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Toward a black gay aesthetic

Signifying in contemporary black gay literature

Western literature has often posited the heterosexual white male as hero, with Gays, Blacks and women as Other... The development of Black literature, women's literature, Gay literature, and now Black Gay literature is not so much a rewriting of history as an additional writing of it; together these various literatures, like our various selves, produce history...

Our past as Black Gay men is only now being examined.

—Daniel Garrett, "Other Countries: The Importance of Difference"1

All I can say is — if this is my time in life... goodbye misery.

—Lorraine Hansberry, A Raisin in the Sun 2

Introduction

With only a few exceptions, the intellectual writings of black Americans have been dominated by heterosexual ideologies that have resulted in the gay male experience being either excluded, marginalized, or ridiculed.3 Because of the heterosexism among African American intellectuals and the racism in the white gay community, black gay men have been an invisible population. However, the last five years have seen a movement characterized by political activism and literary production by openly gay black men. Given their invisibility by both black heterosexism and white gay racism, two questions emerge: How have black gay men created a positive identity for themselves and how have they constructed literary texts which would render their lives visible, and therefore valid? I propose in this essay to answer the former by answering the latter, i.e., I will focus on the strategies by black men who
have either identified themselves as gay or who feature black gay characters prominently in their work. The writers I examine will be Samuel Delany, George Wolfe, Billi Gordon, Larry Duplechan, Craig R. Harris, and Essex Hemphill.

The critical framework that I use is strongly influenced by my reading of Mary Helen Washington’s *Invented Lives* and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s critical method of signifying. In *Invented Lives*, Washington brilliantly analyzes the narrative strategies ten black women have used between 1860 and 1960 to bring themselves into visibility and power in a world dominated by racism and sexism.6 Like Washington, Gates’s concern is with the paradoxical relationship of African Americans with the printed text, i.e., since Eurocentric writing defines the black as “other,” how does the “other” gain authority in the text? To resolve this, Gates proposes a theory of criticism based upon the African American oral tradition of signifying. Signifying is, for Gates, “the black term for what in classical European rhetoric are called the figures of signification,” or stated differently, “the indirect use of words that changes the meaning of a word or words.”7 Signifying has numerous figures which include capping, loud-talking, the dozens, reading, going off, talking smart, sounding, jaming (jonesing), dropping lugs, snapping, wooing, styling out, and calling out of one’s name.

As a rhetorical strategy, signifying assumes that there is shared knowledge between communicators and, therefore, that information can be given indirectly. Geneva Smitherman in *Talkin’ and Testifyin* gives the following examples of signifying:

- Stokely Carmichael, addressing a white audience at the University of California, Berkeley, 1966: “It’s a privilege and an honor to be in the white intellectual ghetto of the West.”
- Malcolm X on Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolent revolution (referring to the common practice of singing “We Shall Overcome” at civil rights protests of the sixties): “In a revolution, you swinging, not singing.”
- Reverend Jesse Jackson, merging sacred and secular siggin in a Breadbasket Saturday morning sermon: “Pimp, punk, prostitute, preacher, Ph.D. — all the P’s — you still in slavery?”
- A black middle-class wife to her husband who had just arrived home several hours later than usual: “You sho got home early today for a change.”

Effective signifying is, Smitherman states, “to put somebody in check ... to make them think about and, one hopes, correct their behavior.”4 Because signifying relies on indirection to give information, it requires that participants in any communicative encounter pay attention to, as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan states, “the total universe of discourse.”9
Gates’s theory of signifying focuses on black forms of talk. I believe that identifying these forms of talk in contemporary black gay literature is important for two reasons. First, the use of signifying by black gay men places their writing squarely within the African American literary tradition. Second, signifying permits black gay men to revise the “Black Experience” in African American literature and, thereby, to create a space for themselves.

The remainder of this essay is divided into two parts. The first part examines the heterosexist context in which black gay men write. Examined are heterosexism and homophobia in the writings of contemporary social scientists, scholars, and, in a longer passage, the novels of Toni Morrison. The last section discusses black gay men’s attempts to revise the African American literary tradition. Specifically examined are the signifying on representations of desire, the black religious experience, and gender configurations.

Heterosexism and African American Intellectuals

Some social scientists have claimed that homosexuality is alien to the black community. Communication scholar Molefi Asante has argued in *Afrocentricity: A Theory of Social Change* that homosexual practices among black men were initially imposed on them by their white slaveowners and that the practice is maintained by the American prison institution. Asante has attributed homosexuality to Greco-Roman culture, with the added assertion that “homosexuality does not represent an Afrocentric way of life.” Likewise, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon, the widely read Martiniquois psychiatrist and freedom-fighter, declared that “Caribbean men never experience the Oedipus complex,” and therefore, in the Caribbean, “there is no homosexuality, which is, rather, an attribute of the white race, Western civilization.”

Other scholars and writers have contended that homosexuality is a pathology stemming from the inability of black men to cope with the complexities of manhood in a racist society. Alvin Poussaint, the noted Harvard psychiatrist and adviser to the *Cosby Show*, stated in a 1978 *Ebony* article that some black men adopt homosexuality as a maneuver to help them avoid the increasing tension developing between black men and women. “Homosexuality,” according to black writer and liberationist Imamu Amiri Baraka, “is the most extreme form of alienation acknowledged within white society” and it occurs among “a people who lose their self-sufficiency because they depend on their subjects to do the world’s work,” thus rendering them “effeminate and perverted.” According to Eldridge Cleaver, homosexuality among black men is a “racial death wish,” and a frustrating experience because “in their sickness [black men who practice homosexuality] are unable to have a baby by a white man.” In *The Endangered Black Family*, Nathan Hare and Julia Hare view homosexuals as confused but worthy of...
compassion because, they state, “Some of them may yet be saved.”

The Hares seem to imply that black gay and lesbian people require treatment for either illness or brainwashing: “What we must do is offer the homosexual brother or sister a proper compassion and acceptance without advocacy. We might not advocate, for instance, the religion of Mormonism, or venereal disease, laziness or gross obesity...”

The acclaimed writer Toni Morrison has woven into her novels these ideas of homosexuality as alien to African cultures, as forced upon black men by racist European civilizations, and as the inability to acquire and sustain manhood. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, she played on the stereotype of the “light-skinned” black man as weak, effeminate, and sexually impotent. Soaphead Church, “a cinnamon-eyed West Indian with lightly browned skin,” limited his sexual interests to little girls because, Morrison wrote, “he was too diffident to confront homosexuality” and found “little boys insulting, scary, and stubborn.” In *Tar Baby*, black homosexual men were self-mutilating transvestites who had dumped their masculinity because they “found the whole business of being black and men at the same time too difficult.”

In her 1988 Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved*, Morrison surpassed her earlier efforts in using homophobia with the creation of the five heroic black men of the Sweet Home plantation. Sweet Home men were unlike slaves on nearby plantations, as their owner Mr. Garner bragged to other farmers: “Y’all got boys. Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin’ boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought um thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one.” Although deprived of sex with women, Sweet Home men were capable of enormous restraint and for sexual relief they either masturbated or engaged in sex with farm animals. When Mr. Garner added to his plantation a new slave, the thirteen-year-old “iron-eyed” Sethe, the Sweet Home men “let the girl be” and allowed her to choose one of them despite the fact that they “were young and so sick with the absence of women they had taken to catses” (emphasis added). Seth took over a year to choose one of the Sweet Home men. Morrison described that year of waiting: “It was a long, tough year of thrashing on pallets eaten up with dreams of her. A year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life. The restraint they had exercised possible only because they were Sweet Home men...”

Yet Morrison’s description of the restrained Sweet Home men does a great disservice to the complexity of men’s lives. Her description reinforces a false notion of a hierarchy of sexual practices in which masturbation is only a substitute for intercourse. Morrison’s description is homophobic because it reveals her inability to imagine homosexual relationships among heroic characters. By implication, sex with farm animals is preferable to homosexual sex, which is like a perverse
reading of a spiritual: “Before I practice homosexuality, I’ll practice bestiality, and go home to my Father and be free.”

Morrison rejects from her fiction the idea that homosexual desire among slave men could actually lead to loving relationships. This, in fact, did happen. Autobiographical evidence exists that slave men in the Americas practiced and even institutionalized homosexuality. Esteban Montejo, the subject of The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave, twice discusses the prevalence of homosexuality among Cuban slave men in his comments on the sexual customs of the plantation. The first incident refers to physical abuse and possibly the rape of young black boys. Montejo states:

If a boy was pretty and lively he was sent inside, to the master’s house. And there they started softening him up ... well, I don’t know! They used to give the boy a long palm-leaf and make him stand at one end of the table while they ate. And they said, “Now see that no flies get in the food!” If a fly did, they scolded him severely and even whipped him.

The second incident is discussed within the context of the scarcity of women on the plantation. “To have one [a woman] of your own,” Montejo writes, “you had either to be over twenty-five or catch yourself one in the fields.” Some men, however, he states, “had sex among themselves and did not want to know anything of women.” Montejo’s comments include observations about the economics of homosexual households. He notes that the division of labor in these households resembled male–female roles in which the “effeminate men washed the clothes and did the cooking too, if they had a husband.” The men in these relationships also benefited financially from the existence of the “provision grounds,” lands allocated to slaves in the Caribbean to grow crops to sell in the local markets on Sunday. Montejo writes: “They [effeminate men] were good workers and occupied themselves with their plots of land, giving the produce to their husbands to sell to the white farmers.”

Most interesting in Montejo’s narrative is the reaction of other slaves to their homosexual brethren. The older men hated homosexuality, he states, and they “would have nothing to do with queens.” Their hatred leads Montejo to speculate that the practice did not come from Africa. Unfortunately, Montejo limits his speculations on homosexuality to origins and not to prohibitions. Thus, another speculation could be that homosexuality was prohibited, but that the practice itself was neither unknown nor undreamt. Montejo’s narrative suggests that the influence of the old men over the feelings and attitudes of other slaves about homosexuality was limited. The slaves did not have a pejorative name for those who practiced homosexuality and it was not until “after Abolition that the term [effeminate] came into use,” Montejo states. Montejo, himself, held the view that the practice of homosexu-
ality was a private matter: "To tell the truth, it [homosexuality] never bothered me. I am of the opinion that a man can stick his arse where he wants." Montejo’s narrative challenges the heterosexist assumptions about the sexualities and the family life of blacks before abolition in the Americas. At least in Cuba, homoerotic sex and exclusively male families were not uncommon.

In the United States, accounts of homosexuality among blacks before abolition are scanty. This is because accounts of slaves’ sexuality are sparse and, until recently, social customs in the United States and Great Britain proscribed public discussions of sexuality. Homosexuality, however, did occur during the colonial period among black men because laws forbidding the practice were created and sentences were carried out. Those laws and sentences are discussed in A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr.’s In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process and Jonathan Katz’s two documentary works Gay/Lesbian Almanac and Gay American History. Katz documents the case of Jan Creoli, identified as a “negro,” who in 1646 in New Netherland (Manhattan) was sentenced to be “choked to death, and then burnt to ashes” for committing the act of sodomy with ten-year-old Manuel Congo. Congo, whose name suggests that he was black, was sentenced “to be carried to the place where Creoli is to be executed, tied to a stake, and faggots piled around him, for justice sake, and to be flogged....” In a second case, “Mingo alias Cocke Negro,” a Massachusetts slave, was reportedly executed for “forcible Buggery,” a term that Katz suggests is a male-male act, rather than bestiality. Beth Katz and Higginbotham discuss the development of sexual crime laws in Pennsylvania between 1700 and 1780 that carefully distinguished between blacks and whites: Life imprisonment was the penalty for whites and death was for blacks convicted of buggery which, Katz notes, probably meant bestiality and sodomy.

Although the evidence for homosexual practices among black male slaves is small, it does suggest that we do not exclude homoeroticism from life on the plantation. The gay Jewish historian Martin Bauml Duberman’s words are most appropriate here:

After all, to date we’ve accumulated only a tiny collection of historical materials that record the existence of heterosexual behavior in the past. Yet no one claims that that minuscule amount of evidence is an accurate measure of the actual amount of heterosexual activity which took place.

Duberman’s words and the evidence we have suggest that, at best, our understanding of the sexuality of our slave ancestors is fragmentary. We need to uncover more and to reread diaries, letters, and narratives to gain a greater understanding of the sexuality of our forebears. At the very least, we need to revise our models of the black family and of homosexuality as alien to black culture.

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Morrison’s homophobia, as that of so many other black intellectuals, is perhaps more closely related to Judeo-Christian beliefs than to the beliefs of her ancestors. Male homosexuality is associated with biblical ideas of weakness as effeminacy. Many of these intellectuals would also argue that the Judeo-Christian tradition is a major tool of the Western-Eurocentric view of reality that furthers the oppression of blacks. Paradoxically, by their condemnation of homosexuality and lesbianism, these intellectuals contribute to upholding an oppressive Eurocentric view of reality.

Enter black gay men

It should be obvious that black gay men must look at other black intellectuals with great caution and skepticism because the dominant view of reality expressed is oppressively heterosexist. Black gay men must also be cautious of looking for an image of themselves in white gay men because the United States is still a racist society. For example, even though one in five homosexual or bisexual men with AIDS is black, it can be argued that Larry Kramer’s searing AIDS polemic, The Normal Heart, is about gay people, not black people. The characters in the drama are from the “fabulous 1970s Fire Island/After Dark crowd,” which tended to be white, middle-class, and very exclusionary on the basis of race, unless one counts the occasional presence of the reigning “disco diva” — who was usually a black woman or the wonderful African American gender-blurring singer Sylvester. In addition, Kramer makes several remarks in The Normal Heart that imply that he accepts certain historically racist ideas about blacks. With a critical eye, one can also find occurrences of racism in works ranging from literature to visual pornography created by or aimed at gay men that employ a racist vision of reality.

Partly as a reaction to racism in gay culture, but mostly in response to the heterosexism of black intellectuals and writers, African American gay men signify on many aspects of the “Black Experience” in their literature. The areas discussed in this section are representations of sexual desire, the black religious experience, and gender configurations.

Representing sexual desire

Because of the historical and often virulent presence of racism, black literature has frequently had as its goal the elevation of “the race” by presenting the group in its “best light.” The race’s “best light” often has meant depicting blacks with those values and ways that mirrored white Americans and Europeans. For black writers this has usually meant tremendous anxiety over the representation of sexuality. An excellent example of this anxiety is W.E.B. DuBois’s reaction to Claude McKay’s 1920 novel Home to Harlem. In the novel, McKay, gay and Jamaican,
wrote about much of the night life in Harlem, including one of the first
descriptions of a gay and lesbian bar in an African American work of
fiction. DuBois wrote:

...Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem for the most part nauseates me, and
after the dirtier parts of its fifth I feel distinctly like taking a bath ... McKay
has set out to cater for that prurient demand on the part of white folks
for a portrayal in Negros of that utter licentiousness ... which a certain
decadent section of the white world ... wants to see written out in black
and white and saddled on black Harlem ... He has used every art and
emphasis to paint drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity
and utter absence of restraint in as bold and bright colors as he can ... As
a picture of Harlem life or of Negro life anywhere, it is, of course, non-
sense. Untrue, not so much as on account of its facts, but on account of
its emphasis and glaring colors.40

The anxiety that DuBois felt was as acute for black women. Mary Helen
Washington comments that this anxiety about the representation of
sexuality “goes back to the nineteenth century and the prescription for
womanly ‘virtues’ which made slave women automatically immoral
and less feminine than white women,” as in the case of the slave woman
Harriet Jacobs, who considered not publishing her 1860 narrative Inci-
dents in the Life of a Slave Girl because she “bore two children as a single
woman rather than submit to forced concubinage.”41 The represen-
tation of sexuality is even more problematic for black gay men than
for heterosexual African Americans because of societal disapproval
against impersonal sex, in which gay men frequently engage, and
because gay sex is not connected in any way with the means of
reproduction.

Black gay science fiction writer Samuel Delany, in his autobiog-
raphy The Motion of Light in Water, takes particular delight in signifying
on society’s disapproval of impersonal homoerotic sex. His signifying
is greatly aided by using the autobiographical form, a successful mode
for black Americans, as Michael Cooke maintains, because “the self is
the source of the system of which it is a part, creates what it discovers,
and although it is nothing unto itself, it is the possibility of everything
for itself.”42 By using himself as the source of the system, Delany is able
to signify on ideas about impersonal sex. Delany imbues situations
involving impersonal sex with social and political significance in the
context of the repressive 1950s and early 1960s. Contrary to stereotypes
that group sex is wild and out of control, the situation on the piers at
the end of Christopher Street “with thirty-five, fifty, a hundred all-but-
strangers is,” Delany states, “hugely ordered, highly social, attentive,
silent, and grounded in a certain care, if not community.”43 At the piers,
when arrests of eight or nine men occurred and were reported in the
newspapers without mentioning the hundreds who had escaped, it was
a reassurance to the city fathers, the police, the men arrested, and even those who escaped "that the image of the homosexual as outside society — which is the myth that the outside of language, with all its articulation, is based on — was, somehow, despite the arrests, intact." Delany's first visit to the St. Mark's Baths in 1963 produced a Foucault-like revelation that the legal and medical silences on homosexuality was "a huge and pervasive discourse" which prevented one from gaining "a clear, accurate, and extensive picture of extant public sexual institutions." The result of Delany's signification is that his participation in impersonal sex in public places is given a political and social importance much like the significance given to ordinary, day-to-day acts of resistance recounted by the subjects of African American autobiographies from Frederick Douglass's My Bondage and My Freedom to Maya Angelou's I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.

Just as Delany seeks to revise attitudes about impersonal sex, Larry Duplechan signifies on both black middle-class and gay stereotypes of interracial love and lust. On the one hand the black middle class and the mental health professions have conspired together to label a black person's sexual attraction to a white as pathology. On the other, gay men have created a host of terms to demigrate participants in black/white sexual relationships, e.g.: "dingle queen," "chocolate lover," and "snow queen." In Blackbird and Eight Days a Week, we are introduced to Duplechan's protagonist, Johnnie Ray Rousseau, as a senior in high school in the former, and as a 22-year-old aspiring singer living in Los Angeles in the latter. In Duplechan's first novel, Eight Days a Week, he summarizes both the gay and the black middle-class stereotype: "I was once told by a black alto sax player named Zaz (we were in bed at the time, mind you) that my preference for white men (and blonds, the whitest of white, to boot) was the sad but understandable end result of 300 years of white male oppression."

Contrary to Zaz's opinion, Johnnie Ray's sexual attraction to white men is anything but the result of 300 years of white male oppression, and if it is, it allows Duplechan a major moment of signifying in African American literature: the sexual objectification of white men by a black man.

Revising our culture's ideas about male-male sexual desire and love is a major concern in Essex Hemphill's collection of poems Conditions. In particular, "Conditions XXIV" signifies on heterosexual culture's highly celebrated "rite of passage," the marriage ceremony. Hemphill signifies on the marriage ceremony in an excellent example of "capping," a figure of speech which revises an original statement by adding new terms. Hemphill honors the bonds created from desire by capping on the exchange of wedding bands. In the opening and closing sentences, fingers are not the received place for wedding rings:
In America
I place my ring
on your cock
where it belongs...

In America,
place your ring
on my cock
where it belongs.

Vows are also exchanged in the poem, but they do not restrict and confine. Instead, these vows are “What the rose whispers/before blooming...” The vows are:

I give you my heart,
a safe house.
I give you promises other than
milk, honey, liberty.
I assume you will always
be a free man with a dream.

Implicitly, “Conditions XXIV” strips away the public pomp and spectacle of the wedding ceremony to reveal its most fundamental level: desire. By capping on the wedding ceremony, Hemphill places homoerotic desire on an equal plane with heterosexuality.

Signifying on the church
Historically religion has served as a liberating force in the African American community. Black slaves publicly and politically declared that Christianity and the institution of slavery were incompatible as early as 1774, according to Albert Raboteau in Slave Religion. “In that year,” Raboteau notes, “the governor of Massachusetts received ‘The Petition of a Great Number of Blacks of this Province who by divine permission are held in a state of slavery within the bowels of a free and Christian Country.’” In the petition slaves argued for their freedom by combining the political rhetoric of the Revolution with an appeal to the claims of Christian fellowship. Christian churches were some of the first institutions blacks created and owned in the United States. From 1790 to 1830 ambitious northern free black men like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones circumvented racism by creating new Christian denominations, notably the African Methodist Episcopal and the African Methodist Episcopal Zion churches.

The organized black church, however, has not been free from oppressing its constituents. Historically, the black church has practiced sexism. In her 1849 narrative, Jerena Lee, a spiritual visionary and a free black woman, reported having her desire to preach thwarted by her husband and Rev. Richard Allen.66 Lee, however, overcame the objec-
tions of men by claiming that her instructions came directly from God; thus, those instructions superseded the sexist prohibitions of men. Some contemporary black churches and their ministers have adopted heterosexist policies and have openly made homophobic remarks. In an essay which appeared in the gay anthology Black Men/White Men, Leonard Patterson, a black gay minister, movingly wrote about how he was forced to leave Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Patterson’s troubles at Ebenezer began when Reverend Joseph Roberts replaced Reverend Martin L. King, Sr. Roberts objected to the fact that Patterson’s white lover also attended Ebenezer. Moreover, Patterson was guilty of not playing the game: “I was told, in effect, that as long as I played the political game and went with a person who was more easily passed off as a ‘cousin,’ I would be able to go far in the ministry. Perhaps I should even marry and have someone on the side. Apparently these arrangements would make me more ‘respectable.’” For refusing to play the political game, Patterson states that he was “attacked verbally from the pulpit, forbidden to enter the study for prayer with the other associate ministers, and had seeds of animosity planted against him... in the minds of certain members so that in meetings with them the subject of homosexuality would inevitably be brought up.”

Patterson recounts an extremely offensive remark made to him by a church member one Sunday: “If you lie down with dogs, you get up smelling like dirt.” Patterson and his lover finally left Ebenezer. Although disillusioned with organized religion, Patterson writes encouragingly that what he and his lover experienced at Ebenezer has “given us more strength to love each other and others.”

Exorcism is a practice used to oppress gays in the church. The late Pentecostal minister and professor, Reverend James Tinney, underwent an exorcism when he came out as a gay man. Tinney briefly mentions the experience in his essay “Struggles of a Black Pentecostal,” which was originally published in a 1981 issue of Insight. Five years later in Blackbird Duplechan signifies on Tinney’s reflections on exorcism. It should be noted that Duplechan was probably familiar with Tinney’s essay. Both that essay and Duplechan’s short story “Peanuts and the Old Spice Kid” appeared in Michael Smith’s anthology Black Men/White Men.

The events which precipitate the exorcism are similar in Blackbird and in Tinney’s essay. Both Tinney and Duplechan’s protagonist, Johnnie Ray Rousseau, are aware of their sexual identity. Tinney writes that he was aware of his homoerotic feelings “even at the age of four.” Johnnie Ray’s exorcism is preceded by an enjoyable first sexual experience with the older bi-ethnic Marshall Two Hawks McNeil, a college student. Publicly stating and affirming their sexual identity actually causes the exorcisms. Put another way, their exorcisms are punishments for stating that they practice “the love that dares not speak
its name." Tinney announced to his wife of three years that he was gay. Her reaction set into motion the events that caused the exorcism: "She immediately called the pastor and his wife and other close confidants to pray for me." When Johnnie Ray’s exorcism was set into motion by two events. First, his confidential confession to Daniel Levine, the youth minister, that he had gay feelings. Then, Levine’s betrayal of the confidential confession to Johnnie Ray’s parents provoked the second event: the teenager’s affirmation of his sexual identity to his parents in the presence of the minister.

Tinney does not discuss the events of his exorcism. In fact, he limits the actions of his wife, minister, and church members to one sentence: "Pray and talk and counsel they did." Tinney’s description of the exorcism is brief, but the event left him traumatized. The exorcism, he wrote, "was extremely painful to my own sense of worth and well-being. It was an experience I would not wish upon anyone ever." Duplechan signifies explicitly and implicitly on Tinney’s remark "Pray and talk and counsel they did." Explicitly Duplechan “reads” Tinney by giving a fuller narrative description of the praying, talking, and counseling of the church people. Implicitly, Duplechan’s “reading” of Tinney is a critique of the clergy and the values of the middle class. Further, Duplechan’s “reading” is an example of what Smitherman calls heavy signifying, "a way of teaching or driving home a cognitive message but... without preaching or lecturing.”

Let us consider Duplechan’s “read” or “heavy signifying” of each of the three terms — pray, talk, and counsel — as they occur in the confrontation between Johnnie Ray and the church people — his parents and the youth minister. The confrontation about Johnnie Ray’s homosexuality happens at his home. Duplechan shows that prayer is often a means of ensuring conformity. In an emotional outburst Johnnie Ray’s mother asks the teen: "Have you asked him? Have you asked the savior to help you?... Have you prayed every day for help? Every day?" When Johnnie Ray answers no, his mother incredulously asks him, "Don’t you want to be normal?" Normality, which is conforming to existing value structures, is believed by the middle classes to be what will guarantee them success in the world. Johnnie Ray’s mother reveals that she is less concerned with his happiness than she is with his possibilities of success. To insure his success, she and her husband must use talk to force Johnnie Ray to become normal. Talk, thus, is a means of intimidation. When Johnnie Ray claims that he has accepted it as a fact that he is gay, his mother intimidates him by "loud talking":

You probably think you’re real cute... going to Daniel [the youth minister] with this ‘I think I’m a homosexual’ crap, and now sittin’ here and tellin’ us you’ve accepted that you’re gay... Lord ha’ mercy today! I don’t know what I coulda done to give birth to a pervert."
While Johnnie Ray’s mother uses “loud talking” to intimidate her son, his father cries. When his father finally talks, it is a mixture of intimidation and compassion: “You’re no pervert,” he says. “No son of mine is gonna be a pervert. You’re just a little confused.” Finally, there is the expert, Reverend Levine, who offers counsel. Levine, however, is a scoundrel. Although he has betrayed Johnnie Ray’s confidence, he sits throughout the entire family crisis “looking as holy and righteous at having done so as my parents looked utterly devastated at the news.” Levine is able to sit “in beatific calm” because of the family’s unhappiness. In other words, the family crisis that Levine has provided proves that the ministry is necessary. Levine’s expert counsel to the family, which they reluctantly agree upon, is an exorcism — “a deliverance from unclean spirits.”

By signifying on Timney, Duplechan exposes an unholy alliance between the church and the middle classes. The church is eager to oppress gay people to prove its worth to the middle classes. For the sake of conformity which, with hope, leads to success, the middle class is willing to oppress its children. The middle class, thus, is denounced for its willingness to use the church to further its ambitions.

In the short story “Cut Off from among Their People,” Craig G. Harris does a “heavy sig” on the black family which also signifies on strategies from slave narratives. The story takes place at the funeral of Jeff’s lover, who has died of complications from AIDS. Both the family and the church, two major institutions in the heterosexual African American community, are allied against Jeff. The lover’s biological family has “diplomatically” excluded Jeff from the decisions about the funeral. At the funeral Jeff is ignored by the family and humiliated by the church. The lover’s mother stares at him contemptuously. Jeff is not allowed to sit with the family. The minister chosen by the family only adds to Jeff’s humiliation. The minister is asked not to wear his ceremonial robes but instead to wear an ordinary suit.

The “heavy sig” is done by using irony. The minister is exposed as a scoundrel, similar to Levine in Blackbird. At the funeral he delivers a homophobic sermon from the book of Leviticus:

In Leviticus, Chapter 20, the Lord tells us: If a man lie with mankind as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them. There’s no cause to wonder why medical science could not find a cure for this man’s illness. How could medicine cure temptation? What drug can exorcise Satan from a young man’s soul? The only cure is to be found in the Lord. The only cure is repentance, for Leviticus clearly tells us, “...whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people.”

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After the funeral Jeff is abandoned and left to his own devices to get to the burial site. His humiliation is relieved by a sympathetic undertaker who offers Jeff a ride to the burial site. Ironically, it is the undertaker, the caregiver to the dead — not the minister, who is the caregiver to the living — who offers Jeff the compassion he so desperately needs. Denouncing both the family and the church, the undertaker's remarks to Jeff become the authentic sermon in the story:

I lost my lover to AIDS three months ago. It's been very difficult — living with these memories and secrets and hurt, and with no one to share them. These people won't allow themselves to understand. If it's not preached from a pulpit and kissed up to the Almighty, they don't want to know about it. So, I hold it in, and hold it in, and then I see us passing, one after another — tearless funerals, the widowed treated like nonentities, and these 'another faggot burns in hell' sermons. My heart goes out to you brother. You gotta let your love for him keep you strong.”

As a result of Harris's use of ironic signifying, one is left to ponder the meaning of the story's title, "Cut Off from among Their People." Who is cut off from their people? The story immediately implies that black gays are oppressed because they are alienated from their families. The opposite, however, is also true: Black families are oppressors, are alienated from their gay children, and thus, suffer. Black families suffer because their oppression robs them of a crucial sign of humaneness: compassion. By their oppression, the family of Jeff's deceased lover has lost the ability to be compassionate.

Harris's strategy — the cost of oppression is the loss of humanity — signifies on slave narratives by authors such as Frederick Douglass. Slave owners' loss of compassion, the sign of humaneness, is a recurring theme in Frederick Douglass's 1845 narrative. Slavery, Douglass contended, placed in the hands of whites "the fatal poison of irresponsible power." Douglass gives numerous grisly examples of his contention: murderous overseers, greedy urban craftsmen, and raping masters. But perhaps none of his examples is meant to be as moving as that of his slave mistress, Mrs. Auld. Originally a woman of independent means, Douglass describes her before "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" took full control of her.

I was utterly astonished at her goodness. I scarcely knew how to behave towards her. She was entirely unlike any other white woman I had ever seen. I could not approach her as I was accustomed to approach other white ladies. My early instruction was all out of place. The crouching servility, usually soacceptable a quality in a slave, did not answer when manifested toward her. Her favor was not gained by it; she seemed to be disturbed by it. She did not deem it impudent or unmanly for a slave to look her in the face. The meanest slave was put fully at ease in her
presence, and none left without feeling better for having seen her. Her face was made of heavenly smiles, and her voice of tranquil music.70

Mrs. Auld even disobeyed the law and taught Douglass some rudiments of spelling. However, Douglass states, “Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me ... Under its influence, the tender heart became stone, and the lamblike disposition gave way to one of tiger-like fieriness.”71

“Cut Off from among Their People” is an extraordinary act of “heavy signifying.” By using a strategy similar to Frederick Douglass’s, Harris equates heterosexism and homophobia with slavery. For upholding heterosexism and homophobia, the church and the black family are oppressors. As rendered by Harris, they are like the Mrs. Auld of Douglass’s narrative. They are kind to the black gay man when he is a child, and corrupted by intolerance years later. Their oppression has robbed them of compassion. The black family and their church, thus, have lost the sign of humanity.

Gender configurations

The last section of this essay examines gay men and the problem of gender configurations. Specifically, in the black literary tradition gay men have been objects of ridicule for not possessing masculine-appearing behaviors. This ridicule was especially evident in the militant Black Power movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The militancy that characterized that movement placed an enormous emphasis on developing black “manhood.” Manhood became a metaphor for the strength and potency necessary to overthrow the oppressive forces of a white racist society. Images of pathetic homosexuals were often used to show what black manhood was not or to what it could degenerate. For example, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee) wrote in “Don’t Cry Scream”:

swung on a saggot who politely
scratched his ass in my presence.
he smiled broken teeth stained from
his over-used tongue, fisted-face.
teeth dropped in tune with ray
charles singing “yesterday.”72

Concurrent with the Black Power movement’s image of manhood was the development of the urban tough, loud, back-talking gay black man. This stereotype was seen on the Broadway stage in Melvin Van Peebles’s Aint’s Supposed to Die a Natural Death, but it was most clearly articulated by Antonio Fargas’s character, Lindy, in the film Car Wash. When the black militant Abdullah accused Lindy of being another example of how the white man has corrupted the black man and robbed him of his masculinity, Lindy responded, “Honey, I’m more man than
you'll ever be and more woman than you'll ever get." Lindy was a
gratifying character because he was tough and articulate, yet his char-
acter was not revolutionary. Vito Russo comments in The Celluloid Closet:
"Lindy is only a cartoon — [his] effect in the end was just that of the
sale sissy who ruled the day in the topsy-turvy situations of Thirties
comedies." But the stereotype of the tough, loud, back-talking ef-
feminate black gay man as an object of ridicule is revised in works by
Samuel Delany, George Wolfe, and Billi Gordon.

Delany signifies on such a stereotype in a section of The Motion of
Light in Water called "A black man...? A gay man...?" The section's title
itself suggests the dilemma of a bifurcated identity that Julius Johnson
discusses in his doctoral dissertation "Influence of Assimilation on the
Psychosocial Adjustment of Black Homosexual Men." Johnson docu-
mented the fact that some African American brothers become "black
gay men" while others become "gay black men"; the designation often
underscores painful decisions to have primary identities either in the
black or in the gay community.

Delany's first memory of a gay black man was Herman, an outrageously
effeminate musician who played the organ in his father's
mortuary. As a child, Delany admits that he was as confused as he was
amused by Herman's aggressive antics. When a casket delivery man
asked Herman if he was "one of them faggots that likes men," Herman
quickly signified on the man:

"Me? Oh, chile', chile', you must be ill or something!... I swear, you must
have been workin' out in the heat too long today. I do believe you must
be sick!" Here he would feel the man's forehead, then removing his hand,
look at the sweat that had come off on his own palm, touch his finger to
his tongue, and declare, "Oh, my lord, you are tasty!... Imagine, honey!
Thinkin' such nastiness like that about a woman like me! I mean, I just
might faint right here, and you gonna have to carry me to a chair and fan
me and bring me my smellin' salts!" Meanwhile he would be rubbing the
man's chest and arms.73

Ultimately Delany's attitude toward Herman was one of ambivalence.
Delany's sig on the stereotype was his recognition of its artifice. He
recognized that there were many unanswered questions about
Herman's sexual life: "Had he gone to bars? Had he gone to baths?... Had
there been a long-term lover, waiting for him at home, unmet by,
and unmentioned to, people like my father whom he worked for?"74
Herman had played a role to survive in a heterosexist and homophobic
world. In that role "Herman had a place in our social scheme," Delany
wrote, "but by no means an acceptable place, and certainly not a place
I wanted to fill."75 Thus, as a teen, Delany remembered that he did not
see Herman as a role model for a man. As an adult, however, Delany's
opinion of Herman changed. He did not see Herman as a role model,
but, he stated, “I always treasured the image of Herman’s outrageous and defiant freedom to say absolutely anything ... Anything except, of course, I am queer, and I like men sexually better than women.”

In *The Colored Museum*, George Wolfe introduces Miss Roi, a black transvestite “dressed in striped patio pants, white go-go boots, a halter and cat-shaped sunglasses.” Wolfe makes it clear that Miss Roi is a subject most appropriate for African American literature by signifying, perhaps deliberately, on Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. In particular, he signifies on its prologue, to create a powerful social comment on the alienation of the black urban poor. Wolfe’s character, Miss Roi, comments that she “comes from another galaxy, as do all snap queens. That’s right,” she says, “I ain’t just your regular oppressed American Negro. No-no-no! I am an extra-terrestrial, and I ain’t talkin none of that shit you seen in the movies.”

Compare that with the first two sentences in the prologue of *Invisible Man*: “I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms.” Ellison’s nameless protagonist lives in a hole lit by 1,269 bulbs; Miss Roi, whose real name the audience never learns, inhabits every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday night a disco with blaring lights called the Bottomless Pit, “the watering hole for the wild and weary which asks the question, ‘Is there life after [herri-curl]?’” In Ellison’s prologue the protagonist gets high on marijuana; Miss Roi gets drunk on Cuba libres [perhaps a veiled reference to popular drinks in the early 1950s, which is when *Invisible Man* was written] and proceeds to snap, that is, “when something strikes ... [one’s] fancy, when the truth comes piercing through the dark, well you just can’t let it pass unnoticed. No darling. You must pronounce it with a snap [of the fingers].”

Ellison’s protagonist almost beats a man to death for calling him a nigger. Of course, one wonders how one can be beaten by invisibility. In a scene with a provocation and an outcome similar to Ellison’s, Miss Roi “snaps” (signifies) on an assialent. She states:

Like the time this asshole at Jones Beach decided to take issue with my culotte-sailor ensemble. This child, this muscle-bound Brooklyn thug in a skin tight bikini, very skin-tight so the whole world can see that instead of a brain, God gave him an extra-thick piece of sausage. You know the kind who beat up on their wives for breakfast. Well he decided to blurt out while I walked by, “Hey look at da monkey coon in da faggit suit.” Well, I walked up to the poor dear, very calmly lifted my hand and ... (rapid snaps) A heart attack, right there on the beach. You don’t believe it?

Ellison’s prologue ends with the protagonist listening to Louis Armstrong’s “What Did I Do to Be So Black and Blue?”; the lights fade on Miss Roi dancing to Aretha Franklin’s “Respect.” As white Americans
must have been puzzled, outraged, and even guilt-stricken after reading Ellison’s Invisible Man, so too is the effect Miss Roi has had on the assimilated blacks Wolfe chose to confront. During performances of The Colored Museum, black audience members have verbally attacked the actor playing Miss Roi and African American intellectuals have lambasted Wolfe for either not portraying blacks in their “best light” or for demeaning women.83

One of the oddest works to appear in black gay culture is Billi Gordon’s cookbook, You’re Had Worse Things In Your Mouth. The title itself is an act of signifying. While one may think it odd to include a cookbook here, it is important to keep in mind that that mode of presentation has been used to create social history in two other books by Afro-Americans. National Public Radio commentator and self-styled writing griot Vertamae Smart-Grosvenor came to public prominence in her 1970 Vibration Cooking: or the Travels Notes of a Geechee Girl. The format of the book itself was signifying on the published travel narratives of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whites such as Frederick Law Olmsted, whose observations on slavery have been treated by some historians as more reliable than artifacts actually left by the slaves. Norma Jean and Carole Darden’s 1978 Spoonbread and Strawberry Wine was as much a family history of North Carolina middle-class blacks as it was a compendium of recipes.

Like George Wolfe, Gordon signifies repeatedly on racial stereotypes and on middle-class culture. On the cover of his cookbook, Gordon, a three-hundred-pound-plus dark-skinned black man, appears in drag. But not just any drag. He is wearing a red kerchief, a red-and-white checkered blouse, and a white apron, calling to mind some combination of Aunt Jemima and Hattie McDaniel in Gone With the Wind. As if that were not enough, Gordon signifies in every way imaginable on the American cultural stereotype of mammies as sexless, loyal, no-nonsense creatures. Gordon’s character is lusty, vengeful, and flirtatious. Gordon appears in pictures surrounded by adoring muscles, swimsuit-clad white men; she wears bikini swimsuits, tennis outfits, long blond wigs, huge rebellious Afro-wigs, and shocking lamé evening wear. As for recipes, one is quite reluctant to try any of them, particularly those from the section called “Revenge Cooking” in which the ingredients include laxatives, seaweed, and entire bottles of Tabasco sauce. Billi Gordon signifies on the American stereotype of the mammy by reversing it and turning it upside down: His depiction of a mammy with a sex life is far from loyal, and certainly his character cannot and/or does not want to cook.

Conclusion: Toward a black gay aesthetic

Restricted by racism and heterosexism, writers such as Samuel Delany, Larry Duplechan, Essex Hemphill, Craig G. Harris, George
Wolfe and Billi Gordon have begun to create a literature that validates our lives as black and as gay. My critical reading of this literature relied upon techniques based in the African American tradition of signifying. The writers discussed in this essay are some of the newest members of the African American literary tradition. Clearly, they also seek to revise the aesthetics of that tradition. Homophobia and heterosexism are oppressive forces which must be eliminated from the social, scientific, critical, and imaginative writings within the African American literary tradition.

Notes
7. Geneva Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), p. 120.
8. Smitherman, Talkin and Testifyin, p. 121.
11. Asante, Afrocentricity, p. 64.
16. Nathan Hare and Julia Hare, The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the -247-
17. Hare and Hare, *The Endangered Black Family*, p. 65.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid., p. 41.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. Ibid.
34. Ibid., p. 61.
38. For example, toward the end of *The Normal Heart*, one of the indignities that befall a deceased person with AIDS is to be cremated by a black undertaker “for a thousand dollars, no questions asked” (p. 106). The implication here is that the deceased was unable to have a decent or respectable burial, which would, of course, be by a white undertaker. This is significant because it is part of a tradition
in Western aesthetics that associates blacks and Africans with indignity. This also reflects an instance of racism by the author.

39. An interesting case occurred in a serious article in the gay male pornohog magazine Stallion. The author, Charles Jurist, criticized the gay literary establishment for its exclusion of or, when included, stereotypical depiction of black men. However, the article perpetuated a stereotype by featuring a series of pictures of a spectacularly endowed Black man.


44. Ibid., p. 175.

45. Ibid., p. 176.


52. Ibid., pp. 164–165.

53. Ibid., p. 165.

54. Ibid., p. 166.


56. Ibid., p. 170.

57. Ibid.

58. Ibid., pp. 170–171.

59. Smitherman, Talkin' and Testifyin', p. 120.


61. Ibid., p. 153.
62. Ibid., p. 151.
63. Ibid., p. 153.
64. Ibid., p. 150.
65. Ibid., p. 152.
66. Ibid., p. 155.
68. Ibid., p. 67.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., pp. 52–53.
75. Delany, Motion of Light, p. 219.
76. Ibid., p. 221.
77. Ibid., p. 220.
78. Ibid., p. 223.
80. Ibid.
82. Wolfe, Colored Museum, p. 4.
83. Ibid.
84. Ibid.

Works cited


