

Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals

By Ron Simmons, Ph.D.

One of the most serious challenges facing black gay intellectuals is the development of a progressive view of homosexuality in the African-American community. Such a perspective is needed to assist the larger African-American community's struggle for self-determination by freeing it from the limitations of homophobia, as well as to liberate and self-actualize black gay genius. Unfortunately, the black gay scholar is faced with a unique burden when intellectualizing with his or her racial peers.¹ Because we are gay, they believe our lives are invalid and our knowledge irrelevant. The insight black gay scholars may provide on the critical problems confronting the African American community is ignored by our heterosexual brothers and sisters who are attempting to solve those problems. Indeed, they often think of homosexuality as one more problem caused by white oppression.

In the African American community, "homophobia" is not so much a fear of "homosexuals" but a fear that homosexuality will become pervasive in the community. Thus, a homophobic person can accept a homosexual as an individual friend or family member, yet not accept homosexuality. This is the attitude that predominates in the African American community. The motivation for homophobia is "heterosexism" – the belief that heterosexual sex is good and proper, and homosexual sex is bad and immoral.

Historically, discussions and theories on homosexuality in the African American community have been offered by scholars who have little, if any, understanding of the homosexual experience. Homophobic and heterosexist viewpoints are espoused by some of our most respected leaders, writers, and scholars, such as Nathan Hare, Jawanza Kunjufu, Robert Staples, Louis Farrakhan, Molefi Asante, Haki Madhubuti, Amiri Baraka, and Yosuf Ben-Jochannan.

There are three basic challenges facing black gay intellectuals. First, we must develop an analysis and understanding of homosexuality in the African American community that is affirming and constructive. Second, we must correct the bias and misinformation put forth by black homophobic and heterosexist scholars. Third, we must not allow the hurt and anger we may feel toward such scholars to cause us to dismiss them or their ideas on other issues that we may agree on.

Black homophobic literature

In reviewing African American literature, one finds that black homophobic and heterosexist scholars believe homosexuality in the African American community

is the result of: (1) the emasculation of black men by white oppression (e.g., Staples, Madhubuti, Asante, Farrakhan, and Baraka); (2) the breakdown of the family structure and the loss of male role models (e.g., Kinjufu, Madhubuti, Farrakhan, and Hare); (3) a sinister plot perpetuated by diabolical racists who want to destroy the black race (e.g., Hare); and (4) immorality as defined in biblical scriptures, Koranic suras, or Egyptian "Books of the Dead" (e.g., Farrakhan and Ben-Jochannan).

In their 1984 book, *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race*, Nathan Hare and his wife, Julia, cite ancient Greece and the modern Western world as examples of societies in a "state of decay" where norms and values are confused, and:

people are alienated and set apart from their natural origins. [In such societies] there emerges a breakdown in childrearing and socialization... Without a solid core to their personalities, children-grow up confused - develop[ing] problems of identity, most notably that of gender confusion. Homosexuality accordingly will proliferate.²

The Hares' view of black homosexuality is a simple one in which "homosexuality," "gender confusion," and "sex-change operations" are synonymous. To them, homosexuality, along with "unisexualization," "feminism," and "birth control," are all part of a genocidal plot masterminded by the "white liberal-radical-moderate establishment coalition." The Hares feel "no need to engage in endless debates about the pros and cons of homosexuality... Homosexuality does not promote black family stability and-historically has been a product largely of European society."³

The Hares are what Jawanza Kunjufu calls "traditionalists."⁴ They long for a primal past in which the male role was "protection [and] providing" while the female attended to "nurturing and gathering."⁵ They lament, "Where once there were pretty women and working men, there now are pretty men and working women."⁶

Both the Hares and Kunjufu believe that black boys become homosexuals because of the preponderance of white female schoolteachers; the Hares, in particular, claim that "white teachers infiltrate black child centers, nurseries and primary schools, compelling black boys to play with blonde dolls in the name of progress."⁷

Nathan and Julia Hare's homophobic raving does not negate the fact that there may be racist genocidal plots against the black community, or that black men are systematically destroyed. Our homosexuality, however, is not a part of such plots and our love is not genocidal. It is their divisive homophobic and heterosexist reactions to our natural sexual expression that play into the plot of divide and

conquer.

Robert Staples in his book *Black Masculinity*, asserts that the "nation's prisons are the main places where homosexual preferences are evident-because of the unavailability of women.,,"⁸ He goes on to allege that some black men continue the "homosexual lifestyle" after being released for various reasons, "ranging from a desire to escape family responsibilities to acquiring money through prostitution." The increasing visibility of black lesbians, according to Staples, is a result of "the shortage of Black men or-the conflict in male/female relationships." He also contends that black homosexuals are "deeply involved in the white homosexual community."⁹

In a 1983 speech at Morgan State University, Minister Louis Farrakhan cited incarceration and the lack of positive male role models as causes of homosexuality among black men, stating:

Those of you-who are homosexual-you weren't born [that] way brother- You never had a strong male image... [These] are conditions that are forced on black men. You're filling up the jails and they're turning [you] into freaks in the jails.¹⁰

In his book *Afrocentricity*, Molefi Asante also blames "prison breeding" for the "outburst of homosexuality among black men." He is particularly outraged that "black gays are often put in front of white or integrated organizations to show the liberalism of the group." To Asante, homosexuality is a "white decadence" that cannot be condoned or accepted. It can, however, be "tolerated until such time as our families and schools are engaged in Afrocentric instruction for males."¹¹

Asante suggests that gay brothers submerge their homosexuality to satisfy what he terms the "collective will," stating:

Afrocentric relationships are based upon... what is best for the collective imperative of the people... All brothers who are homosexuals should know that they too can become committed to the collective will. It means the submergence of their own wills into the collective will of our people.¹²

Haki Madhubuti claims in his book *Enemies: The Clash of Races* that there is a preponderance of black homosexuals in the higher socioeconomic groups. He believes that homosexuality is backward, abnormal, and "rampant in significant parts of the black community":

It is a profound comment on the power of the system that [it] is able to transform black men into sexual lovers of each other... On many black college campuses [and in] the black church, homosexuality and bisexuality [have become] an accepted norm. and far too often these homosexual Black men, because of their *sensitivity, talent and connections* are found in the most sensitive positions of responsibility in the ... working world... actually directing many community, political and educational programs [emphasis added].¹³

Ironically, in a footnote, Madhubuti presents a voice of reason about the "human complexity of homosexuality." Calling for understanding and dialogue, he states that:

Black homosexuality is on the rise and the question becomes do we enlist them into our struggle, or do we continue to alienate and make enemies of them? ... If we are truly conscious adults we have to show a sensitivity to their personal differences as well as the political and cultural differences of our people.¹⁴

That such logic and compassion would be relegated to a footnote might indicate a fear on Madhubuti's part of appearing soft on homosexuality. In the black community, a male is often forced to denounce homosexuality in order to avoid suspicion. Calls for understanding and dialogue must be posed as tactical maneuvers, not strategic goals. Nathan and Julia Hare present a similar stance in *The Endangered Black Family*. After claiming that homosexuality does not promote black family stability, they state:

On the other hand-and this is crucial - we will refuse to embark on one more tangent of displaced contempt and misdirected scorn for the homo sexualized [*sic*] black brothers or sisters and drive them over to the camp of the white liberal-radical-moderate establishment coalition. What we must do is offer the homosexual brother or sister a proper compassion and acceptance without advocacy... Some of them may yet be saved. And yet, we must declare open warfare upon the sources of [their] confusion.¹⁵

Haki Madhubuti published *Enemies* in 1978. Twelve years later, he published another book titled *Black Men: "Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? The Afrikan American Family in Transition. Essays in Discovery, Solution and Hope*. Despite the intriguing title, Madhubuti is hopeless in discovering or understanding black men who are gay. In fact, he regresses on the gay issue. Whereas a footnote in *Enemies* called for "dialogue" and "sensitivity," in *Black Men*, Madhubuti offers no insight whatsoever on homosexuality. He does not even categorize gays as black

men, stating, "Much of the current Black studies have focused on either the Black family, Black women, Afrika, the Black homosexual community or Europe's and America's influence on the Black world. Few Black scholars or activists have given serious attention to the condition of Black men." ¹⁶

In analyzing homosexuality, Madhubuti returns to the "white oppression" model. In a listing of the "most prevalent tactics [used by the] U.S. white supremacy system to disrupt black families and neutralize black men," he states that one tactic is to make black men into "so-called 'women,' in which case homosexual and bisexual activity becomes the norm rather than the exception. Men of other cultures do not fear the so-called 'woman-like' men of any race." ¹⁷

Madhubuti seems incapable of envisioning black gay men as anything other than effeminate men who pretend to be women. He doesn't realize that black men who are soft and feminine are still a threat to the system if they are politically conscious. Loving each other as men does not make black gays any less dangerous to the racist status quo. As a group, black gays can only be accused of being as politically "unconscious" as our heterosexual peers.

The lack of insight about African American homosexuality displayed by some of our heterosexual intellectuals is tragic. Their simplistic and shortsighted analyses promote ignorance and confusion in the African American community, and the oppression of black gays and lesbians. This oppression cripples the vital resources of the community inasmuch as it requires a tremendous amount of energy to hate one another, as opposed to utilizing our differences constructively toward empowerment of the African American community.

Respond with love, not anger

Confronted by racial oppression in the larger society and sexual oppression in our own community, black gay intellectuals face formidable challenges. As stated earlier, we must not allow ourselves to be paralyzed by the hurt, anger, and rage we may feel toward homophobic and heterosexist scholars. Rejecting us is their loss-and it comes back to haunt us *all*. We have the right to criticize their erroneous ideas and to help build a better world for everyone. We know the reality of our lives. We know that we are not gay because of "prison." The vast majority of black gay men have never been near a prison. For Staples, Farrakhan, and Asante to suggest that most black gay men are gay because of prison shows a serious lack of competent insight and scholarship.

We know we are not gay because of "white oppression." Too many of us realized we were "different" during preadolescence before we knew what racism was or

who white people were. Our feelings for other males were not taught by white schoolteachers or white dolls. America has done everything in its power to make black men hate themselves. Black men have been taught for hundreds of years that they are worthless. Yet despite this, black gay men love each other. We have protected, comforted, and cared for ourselves, and for thousands of our brothers, in a white society that despises our "blackness" and in a black community that condemns our love. When black men love each other in an environment that negates them, it is not a sign of sickness. It is a sign of health.

As gay men, we know that our desire to love each other is not wrong. There is sacredness in the act of men loving men. We have experienced the exultation of brothers bonding together. Countless precious moments we have shared with friends and lovers validate the value of our lives. The sacredness of our love is our strength. It gives us the courage to challenge the homophobia and heterosexism of our brothers and sisters and sustains us in the face of their rejection and ridicule.

It is our task to provide an understanding and a vision of homosexuality motivated by our love and not our anger. Anger eats within. It destroys the person who is angry more often than the subject of the anger. Love nurtures and strengthens us to challenge our brothers and sisters because we love them too much to allow their ignorance to continue.

We must help Haki Madhubuti see that his homophobia and heterosexism kept him separated from Max Robinson, his "friend and brother in the struggle." Robinson's death had a great impact on Madhubuti's feelings about AIDS. Before Robinson's death, Madhubuti was "convinced that AIDS was a white middle-class homosexual disease that, at worse, would only touch Black homosexuals." The first time he saw Robinson in the hospital, Madhubuti was "inwardly crushed" by Robinson's emaciated look and found it difficult to "keep back the tears." He states:

Max did not tell me that he had AIDS... According to him, he was improving quickly and would be able to go home soon. I let it go at that, and two months later – without my seeing him again – Max was dead. It was his wish that people know he died of AIDS and did not contract it through the *assumed avenues* of drug use or homosexual activity. Max was a woman's man to the bone (one of his problems), and he did drink a great deal.¹⁸

Madhubuti's tale of Max Robinson's death is tragic in so many ways. It is a tragedy that on his deathbed Max Robinson had to lie to his friend. He did not tell Madhubuti the nature and extent of his illness, nor the nature and extent of his sexuality because he probably knew that Madhubuti viewed AIDS as something that "at worse, would only touch black homosexuals." Members of the black gay

community knew that Robinson was more complex than simply being a "woman's man to the bone," and perhaps this pretense, that people like Madhubuti forced upon him, contributed to Robinson's three divorces and his drinking problem.

Baraka's dilemma: To be or not to be?

Too often the homophobia and heterosexism within the African American community forces men to be the "hardest hard." They must nullify any feelings and emotions others may consider unmanly. To prove their manhood, they will often attack that which they fear in themselves. Amiri Baraka (born Everett Leroy Jones) constantly denounces homosexuality in his writings. He despises "faggots" and believes being called one is the worst insult a man can suffer. In "A Poem For Black Hearts," Baraka praises the late Malcolm X as a "black god" whose death black men must avenge or be called "faggots till the end of the earth."¹⁹

Faggots are the epitome of what Baraka opposes. "Faggot" is the description he uses to insult black leaders he disagrees with. In the poem "Black Art," he speaks of the "negroleader on the steps of the white house-kneeling between the sheriff's thighs negotiating coolly for his people."²⁰ In "Civil Rights Poem," Baraka begins by stating, "Roywilkins is an eternal faggot. His spirit is a faggot."²¹ In the poem "The Black Man Is Making New Gods," he refers to the crucifixion of Christ as "The Fag's Death they give us on the cross."²² For Baraka, faggots have no redeeming qualities and should be persecuted as a matter of principle. In the poem "Hegel," he states, 'I am not saying 'Let the State fuck its faggots,' only that no fag go unfucked, for purely impersonal reasons."²³

In plays such as *The Baptism* and *The Toilet*, Baraka portrays homosexuals as degenerates and cowards.²⁴ They are weak, soft, and unmanly. Gay men are the antithesis of what he idealizes as the "Black man," and they become synonymous with his image of white men. In an essay titled "American Sexual Reference: Black Male," he writes "Most American white men are trained to be fags... [T]heir faces are weak and blank... that red flush, those silk blue faggot eyes."²⁵

According to Baraka, since white men have black men doing their manual labor, white men have become "estranged from... actual physical work." As a consequence, white men are alienated from reality and nature. They have no real "claim to manhood." He states:

[A] people who lose their self-sufficiency because they depend on their "subjects" to do the world's work become effeminate and perverted... Do you understand the softness of the white man, the weakness... the estrangement from reality? Can you for a second imagine the average

middle-class white man able to do somebody harm? Alone? Without the technology that at this moment [allows] him [to] rule the world.²⁶

Baraka characterizes white men as spineless, middle-class bureaucrats, and black men as natural super-strong studs. To support his position, he points with pride to the fact that blacks dominate the "manly art" of boxing.²⁷

Amiri Baraka is a fascinating study of the homosexual-heterosexual conflict among African American males, for the tragic irony is that the "faggot" Baraka attacks so viciously is in reality himself. He has never reconciled his homosexual past with his persona as the clenched-fist black militant leading mass movements, the perfect example of the black warrior. This conflict is alluded to in "Tone Poem" in which he writes:

Read this line young colored or white and know I felt the twist of dividing memory. Blood spoiled in the air, caked and anonymous. Arms opening, opened last night, we sat up howling and kissing. Men who loved each other. Will that be understood? That we could, and still move under cold nights with clenched-fists.²⁸

Perhaps it is the homosexual desires Baraka had as an adolescent and young adult that motivate his homophobia. His homosexual desires are not revealed in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*. No, to truly understand the paradox of Baraka's need to denounce faggots while at the same time suppressing his attraction, one must read an autobiographical novel he wrote twenty years earlier, *The System of Dante's Hell*.²⁹ It is a story many gay brothers can relate to. After reading it, one's anger toward Baraka's homophobia is replaced with sympathy. We understand the pain and the fear.

Before he deemed himself Imamu Amiri Baraka, before he divorced his white wife, before he changed the spelling of his name from Leroy, to LeRoi, Baraka was a "short...skinny...runt [with] big bulbous eyes." He felt inadequate because of his size and was obsessed with growing taller. In grade school, his peers told him about "dicks and pussies and fags and bulldaggers." He saw how people reacted to "cocksuckers," and he grew to understand "what fucking was and what it had to do with sucking."³⁰

As a teenager Baraka pretended to have only heterosexual desires, for he understood the penalty for being a faggot. "We did a lot of things, [those] years... We [told] lies to keep from getting belted, and [watched] a faggot take a beating in the snow from our life. Our fear."³¹

As an undergraduate at Howard University, Baraka saw gay men harassed and ridiculed.³² He felt alienated. It was at Howard that he changed his name to LeRoi and began to read Gertrude Stein.³³ Poor grades, however, forced him to leave Howard in his junior year. He joined the Air Force and was stationed at various bases, including one in Rantoul, Illinois, near Chicago. It was in Chicago that he again engaged in homosexuality. In *The System of Dante's Hell*, he writes:

In Chicago I kept making the queer scene. Under the "EI" with a preacher... [He] held my head under the quilt. The first guy ... spoke to me grinning and I said my name was Stephen Dedalus... One more guy and it was over. On the train, I wrote all this down. A journal now sitting in a tray on top the closet... The journal says "Am I like that?"³⁴

Once more, Baraka found himself disconnected and alienated.³⁵ His homosexual desires would not cease. He felt guilty and frightened of himself. "My cold sin in the cities," he writes, "My fear of my own death's insanity, and an actual longing for men that brooked in each finger of my memory."³⁶

One night in the "Bottom," a poor black ghetto in Shreveport, Louisiana, the shame Baraka feels as a homosexual reaches a climax when he finds himself drunk in a whorehouse, dancing with a prostitute named Peaches. He becomes ill and attempts to leave, but she prevents him.

She came around and rubbed my tiny pecker with her fingers. And still I moved away. I saw the look she gave me and wanted somehow to protest, say, "I'm sorry. I'm fucked up. My mind is screwy, I don't know why. I can't think. I'm sick. I've been fucked in the ass. I love books... You don't want me. Please, Please, don't want me."³⁷

Outside, Peaches and her friends tease Baraka like some "fag" by taking his cap and tossing it amongst themselves.³⁸ To get his hat back, Baraka agrees to buy Peaches another drink. He, too, has more to drink and becomes more intoxicated. Overwhelmed with shame, he longs to be "Some other soul, than the filth I feel. Have in me. Guilt like something of God's. Some separate suffering self."³⁹ Voices begin to haunt him. "You've got to like girls. Say something... Move. Frightened bastard. Frightened scared sissy motherfucker."⁴⁰

Delirious, Baraka reminisces about his cold sin in the cities.

It was Chicago. The fags and the winter. Sick thin boy, come out of those els... To go back. To sit lonely. Need to be used, touched... I hate it... To feel myself go soft and want some person not myself... That I walked the

streets hunting for warmth. To be pushed under a quilt, and call it love. To shit water for days and say I've been loved. Been warm.⁴¹

After dragging Baraka back to her house, Peaches strips him and grabs his penis. He is unable to get an erection. She chastises him and becomes violent.

She pulled, breathing spit on my chest. "Comeon, Baby, Comeon... Get hard... Get hard." And she slapped me now, with her hand. A short hard punch... She cursed. & pulled as hard as she could. [She said] "You don't like women, huh?... No wonder you so pretty... Ol bigeye faggot... Goddam punk, you gonna fuck me tonight or I'm gonna pull your fuckin dick aloose."

I was crying now. Hot hot tears and trying to ... say to Peaches, "Please, you don't know me. Not what's in my head. I'm beautiful. Stephen Dedalus... Feel my face, how tender. My eyes..."

And I [thought] of a black man under the el who took me home... I remembered telling him all these things ... And [crawling] out of bed morning... Loved. Afraid.

[Peaches] started yelling. Faggot. Faggot. Sissy Motherfucker. And I pumped myself. Straining. Threw my hips at her. And she yelled, for me to fuck her. Fuck her. Fuck me, you lousy fag. and I twisted, spitting tears, and hitting my hips on hers, pounding my flesh in her, hearing myself weep.⁴²

After fucking Peaches, Baraka dresses and leaves. He stumbles through the streets, lost and intoxicated. A gay man approaches him in the darkness saying, "Lemme suck yo dick, honey..." Once again Baraka is confronted with homosexual desire. The man begs him, but Baraka won't give in. Peaches has freed him of his past. He walks away as the gay man screams behind him like "some hurt ugly thing dying alone."⁴³

Baraka returns to Peaches' house to sleep. He awakes a new man, a heterosexual man.

I woke up... And I felt myself smiling... [It] seemed that things had come to order... It seemed settled... I thought of black men sitting on their beds this saturday of my life listening quietly to their wives' soft talk. And felt the world grow together as I hadn't known it. All lies before, I thought. All fraud and sickness. This was the world... I cursed Chicago and softened at the world. "You look so sweet," [Peaches] was saying, "Like you're real rested."⁴⁴

Understanding Baraka's life turns our anger toward him to sympathy; indeed, pity. That he would feel so much guilt and shame for desiring male love is the lesser tragedy. The greater tragedy is that once he claims "heterosexuality," perhaps as a disguise, he then denounces and ridicules "faggots" so vehemently. How could a factor of life affording him the opportunity to be understanding and compassionate become one of pathetic hypocrisy? Baraka is not the first man to become a homophobe after experiencing homosexuality or repressing homosexual desire. We have encountered his kind before. Have taken them to our beds and soothed their fears. Made them feel whole in our arms. Our anger will not help these brothers to understand that they fear themselves. We must show them through compassion and understanding that one can be gay and be a socially, culturally and politically useful man. We can be gay and committed to "Blackness," committed to the liberation of black people. We can be clenched-fist militants no matter what gender we love.

Clap if you believe

We can specifically reject the homophobia and heterosexism of writers and scholars such as Madhubuti, Asante, and others, but we should not allow our rejection of their ideas and opinions in regard to those issues to prevent us from supporting them on issues we agree on. We cannot totally reject them. Our common problems as African Americans are too immense and our common resources too scarce. We may all agree with Madhubuti when he observes that:

[M]any Black men have defined themselves as Black duplicates of the white male ethos... Black men, acting out of frustration and *ignorance*, adopt attitudes that are not productive or progressive... The political and sexual games that... are demeaning and disrespectful ... become, due to a lack of *self-definition*, Black men's games also.⁴⁵

We should also include homophobia as another attitude that black males have adopted largely from the white culture.

If Madhubuti is sincere in his call for "sensitivity [to the] personal differences as well as the political and cultural differences" of black people, we can indeed achieve understanding and dialogue. We can work with him if he truly believes that:

The search for truth should always be our guiding force... Always be willing to question past actions as well as accept constructive criticism. Advocating an Afrikan American cultural movement doesn't mean being dogmatic and

insensitive to other positions. Good is good, no matter where it comes from.⁴⁶

If we, as African American people, join together in a "search for truth" that is mutually respectful of our differences, we will all benefit from the insights uncovered and the constructive criticism offered by each other. As black gays and lesbians, we must develop alliance with progressive black groups, organizations, and individuals to work together for the common good of the black community.

Developing an alliance with an organization such as the Nation of Islam, however, may not be as simple. Minister Farrakhan is undoubtedly becoming one of the great African American orators of this century in the tradition of Dr. King, Malcolm X, DuBois, and others. Millions of people listen to his speeches and respect what he says. He has an ability to communicate ideas that is exciting to behold. Unfortunately, Farrakhan's homophobic and heterosexist comments contribute to the oppression of black gays, lesbians, and women.

In 1990, members of the Nation of Islam began to run for political office in Washington, D.C., and in Maryland. If Farrakhan or his followers were to gain political power in the community, to what extent would their policies be secular rather than religious? Would they advocate that all issues in the black community be decided by the Koran?

Why should Africa's descendents base their lives and their future on the Koran, or the Bible? With all due respect, the Koran is not an artifact of African culture, it is Arabian. And the Bible in its present form was given to us by white slave masters. Indeed, both books were introduced to Africa by people more interested in increasing their wealth than in Africa's well-being. Europeans and Arabs enslaved Africans. We don't owe them anything, so why should we be subservient to their books?

On May 20, 1990, Minister Farrakhan gave a speech in Oakland entitled, "The Time and What Must Be Done," in which he stated that African Americans are "polluted" by the decadence of white society. He advocated the strict enforcement of Old Testament and Koranic laws to force black people out of their wickedness and degeneracy. As the audience cheered, Farrakhan proclaimed that to save the nation, "the punishment for sleeping with your daughter-is death" and "the punishment of rape is death." He also included adultery and homosexuality as crimes that should be punished by death, stating:

God is no respecter of persons – [Y]our mother is not above the law. Your brother, your sister, your friend-nobody is above God's law.

Do you know why [in biblical times] they [stoned you to death] for adultery? Because there is nothing more sacred than marriage and family. Nothing... [applause] And every time you stone [an adulterer] you're killing the thought in your own mind... You make an example [by stoning someone] because the individual is not more important than the community [or the] nation. So you sacrifice the individual for the preservation of a nation. [applause]

Now brothers, in the Holy world you can't switch. [Farrakhan walks across the stage like an effeminate man] No, no, no ... in the Holy world you better hide that stuff 'cause see if God made you for a woman, you can't go with a man... You know what the penalty of that is in the Holy land? Death... They don't play with that... [he laughs] Sister get to going with another sister – Both women [are decapitated].⁴⁷

It is dangerous and unwise for Farrakhan to equate homosexuality and adultery with rape and child molestation. The former are victimless activities between consenting adults. The latter are acts of victimization using force and coercion. Has Farrakhan forgotten the dilemma he and Malcolm X faced when they discovered that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad was a *repeated* adulterer? On page 295 of his autobiography, Malcolm states:

As far back as 1955, I had heard hints... [My] mind simply refused to accept anything so grotesque as adultery mentioned in. the same breath with Mr. Muhammad's name...

[In April 1963,] I told Mr. Muhammad what was being said... Elijah Muhammad [replied,] "When you read about how David took another man's wife, I'm that David. You read about Noah, who got drunk-that's me. You read about Lot, who went and laid up with his own daughters. I have to fulfill all of those things."

I found-some [Muslim officials] had already heard [the rumors.] One of them, Minister Louis [Farrakhan] of Boston, as much as seven months before. They had been living with the dilemma themselves.⁴⁸

Farrakhan did not call for the death penalty to punish the Honorable Elijah Muhammad's adultery. No, he remained silent. And after Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam, Farrakhan was given Malcolm's former position as the head of the New York City Mosque.

It is a mistake, tactically and strategically, to advocate the killing of black gays and lesbians. Why encourage more death in the African American community? Too many black men are being killed daily. Farrakhan's statements against homosexuality give the men who follow him a license to harass black men and women who they think are gay. Persecuting gays reinforces a false sense of manhood. Rather than confront the real enemy—those who actually cause and control the oppression—their frustrations caused by powerlessness are soothed by intimidating those who they consider weak. It's easy to prove your manhood by putting down "faggots." Baraka did it for years.

The Bible and the Koran are not the only holy books used to defend heterosexism and homophobia. Egyptologists and African historians, such as Yosef Ben-Jochannan, refer to the *Book of Coming Forth by Day and by Night* (better known as the Egyptian Book of the Dead) as an Egyptian spiritual text that condemns homosexuality. Ben-Jochannan is clearly one of the foremost African scholars of the twentieth century. Thus, his claims that the ancient Egyptians forbade homosexuality must be investigated seriously by black gay scholars.

In his book *The Black Man's Bible*, Ben-Jochannan lists twenty-nine of the forty-two "Negative Confessions" that a departed Egyptian soul had to affirm on the Day of Judgment. The Negative Confessions are rules to live by, similar to the Ten Commandments. Two of the confessions he cites refer to sexual activity: number 19 – "I have not defiled the wife of a man" – and number 27 – "I have not committed acts of impurity or sodomy."⁴⁹

For a reference, Ben-Jochannan cites E.A. Wallis Budge's *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. Budge, however, does not use the word "sodomy." According to Budge, three of the forty-two Negative Confessions stated in the hieroglyphic text refer to sexual activity: number 11—"I have not committed fornication"; number 21—"I have not defiled the wife of a man"; and number 22—"I have not polluted, or defiled, myself."⁵⁰ It is the latter confession that Ben-Jochannan misinterpreted as forbidding homosexuality. A study of the actual hieroglyph with the assistance of a hieroglyphic dictionary reveals that the Negative Confession of "polluting or defiling" oneself actually refers to "masturbation [or the] irregular emission of semen," not sodomy.⁵¹ Within the dictionary, there is a hieroglyphic symbol that means "sodomy" and it is not used anywhere in the Negative Confessions.

Redefining ourselves and our future

While it is critically important to rebut homophobia and heterosexism, the most crucial challenge facing black gay scholars is to develop an affirming and liberating philosophical understanding of homosexuality that will self-actualize black gay

genius. Such a task requires a new epistemology, a new way of "knowing," that incorporates the views our African ancestors had about the material and the metaphysical world. We can no longer accept American society's views of us and the purpose of our lives. We should see ourselves as "geniuses" in the root sense of the word, i.e., *genii* – divine spirits that have a higher purpose to manifest on the physical plane.

In some African cultures, gays were considered blessed because the Creator had endowed them with both male and female principles. Often, they served as the spiritual advisors for the community.⁵² In light of this should we be surprised that so many gay men are active in the black church?

Another important issue we must address is the role that gay men will play in the socialization of black males. Our younger brothers desperately need an outlook on life that goes beyond the world of Hollywood or Madison Avenue. They need role models and rituals that symbolize rites of passage from childhood to adulthood. Young gay males, in particular, and black males generally, need a definition of "manhood" radically different from the one adopted through assimilation. Such a definition must liberate and empower us, enhance our self-esteem and stimulate the manifestation of creative potential. Black male youth need to know that the measure of a man should be based not on the gender of his sex partner, but on his contribution to the community.

The argument that homosexuality threatens black male-female relationships and the black family lacks credibility. Homosexual love does not destabilize true heterosexual love relationships, the black family, or the black community. If a man is sexually attracted to other men, but community homophobia forces him to hide his feelings, he might marry a woman who then bears their children. Should that man one day be unable to sustain the psychic pain of ignoring his true sexual feelings and leave his family, the fault lies not in his homosexuality but in the community's homophobia that forced him to live a lie.

Our straight brothers and sisters need to be more honest and to admit that their relationships are falling apart even when both parties are staunch heterosexuals. The sisters are constantly complaining about "niggers," while the brothers complain about "bitches." Between them there's an abundance of blame, anger, distrust, and hatred, but little love.

Gay men *do* contribute to the black family. A significant number of us are fathers who support our children. Many of us have nieces and nephews whom we advise, guide, and watch out for. We send money to our parents and give shelter to cousins. Unfortunately, homophobia in the black community forces many of us into

"closets." We don't say we're gay, thus our families and the community do not realize the significant contributions we make as gay and lesbian members of the family and the community.

The freeing of black gay genius requires that we develop institutions to secure the foundation of the black gay community. Madhubuti's call for "dialogue" notwithstanding, homophobic statements such as his, and those of Molefi Asante and Nathan Hare, indicate that their tolerance for homosexuality is one of expediency. The reality of our situation dictates that we negotiate with them, and others like them, from a position of cultural, economic, and political strength in the mutual understanding of needing each other.

To achieve the goals outlined herein, the political consciousness of black gay men will have to be raised. Too often, we are narrowly focused on fabulous parties, fierce clubs, fashion, face, and fun. There is a desperate need for organizations to provide social activities that are culturally, educationally, and politically constructive. Organizations such as Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD) in New York City, and Adodi and Unity, Inc., in Philadelphia, should be commended for their efforts in this area.

The tasks faced by black gay intellectuals are formidable. The problems we confront are complex and intertwined. To the extent that our people are homophobic and heterosexist, our tasks become more difficult. We should acknowledge the "sensitivities" and "talents" within us, the root of which is black gay genius. We have been blessed with gifts to share in a society that views love and tenderness between men as a weakness. As we balance and synthesize the male and female energy within our souls, we come closer to the Supreme Being. The inner Voice tells us that our feelings of love are righteous. Black men loving black men is indeed a sacred act.

Endnotes

¹ This essay focuses on black gay males. It does not address the experiences of black lesbians. Thus, the masculine pronoun and possessive will be used in most cases.

² Nathan Hare and Julia Hare, *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race* (San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1984), p. 64.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁴ See Jawanza Kunjufu, "Not Allowed to Be Friends and/or Lovers," in *Crisis in Black Sexual Politics*, ed. Nathan Hare and Julia Hare (San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1989), p. 110.

⁵ Hare and Hare, *The Endangered Black Family*, p. 151.

⁶ Nathan Hare and Julia Hare, eds. *Crisis in Black Sexual Politics* (San Francisco: Black Think Tank), p. 2.

⁷ Hare and Hare, *The Endangered Black Family*, p. 66.

⁸ Robert Staples, *Black Masculinity: The Black Man's Role in American Society* (San Francisco: Black Scholar Press, 1982), p. 88.

⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

¹⁰ Joseph Eure and Richard Jerome, eds. *Back Where We Belong: Selected Speeches by Minister Louis Farrakhan* (Philadelphia: PC International Press, 1989), p. 138.

¹¹ Molefi Keke Asante, *Afrocentricity: The Theory of Social Change* (Buffalo: Amulefi, 1980), p. 65. Apparently, Asante is so homophobic that he used "Homosexuality" as a section heading, yet he doesn't list the section in the table of contents.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Haki R. Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), *Enemies: The Clash of Races* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1978), p. 148.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Hare and Hare, *The Endangered Black Family*, p. 65.

¹⁶ Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous? The Afrikan American in Transition: Essays in Discovery, Solution, and Hope* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), p. 60.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 73-74.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

¹⁹ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Black Magic* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), p. 112.

²⁰ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and Larry Neal, *Black Fire* (New York: Morrow, 1968), p.302

²¹ Jones (Baraka), *Black Magic*, p. 140.

²² Ibid., pp. 205-206.

²³ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

²⁴ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *The Baptism and The Toilet* (New York: Grove Press, 1966).

²⁵ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *Home: Social Essays* (New York: Morrow, 1966), p. 216. ²⁶ Ibid., pp. 217 and 220.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 217.

²⁸ Jones (Baraka), *Black Magic*, p. 28.

²⁹ LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), *The System of Dante's Hell* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966). The thesis of this essay regarding Baraka's former homosexuality rests primarily on the premise that *The System of Dante's Hell* is an autobiographical novel. This researcher believes such a premise to be correct for several reasons. First, *The System of Dante's Hell* is written in the first person. It is set in Newark, New Jersey, and many of the names of characters and places, as well as sequences of events, in *The System of Dante's Hell* parallels Baraka's own life as stated in his autobiography. See Imamu Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (New York: Freundlich Books, 1984). Second, Baraka has cited *The System of Dante's Hell* in an autobiographical context. In his *Autobiography*, Baraka refers the reader to *The System of Dante's Hell* and the incident involving Peaches for details about his once being A WOL while in the military. On page 12 of the *Autobiography*, he states: "In Shreveport... I ended up two days AWOL. I had gotten lost and laid up with a sister down in the Bottom (one black community of Shreveport-see *The System of Dante's Hell*) and finally came back rumped and hung over and absolutely broke." Third, Baraka's homosexuality is referred to by his first wife, Rettie Jones, in *How I Became Hettie Jones* (New York: Dutton, 1990), p. 86. She states: "[Roi] once confessed to me some homosexual feelings, though never any specific experiences."

³⁰ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, pp. 1 and 12.

³¹ Jones (Baraka), *The System of Dante's Hell*, p. 65. In his play *The Toilet*, Baraka writes of a similar incident in high school where one boy, "Karolis," is beaten by a boy named Ray and his friends. Ray is described as "short, intelligent," and "popeyed." Karolis is attacked for writing Ray a love letter. Ray watches silently as his friends beat Karolis unconscious, but at the end of the play it is clear that Ray lied about not having had a homosexual encounter with Karolis.

³² See LeRoi Jones (Baraka), "The Alternative," in *Tales* (New York: Grove Press, 1967). ³³ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, pp. 87-88.

³⁴ Jones (Baraka), *The System of Dante's Hell*, pp. 57-58.

³⁵ Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones*, p. 100.

³⁶ Jones (Baraka), *The System of Dante's Hell*, pp. 125 and 127.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 134 and 135.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 138-139.

⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 139-141.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 142.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁵ Madhubuti, *Black Men*, p. 61.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁴⁷ Louis Farrakhan, *The Time and What Must Be Done*, a videotape of a speech delivered in Oakland, California, May 20, 1990. The videotape was produced by the Final Call, Inc., Chicago, Illinois.

⁴⁸ Malcolm X and Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), pp. 295-299.

⁴⁹ Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *The Black Man's Religion and Extracts and Comments from the Holy Black Bible* (New York: Alkebu-Ian Books Associates, 1974), p. 46.

⁵⁰ E.A. Wallis Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York: Dover, 1967), pp.

196-201. It's interesting to note that Ben-Jochannan did not include in his list the Negative Confession, "I have not committed fornication." To have done so would have implied that the Egyptians forbade sexual activity between unmarried persons—a commandment few heterosexual cultural nationalists would ever consider obeying.

⁵¹ E.A. Wallis Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York: Dover, 1978), p. 818.

⁵² See Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 120-126; Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture* (Boston: Fag Rag Books, 1978), pp. 106-107; and Esther Newton, "Of Yams, Grinders, and Gays," in *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly* 1 (Summer 1988): 28-37.

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