

Who is the Man in the Mirror? : Homosexuality, Blackness, and the Complexities of Intersectional Identity

Omolola M. Ajayi

2012 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

In recent years, homosexuality has undeniably become one of the most controversial, passion-inducing topics of our time. The American public has witnessed a dramatic surge of interest in and information on the topic, and changes in social institutions and ideologies offer proof that the ongoing discourse about homosexuality has indeed had lasting impact on the customs and traditions of American society. There has been a proliferation in scholarship spanning across all disciplines ranging from scientific studies to commentaries on the religious, political, and philosophical implications of homosexuality. Everyday more people are opting to openly live lifestyles that are perceived as contrary to the norm, and as a result the public sector of society has become home to unrelenting tensions between opposing forces of acceptance and rejection. There is an abundance of information about the science behind homosexuality, much research exploring the history, and even more remarks and observations advocating or opposing homosexuality from a multitude of ideological fronts.

However, much of the public discourse on this topic pertains to a rather specific group of people—white homosexuals. Society is aware that minority homosexual populations exist, but the information pertaining to them is indeed not proportional to that of their white counterparts. Minorities in the United States have historically been, and continue to be, marginalized populations in various social arenas regardless of sexual orientation. Now with the added aspect of sexual orientation, minorities that identify as homosexuals become even more marginalized both outside and within their own communities. The scholarship pertaining to homosexuality is

in serious need of becoming more inclusive of and specific to the experience of minority homosexuals.

It is no surprise that the black homosexual's option to live an openly gay lifestyle comes with its fair share of issues, but with the growing visibility and acceptance of this group of people the time is now to move past lamenting on the downtrodden. The goal of this paper is to discuss the topics of homosexuality and masculinity as it pertains to the identity of the black homosexual man situated within the context of the greater black community. It is one thing to analyze the identity of the homosexual black man by not being conscious of his place within the overall narrative of the black American identity, and another to intentionally analyze this specific identity within its proper context. Taking into account the identities of both the particular (black homosexual man) and more universal (black person) will lead to a better understanding of the specific identity as it relates to the identity of the whole. Doing so will only lead to a more precise comprehension of the complexities of the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexual identity within that of the homosexual black man.

There must also be a spatial component taken into account. The black gay male populations of cities like Atlanta, Seattle, and Washington, D.C.¹ are no strangers to a thriving gay culture housed within city limits. All of these cities are large metropolitan areas that accommodate a just as large black population, yet there are still many other largely black metropolitan areas that do not house such a bustling black gay male community and the culture to sustain it. This leads the discussion to inquire whether or not the social environment has anything to do with how the experience of identifying as black and homosexual manifests itself. So relevant to this specific conversation is how living in the city of Memphis creates any more or

¹ "What Makes Atlanta the Gay Capital for Black Men?," The Black Guy, The Color Curve, 2011, 3 August 2012 <<http://www.thecolorcurve.com/blog/dbn/what-makes-atlanta-the-gay-capital-for-black-men/>>

any less tension in reconciling these two aspects of identity with one another. Memphis is a predominately black metropolitan area located in the American south's own Bible Belt. Memphis is a hub for Christian-based conservatism and traditional southern ideals, characteristics that make this an even more intriguing aspect to analyze. The social environment of a city provides the standards by which a person is able to distinguish what behavior is acceptable and what is not. Essentially this is just another piece to the puzzle, but the spatial component of social environment is an important one seeing that it can have profound effects on how someone perceives her/himself.

In light of the increased prevalence of the openly gay lifestyle, much thought is still to be given to the experience of identity that manifests itself in the black homosexual man and what results as a consequence of his existence. The objective here is not to judge whether or not the black homosexual man is a moral being rather the concern is that of understanding why there is a great deal of disconnect between the identity of the black homosexual man and that of the black community at large. Let us face the truth that homosexuality is not simply "the white man's disease". This sexual orientation does not have a target racial population. The only criterion is that one must simply be human.

Continuing to ignore the pertinence of the discussion about black homosexuality will result in additional problems. The continuing denial of such a population can result in the increased severity of current health problems and disparities that heavily plague the black community such as HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections. Staunch denial can also ensure that the black community will continue to perpetuate cycles of oppression experienced as a racial minority by inflicting the same oppression via internal racism, homophobia, and sexism onto the marginalized group of black homosexuals. The result is the production of a

marginalized group within another marginalized group. Ultimately, what is at stake is the identity of the black community and the pride and appreciation associated with that identity. A continued attitude of denial and overlooking the importance of the discourse on black homosexuality threatens to generate a false ideal of what it means to be black in America. There are already too many stereotypes that work to the degradation of the black community, but adding the ideal that what it means to identify as black means to identify as heterosexual stands to create more problems than it solves.

The Importance of Intersections

When giving thought to the construction of human identity and the human experience, it is common to critique and analyze such a complex aspect of life in very simplistic manners. For rational people, it is natural to attempt to understand the world around us by separating, grouping, and categorizing. It is no surprise that in the endeavor to comprehend the social plight of the individual that the same methodology is applied. In the attempt to comprehend, we take an individual's identity and proceed to divide and conquer the various aspects, factors, and traits that make up the whole. Ironically, in our never ending quest to understand the experiences of others we undermine progress by failing to acknowledge an important piece. People may exist independently of one another and we may indeed be autonomous beings, but that does not negate the fact that our lives are intertwined due to the many commonalities in self identification that we share.

In order to genuinely comprehend human experience, there must first be an acknowledgement that no identity is constructed, nor life existing, in a societal and environmental vacuum. Every event that occurs happens in light of or in conjunction with

another; nothing takes place in isolation from the world around it. The same is true for identities and experiences. Identities are unique combinations of various social and environmental factors that give rise to the development of distinct and particular individual selves and practices. These perceptions of who others are and who we know ourselves to be grow out of the social constructs of this world. How these identities grow is in part influenced by the experience of living as a physical manifestation of those identities. Again, first there must be an acknowledgement that the perception of life is molded within the confines of society. Secondly, we must become cognizant of what those confines are and how they affect day to day living – both externally and internally.

Traditionally, common thought is that an individual's self-perception is viewed as one complete entity – a single identity. Many times when analyzing personal identity the easiest thing to do is focus on the whole knowing that there are smaller pieces to the puzzle. For example, the identity of any one person can be likened to a painting. The focus is the painting as one picture within which various details merge to compose the whole image. Because they are considered minor, details are pointed out only if they have significant influence on the perception of the entire painting. If one of the smaller components of the whole is interesting enough, then the next step is to extract it and to examine it in isolation from the rest. The truth is that an identity, the painting in this case, is multidimensional and to study an aspect of identity out of the context of the whole misconstrues the individuality and the correlating experience. Each element of self identification may exist independently of another, but each develops an influence that is interconnected to the influence of other identification markers. A focus on solely the whole is problematic in that it disregards the nuances that manifest with people existing in a dynamic environment. The unique combination of social and environmental factors along with the way

that these influences become noticeable is proof enough that different aspects of identity overlap and further complicate how one perceives her/his personal self and those of others surrounding them.

A person's self-identity, and the experiences that come with it, cannot be fully understood through visualizing it from a top down vantage point and in a two dimensional manner. In the attempt to understand the lives of others it is imperative that the intersectionality, or overlapping of aspects of identity, of various social and environmental aspects within any given identity is taken into account. These overlaps are important in that they are the basics to comprehending the intermingling of various self identification markers that yield complex dimensions in individual identity. Understanding that different factors intersect in different ways to produce just as different livelihoods is vital to making sense of the human experience of identity and the philosophical implications that are yielded as a consequence.

The divide and conquer methodology that is employed in attempting to grasp the whole of the experience of identity bleeds into how we approach categories of social constructs and institutions within society. The human mind only understands what it can break down to fundamental components. When everything is in its basic stage, then the process of comprehension is made easier. In observing social constructs such as gender, race, sexuality, class, ethnicity, etc. there is an inclination to observe them and gauge their value of influence in isolation of one another. Because of society's undying loyalty to societal norms, there remains blindness to the personal hand that everyone has in perpetuating multiple cycles of oppression simultaneously as both victims and perpetrators. Intersectionality highlights the "importance of having a multidimensional analysis of power structures" and "taking into consideration all the

social categories that power and oppression rest upon”². Just as aspects of identity intermingle so too do the working constructs and hierarchies of oppression; oppression does not merely exist on the basis of “race only” or “class only” stipulations.

The term itself was developed out of the critical race theory of Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw’s theory deals extensively with analyzing how gender and race intersect in the case of black women only to produce a double dose of disenfranchisement—one dose due to gender and the other due to race. The significance of utilizing intersectionality in exploring what Crenshaw calls “identity politics” is that examiners of society’s oppressive institutions get right to the heart of the matter. There is an awareness that comes with realizing that “the dimension of...domination that has been [the] most vexing...has not been the social categorization...but, rather, the myriad ways in which those of us so defined have been systematically subordinated.”³ It is important to note that the suggestion here is not to rid ourselves of categorical thinking, but instead to better assess the “values attached to [social constructs] and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies.”⁴ Simply put: “intersectionality might be more broadly useful as a way of mediating the tension between assertions of multiple identity and the ongoing necessity of group politics.”⁵ The challenge here is to first become cognizant of the confines of societal and systemic oppression and then to draw attention to the social institutions that manifest various forms of that recurring oppression. For one must first become conscious of the dilemma before becoming compelled to move towards a resolution.

All of this in the case of the black gay man illuminates the complexity of the environment that houses that identity. There are three basic elements of self identification that intermingle

² Interseksjonalitet. Civis. 25 Jul. 2012. <<http://www.interseksjonalitet.org>>

³ Crenshaw, Kimberlé, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,” The Feminist Philosophy Reader. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. P. 299

⁴ Ibid, p. 298

⁵ Ibid, p. 297

here—gender, race, and sexuality. Each of these elements is existent on their own and has their own set of distinctive markers. However, the distinction of each individual element blurs when it develops in the presence of the other self identification components. All of them merge together to develop into one complete entity. The relationship between the individual factors and the product of their coming together is similar to a chemical reaction of chemical elements in a molecule. Each identification component is a single element with distinctive characteristics. All of these elements are combined with one another via the chemical reaction, and the yielded product is that of an entirely novel molecule with its own set of distinctive characteristics. The molecule is made up of multiple parts, but it is existent with the multiple components fused into one another similar to an entire identity and its many dimensions. Let us be clear that there is no equal level of influence, rather, there are varying degrees in which each identification component exerts influence on the whole and at varying times. Additionally, let us also be aware that the concern is not the end product of the whole identity, yet our concern is with the intersections where aspects of identity cross one another. So here we are concerned with how gender complicates race and sexuality, how race complicates gender and sexuality, and how sexuality complicates race and gender; the gaze of examination is pointed towards the intersections that create relationships between these identity aspects.

The Dilemma of Gender, Race, and Sexuality

In looking at cases of intersectionality, curiosity has been particularly intrigued by the intersections of gender, race, and sexuality as they relate to the identity of the homosexual black man. The intersectionality of the black gay man's identity is one that is controversial in that it questions the limitations of traditional ideas of gender, race, and sexuality within the black

community. Once again, each part of which a person identifies their self to be is made more particular through the relationship with other self identification components. Hence, the experience of self identifying as black does not develop independently of the experience of self identifying as homosexual or as self identifying a man. They are all further complicated by one another just as life is complicated by gender and gender is in turn further complicated by race or socioeconomic status.

The main point of inquiry at the outset of this project is why the existence of the black gay man spurs so much contention in attempting to reconcile the identities of blackness and homosexuality. The black gay man is a representation of how three components of self identification within the black experience mix and give birth to an identity that is the antithesis of what many traditionally picture as the black man. More intriguing than this are the perpetrators of conflict. In the case of a white gay man, immediate perpetrators are members of the white community. For the black gay man, immediate perpetrators are both the white and black community; whites due to racial tension and blacks due to tensions of both race and sexual orientation. To further complicate the situation, the black gay man must also be wary of other black gay men on account of race and forms of sexism. So here it is clear that what causes the elements of gender, race, and sexuality to intersect is that the black gay man can potentially be confronted with discrimination on account of all three fronts. Before moving on and delving into the intersectional relationship between these three identification components, let us first dwell a bit on each of them separately.

On the subject of gender, first it is imperative to note that the gender dichotomy that has come to govern the modern black American community was first the gender dichotomy of the white American man. Let us remember correctly that the black man's ancestor was the African

man and no African man was native to the cultural ideals and perceptions of Western European white society prior to the era of slavery and the slave trade. “Transplanted African men...had imposed on them the white colonizer’s notions of manhood and masculinity”⁶ and these notions and ideas of manhood and masculinity eventually became the standard against which African slaves, and later black Americans, would judge their own personal ideas about manhood and masculinity. The white American ideal of manhood was one that was centered on the relationships of patriarchy. The ideal of masculinity was the evidence in behavior and personality that manhood was manifesting within a boy. This materialization of values would transform the boy into a man who would become the sole provider and protector of the family unit. The man became the symbol of superiority, strength, respect, and rationale while the woman became the opposing symbol of inferiority, weakness, no esteem, and irrationality. So if the black slave was being forced to assimilate into mainstream society, it was expected of him to behave accordingly. However, due to the circumstance of race and racial prejudice, the black man was constantly emasculated by white society. Continuous emasculation resulted in the inability to construct a satisfactory image of manhood within which the black man could invest his pride. White society was giving him the standards on which to develop his masculinity, but any opportunities that yielded successful results were taken away. As a replacement, white society created an ideal of what they perceived to be the ideals of black manhood and masculinity and fashioned stereotypes to be the visuals of those ideals. What modern society perceives today as the “stereotypical black man” may not in fact be the exact same, but the baseline principles have stood the test of time. Existing within modern society is the outcome of those perceptions and they continue to be incessantly perpetuated.

⁶hooks, bell, “Reconstructing Black Masculinity,” The Feminist Philosophy Reader. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. P. 109

The issue here is not that the black man took on the white man's ideas of manhood and masculinity. The problem is that the black man never had any say so in fashioning his own idea of what manhood and masculinity meant to him. Thus we have the never ending battle between aspiring to the false ideas of stereotypes about black masculinity and recognizing the creative license in allowing black masculinity to reflect black men in an authentic way. What this means for the black gay man is that his manhood is questioned first on the basis of race, but also on the basis that his development of traditional ideals of masculinity are taking shape in another form. The black gay man can be physically masculine in that he appears to be the strong, physically fit black body that society expects him to be. However, the black gay man does not appear to be speaking the mental and behavioral language of masculinity. Mental and behavioral masculinity as far as the black man is concerned is geared towards becoming "a man's man—phallogentric, patriarchal," and revered in the way that those around him "respect him...[are] in awe of him...[are] afraid of his power, his physical prowess...and his rare unpredictable but intense rage."⁷ The black gay man is not perceived as possessing the qualities of a barbaric and primitive being and therefore is considered not to be a man, but neither do all heterosexual black men exhibit these traits. A double standard exists here. Without the added dimension of sexual orientation there would no stipulation upon which the double standard would exist. The double standard has lead to the creation of a false idea of what it means to be a black man. Here we must realize that part of the issue between the identity of the black gay man and that of the identity of the black community at large boils down to both the internal and external perceptions of identity.

The subject of race is no light matter when speaking of it in regards to the black community. Much of what is publicly known about the black American racial situation deals

⁷Ibid, p. 108

with the racial dichotomy between white and black Americans. There is a profound amount of information and scholarship that discusses in depth the history of racial tensions between whites and blacks; therefore, we will not belabor the subject any longer. Yet, an important piece to the discourse on homosexuality and blackness is the internal issue of race and how the modern black identity has been characterized by various ideas of what it means to be black. The black community at large has an idea of what it means to be black so anything that does not fall under the umbrella of “traditionally black” leads the community to divide itself employing the “us-them” attitude.

Blackness is a difficult thing to quantify, yet there still seems to be some overall agreement in what constitutes a black person. A black person at best is, first, one who racially identifies as black American and two, one who identifies with the history and culture of that racial profile. Just because a person *looks* black or appears to have a *deep skin tone* does not make that person black; there is a such thing as deep toned Hispanics and Latinos, and the difference between a black American and an African/African-American is one that is paramount and goes past appearances. So with this said it is not fair to simply assume and lump all those that appear to be black together in one category for there is a great risk in losing the distinction of various groups and their identity. The importance in understanding blackness and how both the black individual and community perceive it is key to comprehending the disconnect between homosexuality and the black identity.

Here in the city of Memphis blackness is considered to mean many things to many people. Contained in this predominantly black metropolitan area, there varying forms of blackness that one not familiar with the city should be aware of. Black is the poor and disenfranchised, but black is also the lower, middle, and upper middle class. In some cases, black

is even the elite of the city. However, what black is not is deliberately and openly gay...at least that is what they say. Black is not effeminate, it is not weak, and it is not inferior, and many feel that black homosexuals are exactly that. As a consequence, they are not considered to be black. It is here that the internal racial dichotomy is drawn to give way to the “us = black” and “them = non-black” attitude despite the fact that the external community of other races will see them as the same. There is a removal of the black homosexual man out of the black community and out of the larger black experience because what the black homosexual man supposedly represents is the antithesis of what black is perceived to be. There is a logical fallacy at fault here. The fallacy lies in the fact that the idea of identity rests primarily on the internalization of inaccurate stereotypes of what it means to be both black and what it means to be black *and* homosexual.

Society says that the black American can be reduced simply to her/his black body and what the body alone is capable of achieving. Blacks also possess a meek and disheveled demeanor. This means that the black American has strength and power and intelligence only as these traits relate to the physical uses of the body. However, a black person remains mentally submissive and unaware of the social confines of social constructs and institutions. Society also says that the black gay man is an intense clubber who is extremely flamboyant and feminine; he can play the role as a black gay man or the role as a black woman, but never really a black man. He too is reduced to the physicality of his body in the biological sense that he is male, but not the sociological sense that he is a man. The black community at large knows that neither of these stereotypes is generally true, yet these stereotypes are still used to set the standard of what it means to be black in America. The identity of blackness for the black gay man is constantly called into question by both black heterosexuals as well as black homosexuals, and as a consequence race plays an influential role in how the identity is molded.

Last is the component of sexuality. There is a profound correlation between the perception of the black gay man's sexuality and the perception of the black woman's sexuality. Because black gay men are not genuinely considered to be men, they cannot possess the sexuality of a heterosexual black man. The result is that the truth about the experience of the black gay man's sexuality goes undocumented and remains hidden to society and even to black gay men themselves. The same is true in the case of black women, heterosexual and homosexual alike. The black woman is already objectified on the basis of gender, but is further objectified when the narrative of her sexuality is documented not by her but by those that oppress her. Feminist theorist Eveleynn Hammond's article, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," talks extensively about how "the construction of the black female as the embodiment of sex" is "everything that is not white."⁸ This juxtaposition against the sexuality of the white female creates an image of how the "always already colonized black female body has so much sexual potential that it has none at all."⁹ The same is true for the black gay man. His sexuality is everything that the white gay man's sexuality is not. He is the champion of promiscuity and the know-it-all when it comes to operating relationships in the manner of the "playa". To some extent this might ring true, but the overwhelming majority of black gay men do not live lives outlined by the stereotype.

The way that Hammond resolves to explain why the black female's sexuality has remained for the most part unchanged due to what she calls the "politics of silence" and a denial of sexuality. Much of this is seen also within the gay black male population and within the black community at large. There is an understood code of silence that there will be no dialogue about sexuality. If no one talks about it, then there is no risk of incriminating ourselves and all of the

⁸Hammond, Eveleynn, "Toward a Genealogy of Black Female Sexuality: The Problematic of Silence," The Feminist Philosophy Reader. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. P. 250

⁹Ibid, p. 250

negative images will fade away. The “politics of silence” are problematic in that opting for the code of silence eventually turns into an inability to express any idea of sexuality¹⁰, and this leads to society creating its own notions of what it thinks black sexuality is about. If the gay black male population intends on writing their own narrative about their sexuality and combat the currently staunch standing of black heteronormativity, they must first break their silence and begin to document their truth about their sexuality. Change only happens by way of exposure, enlightenment, and education.

The dilemma of gender, race, and sexuality within the black community is one that is complex and has many layers. The quest to improve the battle of identity acknowledgement, reconciliation, and appreciation will first come with comprehending how all three of these identity components lend themselves to oppressive praxis. The goal here is to take note how each factor influences the other. This is not a task to be done just by the black community at large. The job also falls within the responsibility of black gay men; the road to freedom is a two way street. While we may have uncovered the intersectionality of the traditional ideas of gender, race, and sexuality, there is still the paramount subject of black masculinity and the role that it plays in preventing the identity reconciliation of homosexuality and blackness.

Black Masculinity: “The H.N.I.C.”

The idea of the H.N.I.C., or head nigga in charge¹¹, has been around for decades by that name, but scores more by the principle. When a black man makes the statement that he is the H.N.I.C., he is referring to the traditional ideals and values of black manhood and masculinity. The image of the H.N.I.C. circulates constantly in more forms than one.

¹⁰ibid, p. 253

¹¹*Lean on Me*. Dir. John Avildsen. Warner Bros., 1989.

Before us we have the hardcore, no bullshit black man who is thought to be a “man’s man”. He embodies the characteristics of being personable, responsible, and trustworthy, but from his vantage point the world is a warzone where he is the warrior and white supremacy is the opponent. Then there is the fast talking, gangsta walking rapper who knows how to play the system to get what he feels he deserves. A witty intelligence and amazing ability to entertain he possesses, yet he is still haunted by the stigmatization of being a black man in America. We have all but forgotten the quiet, loving, yet stern father who provides and protects his family. An image produced in the good times of the 1950s, he is a face of the American Dream and is satisfied to live like the rest of society not questioning but simply doing as he is told. There are many more stereotypical images of the black man in addition to the examples given above. Yet, no matter how many times you change the dressing there will always remain the common denominator of a man that finds his pride in his strength and his strength in his pride. He is the H.N.I.C.

Southern black masculinity is a hyperbolized form of southern white masculinity. As noted before, the ideals of manhood and masculinity of the modern black community were developed out of exposure to the traditional ideals of manhood and masculinity of white Americans. The foundations of this idea of masculinity are phallocentrism and the hierarchal structure of patriarchy. Everything revolves around the man, and the man is the guardian over everyone and everything; anything else is secondary in power and a commodity by nature. The complex ideal of black masculinity is a force thwarting harmony amongst the identities of homosexuality and blackness. To be a black man one must be strong physically and mentally capable of making rational decisions. He is heterosexual and religious and does not dare dabble

in the devil's play of homosexuality. The southern black man is to know his place in society and not question why it is so. He supports the status quo, and anything that deviates is not black.

The line of logic above may have worked to the benefit of both men and women to some extent at one point in time, but in today's society it is obsolete. The status of gender roles have shifted dramatically and will continue to do so. As a result, the definition of what it means to have femininity and masculinity have also changed. Cultural modification must take place affecting a shift in defining what it means to be a black man and a black woman. I understand that not all black people are stuck in the idealism of the 1950s. I also understand that black masculinity has not been completely left behind by time and the demands of society. However, while blacks individually may not hold to traditional ideals of black manhood and masculinity, the community as a whole still maintains these standards. The issue of reconciling novel ideas about gender, race, and sexuality is relevant, and prevalent, because those traditional ideas of black masculinity still have a presence in the development of the community identity.

Even more interesting is that this ideal of black masculinity is not acting solely to divide black heterosexual men from black homosexual men. This force is also affecting a division amongst black homosexual men themselves. During one of my interviews, the topic of black masculinity showed itself to be a source of serious divisions. Even amongst the black gay male population, there is a competition to be more masculine than another. The stereotype of the black gay man is one of a highly feminized gay man, and those that fall under this identity are fighting a battle to not fit the stereotype. This in turn has created a culture of "anti-femmes". No one wants to be, nor be associated with, another black gay man who is considered to be femme because he is not a portrayal of robust black masculinity. This insight from the interviewee exposed me to how much of a cornerstone black masculinity is to the black experience. Black

masculinity influences black men regardless of sexual orientation and black women regardless of sexual orientation. Because it is the standard by which people judge what is masculine and what is feminine, every black person will construct their image of the ideal partner based on the idea of black masculinity.

It is impossible for the black gay male to be considered a man by these standards. The black gay man is the representation of what weak men turn into. But, by the essence of his existence and the nature of his identity, the black gay man does not fit into the rigid confines of black masculinity. The most obvious reason why he does not fit is because of his sexuality. The black gay man is a homosexual, and because of this everything else falls to the way side. The opposite of masculine is feminine. In traditional thought, masculine is superior and feminine is inferior. This is the identity battle that the black gay man is fighting; he is caught in between the opposing forces of masculinity and femininity.

During the research portion of my project, I interviewed a young, black gay male who was persistent in getting me to recognize the implications of certain jargon used to describe the black LGBTQ community. The one that sticks out to me the most is his clarification of the meaning of homophobia and the reality of homonegativity. For this young man, the better word to describe unpleasant feelings for those of the LGBTQ community is homonegativity because this word encapsulates the negative reactions experienced by most. I asked a question inquiring about whether or not he thought that homophobia in the black community took on more of a role of a defense. In essence his reply was yes, but he made a point to stress to me that what many view as homophobia he, in reality, experiences homonegativity. According to his understanding, homophobia meant that someone had a severe fear of homosexuals whereas homonegativity describes the negative responses aimed towards homosexuals through thoughts, actions,

behavior, and speech. I have to admit that much of homophobia is homonegativity, but only as it manifests itself in the physical reactions between homosexuals and anti-homosexual people.

However, there is a serious fear of the homosexual and what he represents that manifests itself in the mentality of people. Homophobia is real and it comes across in the way people think.

This homophobia is based on the fear of losing the customary gender binary of heterosexual male and heterosexual female. Losing the current gender binary will result in losing the benefits of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and every other social construct that is in place to divide and conquer so that the status quo of a privileged few remains intact. What is interesting is that in the context of black patriarchy, there exists the thought that equality with the white man is possible. This idealistic perception of equality with the white man is based in fallacy. Within the given context of the modern set up of social oppression, the black man cannot be made equal to the white man because there are still measures in place to guard against that happening.

“From cradle to grave, much of America drilled into Black men the thought that that are less than men. This made many Black men believe and accept the gender propaganda that the only real men in American society were white men. In a vain attempt to recapture their denied masculinity, many Black men mirrored America’s traditional fear and hatred of homosexuality. They swallowed whole the phony and perverse John Wayne definition of manhood, that real men talked and acted tough, shed no tears, and never showed their emotions. These were the prized strengths of manhood. When men broke the prescribed male code of conduct and showed their feelings, they were harangued as weakling and their manhood questioned.”¹²

The above excerpt is from Earl Hutchinson’s work, “My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem,” and in this piece Hutchinson gives a well argued explanation of how much of the anti-gay sentiment of black men, and the larger black community, does nothing in terms of rising in the ranks of the social ladder. He remarks that “black gay bashing will win no brownie points with conservative [whites] and will certainly not make them any more sympathetic to Black

¹² Hutchinson, Earl, “My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem,” The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities. Delroy Constantine-Simms. Los Angeles: Alyson Publications, 2000. P. 3

causes.”¹³ There is much truth in this, and only when the black community at large learns that the presence of homosexuality, in fact does not detract from the external perception of black masculinity, can effective measures be taken to change the false ideas of black masculinity and preserve the overall black identity.

The reconciliation between homosexuality and blackness can happen when it is truly understood that what really leads to the emasculation of a man is his losing of his ability to call himself a man. There are many different definitions and concepts of what manhood and masculinity look like. They both are qualities that cannot necessarily be measured and are dependent upon the person for definition and significance. The current ideal of black masculinity is an ideal that is nonexistent in both mental and physical capacities. People will be people, but they will never be perfect. So instead of striving for a standard of perfection that was given to the black community, the objective should be to take back the license of creativity and define manhood and masculinity the way that black men see fit regardless of sexuality and sexual orientation.

The Resolution for Reconciliation

The aim of this discourse was to discuss in detail the hindrances of black masculinity and what they mean in regards to the intersectionality of gender, race, and sexuality within the black community. It is worth noting that not all black gay men experience trouble with their identity in the same ways or even at all for that matter. However, the lack of presence in leadership and involvement and the development of resources made by and for the black homosexual speak to the fact that the black LGBTQ community is still suffering from some deficiency in support. As

¹³ibid, p. 5.

the visibility of the black LGBTQ community increases, it is increasingly important to have discussions about points of identity such as gender, race, and sexuality.

A few points about the philosophical gain: The benefit in having a dialogue about how points of identity intersect with one another is that it illuminates how factors in our lives influence one another. There is also the benefit in becoming more conscious of the confines of society and the social constructs of society. So despite the fact that each human being exists independently of others, we are all affected by the many social institutions of our world. No one can escape them, and everyone experiences them. Therefore, we must become conscious of our mental processes, the thoughts that we think, and the behavior that becomes habit for it all is a result of the world in which we reside. No two people are alike. Indeed, many people have similarities, but there is always a point where we separate and become our own person. It is those points that make a world of difference, and it is those points, those intersections, that we must actively resolve to acknowledge and understand. In resolving to comprehend these intersections, the activism within society can become more effective activism. It will no longer be the activism that hides behind the face of the masses only to yield results for a few. Rather it will be activism of the masses mad by and for the masses.

In the case of individual identities of the black community, there must first be an acknowledgement of the common denominator of race. No matter how much effort is put into attempting to distinguish a single person from the whole, those that stand on the outside looking in will only see what they assume the person to be—black. Instead of working against one another, the goal should be to understand how the many divisions established maintain the regularities of the status quo. Acknowledge the differences but understand that “the master’s

tools will never dismantle the master's house.”¹⁴ The most effective way to do this is to combat the many stigmas associated with various identities and people. For example, the stigma of HIV/AIDS is one that is working to the detriment of the black community. It is public knowledge that black homosexual and bisexual men as well as black women in general are target communities. So instead of treating these people as if they are lepers, there must be some stand of commitment to not only helping those infected but also to talking about the issues that perpetuate high rates of diagnosis. The battle against labels and stigmas will be a difficult one to combat, but it is a necessary victory in order to win the war. The black community must therefore resolve to make changes in how it approaches issues like gender, race, and sexuality or risk the chance of losing its identity. For being left behind is a sure way to being forgotten.

¹⁴Lourde, Audrey, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” The Feminist Philosophy Reader. Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. P. 49