

1-1-2004

Sorting It All Out: Book Review of Delroy Constantine-Simms's *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*

Anne W. Gathuo

University of Massachusetts Boston

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), and the [Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gathuo, Anne W. (2004) "Sorting It All Out: Book Review of Delroy Constantine-Simms's *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 16: Iss. 1, Article 6.

Available at: http://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol16/iss1/6

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the William Monroe Trotter Institute at ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. It has been accepted for inclusion in Trotter Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at UMass Boston. For more information, please contact library.uasc@umb.edu.

Sorting It All Out: *Book*

Review of Delroy Constantine-Simms's The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities

Anne W. Gathuo, Ph.D.

With contributors from an impressive array of scholars and journalists, The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities, edited by Delroy Constantine-Simms, attempts to tackle a wide variety of issues pertaining to homosexuality in Black communities in various parts of the world. While the book cannot claim to have satisfactorily explained all the issues, a fair attempt has been made. Certainly the book succeeds in illustrating the complexity of Black homosexuality.

This book is a collection of essays, reviews of articles and analyses of various forms of work including literary arts, performing arts, fine art and sculpture about homosexuals or produced by publicly declared homosexuals. The book covers a wide range of topics grouped into categories including: negotiating the racial politics of Black sexual identity; sexuality and the Black church; homosexuality in Africa; homosexuality and heterosexist dress codes; iconic signifiers of the gay Harlem Renaissance; heterosexism and homophobia in popular Black music; homosexuality in popular Black literature, and the silent mythology surrounding AIDS and public icons.

The essays themselves range from simple first-hand accounts such as Hutchison's article "My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem," in

which the author examines his reasons for having been homophobic, to journalistic observations like Toure's "Hip Hop Closet," where he talks about hip hop's connection to homosexuality, to academic analyses of various works. Most of the authors are academics while a few are journalists in popular media. The foreword is written by Henry Louis Gates Jr.

The book is dominated by essays that have a positive slant on the homosexual lifestyle. In his introduction, Constantine-Simms points out that this was not accidental – invitations to people who have opposed homosexuality were turned down. This was not surprising to me although it is still mysterious why this is so. (In putting together this issue of the *Trotter Review* it was very difficult to secure interviews with individuals who had publicly opposed gay marriage while it was relatively easy to secure interviews with those not opposed to the lifestyle.) Is it that, while being opposed to homosexuality, they do not have enough conviction to articulate a coherent argument in defense of their stand? Do they perhaps, while being opposed to homosexuality and gay marriage, believe that those are not such "big problems" so that they are opposed in principle but remain ambivalent as far as taking practical action to counter the lifestyle? Or could it be that they find it demeaning to pay attention to a small community that is already getting more attention than it deserves?

Intellectuals who speak for the Black community speak as if homosexuals are not part of the Black community

Might academics opposed to homosexuality be concerned about being politically correct since being perceived otherwise might hinder their progress in academia? Any one or all of these reasons might explain the inability to obtain views from those opposed to the homosexual lifestyle.

Analyses, Accusations and Explanations

Essays in this book take on three distinctive tones: analytic, explanatory and accusatory. Most essays are analytic, exploring the phenomenon of Black homosexuality from different perspectives. Most of the essays categorized under the heading of racial politics and Black sexual identity are analytic and accusatory, pointing fingers at various groups for their discrimination against gay people. Gregory Conerly in “Are You Black First Or Are You Queer,” examines the intersectionality of being Black and homosexual. He asserts that Black gays have to choose between identifying as gay Blacks (afrocentrists) or Black gays (interracialists). He points accusatory fingers at both the Black community for not accepting Black gays and allowing them to participate fully in the Black culture (sexual orientation discrimination), and the White gay community for not accepting Black gays as equals (racial discrimination). Similarly, in “Can the Queen Speak?” Dwight A. McBride accuses Black intellectuals of not being inclusive, asserting that these intellectuals, who have taken it upon themselves to speak for the Black community, talk about “homophobia in the Black community” as if homosexuals are not part of the Black Community. At the same time, he feels that the voices of Black gay intellectuals have been silenced. Historians too, he asserts, have been complicit in keeping Black homosexuality invisible. In South Africa, Vasu Reddy tells the same tale – White gays oppressed all Blacks, both gay and straight. In the epilogue entitled “Coming Home,” Conrad Pegues also points out that when Black gays are forced to choose between which to identify with, the Black community or the gay community, their oppression is in the fact that they are able to express only half of themselves. Despite the accusatory tone of these articles, most of the authors express hope that a solution can be found that the Black community is capable of being more embracing of Black gays and allowing them to fully participate in Black community life.

Essays on HIV/AIDS also have a distinctive accusatory tone as authors blame the media and historians for their social construction of

HIV/AIDS. In "Eloquence and Epitaph," Philip Brian Harper discusses the reaction to the death of TV personality Max Robinson in 1988. Robinson died of AIDS and the media went out of its way, according to Harper, to prove that he did not contract AIDS from homosexual behavior. In so doing, Harper asserts, the media not only missed the opportunity to educate people of color about HIV/AIDS, it misinformed people about the ways HIV/AIDS is spread. Similarly, Cheryl L. Cole, in "Containing AIDS," points out that when Magic Johnson claimed that he had acquired HIV through heterosexual sex, he was applauded. Cole says that this should be seen as a homophobic display by the media and others and asserts that blaming women and homosexuals as the threats to family and trying to show that AIDS can be contained if one keeps sex inside the family, shows the government's failure to address AIDS as well as "the racism, sexism, and homophobia of science" (p. 435).

Those essays whose authors have written from a personal perspective have an explanatory tone as the authors attempt to explain where they see themselves fitting in as gay or straight people interacting with gay people. In "My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem," Earl O'Fari Hutchison, examines his homophobic attitude that became apparent when he got into a conversation with a gay man who suggested that they go jogging together. Hutchison *explains* his homophobia in terms of his socialization: Black men in America have had it drilled into them that White men are the real men and therefore homosexuality challenges the fragile masculinity of Black men. He further asserts that this may be the reason why Black lesbians do not experience the same negativity as Black homosexual men. Whether or not lesbians are more accepted than gay men is of course debatable. Certainly, bell hooks in "Homophobia in Black Communities," thinks lesbians are more vilified than male homosexuals.

Gloria Wekker's article entitled "Mati-ism and Black Lesbianism," presents the voices of two African-American women poets, Astrid Roemer and Audre Lorde, as they explain their use of the term "lesbian" on themselves. Roemer refuses to call herself a lesbian because

she feels that “life is too complex for us to give names not derived from us [Blacks], dirty, conditioned words, to the deepest feelings within me,” (p. 156). Thus she sees the word “lesbian” as both foreign and debasing to the individual. Roemer insists that she loves one woman, a particular woman, and there is no way of telling whether in future she might not love a man. Lorde, on the other hand, insists that calling herself a lesbian gives her strength because it challenges the “patriarchate.” She illustrates the complexity of the issue by acknowledging that while admitting to being a “lesbian” gives her strength, it also makes her vulnerable.

All the essays categorized under the heading “Homosexuality in Africa,” are used to *justify* homosexuality in African-American societies. The authors of articles in this category challenge the idea that homosexuality is a learned lifestyle (the nurture vs. nature argument) acquired from African-American’s assimilation into White culture, by demonstrating the existence of homosexuality in pre-colonial Africa.

Several themes about Black homosexuality emerge from the articles in this book. The themes include: 1) racial oppression vs. oppression of homosexuals; 2) the use of homosexuals as scapegoats for societal problems; 3) the economic exploitation of Black homosexuals, and the economic implications of the homosexual lifestyle for Black people; 4) the alternative expressions of homosexuality among Black people; and, 5) explaining the “down low” among Black men.

Racial oppression vs. oppression of homosexuals

In the foreword, Henry Louis Gates attempts to sort out the arguments that have been brought forth particularly in comparing the oppression of Blacks and that of gays. Gates argues that the fear of gays is comparable to anti-Semitism where people have the notion that a small minority “commands disproportionate

Gay people need not cross-dress or go to gay clubs for other people to have an idea that they might be gay

and sinister worldly influence,” (p. XII). According to Gates, much of Black suffering stems from historical racism while much of gay suffering stems from contemporary hatred. Gates maintains that trying to compare the oppression of Blacks and gays is a futile exercise – there is no way to measure how much oppression gays or Blacks experience since the oppression happens in different ways; reactions to gay and Black oppressions elicit different societal responses, and in any event, regardless of whether gay people can claim victim status the way Black people do is irrelevant in that like every citizen, gay people must be accorded equal protection under the law. In other words, Gates’s stand is that it is complicated as well as irrelevant to compare separate forms of oppression.

In “Homophobia in Black Communities,” bell hooks also tackles the issue of oppression. She challenges the notion that “the Black community” is homophobic. She argues that while Black people express homophobic attitudes more openly, White people are silent but have the power, and use it to oppress gay people through the denial of employment, housing etc. In other words, accusing Black people of being homophobic is yet another piling of flaws on Blacks – hooks states that the greatest threat to gay rights does not reside in Black communities. Like Gates, hooks sees no sense in the competition over which group is more oppressed – both gay people and Blacks are oppressed but the oppression is different. The difference between Gates and hooks is that Gates acknowledges that “contemporary homophobia is more virulent than contemporary racism,” (p. XIV) – it is easier to get physically attacked for being gay for example than for being Black. hooks on the other hand asserts that gay people, unlike Black people can hide their gayness. Her argument is that gay people can avoid going to obvious gay places like gay bars where most gay bashing happens but Black people can do nothing to hide their Blackness and avoid being attacked. hooks’s argument is simplistic in that she fails to see the internal oppression associated with the inability, for gay people, to associate with whomever and wherever they choose. Secondly, some

people cannot always “hide” their gayness – with more openness and familiarity with the gay lifestyle and gay people, a gay person need not cross-dress or go to a gay club in order for people to suspect that he/she is gay. Indeed, the term “gaydar” implies the inability of gay people to hide their gayness.

Scapegoats

In comparison to prostitution (involving heterosexuals) and promiscuity, is homosexuality a greater taboo? Constantine-Simms in “Is Homosexuality the Greatest Taboo,” argues that, while people have readily seized biblical verses that condemn homosexuality, they have chosen to ignore other biblically forbidden sexual taboos, thus using gay people as scapegoats for all sexual ills. This sentiment of gays as scapegoats for society’s ills is prevalent through the book. In “Their Own Received Them Not,” Horace Griffin points out that there is a tendency to attribute problems of heterosexuals to gays: the physical and sexual abuse of children; rape; violence against women; murder; drive-by shootings; drugs. This scapegoating of gays diverts from seeking solutions to these societal problems. Similarly, according Reddy, African presidents have been very vocal in condemning homosexuality. Like Lorde, he feels that homosexuality challenges the patriarchy and that the African presidents’ condemnation of homosexuality has more to do with the fear of patriarchal myths being challenged than with their fear of homosexuality per se. Obviously, homosexuality is probably the least of problems that leaders in African countries plagued with all kinds of ills should be overly concerned about, just like leaders in African-American communities.

Apart from blaming societal ills on homosexuality, a more direct attack on gay men is the fairly recent trend of blaming the rising AIDS cases among Black women on gay (“down low”) men. In “Envisioning Lives,” Craig Seymour points out that AIDS is also transmitted through heterosexual sex and intravenous drug use, a fact usually ignored when talking about AIDS among Black women. Yet as both Harper and Cole

point out in their pieces about the social construction of AIDS, when it is convenient to do so, there is an overarching attempt to demonstrate that prominent individuals got HIV/AIDS from heterosexual sex.

The general sentiment in the book seems to be that there is an unsaid rule, "Blame it on the gay people" whenever the Black community faces problems it cannot or does not want to explain.

The economics of homosexuality

There are several economic implications of Black homosexuality discussed in the book: 1) Blacks who are economically well-off such as successful musicians and other artists are able to lead an openly gay lifestyle; 2) Black homosexuals have been economically exploited by both Black and White institutions; 3) the "down low" syndrome has as much to do with protection of one's livelihood as it does with preserving social acceptance and avoiding being ostracized by the community. In analyzing the work and lives of various artists, Seth Clark Silberman in "Lighting the Harlem Renaissance *Afire!!*," Margaret Rose Vendryes in "The lives of Richmond Barthe," and Kennette Crockett in "Bessie Smith," all point out that the artists led flamboyant openly gay lifestyles. They were rich and could afford to do whatever they desired. In these cases, the authors equate sexual freedom with economic freedom. The authors imply that economic deprivation among Blacks prevent them from either leading a homosexual lifestyle or being open about it. Successful artists too, according to the authors, are too important artistically, to be discarded. That is, they are tolerated despite their homosexuality because the heterosexual community enjoys their art. The exploitation of gay people comes in different forms and is perpetuated by both Blacks and Whites. Some authors in this book suggest that lack of acceptance of gay Blacks within the Black community leads to their exploitation by the White community. In "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark," E. Patrick Johnson asserts that gay people participate in the activities of the Black church, particularly in music, and are welcomed in

the churches because of their talents, while being denied full expression of their sexuality. Indeed, gay people in Black churches have to sit through sermons condemning homosexuality. (There is a consensus among authors that the Black church is a contributor to the apparent homophobia in Black communities.) Such gay people, Johnson continues, are forced to find their fulfillment in gay nightclubs. In "Any Love," Jason King alludes to singer Luther Vandross's suspected homosexuality and states that the artist is too valuable to be discarded and therefore people make him what they want him to be: applying his music in heterosexual situations even though the music might be an expression of the artist's homosexual nature.

*Black gay artists rely on
White audiences*

An interesting observation by most of the authors in the book is that many Black gay artists' work tends to be patronized by White people and the artists themselves move in mainly White circles. It would appear that, having not been accepted in their own communities, Black gay artists seek out White audiences and associate with them because they are the source of their livelihood. In these White circles, Black gay artists still suffer discrimination. Thus it would appear that the Black community loses: it fails to enjoy the talents of its own people while allowing the people to be exploited by the White community. A more direct form of exploitation of gay people is exemplified in Anthony Thomas's "The House the Kids Built," where the author asserts that disco originated from Black gay clubs but was appropriated by White gay clubs and eventually made mainstream through recording.

The "down low" syndrome among Black homosexuals is explained by several authors as a defense against the loss of livelihood as much as it is a self-protection of Black gays against being ostracized by their community. In Laura Jamison's "A Feisty Female Rapper..." the female rapper who talks about snatching a girl from her boyfriend remains cagey about her sexuality, talking about the possible discrimination she would suffer if she were indeed gay and were to

come out. She references the actress Ellen [Degeneres] to emphasize how much easier it is for a White person to come out. For a Black woman, she would have three strikes against her – as a woman, a Black and a lesbian.

Alternative expressions of homosexuality among Black people

Several authors have brought out an interesting phenomenon: how Black homosexuals express their sexuality in a way that is acceptable to their communities, or in ways that enable them to earn a living. Not everybody, however, would agree with some of the assertions by some authors who seem to see homosexuality in the most unlikely places. Some people might even dismiss the assertions as ridiculous and offensive. In “Safety Among Strangers,” Townsend Price-Spratlen sees the Million Man March as a sharing in the diverse unity of Black men that was inherently homoerotic, which he defines as “same sex, passion-centered longing for change,” (p. 48). In “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark,” Johnson equates the spiritual experience in the Black church to a sexual experience that only heterosexuals are allowed to partake. Unable to experience this sexual experience, gay Blacks must seek alternative avenues of expression such as gay nightclubs. In Wekker’s article, Astrid Roemer points out that loving other women is not necessarily sexual – it is mainly about a deeper connection, a fellowship with other women who understand each other’s struggles, i.e. Black women feeling a kinship with each other. In “How RuPaul Works,” Silberman discusses the work of drag queen RuPaul and explains that the artiste’s successful crossover to the mainstream stems from his acting as the stereotypical Black mother who takes care, as a servant, of White families and makes their lives better. In other words, the way RuPaul expresses his drag queen act is by adopting the heterosexual manifestation of the Black woman. In so doing RuPaul is able to make a living while expressing his art and sexuality. Similarly, King, who discusses the work of singer Luther Vandross, implies that Vandross expresses his (homo)sexuality by reconstructing the R&B scene

as a soft sentimental romantic place. Toure, in "Hip Hop's Closet," contends that "hip hop is a very public celebration of intense Black male-to-Black male love," (p. 316). According to Toure, the lack of male influences in hip hop's youth at home make them look for male love among their peers. Survival too plays a part – in the rough streets, brothers must stay together to survive – and these bonds exclude females. This is similar to Roemer's argument about lesbianism among Black women.

Defending the "down low" syndrome and the refusal to "come out"

In several articles in the book, Black homosexuals have been quoted as, at best, explaining away the "down low" syndrome, and at worst, defending it. In his analysis of artiste Bruce Nugent's lifestyle, Silberman further explicates the complexity of homosexuality and race, and illustrates the difference, in meaning, of "coming out" for Black homosexuals. In 1930s Harlem, the term gays and lesbians was only used for Whites. Nugent maintains that people were free to do and did what they wanted to do; they just did not broadcast it. There was no closet according to Nugent. This would imply that having no closet negated the need to "come out." Men on the "down low" today use the same argument, which essentially amounts to denial. In "Secret lives," an article that appeared in *Essence* magazine in July 2004, four gay men discuss their lives on the "down low." One of the men, Dre', says that if you keep it to yourself, you're not really in the closet. "...if you're a bisexual brother, and for one period of time you're dealing with males and then you go back to dealing with females, but you're not in a serious monogamous relationship, I believe you should just keep it to yourself." (p. 160). Another participant, Edward, feels the same way: "...If a woman asks me, "Are you gay? Are you bisexual?" The answer is no, because at this point I'm strictly with a female" (p.161). In "A Feisty Female Rapper Breaks a Hip-Hop Taboo," the rapper, Queen Pen, refuses to own up to her sexuality, maintaining that it is a private matter but pointing out that she would suffer a lot of

discrimination as a Black, a woman, and a lesbian in America. Thus, she uses racism and sexism as the reasons for not “coming out.” In the epilogue, Pegues quotes the Cambridge, Massachusetts mayor, Ken Reeves, as saying that coming out in a particular way is a White thing and therefore oppressive to Black homosexuals. (This is the same argument used by Roemer in refusing to call herself a lesbian). The fact that Blacks don’t make a public proclamation does not make them necessarily closeted. “To speak the truth of one’s sexuality requires a personal context, relationships between the sgl [same gender-loving] person and the person or persons asking, not an audience, not White definitions of what it means to live out of one’s own truth” (p. 444). According to Pegues, gay Whites see coming out as an opportunity to be delivered from the oppression of silence and hiding in the closet. But for Black people, it is very different because they must define themselves according to their gayness or their blackness but not both. In other words, because the Black community is not fully embracing of its gay people, Black gays must remain silent. Yet another reason given for not coming out is the fact that Black people are already judged as amoral by the White community – they therefore feel the need to adhere to the code of public heterosexuality in order not to give the White community more reason for condemnation. Elsewhere in this *Trotter Review*, Senator Diane Wilkerson expresses the same sentiment saying that the apparent “homophobia” in the Black community is a defensive reaction against a race that is vilified and blamed for a lot of society’s ills.

Is homosexuality the greatest taboo?

It would seem that the answer to this question is “yes.” Even the most depraved seem to be able to condemn homosexuality. Popular athletes and personalities would rather brand themselves promiscuous than own up to homosexual activity. Black women blame homosexuality for their lack of partners. Church ministers readily condemn homosexuality while not being as harsh or vocal about other “sins” related to sexuality, such as adultery.

There is a lot of finger pointing by gay people and gay supporters at the Black community and its isolation of Black people. The consensus among the authors in the book seems to be that the Black community must be more accepting of Black gays if they are to become personally fulfilled as Blacks and as gays, and if they are to contribute meaningfully to their communities (as opposed to immersing themselves in the wider gay community). On the other side of the coin, Hutchison in "My Gay Problem," appears to appeal to Black gays to come out and make themselves more understood (and therefore more accepted) by the Black community. In so doing, he exonerates the Black community, particularly straight Black men, and shifts the burden onto gay people. One might argue that he is being realistic in pointing out that gay people must fight their own fight for acceptance rather than sit by the sidelines (or in the closet) and watch passively as they are exploited and marginalized.

Reading through the essays, the complicated nature of Black homosexuality becomes very clear. It also becomes clear how difficult it is to resolve issues of racism, economic exploitation, community isolation and the myriad problems resulting from being gay and Black. The authors certainly do not pretend to have a solution to these problems. The book tries to explain the phenomenon of Black homosexuality and how it manifests itself and appeals to the sense of decency among Black people in understanding and accepting Black homosexuals.

The book is not a case study or a report of a research study but an analysis of historical and contemporary issues. In that respect, it does not shed too much light on the current state of homosexuality and the Black community. There is nothing in the book about attitudes of the Black community towards homosexuality – "Black homophobia" is only assumed. There are also no studies about how Black gays feel about their place in their community. This is a major weakness of this book.

Another weakness, as mentioned above, is the fact that all the essays in the book have a decidedly positive slant on homosexuality. This makes the book a one-sided conversation. According to the back

cover blurb, the book “seeks to stimulate a lively discourse and foster greater understanding of this internationally important, vastly misunderstood, and fascinating area of study.” Yet it’s prudent to question whether it is possible to have a meaningful discussion if one side of the debate is silent or unvoiced.

References

Harris, E. L. & Roberts, T. “Passing for Straight,” *Essence*, July 2004, pp. 156.

Anne Gathuo is the managing editor of the Trotter Review. She is a graduate of the Ph.D. Public Policy program at the University of Massachusetts