alterity, of otherness, we are doubly or triply the ultimate Other, the Different One"—as black men, as queer men, as black queer men.[332] Sneed, in his examination of black queer literature, found themes of alterity in these men's fictional telling of black gay experience—alienation, longing for belonging and home, reconciliation and revision. Locating the otherness of black gay men yielded a "thicker" examination of black queer life than theological scholarship was offering at the time.[333] Though the alterity of the black queer led to "othering" and othering often leads to rejection, dehumanization and even death, it could also be a source of liberation and below, we will see how alterity could serve as resistance. In the "othered" space, black queerness is afforded the fluidity and freedom eluded by compulsory heterosexuality and patriarchal dominance. Embracing this type of subjecthood has allowed for unorthodox representations of black queerness in black queer discourse, and expansions of what it is to be black, to be queer, and to be black queer.

Conversely, other black queer scholars conceived of their subject not as a despised "other," but as a uniquely "good" representation of God's diversity and desire for humanity. For example, Griffin framed gay and lesbian people and their love as representations of God's presence and love.[334] This is not to say that heterosexuals are not, but Griffin is presenting a God who disrupts the notion that what is considered "normal" is the sole good. As noted above, Griffin tended to speak of homosexuality in

[332] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 141.
[333] Sneed, "Like Fire," 247.
[334] Griffin, "Toward a True," 150.

"love" terms, offering a palatable version of queer relationships, as Sneed argued. Sneed further argued, "Griffin has to present black homosexuals as an aggrieved party suffering great injustice at the hands of heterosexual oppressors. In other words, Griffin has to follow the same model presented by Cone and others in the formulation of black liberation theology."[335] This model centered in liberation often created static categories of "oppressed" and "oppressor" that masked over the messiness of reality with unnuanced labels. Conversely, Sneed (like black gay and lesbian writers of the 1970s and 1980s), addressed black queer experience as "not a problem that [needs] to be fixed,"[336] but simply human. Young continued along these lines by employing black queer moral agency against the narrative of black queer victimhood—black queer people as passive recipients of institutional, social, and interpersonal circumstances.[337]

What Sneed and Young illumine is the importance of black queer theorists naming themselves, often in opposition to the dominant discourse. In fact, Young argued that black queer narrative, and the telling of these narratives, were a form of resistance to black queer erasure in other narratives and an act of reintegration into the self: "lives that are lost through the narrative can be restored through a counter narrative."[338] Through self-naming, Farajajé-Jones asserted quite the opposite from a narrative of victimization and being destroyed by the AIDS virus, but instead he claimed the vibrancy of "life" for

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[335] Sneed, *Representations*, 94.
[336] Sneed, "Like Fire," 247.
[337] Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 33.
[338] Thelathia Nikki Young and Shannon J. Miller, "Asé and Amen, Sister!: Black Feminist Scholars Engage in Interdisciplinary, Dialogical, Transformative Ethical Praxis," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 43, no. 2 (2015): 300, 311-12. Young took up the argument of Hilde Lindemann Nelson in making this assertion and her own paradigm of listening and telling as ethical imperatives.

those who were "in" it (i.e., an "in-the-life" theology).[339] Additionally, Griffin argued that through telling our own stories, black gay Christians, who are also capable representations of the *imago Dei*, reflected Christian faith and witness—an argument that was antithetical to the notion that homosexuality was incompatible with good forms of Christian sexuality.[340] Griffin even centered the importance of lesbian experience and narrative.[341] Writings by and about Christian black queers generally focused on cisgender men's narratives and concerns that most impacted cisgender men. This aligned with Christianity's fixation on male homoeroticism. As the dialogue evolved, cisgender women and concerns specific to them have not been explored comprehensively besides

[339] Though Sneed later takes issue with Farajajé-Jones's use of "in-the-life" because its historical included a variety of people that Farajajé-Jones does not mention besides sexual non-conformists who would be identified as in the life according to its definition (e.g., pimps, prostitutes), Farajajé-Jones was adamant about asserting "life" in connection with all oppressed peoples because these populations so frequently needed to resist "suffering and death." Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 140. According to Sneed, "The term in-the-life had traditionally been used in order to refer to unsavory elements within black life […] If Farajajé-Jones wants to take in-the-life seriously, he has to contend with the negative associations that this term entails." Sneed, *Representations*, 60. Sneed's critique seems unfair particularly considering Farajajé-Jones notes how the term associates those in the life with all the oppressed peoples of the world, perhaps including pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers that Joseph Beam names, who are oppressed by socioeconomic pressures. I do not feel that he would not want to include these rejected populations who also exist in alterity because they too struggle against injustice and disinheritance. Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 140-141.

[340] Griffin, "Toward a True," 149.

[341] Horace L. Griffin, "Revisioning Christian Ethical Discourse on Homosexuality: A Challenge for Pastoral Care in the 21st Century," *Journal of Pastoral Care and Counseling* 53, no. 2 (June 1999), 215, 218. In *Representations of Homosexuality*, Sneed examines the literature of black men only but not in an effort to exclude black lesbians, but because he does not have a depth of knowledge about that subject matter. This plays into black gay men's patriarchy and the fact that queer women and lesbians are rarely written about, made subjects, arguably because the writers are primarily men and are shaping a patriarchal discourse, even from their marginalized position. However, in Sneed's later article, "Dark Matter" (2013), he draws from queer black women Octavia Butler and Meshell Ndegeocello's cultural productions.

by the lesbian and queer women themselves. Unfortunately, according to Griffin's explanation, the purposes for sharing these narratives had more to do with convincing heterosexuals than empowering black queer people.[342] Though decades of gay and lesbian narratives existed, Griffin insisted on those who were being harmed to further act as a catalyst for others growth. While this approach, in the end, served the wellbeing of the entire community (queers included), the onus seems misdirected. Stories' liberative potential lies in their capacity to first be liberative for the teller, otherwise, the stories are not worth telling.

Later in her career, Hill also affirmed the need for narrative—those that reveal "the breadth and depth of human sexuality"— as resources for (black) theological reflection and responsiveness to the complexity of human experience.[343] The narratives of people of all sexualities must be included in order for communities to understand one another as subjects possessing moral worth and value. Roland Stringfellow likewise affirmed the need for faithful black queer people to "come out and offer their distinctive voice."[344] While Stringfellow conceded that this bold manner of coming out may yield rejection, I do not believe that Stringfellow, Hill, and Griffin are attentive to the ways that

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[342] In identifying reasons for Black gay Christian narratives and drawing from Larry Kent Graham, Griffin states that sharing these stories will "demonstrate that all human beings are capable of reflecting the *imago Dei*—when their concrete and everyday lives and relationships are truthful, loving, creative, just and diverse and consequently assist in transforming the understanding of many Black heterosexuals so that they will come to recognize that Black gays and their loving sexual relationships are also moral." Griffin, "Toward a True," 149.

[343] Renee L. Hill, "Human Sexuality: The Rest of the Story," in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education,* eds. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR : Cascade Books, 2010), 186.

[344] Roland Stringfellow, "Soul Work: Developing a Black LGBT Liberation Theology," in *Queer Religion: Volume I*, eds. Donald L. Boisvert and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 124.

in many parts of the U.S., coming out may mean much more than rejection. Coming out could even mean death if people are expelled from homes and communities or forced to live in unsafe conditions, as homeless LGBTQ youth so often do. This risk of exposure to death is also especially for transgender people, who confront physical violence at a higher level than other members of the LGBTQ community.[345] While I affirm the generative potential of narrative and note that coming out can be liberative for some, it can also lead to dangers. More careful language and attentiveness to trans experience could provide a better understanding of the realities surrounding these appeals for black queer people to come out and share intimate aspects of themselves.

Assertions of black queer subjectivity and identity by the act of self-naming were developed by the use of the term queer itself. The fluidity of queerness for my own use, beyond serving as an umbrella term, also deconstructs rigid categorizations related to sexuality and gender in order to create more space for self-determination and expansive communality. While some of the black queer Christian scholars utilized the term queer, it was not without some interrogation of the limits (or lack thereof) of the term to offer insight into identity and subjectivity. Farajajé-Jones finds the term empowering for black queer people and reflective of resistance to "white male-dominated heterosexual culture."[346] On the other hand, Lightsey critiques the term for its whiteness, but utilizes it to refer to "gay men, lesbian women, bi-sexual [*sic*], transsexual, and intersexed [*sic*] persons in ways that do not limit—as does 'gay'—our lives to the intimacy of

[345] See "Fact Sheet on LGBT Youth," Religious Institute. Accessed May 8, 2019. http://religiousinstitute.org/resources/fact-sheet-lgbt-youth/.
[346] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 140.

lovemaking nor the attractions we may or may not have."[347] The term is expansive and adds layers of multiplicity to what it is to be a full person who is a sexual nonconformist and more. Such a move responds to a concern early-stated by Farajajé-Jones, that "in the minds of most people, our lives do not exist apart from sexual acts."[348] The use of queer can decenter sex acts and instead, make a statement about ways of relating, subversively and toward justice.[349]

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[347] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 34.

[348] Farajajé-Jones, "Breaking the Silence," 141.

[349] Uniquely, Jennifer Leath incorporated the use of the term *quare*, as coined by performance theorist and anthologist of black queer experience E. Patrick Johnson, which reflected a relational imperative in self-naming and "[embodied] the newness and now-ness of a discourse of Afro-diasporic queer LGBT SGL [same-gender loving] simultaneity." Utilizing Alice Walker's definitional framework that she employed for womanism, Johnson stated, "quare is to queer as 'reading' is to 'throwing shade,'" much like "womanism is to feminism as purple is to lavender." According to the renowned film in black gay and queer culture, *Paris is Burning*, as stated by Dorrien Corey, "Reading comes first," that is, before "throwing shade." E. Patrick Johnson's definition seeks to assert the preexistent, as well as the deeper, more poignant meaning of quare as compared to queer. From Johnson's essay, Leath draws the following definition: "Quare (Kwâr), *n.* 1. Meaning *queer*; also, opp. of *straight*; odd or slightly off kilter; from the African American vernacular for queer; sometimes homophobic in usage, but always denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of *being*; curiously equivalent to the Anglo-Irish (and sometimes "Black" Irish) variant of queer, as in Brendan Behan's famous play, *The Quare Fellow*.
—*adj.* 2. a lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered person of color who loves other men or women, sexually or nonsexually, and appreciates black culture and community.
—*n.* 3. one who *thinks* and *feels* and *acts* (and, sometimes, "acts up"); committed to struggle against all forms of oppression—racial, sexual, gender, class, religious, etc.
—*n.* 4. one for whom sexual and gender identities always already intersect with racial subjectivity.
5. quare is to queer as "reading" is to "throwing shade."" E. Patrick Johnson, " 'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (January 2001): 2.
In her lecture, "Is Queer the New Black?", by invoking quare, Leath asserted a black queerness that did not have the trouble of stumbling over the whiteness of queerness and the heterosexism of blackness. Quareing was an act of justice and therein lies the value of the term: its justice-orientation that grows out of the experiences of black LGBTQ folks and seeks justice for all black people. Like the communities of black queer Harlem,

The tension of possessing three identities—black and queer and often non-normative gender—and the desire to claim them all represents a significant point of departure for black queer critique, particularly, as black queer scholars contended with queer theory's deconstruction of identity and the postmodernist critique that claimed the unintelligibility of a group identity.[350] While Lightsey decried the damages of identity politics and essentialism, utilizing Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García, she (with Young) was careful to retain the cultural particularity that made up the experiences of being black queer and black women, as well as the real consequences that persons encounter as a result of their identities.[351] Leath argued similarly in asserting, "'queer' […] does not supplant racial discourse, [though] we might strategically and occasionally conceive of it as *another* Black—or (alternatively) a Blackness. Similarly, Black might be conceived of as *another* queer—or a queerness."[352]

In agreement, Young skillfully shifted the conversation around queer deconstruction and identity. Her black queer ethic avoided the pitfall of deconstructing blackness or the racial identities of people of color, and the subsequent erasure because of their marginalized position in moral discourse.[353] Rather, she argued, "troubling the concept of stable identities is more a matter of troubling the technologies of normalization and processes of categorization than it is a matter of dismantling the

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"quare" serves as an example of the potentiality for individual and collective identity to act as a means of justice-making.

[350] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 21.

[351] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 32, 24.

[352] Jennifer Leath, "Is Queer the New Black?" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 43, nos. 3 and 4. (Summer/Autumn 2015), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/queer-new-black.

[353] Young, *Black Queer*, 80.

identities themselves."[354] The question then became, not who are black queer people, but how have black queer people been subjected to technologies of normalization that essentialize them. Young refused a monolithic black queerness which, according to E. Patrick Johnson and Roderick Ferguson, would reify "the racist and homophobic thrust of ethnic and sexual genealogies."[355] She, instead, wanted queerness to be as complex and multiplicitous as the black queer lives that she explored. There are "norms, behaviors, values, and virtues" she ascribed to black queerness, but this is not an essentialist or hero-making move.[356] For Young, black queer people were agents with something valuable to contribute to moral discourse through their subjectivity, agency, and imagination.[357] From the stories of black queer people and with critical textual analysis, Young framed black queer moral practice as "confronting and destabilizing norms, creatively resisting the disciplinary technologies of race, gender and sexuality in families, and subverting normative ideas of family through the imagination of new relational possibilities."[358] I employ a similar approach in my own selection of black queer Harlemites as a resource for moral inquiry, as I argued the ethical fecundity in their subjectivity, agency, and imagination for a black queer ethic.

Each black queer scholar uniquely describes who black queer people may be and are becoming as they appreciate forebears and contemporaries of black queer discourse, not for their monolithic, utopic expression of what it is to be black and queer, but for their voices in asserting black queer becoming, resistance, and mattering. They spoke from

[354] Ibid., 59.
[355] Ibid., 50.
[356] Ibid., 50, n.12.
[357] Ibid., 7.
[358] Young, *Black Queer*, 2.

their own lives of the tension of being black queer and Christian—the "shame and self-hatred"[359] as well as the power of unapologetic existence. Through their distinctive collective acts of communal-determination, black queer scholars imagined an understanding of being in community that integrated race and queerness. The black queer ethic that I propose affirms the integration of identities in a way that also integrates a variety of identities into communities, without the disintegrative choosing that people of color and sexual and gender nonconformists are often subject to in religious space.

Resistance and Difference

Resistance in black queer discourse primarily took the form of asserting black queer value and goodness. Ultimately, this was done by countering the negative teachings about sexuality and LGBTQ identity that have dominated Christian thought.[360] Young stated, "Black queers' efforts to resist is a critical first step in the longer, creative process of generating a notion of the good." Resistance is then transformed into resilience, which can lead to thriving.[361] Each black queer scholar resisted by not shying away from the difference that black gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer identities represent. I explore here resistance via authority, the construction of family, pleasure, research method, and embracing deviance as modes of resistance employed by black queer scholars.

Black queer scholars addressed authority as it relates to the Bible, to black moral and theological discourse, and to black queer people. Authority equated to validity, and subsequently, the capacity to shape moral and theological norms. Griffin challenged anti-

[359] Griffin, *Their Own*, 3.
[360] Griffin, *Their Own*, vii.
[361] Young, *Black Queer*, 195.

homosexual uses of the Bible by frequently invoking the argument that scriptures about homosexuality must be rethought just as those related to enslavement were. This created a loaded comparison between black and queer suffering. Yet, as the primary target audience was presumably black (he wrote within black liberationist discourse), one could see the efficacy of creating that parallel. Griffin also subverted the narrative of gay and lesbian presence in the church by going beyond the trope of the gay choir director to include concrete examples of Black gay and lesbian ministers that have imputed value to lesbian and gay experience by founding churches where queer people could see themselves in leadership positions, without forsaking a culturally connected worship experience. This self-sufficiency was also reflected in Monroe's essay, "When and Where I Enter, Then the Whole Race Enters with Me: Que(e)rying Exodus," in which resistance took the form of self-love through African American people's reclamation of the body from demonization "by white culture."[362] Young called self-love among black queer people a "radical, revolutionary, creative, and resistant act." She went on to say, in loving self and one another,

> [Black queer people] resist three things: first, that black lives are unlivable and unworthy of protection, care, justice, and love; second, that material realities of oppression are inevitable outcomes of black subjectivity. And third, that black queer subjectivity is devoid of moral and ethical reasoning and practice.[363]

Communal self-love resists valuelessness and practices black queer mattering. Similarly, in her essay, "Inner Dictum," Lightsey asserted queer value by divorcing it from the need

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[362] Irene Monroe, "When and Where I Enter, then the Whole Race Enters with Me: Que(e)rying Exodus," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic,* eds. by Anthony Pinn and Dwight Hopkins (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 123.
[363] Young, *Black Queer*, 107.

for heterosexual support. In contrast to Griffin and other non-queer identified theologians and ethicists who attempted to convince heterosexuals of homosexual worth, Lightsey and others who subvert "societal expectation and constructions of what presents a 'normal,'" proclaimed queerness as a good without qualification.[364]

As a pastoral theologian, Griffin first interrogated the conception of family and the roles of black gays and lesbians therein. In "Giving New Birth: Lesbians, Gays, and 'The Family': A Pastoral Care Perspective," Griffin delineated the experiences that gay and lesbian families encountered socially and within pastoral settings, including heterosexist, rigid conceptions of "the family," while offering pastoral care alternatives that attended to the individual and to social injustice.[365] Young comprehensively takes up this question from a black queer ethical position by exploring the subversive creation of family that black queer people enacted over and against society's familial norms, and elaborating the potentiality of moral imagination for queer relationality. To this end, the notion of family was contingent upon the marriage of a (Christian) heterosexual man and woman was disputed and expanded to include a diversity of sexualities and relational modes. At the same time, Young argued, "the American family *is* a queer family," such that the moral imagination found within (black) queer families is not totally against the

[364] Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 342. Lightsey chooses to frame same gender attraction through the lens of "loving relationship," an approach that Sneed critiques in Griffin because it presents a respectable form of sexuality without acceptance that all relationships that queer (or heterosexual) people engage are not aiming to culminate in romantic love. Even if the connotation were that all Christians practice loving relationship, the invocation of the term "loving" relationships carries with it the weight of sanitization that Lightsey must be mindful of because of the stereotypes that make queer relationships dirty.

[365] In this article, Griffin also briefly argues for a conception of family that includes African American single-parent households, which also disrupts the normative "family."

social practices.[366] Yet, it is black queer families' disruption and irruption of normalizing technologies by recognizing, naming, evaluating, and re-orienting themselves in relationship to these technologies that enabled profound moral imagination in order to formulate new, liberative constructions of family.[367] A black queer ethic sees the value in redefining family by its focus on community-making with vulnerability and humility, and acknowledging that communities are typically made up of a variety of families. Yet, the constructed term, "family," carries with it real benefits in U.S. society from which unmarried people or people without children are often precluded (e.g., sharing a joint health insurance plan, the ability to be next of kin—usually a spouse or a child— in medical emergencies). I question the innate moral value of (namely, narrowly defined) "family" as it serves as a means of upholding inequitable access to resources in our current institutional structures, though a deeper exploration of this topic goes beyond the scope of this project.[368]

Womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes offered an entree to black queer moral thought, namely within womanism, that was unafraid of the body, pleasure, sensuality, sex and sexuality and which acted as a counter to oppressive proscriptive norms and systematic injustices that pervade Christian contexts.[369] The black queer body itself (as well as the black woman's body as a non-normative body) was conceptualized as a site of

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[366] Young, *Black Queer*, 5.
[367] Ibid., 57, 85-86.
[368] Examples of such maintenance of inequitable power include adults with health insurance through their jobs only being able to pass on those benefits to a spouse or child, and first time home-buying benefits granted to married couples and not unwedded friends or partners.
[369] Emilie M. Townes, "The Dancing Mind: Queer Black Bodies and Activism in Academy and Church" (Gilberto Castañeda Lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, April 28, 2011).

resistance that asserted its pursuit of pleasure against the command of repression, that asserted its sensuality and corporeality in the face of duality, and that embraced sex and sexuality that has been deemed hypersexual. Resistance and an imputation of value upon differing marginalized bodies, for Townes, was located in embodiment.

Another means of resistance existed via method and lay in the use of queering, or in the case of Leath, quareing. In Lightsey's theological use, queering allowed for a reexamination of gender norms by destabilizing the categories, and taking these reflective insights together with the traditional resources for theological and ethical reflection, with the understanding of a liberative God as the foundation.[370] According to Lightsey, queering and womanist theology could work in complimentary ways toward more just ways of relating as gendered selves.[371] This approach rooted in solidarity could well-serve gender nonconformists. Similarly, though she does not use the term queer, Hill wished to push religious discourse of sexuality to take more expansive and fluid approaches to theology, community, and identity categories.[372] Commonality rested in embracing ambiguity, an approach also employed by Sneed, wherein black queer people abandoned "neat resolutions" in order to embrace the creative potential of liminality for their collective wellbeing.[373] This embrace of ambiguity is integral to the communality of a black queer ethic that values process over ends, and values the ongoing process of communal reflection, including periodic re-visitation of agreed upon ethical conclusions.

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[370] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, 27, 49.
[371] Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 339.
[372] Hill, "Human Sexuality," 192.
[373] Roger A. Sneed, "Dark Matter: Liminality and Black Queer Bodies," in *Ain't I a Womanist Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought,* ed. Monica A. Coleman (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 147.

Further, as a mode of resistance, utilizing narrative as a methodological tool enabled black queer religious scholars to provide a counternarrative to the "thin" view presented by Black theologians and cultural critics that revolved around victimhood as a result of homophobia and HIV/AIDS, and the notion of black queers as "immoral and unnatural" held in many black ecclesial spaces and community.[374] In Lightsey's *Our Lives Matter*, she utilized the narratives of black women and black queer people to articulate empirical knowledge and to center experiences of black women that are often overlooked, even within womanist theologies.[375] This was something that both black liberation theologians and womanists did for nearly a decade before a black queer critique: privilege subjugated knowledge. Yet, the difference was in the compounded symbology that surrounded particularly black queer bodies as both black and queer—that these bodies and experiences have been considered inconsequential in moral discourse, and even morally reprehensible. Black gay men's fictional narratives (what Sneed calls an anthology of black queer literature) provided a foregrounding of black queer experience as resistance to alienation.[376] The archive itself offered voice and visibility that signaled the multiplicity and complexity of black queer men (and people of all genders), beyond homophobia and HIV/AIDS, reflecting the belief argued by Joseph Beam and espoused by Sneed, "visibility is survival."[377]

Leath took resistance a step further by nuancing the conversation of visibility and black queer liberation. She located the hyper(in)vis/audible among black queers, whereby

[374] Sneed, "Like Fire," 242, 255-56.
[375] Lightsey, *Our Lives*, xx.
[376] Sneed, "Like Fire," 257-58.
[377] Ibid., 246, 260.

both bodies and voices were simultaneously overly visible and heard, yet eclipsed in their abjection.[378] Leath drew from feminist scholar Evelynn Hammonds who argued, "visibility in and of itself does not erase a history of silence nor does it challenge the structure of power and domination, symbolic and material, that determines what can and cannot be seen. The goal should be to develop a 'politics of articulation.'"[379] More articulation/expanding the resources for knowledge production in Christian discourse is an imperative of quareing justice in order to create space for the hyper(in)vis/audible. To quare justice was to assert black queer subjectivity as a means of disrupting epistemology and ontology toward the end of challenging all oppressions, intersectionally and beyond superficiality.[380] A black queer ethic affirms this disruption to ways of knowing and being in order to formulate a communality that honors a variety of positionalities, particularly those made hyper(in)vis/audible by existent beliefs about gender and sexuality in Christianity.

Lastly, the label of "deviant" has served as both an epithet and reclaimed moniker for black queer people to declare their difference. Black queer discourse that reclaims deviance neither does so for the sake of being contrary nor haphazard. Influenced by lesbian black feminist Cathy Cohen, Leath forwards a strategic deviance that claims

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[378] Leath, "Is Queer." Leath's notes clearly articulates, "Katie G. Cannon notes the ways that Afro-Diasporic or Black women's bodies are particularly visible as abject objects to be targeted for oppression and incomprehensibly invisible as subjects deserving dignity and respect. In my work, I hope to respond to the 'hyper(in)visibility' and the 'hyper(in)audibility' of these same women." Katie G. Cannon, "Sexing Black Women: Liberation from the Prisonhouse of Anatomical Authority," in *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Anthony B. Pinn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

[379] Leath, "Is Queer."

[380] Leath, "Is Queer."

"dignity in shame," so that the "sociopolitical integrity of people and communities" may be gained and maintained.[381] Deviance enabled black queer subjects to consider alternative possibilities that normative approaches might not otherwise allow. Within the framework of deviance, Sneed's humanist ethic of openness as an articulation of resistance suited black queer discourse fittingly because its aim was multiplicity for the sake of black queer integrity. Located outside of theo-centric discourse, this approach sought to assert black queer subjectivity and worth, by asserting human responses and subsequently removing theism/God as a means of ascribing/prescribing what is the good.

While I recognize the value of resistance and difference to the formulation of black queerness and celebrate the moral imagination and agency practiced in embracing resistance and difference, I am challenged by a subjectivity that exists as a result of an oppositional relationship. I am concerned that commitment to this framing diminishes the chances for imagination toward futures that are not contingent upon oppressions.[382]

The Black Queer Body

For black queer scholars to theorize the embodiment of the black queer, to assert the presence and reality of experience within a black queer body, is to reorient the theoretical gaze from a focus on a problematized object to a multiplicitous subject. Victor Anderson argued, "There is no body (literally) more contested in Black churches than the curious body of the black homosexual."[383] While I eschew the comparative framing, particularly as a person in a black queer and black woman and black queer woman body,

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[381] Leath, "Is Queer." See also Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Harvard University Press, 1999), 36.
[382] This point is elaborated further in the next chapter with support from Anderson and Sneed.
[383] Anderson, "Curious Body," 297.

his point is worth engaging for what appears to be his primary point and my own understandings of the black queer body in my conception of black queer ethical values. The black queer body, for many in black (and nonblack) Christian settings, held no legitimacy or value.[384] And for this reason, the black queer body is a vulnerable body. The black queer body is simultaneously a black body, so it is a stigmatized, abject body. The black queer body is also a vehicle of non-normative expression, a symbol of potentiality. The black queer body is a holy body.[385]

While the topic of embodiment has yet to receive a robust treatment in black queer Christian discourse, some of the theologians and ethicists examined here built upon the work of womanists and black cultural critics who have written about black sexuality and its maligning in the U.S. historical and contemporary context.[386] The black body was understood not only within the racist narrative that has shaped much of the public imagination about black sexuality, but also the internalized shame experienced by black people about their own bodies. Townes decried the black body as stereotyped and as that of which black people themselves are terrified.[387] Griffin concurred, stating

> The internalization of dark skin as ugly and in need of lightening; coarse hair texture as bad and in need of straightening; writhing Black bodies as nasty and in need of saving; sexual attitudes as dirty and in need of purifying; Black sexual longings as uncontrollable evil and in need of taming; and sex talk as inappropriate and in need of silencing, have made

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[384] Ibid., 311.
[385] Emilie M. Townes, "The Dancing Mind: Queer Black Bodies and Activism in Academy and Church" (Gilberto Castañeda Lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, April 28, 2011).
[386] For example, Kelly Brown Douglas's *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), namely Part I and Part II; Michael Eric Dyson, *Race Rules: Navigating the Color Line* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1996); and bell hooks, *Salvation: Black People and Love* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001_.
[387] Townes, "The Dancing Mind."

> it difficult for Black people to love their bodies and contributed to an understanding of their own sexual expression as nasty.[388]

Within the contextual framework of internalized racism and the larger context of anti-black racism, the discourse of the body (in black liberationist/liberative scholarly conversations, and in the public imagination) often tended to center in on more negative aspects of the sexual body. While it was true that stereotypical imaginations about the sexuality of people of color rarely had anything positive to say (even those that claimed to be complimentary), most recent black queer scholarship sought to focus on the good of black queer selves, including the body.

Exploring the black body in the era of Black Lives Matter, Leath argued that black (Afro-Diasporic) bodies only seem to matter within the U.S. context when they are framed as abject.[389] In her article on procreative choice in Afro-Diasporic communities, she argued that the "questionable mattering" of black bodies "signifies a perennial marginality and thus a perennial abjection." I include Leath here as an ethicist who considered the place of meaning-making (making matter) to be queer in itself, and therefore, instructive in the understanding of the black queer body as one among other black bodies that do not matter. In explicating what she calls a "paradox of modern black existence," Leath stated,

> black bodies make a difference or "mean" something only to the extent that they lack meaning; that is, that black bodies have come to signify or define insignificance. On the other hand, black bodies come into existence-or "matter"-through birth via canal of claws condemning hypersexual(ized) black bodies and fueling the suicidal ideations of black nihilism.[390]

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[388] Griffin, "Toward a True," 133.
[389] Leath, "(Out of) Places," 157.
[390] Ibid.

At the same time, Leath argued for the mattering of black bodies, despite social realities. Black queer integrative communality calls for the mattering of all bodies, namely the distinct mattering of bodies that are marginalized. What Leath identified in the mattering and non-mattering of bodies, this in-between space wherein bodies are affirmed in some spaces and disaffirmed in others reflects the need for an integrative approach to understandings of the self as fully body and fully spirit, in mutually edifying ways, as well as the integration of a diversity of bodies (e.g., differently abled, children's bodies) in ideas of ethically relating to bodies in a communosexual ethic.

In "Dark Matter: Liminality and Black Queer Bodies," Sneed utilized black queer expressive culture (Octavia Butler's novel and Meshell Ndegeocello's album) to argue that black queer liminality, as a creative space, could shift toward a "humanist conception of the self," that is a human-centered approach to that which sought to limit the flourishing of black queer bodies and black queer life.[391] These cultural productions illumined the complexity of black queer life occupying liminal space and attempting to make sense of that space by imagining new, dynamic meanings.[392] To name this queer space of not belonging here or there as liminal, as opposed to disempowered, imbued the subject with power and possibility. The meaning that came forth is not a new hegemonic discourse like that which was fled, but it was contentedly ambiguous—neither queerness nor blackness were resolved.[393] In these black queer women's works, Sneed found that "the black queer body, in the final analysis, is not a problem, not a marginalized figure that will always point back to the heteronormative body at the center of discourse. Nor is

[391] Sneed, "Dark Matter," 142, 147.
[392] Ibid., 145, 147.
[393] Ibid., 147.

the black queer the heroic yet still marginal body that will deliver us from our wayward ways."[394] The flourishing of the black queer body lay not in decentering the heterosexual body so that the queer can be centered, but occupying the liminal space unmanaged by the hegemonic discourse that created liminal bodies in the first place. This offers a powerful disruption to the aims of seeking legibility—not in order to be centered, but to make oneself according to one's own desires rather than as directed by normativizing discourses. Integration does not require organizing a new center where queer people become the dominant norm, but allowing individuals bodies the space for liminality that affirms all sexualities and genders absent of regulating powers.

While Sneed mined liminality for its positive qualities, he and others also analyzed the challenges of liminality. Along with understandings of the body, though not frequently named explicitly, was the two-ness, the "divided soul" that came with inhabiting a black queer embodied self in black churches and communities.[395] This "bifurcated existence" also occurred as black queer people attempted to navigate white-centered queer spaces, as well as religious communities that carry an essentialist notion of blackness that excludes gender and sexual difference.[396] While black queer discourse centered responses to this bifurcated existence around inclusion, I am instead interested in how individual selves pursue integration within their various identities and communal relationships, and formulate spaces of belonging that does not demand the enactment of self or communal erasure.

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[394] Ibid.
[395] Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 341.
[396] Monroe, "Between a Rock," 39.

Hill's critique of the absence of a lesbian voice in womanism noted the affirmation of sexuality, particularly as a check to womanist discourse that seeks to be committed to the wellbeing of whole people, including their bodies, as a viable womanist imperative. Where there is a concern for "physical health, wholeness, and wellbeing" there are bodies that cannot be ignored.[397] As Hill later explained in "Human Sexuality: The Rest of the Story," the embodied experience of GLBTQ people went beyond that of exclusion and rejection from churches, but also included the social injustices that limit survival and thriving, like various forms of violence and discrimination related to housing, healthcare, and employment.[398] To be attentive to these embodied realities can yield ways of relating interpersonally and activism that is concerned about healthy sexuality in all aspects of communal and social existence.[399]

For Lightsey, a primary starting point in discourses of the body was to claim the body as good, particularly for black women and black queer people.[400] Her queer womanist theology argued that LGBTQ bodies are essential for aiding in the task of building a better world, a world wherein the presence of LGBTQ bodies makes a difference.[401] Through her framing of "woman love," Lightsey became a primary celebrant— openly and without innuendo or veiled language—of what one black woman's body can do for another in an embodied and sexual way.[402] Contemporary theological and ethical discourses often shy away from explicit representations of sex

[397] Hill, "Who Are We," 347.
[398] Hill, "Human Sexuality," 185.
[399] Ibid.
[400] Lightsey, "Our Lives," 85.
[401] Ibid., 84.
[402] Lightsey, Inner Dictum, 341, 348-49.

acts, particularly when referencing bodies that have been hypersexualized, which made Lightsey's invocation of black women's bodies engaged in sexual pleasure all the more subversive.

Because black queer discourse has primarily concerned itself with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer sexuality, it has not shaped its conversations with attentiveness to the ways that black queer bodies express gender, perhaps beyond cisgender women. With the exception of Lightsey who incorporates transgender experiences by referencing actress and activist Laverne Cox, writer and activist Janet Mock and others, black queer discourse missed the opportunity to explore how being, for example, a "butch queen," a "femme," non-binary/enby, "butch," "dyke," or transgender[403]—particularities perceived and expressed through the body— could carry real implications for some of the issues explored as black queer realities, such as serving in ministry, encountering violence or various forms of discrimination, as well as being queer gender. The politics of these varied queer positionalities of the black queer body creates an opening within a black queer ethic to, again, think of the self more holistically and to consider the implications of our body talk for transgender and gender non-conforming bodies.

[403] While some of these terms can be perceived as offensive, many black queer people have reclaimed these terms in order to express their unique way of expressing gender while being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Monroe has dismissed terms like "butch" and "femme" or even "lesbian," "gay," or "queer" as belonging to white queer vernacular, but this dismissal seems unfounded considering black folks and people of color (presumably in cosmopolitan areas, especially) have utilized these terms alongside white LGBTQ persons for much of the 20th and into the 21st century. Monroe, "Between a Rock," 40.

Power

According to Renee L. Hill, "in our [U.S.] culture sex and power go together." Cultural barometers of power and status determine insiders and outsiders, worthiness, leadership, norms, and the capacity to practice self-determination.[404] Black queer ethicists and theologians analyzed power dynamics demonstrated in the practices of black churches and communities, as well as the conceptual assumptions in black theology and womanism, as well as in their academic disciplines. They have contended with the hegemonic power to construct family and community in exclusive terms, to direct the dialogical parameters in academic discourse regarding black queer people, to maintain the existing power imbalance, and to collude with the aims of whiteness as black institutions.

Systemic and ideological expressions of power are at work in constructing both "the black family" and "the black community," as well as both institutions' conservative/preservationist approach to which people are framed as threats.[405] Essentially, though the social understandings of family are evolutionary, there is power to gain by clinging to a narrative of an inherently moral heteronormativity, and by inciting fear via a "current moral breakdown" with homosexuals at the helm.[406] One example that explored this power dynamic is located in Victor Anderson's essay in analyzing the work of Christian ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders. According to Sanders, it is because gay and lesbian people are non-generative—both physically and morally—that they are not valid

[404] Hill, "Human Sexuality," 185.
[405] Anderson, "Curious Body," 309.
[406] Griffin, "Giving New Birth," 88-90. I would argue this narrative also centers the white family in the U.S. social and political definitions of family, a standard which is unreachable by black people of any sexual orientation.

and welcome to remain as they are in ecclesial spaces and they are a threat to the wellness of the black family.[407] Such a rigid construction of family was disrupted as black queer people like Griffin and Young who drew from both biblical tradition and black queer lives to rewrite a definition of family rooted in inclusivity and imagination. As mentioned above, Griffin prompted pastoral theology to be attentive to the particular concerns of (black) gay and lesbian persons in their suggestions of care, while Young gleaned from black queer moral imagination to create new realities and to subvert current realities for queer thriving.

Black queer discourse offered a critique of the ways that black liberation theologies and the leadership of Black Church/es have exerted their power to direct the dialogue at the intersections of black religion and queer lives. Farajajé-Jones posed a critique of how black religious communities utilized their power to silence and their ability to direct a discourse of sexuality to exclude and diminish queer people. He argued against the silencing of the cries against homophobia/biphobia and called out the silences of the Black Church about sexuality. The exclusion and dehumanization was simply stated: "In the eyes of the Black Church, queers have a 'lifestyle' and not a life."[408] Whereas silencing took the form of the injunction, "Black folk have bigger issues than

[407] Anderson, "Curious Body," 309. See Cheryl J. Sanders, "Sexual Orientation and Human Rights Discourse in the African American Churches," in Sexual Orientation and Human Rights in African American Discourse, eds. Saul Olyan and Martha C. Nussbaum (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998): 178-184. For more of Sanders insights about lesbian and other homosexualities, as well as her critique of womanism's potential connections with lesbianism, see Cheryl J. Sanders, "Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 83-91.
[408] Ibid., 146.

that!",[409] it is clear that black queer discourse sought to problematize the ability of black communities, churches, and academy to overlook queer presence, not for lack of knowledge of existing concerns, but simply by choice.[410] The reluctance by black women scholars, who were already examining marginalization by race and gender, reflected the hesitancy in black religious scholarship toward productive dialogue about sexuality at all, and that the hesitancy was a result of cultural commitments. Yet, to confront sexism alongside heterosexism would have been a means of reclaiming power for black women of all orientations.[411] Such a critique does not disregard the bold contributions to this discourse from womanists like Kelly Brown Douglas and M. Shawn Copeland, but pushes to expand the established bounds of womanhood and what is needful for the thriving for black people sought by womanists.[412]

Black queer critique challenged the power that labels homosexuality as a problem only, without learning about and learning from the stories of black queer people. Griffin identified this problem at its core as an unwillingness to see gay and lesbians people as "equal members in the body of Christ," which kept black queers in a perpetually subordinate position constantly rendering apologetic formulations in scholarship rather than constructive ones.[413] In subordinating black queers, some black (heterosexual)

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[409] Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 342.
[410] As noted above, Hill attempted to locate the fear of association and accusation that she claimed womanists possessed in their choice to not include lesbians in their analyses of black women's lives.
[411] Ibid.
[412] See the pointed critique in Kelly Brown Douglas, "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community," in *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999). See also M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009).
[413] Griffin, "Revisioning Christian Ethical Discourse," 217. Sneed, "Like Fire," 260.

people claimed the moral dignity that black people have been systematically denied by anti-black and gender-specific racism, but at too high a cost—the fracturing of communities, the harm to heterosexual and queer people's relationships to their sexuality, and the indissoluble cost of pandering to whiteness. As Griffin made clear,

> negative understanding of homosexuality causes Black people to internalize another negative understanding about themselves, about their sexual longings, their lovemaking and their capacity to appreciate sexual intimacy and orgasm. Thus, heterosexual supremacy, like white supremacy, male supremacy and so forth, further imposes bondage upon Black people, a spiritual estrangement that prevents them from loving their black bodies.[414]

Griffin illumined the ways that oppression begets oppression, and pointed toward the need for an alternative means of engagement between heterosexual and gay and lesbian black people. For Griffin, this often took the form of aiding black heterosexuals to see gay and lesbian people as fully human by hearing their stories, and eventually struggling in support of them so that black queer people may have equitable power.

As shown above, Sneed viewed such methods to gain heterosexual sympathies with reproach. He observed a sensationalism, namely by non-queer theorists, around gay experience through focusing solely on HIV/AIDS, homophobia, men who are "on the down low"/who practice sexual dishonesty, and other stories of "the tragic homosexual."[415] Sneed argued, "It seemed that the only way to gain an audience among

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[414] Griffin, "Toward a True," 135.

[415] Sneed, "Like Fire," 241, 244-45. Sneed includes in his critique Kelly Brown Douglas, a foremost voice on sexuality among womanists and in the black liberationist tradition, who chose to write about men "on the down low," and the unfortunate framing of black gay men as "uniformly promiscuous and carriers of plague." He goes on to say, "[Douglas] accepts [the media presentation of men "on the down low"] uncritically as a complete representation of the lives of black men who have sex with other men and keep that a secret."

black heterosexuals was to present gay experience and existence through the lens of victimization."[416] In order to counter the oppressive power of a constructed discourse wherein gay men were not allowed to speak for themselves,[417] Sneed utilized black gay (and later lesbian) cultural productions to present a more complex representation of the black queer subject.

Rigid boundaries in sexuality and gender are utilized to maintain heteropatriarchal structures. Hill believed this may have been why bisexuals and transgender people who trouble the categories of sexuality and gender incur such vehement phobia.[418] According to Young, systematic oppressions frequently functioned as stabilizing forces which limit the capacity for human relationality. Black queer ethics/discourse disrupted that power by prizing values such as interdependence, potentiality, and becoming.[419] Each of these values countered the binaries that buttress hegemonic power and normalize discrimination. Like binaries were also employed among those seeking justice, in order to solicit commitment in combatting a singular oppression. While black communities and black liberationist scholars gathered considerable thrust in combating racism, Monroe argued this power came by treating racism as "the only and ultimate oppression" black people face in the U.S, to the neglect of the manifold ways black people are impacted by oppressions. Sexism and homophobia, she maintained, would remain unaddressed until the locus of attention was focused with various oppressions in mind.[420]

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[416] Sneed, *Representations*, 9.
[417] Sneed, *Representations*, 14.
[418] Hill, "Human Sexuality," 186.
[419] Young, *Black Queer*, 185-86.
[420] Monroe, "When and Where," 130.

The problem of whiteness' impact in shaping black sexual mores was taken up in black queer critique, just as it found place in black liberative traditions. As Griffin stated, "historical circumstances that demonized Black sexuality are largely responsible for African Americans' current prudishness or public silence about sexuality."[421] While both Griffin and Farajajé-Jones identified silences regarding sexuality in black ecclesial spaces and communities, it seems more accurate to say the spaces were not producing productive dialogue about sexuality as they railed against homosexuals, abortion, and fornication. Yet, the demonization of black sexuality produced a wariness among black people about publicly engaging sexuality in positive ways.

Monroe sharply critiqued the accommodationist stance that she argued the Black church has taken in order to maintain power and relevance in U.S. society—"megachurches, prosperity gospel, and the selling out of its social gospel message of justice in return for government money for faith-based initiatives."[422] To this end, she interrogated the collusion of African American ministers with the religious right in order to subjugate (African American) LGBTQ communities.[423] Implicit and explicit collusion with the aims of anti-black racism forfeited the power black people possessed to shape their own understandings of sexuality that celebrated and uplifted the black body and its pleasures without shame and with moral agency.

As delineated above, resistance and the assertion of black queer subjectivity acted as primary modes of power within black queer discourse. Black queer discourse has within it the capacity to reshape theology and ethics with all people in mind through its

[421] Griffin, "Toward a True," 134.
[422] Monroe, "Between a Rock," 58.
[423] Ibid., 49-51.

particularity. Engaging marginalized subjectivities as sites of moral reflection, Young argued, enabled space for everyone's moral potential, disrupting a hegemonic approach to theological and ethical reflection.[424] In a like manner, an integrative black queer ethic pushes Christian academic disciplines and Christian communities to redistribute power with keen consideration of the diversity and pluralism that enlivens these spaces, and creates opportunity for more just ways of being community.[425]

The Urgency of Black Queer Ethics

In this chapter, I sought to highlight the ways black religious discourse has enlivened black theological and ethical discourse over the last two and a half decades, and to locate potential openings for my black queer ethic, expounded in greater deal in chapter four, to continue to do so. The black queering of religious discourse has focused on community-affirming ways of relating to sexuality and the implications of that relationality for justice love in Christian religious space. Rather than focusing on the "do's and don'ts" of sex acts, black queer discourse sought to affirm the goodness of those who are marginalized sexually (with room to grow for those of marginalized gender identities) and oriented talk about sexuality toward being in right relationship to power, to the body, to identities, to justice, to one another. It has sought to integrate the fullness of what it is to be human through honoring the spirits of black queer persons and their embodiment, and to integrate the fullness of what it is to be in community—struggling against oppressions, as well as locating and celebrating communal goodness for the

[424] Young, *Black Queer*, 185.
[425] Ibid., 4.

wellbeing of the collective. Inspired by the moral imagination of those who have been marginalized by Christian traditionalism, as well as those informed by a Christian liberative tradition that shaped a black queer critical discourse, I propose the justice-love focused, communosexual black queer framework offered in chapter four.

Chapter 4: Constructing a Black Queer Ethic of Sexuality

In chapter one, I argued for the good of a community-centered sexual ethic that seeks to integrate selves and communities by examining the early opening for such a framework in the pioneering scholarship of significant feminist and liberative ethicists. In chapter two, in seeking a setting in which we might find inspiration toward the integrative communal values to inform such an ethic, we looked to 1920s black queer Harlem and the subversive spaces of blues environs, rent parties, and the Hamilton Lodge Balls. In chapter three, I engaged in a communal dialogue with the community of black queer scholars who have shaped the Christian sexual discourse since the early 1990s and contributed invaluably to its justice- and community-centeredness. I identified themes of black queering engaged by each scholar, in both divergent and analogous ways: inclusion, black queer subjectivity and identity, resistance and difference, the black queer body, and power. The aim of this chapter is to elaborate a liberative Christian *communosexual* ethic informed by the black queerness found in chapters two and three, and built upon integrative values that work toward justice love: communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited bodies/embodied spirits, and shared thriving.

I invite a consideration of how these values may aid in garnering justice love and wholeness for communities and individuals. The momentary (perhaps, fleeting) nature of how these values were exhibited in black queer Harlem does not lessen their worth or usefulness. Rather, the truth of their impermanency reminds us, from a realist perspective, that we receive incomplete glimpses of ideals but they are still worth pursuing. Mark D. Jordan accordingly argued, we ought not look to Christian ethics to

"settle the question" of whatever we pose to it.[426] The five values highlighted here contribute to creating the space for liberative ethics to be discerned in community that intentionally strives toward justice love. While there are certain goods that both black queer Harlem and black queer critique cause us to consider, it is important to note that the consideration of the values does not settle all questions posed to black queer sexual ethics or Christian sexual ethics more broadly.

My intent in this chapter is not to provide universalizing norms that can be applied in all times and in all places in order to produce integrative outcomes. As a black queer ethic, this ethic is constantly in process, constantly becoming, as well as more concerned with process than outcome. Because, as a liberative ethic, it depends upon the communal reflection of peoples and the communal wisdom that arises in their seeking of the good, universalization would diminish the agency and moral wisdom of Christian communities. This communosexual ethic, that understands sexuality as impacting and impacted by our communal existence, invites communities to sustained moral reflection, as defined by Lisa Sowle Cahill.[427] At the heart of a relations-based ethics is the practice of communal reflection, where communities may discern and grow into what they find to be good as they pursue justice love and integrative Christian communosexual ethics. The ethic is able to evolve as communities continue to engage and as they transform in their understandings of and relationship to themselves, God, all creation, and the good.

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[426] Mark D. Jordan, *The Ethics of Sex* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 7.
[427] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Between the Sexes: Foundations for a Christian Ethics of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 152.

The aim for the reader is to consider communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited bodies/embodied spirits, and shared thriving, appreciating that they will be enacted differently in each community and individual with different outcomes oriented toward a fuller becoming for all individuals, communities, and society. It is the case that we might examine these values and see how they might apply beyond sexuality. Such an approach reminds us in our ethical reflection that sexuality is not a self-existent, exceptional part of the self, but that it ought to be integrated with our ways of existing as ethical beings.

Before exploring the five black queer ethical values, a brief discussion of justice love is warranted. I define communal right-relatedness through justice love. As articulated by Marvin M. Ellison, justice love may be described as

> a strong commitment to the dignity and well-being of persons, a fair sharing of power and pleasure, concern for each person's safety and health, and a mutual pledge to foster respect and care for each other and to invest, as well, in the vitality of our wider communities.[428]

To do justice love is to pursue right relationships that reflect wholeness through individuals, in communities with the aim of impacting society.[429] My understanding of justice love likewise honors pleasure, wellbeing, and just distributions of power, while also fostering a commitment to creating the spaces in which collective thriving can take place, with specific attention to race in intersectional understandings of gender and sexuality.

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[428] Marvin M. Ellison, *Making Love Just: Sexual Ethics for Perplexing Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 58.
[429] Marvin Ellison, *Erotic Justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 115.

Justice love must not only be the end sought by communities, but justice love must also reflect their processes of doing ethics. In justice love there is not only person-to-person relationality, but connectivity with oneself, God, one's community, and the earth.[430] A relationship to the earth may appear to have no role in sexual ethical understandings for some. Yet, in fostering this integrative communosexual ethic, the individual and communal body cannot help but to honor the earthly body through which we receive pleasure, wellbeing, sustenance, and with whom humanity is becoming. This relationship reflects all other just relations that practice "mutual respect, commitment, and care and a fair sharing of power."[431] Justice love in this black queer ethic demands a politically integrative approach that rejects the racial (namely, anti-black), sexual, gender hegemonic norms that attempt to limit communal becoming in all aspects of human existence.

Though I utilize the term queer, a black queer ethic's approach to justice is akin to the quaring of justice identified by Jennifer Leath, which is centered in an integrative approach to justice for all people—a justice that does not ignore race/is anti-racist:

> to "quare" justice, normatively speaking, is to awaken visions and expressions of justice that insert off-kilter blue notes, troubling epistemological and ontological certainties or arrogances with primary perspectival regard for the subjectivity of LGBTQ persons of color who love other people and appreciate Black culture or community. And it means to do this in a way that is holistically committed to the struggle against all oppression, in a way that reflects the connection between gender, sexuality, and race, and in a form that engages situations *deeply* instead of "throwing shade."[432]

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[430] Ibid., 114.
[431] Ellison, *Making Love Just,* 21.
[432] Jennifer Leath, "Is Queer the New Black?" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 43, nos. 3 and 4. (Summer/Autumn 2015), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/queer-new-black.

My emphasis, with Leath, on people of color, and more specifically black people and blackness, infuses this black queer ethic with a broader outlook on justice that is not an abstraction, but is located in material realities for black queer bodies and therefore, all marginalized bodies.[433] This approach to liberative sexual ethics serves as a response to the experiences that have been erased in Christian sexual ethics and as a contribution to a small body of liberative ethical scholarship that confronts much of the disciplines' anti-black research practices.

The love within justice love is communal and accordingly, political. It strives to reflect practices that are anti-racist, gender expansive, sexually liberative, socioeconomically equitable. That love is enacted through and with justice, and informs any relationship that sees as its end communal right relationship. As Margaret A. Farley described it,

> When I love you […] I am affirming your very existence, your life, your well-being. I want you to be firm and full in being… If I behold you in need or in danger, I move to help you— if I can. If I love you with […] a "radical" love— that is, a love for you yourself, a love that is the root of my care for you, my joy in you, my desires for your well-being— I affirm you as I affirm myself.[434]

The radicality of such love, though not as expansive in Farley's use, is found in the liberal expression of it in the work of doing justice—affirming and seeking the fullness of life for those enduring oppressions and those self-deleteriously upholding oppressions related to race, gender, sexuality, class and more. Justice when coupled with such love brings us to a core question of this black queer ethic: *How* are we toward one another?

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[433] Ibid.

[434] Margaret A. Farley, *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 201.

Consistently assessing and reassessing the answers to this question, reflecting on whether communities are indeed espousing the values they seek or claim to hold, challenging our ethics to answer the invitation to justice love breaks down the hold that shame and legalism currently possess in the Christian sexual ethics marred by traditionalism espoused by many of our religious spaces as well as the whiteness, heterocentrism, and cis-centrism in some liberative Christian sexual ethics.

Justice love is paramount in constructing this black queer ethic that is relations-based and not rules-based, in order to actively reject "a rule-based sexual morality [that] has been rigid, legalistic, and punitive, relying on fear and shame to keep people compliant and on the 'straight and narrow.'"[435] Communal right relationship does not manifest in the face of the demand to be compliant or to otherwise bear insoluble fear, shame, and punishment. As opposed to a straight and narrow ethic, the values that I explore below are intended to open communities to seek new and different, life-giving ways of relating that are as queerly crooked as they are wide.

Through the weaving of the experiences of black queer Harlemites of the 1920s with black queer religious discourse and the aims of liberative Christian sexual ethics, I employ what black feminist Christian ethicist Traci C. West termed as an "explicitly dialogical method." To this end, I draw from varied theoretical and practical sources of moral wisdom and subsequently, challenge the racial superiority— and I would add the heteronormative superiority— that has so long determined the delineations of valid Christian sexual ethics.[436] The dialogical approach is practiced throughout this

[435] Ellison, *Making Love Just*, 4.
[436] Traci C. West, "Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2004): 29, 37, 46.

dissertation as I placed black queer Harlem in dialogue with pioneering liberative thought and black queer critique, as this dissertation is rooted in practice and theory, and as the specificity of Christian tradition and identity is in dialogue with black communal nonreligious space in Harlem. Allowing these resources and approaches to converge with one another as a methodological strategy may create space for an evolving, dynamic ethic, which can yield a dialogical approach to the *doing* of ethics. Each section below reviews the aspects of black queer Harlem (elaborated in chapter two) and the particular theme of black queer critique (elaborated in chapter three) that inspires the value, followed by an explanation of its meaning to this black queer ethics. The dialogue between these three elements offers a thematic value from black queer critique upon which I build in order to more effectually embody integrative communosexuality and justice love in a black queer ethic.

From Inclusion to Communal Belonging

As outsiders, black queer Harlemites created ways of belonging to one another within the spaces that they constructed for a celebration of what was deemed abject—their black sexual and gender non-conforming selves. Ostracized by many of Harlem's African American bourgeoisie understandings of upstanding company, the black queer people of Harlem established their own sense of communality rooted in self-determination and chosen connectivity. As I presented in chapter two, I utilize Nancy Fraser's concept of the subaltern counterpublic to describe black queer Harlem. She argued that within subaltern counterpublics, "members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs," ascribing alternative

meaning to their reality. This can be empowering for a community because it has the capacity, in some instances, to reduce the harms caused by exclusion from the public,[437] and particularly in this instance, to shift the locus of belonging.

Blues environs, rent parties, and the Hamilton Lodge Balls fostered belonging by granting the permission of expression: as sexual beings, as people contending with the restricting binds of gender, as people embracing their desire and pleasure. Visions of queer futures could be grasped through the liberating gender and sexual performance of blues women who sometimes served as role models to their listeners,[438] and as their songs offered the reprieve from troubles (e.g., racial, economic, relational) that creative cultural productions often provide. As historian Lawrence Levine affirmed, "Although blues songs were individual expression they were meant to be shared, they were meant to evoke experiences common to the group, they were meant to provide relief and release for all involved."[439] The rent parties fostered communal belonging by developing community, establishing cultural solidarity, and demonstrating interdependence.[440] They existed as places where new-comers could go to become acquainted with others, and the light atmosphere fostered a sense of welcome in the "overlay of camaraderie, sex, and music."[441] The economic disparities in New York City gave rise to the need for such

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[437] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 67.
[438] Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1999), 41.
[439] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 237.
[440] James F. Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies, and Chocolate Babies: Performance, Race, and Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 12.
[441] David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 107-08.

gatherings, yet in the assembling of themselves, sexual and gender nonconformists in some instances were able to create deeper community rooted in authenticity, risk, joyfulness, song, dance, food—connectivity. The Hamilton Lodge Balls uniquely offered what newspapers of the time framed as a suspension from the color prejudice ordinarily experienced day-to-day in New York City. While the veracity of such a claim is challenging to prove, there is no doubt that the racial integration and formulation of a black queer cultural aesthetic developed in a way that challenged the hegemony of white supremacy found outside of the balls. The balls offer to a black queer ethic that values communal belonging openness to a variety of people who are not black queer, and they invite the possibility for imagining, creating, and playing (even at times in drag) together.

The black queer critique of exclusion sought to expand existing black theological and ecclesial, as well as disciplinary, space to include black queer existence or to create new black queer spaces. This critique of ecclesial and scholarly spaces offered the opportunity to contend with erasure's diminishment of communality, and to strategize new ways of being together. Frequently, within the aforementioned spaces, those affected by HIV/AIDS have been erased, and continue to be. Those without access to resources to accommodate a flourishing sexuality have been erased and continue to be. Too often the insights and adaptations of transgender and gender non-conforming people have been erased from narratives of history and theology either by exclusion of their experiences or the marginalization of their stories.[442] Tourmaline, a transgender artist, activist and

[442] C. Riley Snorton makes a comprehensive argument for the ways that blackness and transness are "inextricably linked" with "transness [as] a racial narrative" and as "blackness finds its articulation within transness," though the two are also "irreconcilable." This is evidenced, for instance, in the mutability of gender that was practiced during chattel enslavement of black people. See C. Riley Snorton, *Black on*

filmmaker, argued that historical erasure is a form of violence, and decried the consistent erasure of transgender communities' legacies and work toward justice and thriving.[443] Seeing such consistent erasures as violence warrants a restorative move. In contending with the violence of erasure and then, honoring one another's stories, particularly those who have been disinherited, the foundation for community may become increasingly egalitarian and perhaps, those erased may again find desire to belong in that particular community who has done this work.

The struggle for inclusion offers some helpful insights for reflection on belonging. Because within black queer discourse inclusion of queer people hinged upon a powerful people bestowing the opportunity to be included or through heterosexual people being transformed by learning from black gay and lesbian people's stories, particularly in churches, it is contingent upon heterosexual benevolence for the inclusion of queer sexualities to take place.[444] As examined in chapter three, black communities, ecclesial spaces, and academic disciplines' exclusionary reasoning lies in heterosexism, homophobia, embarrassment by association, HIV/AIDS stigma, heteronormative biblical interpretation, and commitments to right-wing conservative agendas. On the other hand, Elias Farajajé-Jones' in-the-life theology and Pamela Lightsey's queer womanist theology, as well as Roger Sneed's ethic of openness offer a counter to exclusion by the theology's connectivity with all persons surviving and thriving under oppressions and the

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Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 8, 57.

[443] Reina Gossett, interview by Hope Dector and Dean Spade, Barnard Center for Research on Women, Queer Dreams and Nonprofit Blues Conference at Columbia Law School, October 4-5, 2013.

[444] Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality*, 9.

ethic's unwillingness to exclude any, both affirming that sexuality itself should be affirmed without need for narrow relational norms.

Yet, because queer people in particular, and all people in general, should not have to prove their worthiness to be included as fully belonging to or having a right to belong to communities and because inclusion is usually seen as conferred by those at the center, inclusion is not a question I find morally fecund. Ellison noted, inclusion is "an insufficient change strategy," though he argued for it as a good.[445] Inclusion assumes hegemonic power, which often buttresses white-centered heteropatriarchal normativity, and is meant to maintain conformity. This says little about just relationality and so, I disagree with it as a good. Rather, communal belonging serves as an integrative value for our consideration.

As introduced in the example of 1920s black queer Harlem, communities create the environment for the belonging of full selves, including gender and sexuality. They do so by fostering an ethos of authentic expression without the burdens of striving for prescribed notions of "normalcy" and respectability. Communal belonging models consent, forgiveness, vulnerability, and acknowledgement of others' belonging, even those with whom one may disagree, in openness and in holy curiosity. Communities create environments of belonging through enabling and supporting exploration and becoming. Such communal belonging may grant persons the courage they need to take the bold steps needed toward living in queer (unconventional and revolutionary) ways, to include, but also beyond sexual orientation. Practicing communal belonging yields both interpersonal and political care for one another's wellbeing as sexual and gender selves.

[445] Ellison, *Making Love Just*, 68.

For example, communal belonging means being vigilant to not leave the "T" out of LGBTQ, by fighting for the access to healthcare for transgender folx and ensuring trans voices contribute to our collective leadership and struggle for rights as queer people. This sort of focus on transgender people is not so that they feel they belong, but *because* they belong as we all belong to community.

Further, as a member of a community, belonging connotes a sense of one's own realization of being valued as a part of the body, of a participatory hold on the dignity of mattering. To belong within community is to have space for one's authentic self and that of others. Belonging within a community is more than a matter of affiliation by invitation or homogeneity. Instead, belonging is an opening to knowing and being known without the mandate for unity because belonging is a choice that each member of a community makes. Christian community (members of the body of Christ) is built upon an intrinsic sense of belonging. The intrinsic belonging with God and in Christ signals the expectation of communal belonging that may exist within or outside of institutional religious space, and is not necessarily contingent upon physical presence. Belonging means that no one possesses the ability to say who does and who does not belong. In this way, belonging is more than a utopic vision; it is the messy ecclesial work of choosing to be in community and the continual epistemological work of being fully and authentically present with the knowledge that one's belonging and that of others is undebatable, and also that belongings clash in hurtful and sometimes harmful ways.

Communal belonging does not discount the truth that harm is a reality when people come together, and it requires responses oriented toward restorative justice love. Harm is a serious reality, particularly when those in positions of power abuse their

authority and responsibility by engaging in intimate relationships that are not equitable, resulting in sexual harassment or assault. In the practices of communal belonging that are nurtured through a black queer ethics of sexuality, accountability is paramount. Accountability demands the taking of responsibility for harm done, but does not sanction communal harm of the perpetrator such as denying basic human worth, dignity, and preciousness to God. Justice love and integrative commitments neither means reconciliation, nor does it force forgiveness. It allows space and time for grief and for processes of healing for both individuals and the community.

By using the term "community," I want to draw a distinction between my conceptualization and more commonly understood institutional forms that are frequently more a matter of doctrines or church charters than connectivity. Instead, I understand community through the power of people to practice communal belonging where institutions, as structures maintained by systematizing the status quo, have not. It is sometimes the case that persons find that they ideologically misalign with the communities, often housed within institutions, in which they find themselves. In this instance, belonging is not removed, but community members must make decisions about their belonging that reflect their ideas of the good. As an example, the case of Bishop Yvette Flunder, a lesbian and ordained clergy person and pastor of City of Refuge United Church of Christ in San Francisco, California is instructive. She has her religious roots in the conservative and same-gender-loving-exclusive Church of God in Christ (COGIC). After many years of encountering the church's exclusion and its accompanying theologies, she founded this new community of belonging in order to reach HIV/AIDS-

affected communities, to practice the "radically inclusive love of Jesus Christ,"[446] and to reclaim erased and discarded identities in an integrated manner for a fuller expression of community ("for and among [queer]selves") and God.[447] Out of her own sense of belonging, she created a new community to practice communal belonging. Where the situation demands (e.g., where there is a consistent commitment to disintegrative values), as Flunder illustrates, the practice of communal belonging can be implemented elsewhere.

The incapacity of black liberation theologies for many years to tell full stories of black life in the U.S. is mirrored in black Harlem's incapacity to embrace the non-respectable expressions of black life. In response to such shortcomings, as elaborated in chapter three, Roger A. Sneed advocated an ethic of openness which held a "deep appreciation for difference," and which saw the innate worthiness of humanity and practices vulnerability.[448] Sneed found a God of love and liberation, often invoked in pro-LGBTQ discourse, was not sufficient in battling the anti-homosexual rhetoric that exists within Christianity. Subsequently, he offered an ethic without a theistic orientation in a desire to shift black intellectual discourse away from conventional, inflexible theological articulations and toward a focus on describing and critiquing the actions of humans toward other humans, which also affirms human sacredness.[449] While I agree with the

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[446] "Bishop Yvette Flunder," City of Refuge UCC, accessed April 27, 2019, http://www.sfrefuge.org/bishop-yvette-flunder.
[447] Yvette Flunder, "Healing Oppression Sickness," in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms*, eds. Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 116.
[448] Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality*, 179, 192.
[449] Ibid., 179, 180. Sneed goes on to say about his humanist ethic, that it recognizes ethics as a human endeavor, appreciates human worth, value, and action, and centers human being and agency. I contend that an humancentric emphasis can create a binary

latter focus, I find it neither necessary to remove the theism from a black queer ethic, nor needful to overstate characteristics of God in order to consider human action that seeks justice love and integration as good. While I assert the futility of seeking to sway the opinions of those in communities who believe in a God-ordained "heteronormative social order"[450] —as was found in 1920s black Harlem and currently in various traditionalism-centered Christian spaces— a black queer ethic is not an apologetics intending to convince anyone of the worth of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary, two-spirit, intersex, asexual, questioning, or any other sexual or gender nonconformists. It is rooted in the belief that queer worth is not debatable and the practice of belonging ought to create space for all sexualities/persons.[451]

From Black Queer Subjectivity and Identity to Individual and Collective Becoming

The historical example of black queer Harlem inspired the value of individual and collective becoming through the community's commitment to its developing embodied existence and expression. In chapter two, building upon literary theorist Terry Eagleton and Nancy Fraser, I argued that the discourse of the gender and sexual nonconforming body in black queer Harlem contributed to it becoming a subaltern counterpublic. As a

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relationship with humans and the whole of nature, and concede that a theocentric interest can diminish the fervor of human agency out of dependence on the action of an unknowable God. "By post-humanism, I do not mean *after* humanity or *beyond* humanity. I mean to point toward a radically material entanglement that unites or braids together all matter of life, which is vibrant in its becoming." Robyn Henderson-Espinoza, "Difference, Becoming, and Interrelatedness: A Material Resistance Becoming," *Cross Currents* 66, no. 2 (July 2016): 286.

[450] Sneed, *Representations of Homosexuality*, 179.

[451] Recently, there have been activists seeking to include pedophilia as a valid sexuality and as part of the LGBTQ community. I wholeheartedly dismiss this nonconsensual form of relating that I argue is not a sexuality at all, but one of many forms of child abuse. See Mirjam Heine,"Pedophilia Is a Natural Sexual Orientation," Tedx at the University of Würtzberg, Germany, accessed May 17, 2019, https://youtu.be/MNr3yhjQPI8.

subaltern counterpublic, it served as a space of not only oppositional realities, but of potentiality.

> Part of the attraction of an amusement district such as [Harlem] was that it constituted a liminal space where visitors were encouraged to disregard some of the social injunctions that normally constrained their behavior, where they could observe and vicariously experience behavior that in other settings—particularly their own neighborhoods—they might consider objectionable enough to suppress.[452]

The space for the black queer body to be freer to move, to live more deeply into its authentic expression, and to counter hegemonic norms of suppression and constriction fostered new, varied ideas of being, and subsequently becoming. As "transqueer Latinx activist scholar" Robyn Henderson-Espinoza argued, "combining disparate strands of thinking and being (and becoming) and finding a particular style of relationality in the in/betweenness of difference […] allows for becoming to materialize."[453] Black queer Harlemites' multiplicity in their sexuality and gender converged in their chosen communal spaces, and through the convergence they related in ways that brought out one another's desired forms of expression. Inching toward the value of becoming, though incremental, provided generative spaces for difference which contributed to their continual process of communal self-determination.

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[452] George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 236.

[453] "Robyn Henderson-Espinoza: Biography," SpeakOut - The Institute for Democratic Education and Culture, accessed May 17, 2019, https://www.speakoutnow.org/speaker/henderson-espinoza-robyn. Additionally, Robyn Henderson-Espinoza utilizes they/them/their pronouns and will be referred to as such throughout this chapter. Henderson-Espinoza, "Difference, Becoming," 283. The process that Henderson-Espinoza is explaining is called diffraction from Karen Barad in *Meeting the University Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

Harlem's black sexual and gender nonconformists were also models for one another, reflecting a liberation that was not reflected in the legal, social, economic, and religious mores of New York City and the rest of the nation. Performance theorist James F. Wilson noted, the social and political freedom reflected in the space of rent parties mirrored that which was sought by black people in the racially and economically discriminatory city that also criminalized gender and sexual subversion.[454] The arts, in the form of the blues environs, and the Hamilton Lodge Balls that Harlem's sexual and gender nonconformists inhabited inspired becoming through imagination and through bold performativity. According to Wilson, the (primarily) supportive space of rent parties aided in the development of talents of attendees, particularly musicians, and cultivated talents, such as Thomas "Fatts" Waller.[455] These supportive attitudes point toward an integrative affirmation of the entire person that lead communities to foster the vulnerability needed for relationality and becoming.

The notions of subjectivity and identity in black queer critique in some ways reflected the aims of individual and collective becoming. Black queer religious theorists wrote of the particularity of being both black and queer, which demonstrated their subjectivity within theological, ethical, and ecclesial settings and destabilized heterocentric religious discourses of sexuality. By destabilizing the orientation and aims of the discourse, they likewise destabilized the technologies of normalization, as black queer ethicist Thelathia Nikki Young noted, to invite black queer identity to a process of

[454] Wilson, *Bulldaggers, Pansies*, 18.
[455] Ibid., 20-21.

becoming both within academia and in church.[456] The liminality of becoming creates space for alternative expressions and embrace of difference. As explored by ethicist Jennifer Leath, having an identity so closely connected with alterity and deviance lends itself to becoming because the otherness can be utilized as a tool of discerning potentialities when utilized strategically. Leath's black sexual ethic, "dares to develop a distinctive discourse on sexuality, that is, a discourse that engages the normative potential of sexuality without stipulations of respectability and without rejecting the latent morality of deviance."[457] In becoming, unlikely sites of moral reflection provide openings to unfettered, though communally conscious, exploration.

From black queer theorists came the call to reclaim and name the collective as multiplicitous, complex, and thoroughly queer, rather than solely as victims.[458] Telling our own stories and formulating our own theories is a start, but not if the outcome will be monolithic characterizations as heroes or "the oppressed." As a matter of strategy and the development of the academic and activist discourse, perhaps these static identities once served a needful end.[459] Yet, a black queer ethic is an invitation to complex becoming and frequently indeterminable being. This liminality can be utilized for communal

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[456] Thelathia Nikki Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 59.
[457] Jennifer Leath, "Revising Jezebel Politics: Toward a New Black Sexual Ethic," in *Black Intersectionalities: A Critique for the 21st Century*, eds. Monica Michlin and Jean-Paul Rocchi (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 196.
[458] Roger A. Sneed, "Like Fire Shut Up in Our Bones: Religion and Spirituality in Black Gay Men's Literature," *Black Theology* 6, no. 2 (2008): 242.
[459] For insight into strategic essentialism, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies. Deconstructing Historiography," in *The Spivak Reader*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London: Routledge, [1985] 1996), 203-236.

creativity and imagination,[460] as Sneed argued, to feature prominently in the process of becoming.

Becoming is a process wherein realities are continually transforming and being organized anew.[461] Henderson-Espinoza's description of becoming builds upon philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari argument that becoming changes and continually renews the function of the element, which is in this case, community.[462] For Henderson-Espinoza, this becoming takes place in the borderlands, that is the in-between, liminal space. As the body is also continually in a process of becoming, so the discourse of the body continues to unfold in order to reflect the values espoused within a community and to articulate new values.

To conceive of becoming within a collective, it is important to consider the ways that the sexualities of subjects (and all other aspects of personhood) exist together and subsequently influence one another's becoming. Such becoming is facilitated by "intra-action" between agents. Drawing from feminist theorist Karen Barad, Henderson-Espinoza utilizes "intra-action" to indicate the mutual entanglement of agencies that relate to one another when bodies are in relationships of difference and multiplicity toward becoming.[463] Barad defines intra-action "in contrast to the usual 'interaction,'" that recognizes "distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-

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[460] Roger A. Sneed, "Dark Matter: Liminality and Black Queer Bodies," in *Ain't I a Womanist Too?: Third Wave Womanist Religious Thought,* ed. Monica A. Coleman (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 142.
[461] Henderson-Espinoza, "Difference, Becoming," 286.
[462] Ibid.
[463] Ibid., 284, 286. I also treat being and becoming as Henderson-Espinoza does. Being and becoming are not necessarily in opposition to one another, as they were at their Ancient Greek foundations, but function distinctly to elucidate ontological reality.

action." What communities become is as a result of their intra-action with one another. The intra-action also reminds us that selves who recognize their entanglement with others build stronger, more compassionate communities, and that mutuality in recognition of this entanglement can sharpen communities' moral reflection toward the goods they seek.

An example of becoming being shaped by the intra-action of individuals could be expressed through a couple who through their senses of agency meeting on equitable grounds, decide that they would like to practice polyamory. We can name this cis-gender couple Yvonne and Allen. In exploring his own queerness, Allen believes that it would be a good idea to explore the possibility of practicing ethical nonmonogamy with Yvonne with the guidance of values they establish as a couple and members of communities to whom they are accountable. The couple, in treading into new territory and as people of faith with few resources to assist their sexual and relational exploration, share vulnerably with one another about their fears, insecurities, and excitement. They imagine together the parts of themselves that may be brought out by engaging other lovers. They are unsure of how their relationship will fare in a new configuration, but as they bring their questions and sense of moral grounding, they establish boundaries that will help make for a just transition. They collaborate toward the ends they desire for themselves of mutual pleasure, expansiveness, adventure, and growth in love. Both the challenges presented by transforming one's relational framework, and the joys of forming something new from an in-between space are a part of processes of becoming. In the openness to potentiality is individual and collective becoming.

Creating communities that enable the exploration of who they can become and how they become challenges the notion of a static, purist community of sexual and

gender beings. This becoming is fraught with chaotic potential and requires continual reworking. If there is to be authentic, vulnerable communities opening space for becoming, it is likely that community members may clash, and the same is true in society. In some ways, this clashing and need for reworking is a failure worth pursuing willingly in order to find "alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends."[464] While many seek a fully safe space where nurture and learning can take place, this is often not realistic, and at times, it is not helpful. A community must prod itself in order to grow. Womanist activist and healer, Micky ScottBey Jones, stated in poetic form, "Together we will create *brave space* / Because there is no such thing as a 'safe space' / We exist in the real world / We all carry scars and we have all caused wounds."[465] Embracing brave space allows communities to explore, risk power, forgive, correct, and confront for the sake of a fuller manifestation of individual and collective becoming.

From Resistance and Difference to Goodness

The alternative understandings about communal ways of being together that Black queer Harlem provided comprised of less social scripts and allowed for the assertion of self-worth and expression. Among one another, Harlem's black sexual and gender nonconformists "danced, drank, saw their friends, and claimed stature and respect in a cultural zone governed by their own social codes rather than those of white employers of the black bourgeoisie," according to historian George Chauncey.[466] To the chagrin of

[464] Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.
[465] Micky ScottBey Jones, "Invitation to Brave Space," accessed April 23, 2019, http://www.mickyscottbeyjones.com/invitation-to-brave-space/
[466] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 248.

members of the black middle-class, black queer folks sometimes took an anti-respectability stance, rejecting the notion of being exceptionally "good." While this may have been more circumstantial than strategic—Chauncey notes, some "had no hope of respectability"[467]— it allowed for a differing set of values, new definitions and common language, and communal supports to emerge in their counterpublic which at times and in particular ways reflected liberative, integrative practices like authenticity, freedom, disruption of hegemony, pleasure, and mutuality. Ultimately, black queer Harlemites defied the established notion of the good and generated goods that reflected their sense of communality.

Black queer critical thought concerned itself with countering the dominant discourses that diminished and marginalized LGBTQ persons by providing a counter-narrative to that of immorality, suffering, and shame. Though the scholars at times wrote about the suffering and shame, they sought to present a fuller picture of queer life. Through their resistance and embrace of the difference embodied by LGBTQ people, they transformed the theological and ethical understandings of queer faith and communal moral reflection. Their notions of resistance included unseating established sources of authority (e.g., the Bible, black liberationist thought); loving the (black queer) body, pleasure, and stories; re-constructing the meaning of family; and reclaiming dignity and integrity while assuming otherness. While deconstructing, building upon, and

[467] Ibid., 15-6. The quote reads, "While the 'faggots' who were highly visible in the neighborhood's streets and nightspots might earn a degree of grudging respect from others, they had no hope of respectability. Most middle-class gay Harlemites struggled to keep news of their homosexuality from spreading, lest it cause their social downfall." "Faggot" was a term used more frequently by black people than white people to refer to men "who dressed or behaved in what they considered to be an effeminate manner."

acknowledging the value in their resistance, they look to queer epistemologies and experiences to offer constructive resources and to assert the goodness of black queerness without qualification. As mentioned in chapter three, Young aptly argued that it is resistance that is a crucial first step in communities' exploration toward conceptions of the good.[468] Black queer discourse offered to black queer ethics the import of resistance and difference, but also the need to thrive beyond that which needs to be resisted and that from which one is differentiated.[469]

Moral practices like authenticity, freedom, disruption of hegemony, pleasure, and mutuality contribute to the stories of black queer communities and scholars striving toward some sense of the good.[470] The black queer ethic I propose argues not about prescribing the particular goods that communities should espouse, but rather, what is good in itself is that communities come to their determination of what is good in a process and in togetherness. In such a process, it can be fruitful to lean into moral diversity. As defined by Ellison, "Moral diversity arises when we recognize that responsible people differ in their moral judgments and can offer good, even compelling

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[468] Young, *Black Queer*, 195.

[469] Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness* (New York: Continuum Books, 1995), 16. As Victor Anderson argued regarding black theology and its liberationist construction that he claims does not create space for transcendence with its oppressed-oppressor paradigm, I feel a centering in resistance creates a similar paradigm built around hegemony that needs imagination in order to envision black queer futures (and present) beyond (or even powerfully alongside) struggle.

[470] These moral practices are also especially helpful in determining the good for black women as sexual beings. Particularly as it relates to pleasure, womanist ethicist Monique Moultrie, offers helpful insights for deconstructing limiting attitudes and locating integrative and affirmative ways of relating to oneself before God. See Monique Moultrie, *Passionate and Pious: Religious Media and Black Women's Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

reasons for their positions, and we must figure out where we stand, and why."[471] Diversity may seem easy when persons function primarily from an individualist position. And there are ethical choices to be made by individuals, while considering the good of communal right-relatedness. However, in community, plurality in ethical judgments serves to destabilize the "either-or" approaches to sexual ethics that have fragmented individuals, families, communities, and societies, and allows for particularity to have a role in shaping communal goods.

Engaging processes of communal moral reflection requires humility—that is, the capacity to sit with the discomfort of the unknown and unknowable. It also assumes that the good is not always readily knowable, even if tradition, scripture, experience, or reason have persistently affirmed a particular idea of the good for even centuries. Humility is consistently open to revisiting, reforming, imagining and reimagining. Additionally, communal reflection on the good requires deep listening. Black queer scholars like Renee L. Hill, Horace Griffin, Pamela R. Lightsey, Roger A. Sneed and Thelathia Nikki Young frequently struggled for and included in their own theological reflection the narratives and experiences of black LGBTQ people. More than the disruptive quality of decentering whiteness, heterosexuality, or cis-gender maleness, the value of sharing these stories also lies in the opportunity it presents to communities— to know one another in one's own words. In this practice of knowing, ethics can be formulated based upon compassion and practicability, rather than the normativizing impulse. Lastly, engaging the process of formulating ethics in community requires vulnerability, which lies at the center of relationality. I have consistently utilized the term

[471] Ellison, *Making Love Just,* 2.

"community" in examining the process of formulating ethics as opposed to church (as indicative of an institution), the black church, ecclesial disciplines, or other institutional powers. I conceive of community alongside belonging, which relies heavily upon choice and connectivity with persons who honor one another's dignity and their own integrity. Vulnerability can be practiced where there is community, that is a willingness to center relationality over rules. A practice of vulnerability within community softens the heart, in opening to others and in receiving, which supports communities as they strive toward authentically becoming and foster an environment of belonging, nonduality, and thriving.

At times what is most needed is a willingness to revisit what is considered good, especially when individuals, communities, or societies believe they have the "right answer." This speaks to the opportunity for creative possibility in liminality and becoming. Communities must also be attentive to create the space, as Kate M. Ott posited, "for individuals to discover and define their sexuality in a way that is most consistent with whom they know themselves to be as God's beloved."[472] Goodness that is established and intentional on an individual level can then translate to a more just and loving approach to sexuality in society. An example of this approach to determining goodness is found in the story of Rev. Dr. Christine Wiley and Rev. Dr. Dennis Wiley, Pastors Emerita of Covenant Baptist United Church of Christ in Washington, DC. Their experience in leading this prominent congregation in discernment about affirmation of LGBTQ covenantal relationships reflects a community seeking to discern the good for

[472] Kate M. Ott, "Sexuality, Health, and Integrity," in *Professional Sexual Ethics: A Holistic Ministry Approach*, eds. Patricia Beattie Jung and Darryl W. Stephens (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 14.

itself as it relates to communosexual ethics, even the intentionality that led to revisiting their approach over an extended period of time.

In a 2015 short documentary, *Reverend Dennis W. Wiley: A Journey Towards Inclusiveness*, Wiley shares the story of his development as an inclusive minister, including contending with anti-black racism in his native town of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, insights gained from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and his liberationist hermeneutic gained from black liberationist theologian James H. Cone. In 1994, Wiley's "traditional black church" sponsored a conference entitled "Breaking Down the Barriers that Divide Us" that examined gender and sexual orientation among other controversial topics, and there, the congregation adopted the language of inclusivity in their mission. In 2007, the church convened a meeting of its community wherein the community responded positively to the prospect of a gay union ceremony, though a short time later, dissenting voices arose. Many members left the church following the ceremony, and some stayed. The church leadership called a meeting, particularly for members aggrieved by the performance of the ceremony, and the community decided to have a moratorium on union ceremonies for a year to have deeper conservations (utilizing Bible study and dialogical engagement) to decide whether they would commence with the ceremonies—what Ellison might call a slow-down ethics.[473] The church voted and agreed to continuing the ceremonies at a margin of sixty percent to forty percent. The community endured

[473] Ellison, *Making Love Just*, 3. A reflective process that asks "us to sit with perplexing, even discomforting questions, listen to fresh and sometimes challenging perspectives, and patiently work out matters as best we can."

hardship, including a member suing the church for the performance of gay unions,[474] and many members among the forty percent redirected their practices of belonging elsewhere, yet the community was able to move forward in intentionality having gone through a process of seeking the good as it related to LGBTQ union ceremonies.[475] While one could question some of the actions and rationales undertaken by church leadership (e.g., a meeting that centered the aggrieved, presumably heterosexual membership; a moratorium of one year that limited LGBTQ members' access to celebrating their love through Christian ceremony), the process of pursuing goodness can be wrought with complexities and lapses in judgment. Yet, through this process, the church continued to be a force in ensuring civil rights and social justice for LGBTQ people in its various sites of influence, arguably with greater intentionality and solidarity. Covenant Church, and like communities, demonstrated that in community, goodness can and must be discerned. Discernment is supported by knowledge and the search for it as new scientific information, experiential knowledge, and scriptural and traditional understandings become available.

From Black Queer Bodies to Inspirited Bodies/Embodied Spirits

Black queer Harlem and the spaces created through its counterpublics considerably developed out a response to dire physical and social need. Early on, rent parties were a response to economic impoverishment, but also built community among many who were migrants from the south and from the Caribbean. In the spaces they

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[474] "Woman Sues Church Over Gay Marriage," interview by Soledad O'Brien, CNN Religion, June 24, 2010, accessed April 27, 2019, http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2010/06/24/gay-marriage-splits-african-american-church/.
[475] "Reverend Dennis W. Wiley: A Journey Towards Inclusiveness," directed by J.R. Baker-Flowers (2015; Washington, DC: The UNLEARNing Project), documentary.

created, black queer Harlemites had a rare opportunity for the integration that eluded them in the racist segregation of New York City and the gender and sexual middle-class sensibilities espoused in black Harlem. Daily they faced the obstacle of needing to negotiate their full black queer presence in the Harlem public,[476] a fragmenting hierarchy of the self often experienced by persons who are both black and queer and marginalized peoples whose bodies have been vilified. Yet, in their bodies they carried their resistance: the expression of gender where women wore top hats, and men wore dresses; the use of the body for personal pleasure where it had only come to recently know autonomy in its departure from the New South; the exploration of sexuality in communality that the civil society would punish with jail and the local society by ostracism. They struggled to not place the aims of racial and socioeconomic uplift above their own need to pursue self-hood, which often led them to being labelled as "part of an undesirable and all-too-visible black 'lowlife' that brought disrepute to the neighborhood and 'the race'."[477] Despite the backlash, they continued to practice an integrated existence that enabled a fuller expression of the self. As both feminist theorist Angela Y. Davis and historian David Levering Lewis affirmed, particularly their blues environs facilitated this reclamation of the body and its freeing from sexually repressive norms, while also going deeper into "sacred consciousness," providing a holistic experience of transcendence, albeit brief and circumstantial, yet partially denied them in religious spaces that disparaged gender and sexual subversion.[478]

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[476] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 248.
[477] Ibid., 253. According to Chauncey, they were labeled along "with prostitutes, salacious entertainers, and 'uncultured' rural migrants" by "many middle-class and churchgoing African Americans."
[478] Davis, *Blues Legacies*, 8-9.

Part of the challenge for black queer discourse was the task of redeeming the goodness of black queer flesh, while positing black queer spirit/uality. The body, within black queer critique, underwent a process of transformation from a body that was a site of trouble to a complex body with subjectivity and potentiality. Understanding the black queer body as a black body with a sexuality that, in the U.S. context, has been stereotyped and stigmatized through subjection to anti-black ideology, black queer scholars contended with the implications of the black queer body in Christian religious scholarship and sociocultural discourse, as well as its peculiar absence.[479] Further, they contended with the shame internalized by black queer people who have been taught to alienate themselves from their bodies. Yet, alongside the hypersexualization and vulnerability of black queer bodies lay embodied resonances of potentiality and, as Townes noted, the holy.[480]

Black queer scholars responded to the disintegration of being queer in black spaces and black in queer spaces, as well as the internal dissonance that accompanies the command to hold abjection in their flesh. In this in-between space, ethical theorists like Victor Anderson, Roger Sneed, and Jennifer Leath de-problematized the body of black queers, and focused instead on the new meanings black queer people were able to formulate for themselves in their generativity, in their liminality, and in their quare-ness, respectively. As blackness and queerness come together within the black queer body,

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[479] See Pamela R. Lightsey, "Inner Dictum: A Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm," *Black Theology* 10, no. 3 (Nov 2011), 248. Also see Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 7.
[480] Emilie M. Townes, "The Dancing Mind: Queer Black Bodies and Activism in Academy and Church" (Gilberto Castañeda Lecture, Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL, April 28, 2011).

they formulate the "abject," yet, also reflect the fecundity of possibility in their being cast out from the center. What is rejected and outside of the framing of normativity necessarily has to make its own meaning. And there is the possibility.

The possibility is in inspirited bodies/embodied spirits.[481] The black queer body within Christian space is one that uniquely models the values reflective of integration, by holding together black and queer, as well as flesh and spirit— a striving to pursue Christianity/the spirit despite rejection, an aim to find community despite pressures to disregard one's queerness and its expressions. Embodied spirits/inspirited bodies is a value that reflects the equity of and entanglement of flesh and spirit in human lived experience, and particularly sexuality. There ought not to exist a dichotomous relationship, where the sexual or gender body finds itself in constant conflict with the spirit in the pursuit of Christian faithfulness. As Gudorf affirmed, "the body is the self, […] the mind is a part of that body, and […] emotions, too, emerge from the bodyself," and one could add, so is the spirit part of the bodyself.[482] Attentiveness to embodied spirits/inspirited bodies is attentiveness to selves with which we desire to be in communal right-relatedness.

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[481] It is not the intention to neglect the mind, or to ignore that there exist dichotomies between the mind and spirit and mind and body. Instead, I focus on this particular dichotomy for the ways it is exacerbated by religiosity grounded in traditionalism and with the understanding that other immaterial factors that make up the internal self may be included because the dualism that exists is a matter of matter versus form (Aristotle) and immaterial versus material (Descartes).

[482] Christine E. Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure: Reconstructing Christian Sexual Ethics* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 160.

As a part of a sexual ethic, there must be a recognition and appreciation for bodies and the spirit that inhabits and interconnects all.[483] That spirit is of God's spirit, equitable in its accessibility, whatever the identity or practices of the beholder. Because we share human experience in both spirit and body, as a "unified whole"[484] (which we strive toward both individually and communally), we are able with effort to be more mindful of these truths when engaging one another—mindful of one another's suffering, mindful to not objectify but to create space for folks' subjectivity, mindful that our bodies are subject to a variety of conditions (e.g., disease, disability, aging) as time goes on and this will demand evolving just responses from individuals, communities, and society.[485]

What we allow to be said and done with the body is important for sexual ethics and communal right-relatedness. In sexual ethics, body-affirming arguments usually take up the import of bodyright, which a black queer ethic also affirms as a matter of challenging patriarchal injustice and of integration.[486] In the wake of increased

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[483] While my presupposition that bodies are good is an assertion that they are not innately evil, I find it important to honor the complexity of bodies for people whose bodies do not align with their understanding of themselves and people with disabilities, bodies that sometimes act in opposition to the mind or spirit of the embodied. See Jackie Leach Scully, "When Embodiment Isn't Good," Theology & Sexuality 9 (1998), 10-28. See also Krzysztof Bujnowski, "Through the Wilderness," in *Trans/Formations*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London, SCM Press, 2009), 59-69. Also, Elizabeth Stuart, "Disruptive Bodies: Disability, Embodiment, and Sexuality," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, Second Edition, eds. Marvin M. Ellison and Kelly Brown Douglas (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 322-337. For insight into one perspective of the gifts offered by transgender people in religious community, see Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, "We Come Bearing Gifts: Seven Lessons Religious Congregations Can Learn from Transpeople," in *Trans/Formations*, eds. Lisa Isherwood and Marcella Althaus-Reid (London, SCM Press, 2009), 46-58.

[484] Farley, *Just Love*, 120.

[485] Ibid.

[486] Gudorf, *Body, Sex, and Pleasure*, 162.

attentiveness to the sustained violence against black bodies in the U.S., many black people and other concerned humans have asserted anew the mattering of black bodies and lives.[487] "The normalizing discourses," stated ethicist Jennifer Harvey, "are always as much about race and class as they are about gender and sexuality."[488] Therefore, attentiveness to the intersection of gender and sexuality with race is much-needed if an ethic is to be attentive to the inspirited bodies/embodied spirits of black people and people of color because the consequences of not doing so are dire.

As social theorist and religious ethicist Elias Ortega-Aponte noted, "For those committed to the Christian faith it is imperative to decry the sinful transubstantiation of black living bodies into dead flesh."[489] Black bodies, and particularly black queer bodies, encounter the negative beliefs society holds about the body and the non-mattering of black bodies in a compounded fashion. More specifically, the violence enacted against the embodied spirits/inspirited bodies of transgender women of color must be addressed. These women encounter violence because of anti-transgender attitudes, and also because of the disinherited spaces they are often forced to occupy in a trans-antagonistic society.[490] The violence frequently occurs in secrecy, without citizens recording it, and

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[487] Jennifer Leath, "(Out of) Places, Please! Demystifying Opposition to Procreative Choice in Afro-Diasporic Communities in the United States" *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30.1 (Spring 2014): 158.
[488] Jennifer Harvey, Disrupting the Normal: Queer Family Life as Sacred Work," in *Queer Christianities: Lived Religion in Transgressive Forms,* eds. Kathleen T. Talvacchia, Michael F. Pettinger and Mark Larrimore (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 105.
[489] Elias Ortega-Aponte, "The Haunting of Lynching Spectacles: An Ethic of Response," in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics,* eds. Vincent W. Lloyd and Andrew Prevot (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 112.
[490] "Violence Against the Transgender Community in 2019," The Human Rights Campaign, accessed April 28, 2019, https://www.hrc.org/resources/violence-against-the-transgender-community-in-2019.

disappears quickly without media coverage and sometimes with open-and-shut trials written off with the use of the "trans panic defense."[491] Egregiously, the violence is largely overlooked by religious communities and even those seeking the mattering of black lives, causing even greater specificity to come about in activist circles proclaiming, "all black lives matter" and "black trans lives matter."[492] The specific case of a black transgender woman, Islan Nettles, comes to mind.[493] Murdered on a Harlem street in an act of anti-transphobic violence in 2013, the public outcry was minimal. Notably, Rev. Al Sharpton hosted "My Brother's Keeper: Discussion on Discrimination and Violence towards LGBT Community" in honor of Ms. Nettles, who also happened to be a friend of

[491] According to The National LGBT Bar Association and Foundation, "The gay and trans "panic" defense is a legal strategy which asks a jury to find that a victim's sexual orientation or gender identity is to blame for the defendant's violent reaction, including murder. It is not a free-standing defense to criminal liability, but rather a legal tactic which is used to bolster other defenses." The National LGBTBar Association and Foundation, "Gay/Trans Panic Defense," accessed May 1, 2019, https://lgbtbar.org/programs/advocacy/gay-trans-panic-defense/.

[492] I accept the necropolitical critique that could be fielded regarding my inclusion of Islan Nettle's death and the generativity this story created for the National Action Network, as well as this portion of my dissertation. At the same time, I hold the complexity of what it means to retain silence as it relates to the mattering of black trans lives and so few national stories that reflect a level of care from among religious realms. See C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," in *Transgender Studies Reader 2*, eds. Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura (New York: Routledge, 2013), 66-76.

[493] James C. McKinley, Jr., "Guilty Plea in Killing of Transgender Woman," *The New York Times*, Apr 5, 2016, *A23*. James Dixon murdered Islan Nettles, a transgender black woman, after he attempted to make romantic advances towards her then noticed she was transgender. Here is what followed after his friends made fun of him: "Mr. Dixon admitted that he had punched Ms. Nettles in the face, knocking her down, then punched her a second time while she lay on the sidewalk. "I just didn't want to be fooled," he said. Ms. Nettles, a 21-year-old assistant at a fashion company, died five days later of head injuries she sustained when her head hit the sidewalk. Prosecutors say the evidence shows that she was struck repeatedly while she lay on the pavement, and that her head had been rammed into the concrete."

Sharpton's daughter.[494] Such a show of support was unprecedented for many historically black organizations that claim to seek the civil and human rights of African Americans, as well as other Christian spaces who hold at the center of their faith a person of color unjustly murdered. Ortega-Aponte's employing of H. Richard Niebuhr's ethic of response finds resonance in upholding the value of inspirited bodies/embodied spirits amidst bodily violence based on sexuality or gender, wherein communities may respond to the actions upon marginalized bodies, interpret the meanings and potential responses to the event, practice accountability, and offer social solidarity to affected community members.[495]

From Power to Shared Thriving

As a social and cultural, as well as a communal force, the settings fostered by black queer Harlemites for the participation of people of varying sexual orientations and gender expressions served to offer an alternative experience than what was available in more respectable parts of Harlem and of New York City. Black queer Harlem's rough edges and sketchy characters were not rushed to be removed or hidden. Arguably, it is deviance that gives an alternative public its power, and that invites a disruption of heteronormativity, gender and sexual roles, and body politics.[496] People were welcomed from around the country and world to experience the communal spaces which black

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[494] National Action Network, "Sharpton Entertainment to Hold 'My Brother's Keeper' Panel Focusing on LGBT Rights Saturday at National Action Network After Violence Claims the Life of Community Transgender Woman Islan Nettles," accessed May 3, 2019, http://nationalactionnetwork.net/press/sharpton-entertainment-to-hold-my-brothers-keeper-panel-focusing-on-lgbt-rights-saturday-at-national-action-network-after-violence-claims-the-life-of-community-transgender-woman-islan-nettles/.
[495] Ortega-Aponte, "The Haunting of Lynching Spectacles," 118.
[496] See Cathy J. Cohen, "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics," *DuBois Review* 1, no. 1 (2004), 27-45.

queer Harlem played a major role in creating. The many people who participated in Harlem's black queer life should not be brushed off as the zeal of "culture vulture" tourism, though it is certain the entertainment and the cultural burst of energy in Harlem were a draw. I contend it was the openness and accessibility, the sharing of black queer Harlem, that made for a unique sense of engagement for those who were not a part of the neighborhood.

A counterpublic's power lies in its ability, as an outsider, to shape the public and to influence it toward some desired end, according to Fraser.[497] While the scope of this project does not enumerate the specific impact of these outsiders on their public, it is clear that black queer Harlem's disruption to the status quo was a force to be reckoned with—not because it had the power to forcibly change the society around it, but because in its being and becoming, it offered a counter-reality in which others from New York City and beyond could participate. Even the bohemians of Greenwich Village, the country's premiere gay enclave, came to Harlem to experience the livelier, less exclusive gay life.[498]

The sounds of black queer Harlem, through the blues, presented disruptive and imaginative possibilities rooted in subversions of power.[499] The rent parties were more than just parties. In a space and place where marginalization is the everyday experience, the personal is political. Behind the closed doors of apartments and on elevated platforms of the Hamilton Lodge, these gatherings allowed for explorations of sexuality and gender

[497] Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 71.
[498] Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 244.
[499] Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 111.

that challenged the power of society's ability to dictate what is and what could be not only for black queer Harlem, but for black people, for gender and sexual nonconformists, for their allies. Black queer Harlem in its openness to others and individual member's agency in exploring their own power (sexual, gender, bodily) inspired the value of finding joy in one's and one's communities' power without the systematic hegemonizing of that power in the lives of others—shared thriving.

Power played a role in the examination of black queerness in theological and ethical scholarship, and shaped black queer discourse from its beginnings. As explored in chapter three, both scholarly and ecclesial spaces have retained the power to construct family and community in exclusive terms, even in ways that view black queer people as a threat, as in the case of the ethicist Cheryl J. Sanders and Protestant denominations like the United Methodist Church, for instance, that do not support same-gender unions or queer leadership. The power to direct the dialogue about a particular people (especially a marginalized people) without creating space for their voices and power leads to a hyper(in)vis/audibility that maintains the positionality of "other" for black queer people.[500] In other cases, it leads to a focus on HIV/AIDS and homophobia (which are vital concerns), without attention to the ways black queer people create communal bonds, their strategies of thriving, their resistances and goodnesses, and the cultural productions of black queer people that foretell freer futures. Black queer theorists relocate power from traditionalism's relational framings and methodological constrictions toward

[500] Jennifer Leath, "Is Queer the New Black?" *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 43, nos. 3 and 4 (Summer/Autumn 2015), https://bulletin.hds.harvard.edu/articles/summerautumn2015/queer-new-black.

expansiveness, deconstruction and reconstruction, interdependence, vulnerability and other more integrative values.

An important critique of power forwarded by black queer scholars included an invitation to power redistribution. Scholars like Irene Monroe and Pamela Lightsey the Black Church/es for forfeiting their power in the interest of whiteness and right-wing fundamentalist aims.[501] Monroe went on to say that in this pursuit of power, queer people and even black communities' own interests were sacrificed.[502] This critique is not exclusive to black Christian institutions, and could be applied to the institutions of people of color and various religious expressions that support these same aims. The indictment of the struggle for relevancy that runs roughshod over black queer people in the process is an example of an unwillingness to release or share power. A redistribution of power, particularly with people of marginalized subjectivities makes space for "everyone's moral potential" while supporting communities in doing communosexual ethics more justly.[503]

Shared thriving is manifested through equitable power relations, power that does not seek to be power over. It evolves out of shared power. Thriving means having and wielding *enough* power. For some, because of the harms of oppression, power is perceived as a liability and a source of corruption. Its abuse does lead to corruption. If, as Foucault argued, power comes from everywhere (including "from below") and is not in exteriority to relationships,[504] then power is possessed by everyone as a tool of self-

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[501] See also Lightsey, "Inner Dictum," 345.
[502] Irene Monroe, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," in *Out of the Shadows, Into the Light: Christianity and Homosexuality,* ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Danvers, MA: Chalice Press, 2009), 44-51.
[503] Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 182.
[504] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, An Introduction* (London: Penguin Books, 1970), 93-95.

determination. Additionally, as he argued, where there is power there is also resistance within power,[505] resistance that aims, in its best pursuit of justice love, toward equitability. Within shared thriving, power is a good for communal vitality and social improvement.

Shared thriving helps us understand that there is no virtue in surrendering power to one's own detriment. There are instances where those who hold inordinate power ought to voluntarily relinquish their power and utilize the power they possess in the interest of marginalized peoples and the whole of the community. When one person's power meets another, a choice (purposefully or by habit) is made to engage equitably, to assert dominating power, or to submit one's power. The aim of the engagement of powers is not to create a new center, a new possessor of hegemonic power. Drawing from Young's ethical approach to power, which marked a move away from the self-sufficient autonomous self of queer theory (in tandem with Muñoz, in order to center a relationality rooted in mutuality), a black queer ethic seeks the shared thriving only found in relationality in order to practice mutuality and reciprocity in the opportunities for equitable power engagement that humans encounter each day.[506]

It is also significant to include a critique of how race informs the use of power in communal notions of shared thriving. Racism has consistently functioned within Christian and U.S. sexual discourse to limit the thriving of people of color, particularly black people. Black feminist Christian ethicist Traci C. West explained the ways anti-queer Christian teachings and white racism work together:

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[505] Ibid., 95.
[506] Young, *Black Queer Ethics*, 168-170.

> The racial status of white people constitutes an abiding cultural norm and centre [sic] as black and brown people are consigned to a marginal racial status perpetually lacking in human worth and high-level human capacities. Sometimes, in a supposedly less harsh Christian narrative of white supremacy, black and brown people are regarded as occupying a perpetually pitiful human identity in need of ongoing, paternal, white Christian assistance. In both secular and Christian religious constructions of how moral worth is racially and sexually marked in society, insiders are indelibly divided from outsiders in a social arrangement that maintains hierarchical understandings of how we value one another in our communal lives.[507]

Such hierarchical understandings, as we explored above in the instance of Islan Nettles and other transgender women of color who incur wanton violence, cause communities to neglect sexual and gender injustice with more lives being lost in the process. They cause the harmful messages about HIV/AIDS that black queer religious discourse has critiqued. They disintegrate community. Essentially, hierarchies that devaluate community members causes inequity in power that prompts erasure and thriving for the few instead of the many.

West likewise forwards the rejection of claims upholding heterosexual supremacy, and instead finds value in a fluid power balance between heterosexuality, "same-sex desire and the gendering of sexuality."[508] This fluidity is the work of queering. It is often rigidity that keeps communities beholden to sexual ethics that do not serve communal right-relatedness, namely in this nation that is influenced by Christian ideals committed to traditionalism that maintain social injustices toward women, LGBTQ persons, and people of color. Embracing the expansion that black bisexual queering offers may enable communities to assess their own relationships to power, and their fears

[507] Traci C. West, "Black Bisexual Queering of Anti-Violence Christian Ethics," *Modern Believing* 60, no. 1 (2019), 16.
[508] Ibid., 20.

of the scarcity of power. Fluidity evokes abundance because nothing belongs in just one hand of power. Subsequently, breaking the binaries— of power-holder and oppressed, white and black, heterosexual and queer, cis-gender and transgender—evokes abundance. Black bisexual queering utilized in the service of shared thriving promotes a disruption of the status quo as it relates to power: power does not have to be power-over in order to be powerful.

As an example of how shared thriving might be reflected in communal space, we consider the use of various genders and pronouns within ecclesial spaces. In many settings, as feminist theologians have long argued, the "he" pronoun is often utilized to refer to God. As a counter-discourse, some progressive Christians have utilized "she" instead or discontinued the use of pronouns at all in referring to God. Shared thriving might invite communities to consider using not only "she" pronouns, but "ze/zim/zis" or "sie/hir/hirs" or "they/them/theirs."[509] This practice affirms that there are many things that we do not know, but that we can learn together in community. This practice affirms that there may be sies and zes in the space, and they too have power here. While this can cause some confusion initially, confusion often serves as an opening to dialogue and an opportunity to practice slow-down ethics in order to teach communities how power functions in language and can be exclusive to members who ought to have equitable power to be named and to name. It takes a sharing of power to disregard the rules of grammar when they favor hegemony in order to affirm the presence and value of another,

[509] "Gender Pronouns: Gender Neutral/Gender Inclusive Pronouns," University of Wisconsin Milwaukee Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center, accessed April 30, 2019, https://uwm.edu/lgbtrc/support/gender-pronouns/.

and it is well worth the benefit of contributing to the thriving of a community that continually chooses justice love and the integration of all members.

Communal belonging, individual and collective becoming, goodness, inspirited bodies/embodied spirits, and shared thriving as integrative values can offer to communities a basis for sexual ethics that values people over the perception of piety. Rules-based sexual ethics, and even liberative sexual ethics that center whiteness, cis-gender, and heteropatriarchy, fragment communities and society, while limiting the capacity for individuals to show up as their full and authentic selves for the doing of community together. A black queer ethic posits that how we are to one another in our doing of the actions we choose is what determines the capacity of communities to thrive or to die. Disrupting the normativizing discourse by asserting black queer moral worth and value, as found in certain integrative practices in 1920s Harlem and as black queer scholars continue to uphold in the present, challenges universalizing ideals that ignore or fracture particularity and diminish the experiences of those deemed "other." When black queer experiences can matter enough to communities to shape our sexual ethics, then all experiences will matter. As long as Christian sexual ethics centers whiteness, patriarchy, heteronormativity, homonormativity, and cis-gender experiences, they will be hypocritical, impotent, and subsequently, unusable ethics. The mattering of all experiences, particularly of black queer people—as makers of new meaning, establishers of communal worth and value, and resisters of abjectification— is at the heart of a black queer communosexual ethic that strives toward justice love so that all may be whole.

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