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Troubling the Water:

Black Masculinity, Gender Performance and The Politics of Memory in Gospel Music

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Abstract

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By Justin Tyler Dickerson

This study aims to explore the number of ways Black male gospel artists navigate within Gospel music as subjects that are gendered male, and the ways in which they choose to delegate or deconstruct ideas of black masculinity within sacred space. Drawing from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, E. Patrick Johnson's quare theory, and Alisha Lola Jones's work on gospel performance and the role of deliverance narratives, this study explores how emotional vulnerability, bodily comportment, and sonic gestures are embedded within religious and cultural codes of masculinity through engaging in close readings of gospel performances, artist's narratives, media coverage, and public statements, alongside a historically informed analysis of gospel's development as a male-centered institution. Additionally, this study engages the role of memory in upholding patriarchal systems within Black religious spaces and seeks to re-member for the purposes of a post-gendered egalitarian Gospel aesthetic.

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Prologue

The idea for this thesis began with a conversation between a friend and me as we imagined a world in which we would construct a tribute for one of Gospel's greatest tenors, Daryl Coley. Living with vivid imaginations and surrounding ourselves with others who do as well, we began naming numerous Gospel music artists who could beautifully honor Coley's sonic legacy. Whether imagining Avery Wilson performing He's Preparing Me or Titus Burgess and Billy Porter lending their voices, a clear pattern emerged. The Black men we envisioned—those we believed could do justice to Coley's artistry—were first, queer, and secondly, no longer affiliated with the church.

This realization led to a deeper conversation about the era of great Gospel tenors like Coley, James Moore, and, later, Donnie McClurkin, whose vocal brilliance inspired generations of high-singing Black men. However, many of these prodigies have since chosen career paths outside of Gospel music and remain publicly unaffiliated with the traditional Black church, which once served as a sanctuary for Black talent. Instead, these gifted individuals now perform on Broadway, at City Wineries, or as musical directors and vocal coaches in the R&B and pop music industries.

We discussed the complexities faced by these talented Black men—many inspired by Gospel pioneers—who no longer align theologically or socially with the Black church. Unfortunately, the prodigies of these legends are no longer present in the church pews; their talent has been redirected to secular spaces. When examining the current state of Gospel music, it is apparent that a talent drain is taking place, driven by several factors. First, gospel artists themselves have pointed to challenges such as the lack of financial viability within the profession and unethical business dealings in the industry. A second significant issue lies in the theopolitical

landscape of Gospel music, which has long policed the imaginations and embodiments of its artists.

Gospel Music - A History

Gospel music has historically been a cornerstone in the lives of Black Americans, serving as both a form of religious worship and a powerful medium for cultural expression. Rooted in the spiritual traditions of African American communities, gospel music is deeply intertwined with the history of the Black church. It has provided motivation, inspiration, and hope amid the struggles of a society guided by white supremacist ambitions.

The origins of gospel music are closely tied to the early 20th century, particularly during the Great Migration,[1] a period when millions of Black Americans left the oppressive environment of the rural South for opportunities in Northern and Midwestern cities. This migration marked a significant cultural shift, bringing together a fusion of Southern spiritual traditions and the rapidly evolving culture of urban centers. Gospel music emerged during this transformative period, blending elements of African American spirituals, and the blues to create a sound that resonated deeply with the Black urban experience. It was a sound that spoke to both the heritage of the past and the hope for a future marked by greater freedom and equality.

Central to this evolution was Thomas A. Dorsey, known as the "Father"[2] of Gospel music whose work in composing and arranging gospel songs laid the foundation for what would become a defining genre within the Black Church. Dorsey, originally a blues musician, brought a new style to gospel that combined the emotional depth of the blues with the spiritual fervor of traditional hymns. His contributions were instrumental in formalizing Gospel music as an

[1] Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 14, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[2] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.

organized tradition within the church, making it accessible to a wider audience and deeply impactful for Black Americans seeking solace, strength, and a sense of community. By establishing gospel choirs and promoting gospel music as a distinct form of religious and cultural expression, Dorsey helped shape a genre that would become a bedrock of Black religious and social life.

As gospel music developed within the church, it also became a space where social expectations, particularly around gender roles, were both reflected and reinforced. The Black Church, as an institution, has historically upheld traditional views of masculinity and femininity, influencing the ways in which men and women participate, perform, and present themselves within its walls. Within this framework, men were typically seen as leaders, embodying qualities such as authority, strength, and moral responsibility. Women, on the other hand, were often expected to exhibit qualities of humility, emotional expression, and supportiveness, roles that were both valued and restricted by the church's gendered hierarchy. These expectations shaped not only the organization of gospel choirs but also the aesthetic and performative aspects of gospel music, creating a dynamic in which gender roles were constantly being enacted and reinforced through music.

This study employs cultural criticism that draws from Black queer theory, gender studies, and performance analysis to interrogate gospel music as a contested site of Black masculine identity. Grounded in Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and E. Patrick Johnson's concept of quareness, this project analyzes how Black male gospel artists negotiate the performance of masculinity and queerness within a religious tradition steeped in heteropatriarchy. Rather than treating gospel music solely as a genre of sound, I approach it as a

cultural field of expressive embodiment—one where confession, fashion, media discourse, institutional recognition, and memory function as key texts of gender and sexual regulation.

Gospel Music as Cultural Continuity with Gendered Dynamics

Gospel music has been an essential expression of faith, resilience, and identity within Black American life. It extends beyond mere musical expression, weaving together the threads of African American spirituality, history, and social identity. Originating in the early 20th century, gospel music took root in the Black Church during the Great Migration, when millions of Black Americans moved from the rural South to urban centers in search of better opportunities.[3] This migration marked a period of cultural transformation, as Southern religious traditions merged with the dynamic energies of Northern cities. As a result, gospel music emerged as a powerful medium of both worship and cultural continuity, allowing Black Americans to preserve their spiritual heritage while adapting to new social realities.[4]

Men in gospel music usually embodied a certain masculine ideal, which encompassed short hair, short nails, a dark suit with a tie. Male gospel artists, especially choir directors and lead vocalists, were often seen as respectable figures with authority, and embodying a form of masculinity that underscored stability and respectability represented in the embodiment of famed gospel baritone, J. Robert Bradley. This masculine ideal resonated within the Black community, where social and economic pressures often made the church one of the few spaces where Black men could hold recognized positions of leadership and influence. In gospel music, black men could be presented as spiritual leaders and cultural symbols, representing ideals that extended beyond the church and into the larger Black community.

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[3] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 34, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[4] Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 17, ProQuest Ebook Central.

For women, gospel music roles were shaped by expectations of modesty and piety, qualities that aligned with traditional views of femininity within the church. Female gospel artists were often celebrated for their ability to convey the spiritual depth of the gospel through emotive performances, expressing their deep devotion to gospel audiences. However, these performances also reinforced a specific gender framework, one that emphasized women's roles as damsels, and untouchable as it related to romance and/or sexual relationships. Women were central to the emotional and spiritual impact of gospel music; high-singing sopranos and booming altos became vessels for spirit and story.

Gospel music, therefore, became a musical genre and space where these gendered roles were both enacted and, at times, challenged. While the church upheld traditional values around masculinity and femininity, gospel music provided a unique context in which individuals could express aspects of their identity that would transgress expectations. The performative dynamics of these gender roles offered subtle opportunities for alternative expressions of identity in black church spaces.

For example, female gospel artists, such as Mahalia Jackson and Sister Rosetta Tharpe, became icons not only for their vocal abilities but also for their ability to communicate the spiritual depth of the gospel genre. Their legacies as rich-velvety voices that were dark in texture inspired just as many male Gospel artists as women. The spinning-head voice of Marion Williams would stir many tenors including Little Richard, the architect of Rock and Roll. Gospel Music also featured high-singing men in the persons of Reverend Glenn Allen and quartet soprano singers. In fact, famed disco-diva, Sylvester started off singing Gospel Music and continued to do so in the heights of their career.[5] So, what bears asking is what is it about Gospel

[5] Joshua Gamson, *The Fabulous Sylvester: The Legend, the Music, the '70s in San Francisco* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005), 20.

Music affords Black males to engage in transgressing gender norms? and as well, how does the Gospel music industry as well as Gospel male singers respond to such transgression?

Transgressive Behaviors of Black Gospel Male Singers and Aesthetic Choices

Gospel male singers' transgressive behaviors have traditionally been exhibited in the following ways. Black masculinity combined leadership with emotional vulnerability opening the way for gospel music to be the only art-form to require all, despite gender, to claim and sing about intimacy using male pronouns for God. In the gospel music scene, Black men who shout "*I love Him"* are not suspected of being queer because of such words and actions. Here, Black males can assume a submissive role in relation to God. In Gospel music, Black men can sing about being cared for, being heard, and being protected—behaviors and attributes traditionally ascribed to women. Further, as gospel music grew in appeal to black church parishioners, Black male gospel artists negotiated Black Church spaces by, at times, embodying subtle and queer-identified behaviors, thus challenging traditional notions of black masculinity and expanding expressions of Black male identity within religious frameworks that were often heteronormative.

Through an analysis of gospel music's performance practices, lyrics, and aesthetic choices, this research reveals how Black male gospel artists negotiate church-based expectations while creating space for alternative expressions of identity within structured yet expressive black church settings. Moreover, this study examines black church gendered dynamics, exploring how gospel music serves as both a reinforcer of traditional gender roles and a platform where Black men and women can subtly negotiate and redefine these roles.

By analyzing the ways in which gospel artists navigate the expectations of masculinity and femininity, this work in each of its chapters reveals the ways in which gospel music reflects and reshapes Black identity within the Black Church.

Through gender performance, gospel music becomes more than a form of worship—it becomes a window into the complex interplay between cultural values, personal expression, and community identity.

Chapter 1: Fathers & Kings: Foundations & Memory of Patriarchal Power in Gospel Music provides a historical overview of gospel music's early development, focusing both on Thomas A. Dorsey's and James Cleveland's role in formalizing the genre and establishing its aesthetic and organizational structures. It examines the institutional authority of both Dorsey and Cleveland as convention founders, and also how patriarchal power asserts itself as a memory-making tool.

Chapter 2: Confessions: Sexual Conversion Narratives, Gossip and Gospel Media draws on Alisha Lola Jones's exploration of sexual conversion narratives as seen in the public confessions Pastors Daryl Coley and Donnie McClurkin. This chapter examines how Black male gospel artists navigated discussions around gender and sexuality, particularly within gospel media outlets like Gospel Today and The Word Network. This chapter delves into the themes of "deliverance" testimonies, a narrative often used by artists to address or distance themselves from perceived queerness and explores the rumor mill's shaping by public perceptions of masculinity and sexuality in gospel media. Through analyzing these narratives, this chapter reveals how Black male artists balanced the tension between religious expectations and personal identity.

Chapter 3: The Autopsy of a Blackball—The Quareing Work of B.Slade as Tonex focuses on the gospel artist formerly known as Tonex, now B.Slade, a figure who challenged traditional gender norms and aesthetics within gospel music. B.Slade's style, performance choices, and public persona as Tonex pushed the boundaries of what was considered acceptable in the realm

of gospel music, introducing elements of queerness into a genre that had often reinforced heteronormative ideals. By examining B.Slade's bold fashion choices, genre-bending performances, and gender-complex identity as Tonex this chapter analyzes how his artistry queered gospel music's framework by offering a version of Black masculinity that transcended conventional definitions. B.Slade's journey from Tonex to his current identity reflects a transformative path in gospel that encourages alternative expressions of Black masculinity and reshaping the narrative around gender and sexuality in the Black Church. This chapter will explore both personas: Tonex in the Gospel Music Industry and his transition to B.Slade who is currently a multi-genre creative. Tonex's career will be examined from the Quareness perspective defined by E. Patrick Johnson.

Chapter 4: Where Have All the Choir Directors Gone?— HIV/AIDS Epidemic, and The Rise of Praise and Worship examines the shift from traditional gospel choirs to praise and worship music, a transition influenced by changing attitudes within the Black Church towards gospel choirs and the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on Black male choir directors. The emergence of praise and worship as a popular genre in gospel coincided with rising homonegativity towards queer black men within church spaces alongside a declining visibility of these men in leadership roles. This chapter explores how the shift affected the visibility and influence of Black queer men within gospel music, by looking at how homonegativity and the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS intersected with gospel's evolving aesthetics. By analyzing this transition, this chapter offers insights into how external social pressures reshaped gendered and sexual dynamics within gospel music.

This chapter will draw upon the works of Darius Bost in *Evidence of Being* and Alisha Lola Jones' chapter, "Are All the Choir Directors Gay? Black Men's Sexuality and Identity in

Gospel Performance." Together, these chapters illuminate the ways gospel music became a site of both conformity and resistance. As a music genre, it allows Black male artists to balance public expectations with personal expressions of identity that do not always align with traditional norms. By highlighting the experiences of artists like B. Slade, who brought queerness into gospel's aesthetic space, and the influence of the HIV/AIDS crisis on the visibility of queer Black men in the church, this study uncovers the intersections of faith, gender, and queerness within gospel music.

In exploring these dynamics, this research contributes to broader conversations about Black masculinity, queerness, and the evolving role of gospel music in shaping cultural identity. Additionally, by examining gospel music's evolution, this study reveals a genre that is as much about social structures as it is about faith and spirituality. Gospel music, shaped by the Black Church's cultural values, has historically reinforced specific ideals around gender and identity, positioning men and women in roles that both mirror and support the community's broader values. Yet, within these roles, gospel music has also allowed artists to subtly reinterpret the boundaries of masculinity and femininity, expressing complexities that challenge conventional understandings of gender within a religious setting.

Chapter 1. Fathers &Kings: Patriarchal Power and Influence in Gospel Music Memory

What does it mean for Gospel to have a King? and why, within Gospel's collective memory, do we speak often of the Father of Gospel Music, without mentioning anyone serving as a Mother? What does such historical interpretation reveal about the foundations of Gospel music and gendered dynamics? These questions are diagnostic entry points to question male-centrism (i.e., androcentrism) within Gospel music, in its production, performance, and organization. Gospel music has long been perceived as a space for the feminine, due to a history of gender-inclusivity regarding the gifts, talents, and leadership of Black women. For many women, gospel music was one of the rare spaces where their spiritual and moral leadership would be welcomed without facing the scorn of black clergymen who served as patriarchs of post-Reconstruction and black religious institutions. Additionally, gospel music has a legacy of bestowing honorific titles upon some of America's most famous female Gospel singers, such as "Queen of Gospel," in the 21st century, conferred upon Mahalia Jackson, Albertina Walker, and Shirley Caesar, in sequential order or "Madame," in the cases of Ernestine Washington and Mattie Wigley. Such designations conveyed a sense of honor, admiration, and influence.

As DoVeana S. Fulton argues: "gospel…in the first half of the twentieth century…became a vehicle through which African American women could circumvent the restrictive dictates of Black churches, particularly Baptists, that barred women from preaching."[6] Expanding on Fulton's argument, African American women in black Pentecostalism also prominently used Gospel music in order to testify, preach, and witness despite not being licensed to preach, or ordained within their denominations. Therefore, for Black women, Gospel music supplied access to a pulpit of some sorts, and microphone so that their witness would be heard.

[6] DoVeanna S. Fulton, "Come Through the Water, Come Through the Flood: Black Women's Gospel Practices and Social Critique," *Journal of Religion & Society* 13 (2011): 12.

This visibility despite its alternative offerings, came with a cost, accommodating a tightly controlled structure that was both gendered and sexist towards Black women.

Embracing the feminine in any place of visible leadership is always contested, and Gospel is no exception. The tightly controlled structure within Gospel music privileged the patriarchal gaze. The patriarchal gaze functions like Toni Morrison's idea of "the white gaze"[7] in literature, which speaks of the positionality of whiteness as the central goal in the imagination and later production of literary work. Similarly, the patriarchal gaze within Gospel and Black Church culture positions cis-heterosexual maleness as the main audience for leadership and authority and expressing primary opinions for both. Thus, this gaze governs bodies, and specifically Black femme bodies while also exerting epistemic authority over how such bodies are read within religious spaces—either as acceptable or non-acceptable, well clothed or poorly clothed, and policed to safeguard from any offense to cis-heterosexual concepts of decency.

The Gospel music stage functions as one of the primary places where Black women's bodies are scrutinized and critiqued. They are critiqued as modest or not modest, too sexy or homely, as well as fit or unfit. Just check the comments sections of social media forums or articles about female gospel singing sensations such as Yolanda Adams or Erica Campbell, who are verbally chastised for what they wear, and how their clothes are fitted to their body. One could ask a series of questions: Too tight for whom? Whose gaze is being centered? Whose lust is being triggered? Certainly, while same gender attraction might be a concern for the gospel audiences, mainly these remarks privileges and centers male desire. While the ladies of Gospel

[7] Laraine Wallowitz, "Resisting the White Gaze: Critical Literacy and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," *Counterpoints* 326 (2008): 151.

are often lifted up as virtuosos when it comes to sonic ability, they are not remembered as institutional leaders, or primary authorities on Gospel music.

By contrast, Black men in Gospel are regarded as the *Fathers* and *Kings of Gospel,* which are titles that evoke memories associated with establishing the genre and giving the genre definition and structure. Both Thomas Dorsey as the "Father of Gospel Music," and James Cleveland, the "King of Gospel Music" are remembered for having institutional weight and strength beyond the stage and for shaping the very definition of what is Gospel music. Meanwhile, pioneering Gospel women are not remembered for their institutional building and definitive role in Gospel Music as seen in a failure to share the legacies of Arizona Dranes, Sallie Martin, and Willie Mae Ford Smith. Gospel women are primarily remembered as performers, but not leaders. Thus, the historical account serves as patriarchal ideal and memory of Black men as the heads, rather than accounts of the foundational efforts of both women and men in establishing Gospel music, both as an industry and an art form. This chapter analyzes the black church's historical memory of Black men in Gospel music, as well as male-centrism (i.e., androcentrism) within the Gospel music industry as it relates to awards, organizational efforts, and music production.

A Place of Our Own: Black Sacred Space, Post-Reconstruction Black Masculinity

The privileging of maleness, and male authority within gospel music is not an exclusive phenomenon to African American life but is the result of theological and historical constructions of masculinity that have dominated American religious and cultural discourses, and overall Western traditions of Christianity. Within the long arc of Christian theology, maleness has been positioned as first and foremost in the human ideal; possessing the qualities of reason, autonomy, and strength. This Eurocentric model spawns from both Greek and Roman philosophies that

theorized masculinity as primary and femininity as secondary. These ideals yet endure in Western Christianity and serves as a patriarchal justification for the exclusion of women from the pulpit, equating spiritual authority, and moral reason to masculine virtues. Theologian Nico Koopman states: "The dominant liberal of modernistic anthropologies that emphasized the rational capacities, autonomy and power of human beings…have their roots in the classical Greek model…and have been absorbed into Western Christian understandings of God and humanity."[8] This ideological inheritance provided the framework for ideas about gender and leadership, which is present within Black Church.

As analyzed in political scientist TeResa Greene's "A Gendered Spirit", the gendered ideal of male headship as practiced by American Society became an adoption of Black religious life, institutionally. "The underground religion of the slave churches"[9] had become institutionalized, and with institutionalization came both "gender and class assumptions"[10] that did not mark Black religious life as strictly before. Black churches both in antebellum enslavement and post-bellum Reconstruction became institutionally focused on elevating Black men. Greene further states that "The position of Black women changed in post-Civil War southern society and was circumscribed by the traditional gender roles of 19th century America."[11] The church became a central institution for Black survival and resistance, but also a stage upon which the ideal of Black male restoration was vigorously pursued. In the face of a society that had systematically emasculated Black men, many postbellum institutions—religious, educational, political—sought to construct a vision of respectable Black masculinity. Leadership,

[8] Nico Koopman, "Theological Anthropology and Gender Relations," *Scriptura* 86 (2004): 195.
[9] TeResa Green, "A Gendered Spirit: Race, Class, and Sex in the African American Church," *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 1 (2003): 120.
[10] Ibid.,123.
[11] Ibid.,123.

visibility, and dignity became the hallmarks of racial uplift, but they were often mapped onto male figures.

This structure was mirrored in church life: preaching became synonymous with male intellectual authority, and biblical texts such as Paul's letters were interpreted to reinforce male leadership and female submission. Women could sing, pray, and serve, but leadership was affixed to male bodies; and black leadership was even further affixed to black manhood both in function, and theological and social justification. Not only were Pauline letters used for the suppression of women in senior leadership within Black institutional life, but also the idea of black manhood being most suited to lead the Black community. This ideal is further amplified within DuBoisian concepts of the Talented Tenth, which prioritizes black men that are educated as most primed to lead the African American community. Therefore, to be black, and male within Black institution came an opportunity to ascend to the heights of leadership while the expectations of women were otherwise. Greene in her article further states: "The church, to a certain extent, supported the traditional separation of work along gender lines by refusing women admittance to the ministry and other offices within the institution."[12]

These patterns extended naturally into the world of gospel music, especially as Gospel became an institution in its own right. As Gospel music professionalized into an industry, the patriarchal structure of the Black Church was reproduced: women's voices became preeminent to the sound, but male leadership remained at the helm. Positions of institutional power—convention founders, denominational music directors, recording gatekeepers—were roles that were held by men.

[12] TeResa Green, "A Gendered Spirit: Race, Class, and Sex in the African American Church," *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 1 (2003): 120.

This legacy is nowhere more evident than in the exalted titles afforded to gospel's male pioneers and the male heirs to their legacy. Thomas Dorsey is remembered as the "Father of Gospel Music," and James Cleveland as the "King of Gospel." These are not just honorary names—they are markers of cultural power, theological authority, and institutional ownership. They signify not only excellence in music, but mastery over the infrastructure of gospel: the conventions, choirs, publishing houses, and performance circuits that defined the tradition. In this system, men were not just performers; they were builders, historians, and decision-makers. Gospel music like the Black Church became a place for Black men to exert leadership as directors, musicians, quartet leaders, soloists, publishers, and songwriters; a place of their own to replicate the gendered dynamics they had observed in White America.

Male Pioneers, Memory and Institutional Power

There are two men who will forever be linked to the genre of Gospel Music. Those two are Thomas A. Dorsey and Rev. James Cleveland. These two men, known respectively as the "Father of Gospel Music" and the "King of Gospel," are not only remembered for their contributions as composers, arrangers, and performers but more significantly, for their institutional influence. Their titles reflect not empty vanities but rather cultural authority, organizational control, and instructive authority. The legacies of both men have been instrumental in forming, what I characterize as a 'gatekeeper tradition' that flourishes in the gospel music scene as one who has a great amount of power in the creation of Gospel celebrity and is seen as an elder within Gospel music.

Thomas Dorsey's story as a songwriter is widely known, especially as the composer of *Precious Lord, Take My Hand*, however not often discussed is that Dorsey is also an institutional establishmentarian for Gospel music. In 1932, he founded the National Convention of Gospel

Choirs and Choruses (NCGCC) still remaining one of the longest standing organizations in Black sacred music.[13] Dorsey's convention served a dual purpose: pedagogical and developmental. The NCGCC functioned as an educational institution, teaching aspiring Gospel singers the do's and don'ts of Gospel music performance. Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith was primarily responsible for the mentorship of Gospel soloists, serving as both a vocal coach and spiritual mother to men and women who desired to minister through song. Additionally, NCGCC served a developmental purpose, and that was through the organization of the genre by establishing chapters across the United States, as well as the development of economic support for the genre through the purchasing of sheet music and gospel albums.

Through the NCGCC, Dorsey began to define what Gospel music was and what it was not; it was singing for the Lord—sacred work. Additionally, through the emphasis on piety, Dorsey made Gospel music distinct from the Blues, despite utilizing his Blues piano skills within arrangements. Gospel Music, with the help of Mother Willie Mae Ford Smith became more and more of a ministerial call, a way to win souls for Christ, otherwise known as evangelism. In doing so, he established himself not only as an originator of Gospel music but also a moral authority within the Gospel music tradition and therefore, Black religious life.

Dorsey's work was further built upon by the Rev. James Cleveland, a noted composer that also started a Gospel convention. In 1967, Cleveland founded the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA)[14] , which rapidly became the most influential gospel convention in the country. The GMWA created a formal space for aspiring gospel artists to learn, network, and gain exposure. But more than that, it became the central platform for determining who had

[13] National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses, "NCGCC – Our History," *NCGCC Inc.*, accessed April 7, 2025, https://www.ncgcc.org/about.html
[14] Gospel Music Workshop of America, Inc., "History of the Gospel Music Workshop of America," *Gospel Music Workshop of America, Inc.*, accessed April 7, 2025, https://www.gmwanational.net/History.htm.

access to gospel's mainstream industry. Through GMWA, Cleveland exercised cultural and professional authority: he mentored generations of artists, curated mass choirs, and solidified a performance aesthetic that shaped the sound of modern gospel. His impact extended beyond the choir stand. As a pastor, producer, and administrator, Cleveland wielded institutional power across spiritual, musical, and economic spheres.

Cleveland's masculine leadership was embodied not just in his organizational skills, but in his public presence. He conducted massive choirs with commanding energy, directed worship services with authoritative flair, and represented the face of gospel music at award shows, recordings, and religious conventions. He was not just a singer—he was a statesman of the tradition. This is further the case of Cleveland being the host of the critically acclaimed musical, Gospel (1983) directed by Frederick A. Ritzenberg and David Leivick. One of the first of its kind for the genre, that had crossover and international appeal. The musical Gospel (1983) featured The Mighty Clouds of Joy, Shirley Caesar, Walter Hawkins and The Hawkins Family and The Clark Sisters, with Rev. Cleveland and Southern California Community Choir ending the show.

Both Dorsey and Cleveland left behind more than songs, they created systems. Their leadership through the NCGCC and GMWA institutionalized a form of male cultural dominance that extended beyond the pulpit and into the musical realm. They built frameworks of recognition, publishing, training, and industry standards that persist today. Yet their stories are often told as singular triumphs of male genius, rather than collective efforts that involved countless women laboring behind the scenes. Women like Martin and Ford Smith are often caste simply as supporting characters in stories centered on male founders, dutiful helpmates but not co-founders.

Case Study I – *Come To The Father*: Thomas Dorsey, Male Definitive Authority and Moral Legacy

Thomas Andrew Dorsey (1899–1993) occupies a singular place in the history of American music—not only as a composer of deeply influential gospel songs but as the chief architect of gospel as a formal, institutionalized genre. Hailed as the "Father of Gospel Music," Dorsey's legacy is both musical and structural: he is remembered not only for what he sang but for what he built. His life's work offers a clear view into how Black masculinity, shaped by theological, cultural, and historical forces, came to dominate the infrastructure of gospel music. Through Dorsey, we see how authority, institution-building, and legacy preservation in gospel have been framed as male domains.

Born in Villa Rica, Georgia, Dorsey was raised in a religious household by a Baptist preacher father and a piano-playing mother. Yet his early musical path led him away from the church and into the world of blues, where he performed under the name "Georgia Tom"[15] and became a successful composer of blues material. This dual background—sacred and secular—would come to define his unique contribution to gospel music. After a personal religious reawakening following the tragic death of his wife and newborn child, Dorsey turned his creative energy toward composing sacred songs in a blues idiom, blending emotive melodies with evangelical themes. This theological-musical synthesis laid the foundation for what we now recognize as traditional gospel music.

But Dorsey's significance cannot be reduced to stylistic innovation. As Michael W. Harris asserts in *The Rise of Gospel Blues*: "Dorsey personifies—almost uniquely so—the

[15] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 40.

thought and social forces that forged the culture in which this music was shaped."[16] Dorsey did not simply innovate gospel blues; he institutionalized it. In 1932, he co-founded the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses (NCGCC), the first major organization dedicated to training gospel singers and musicians. Through this convention, he provided structured education, created networking opportunities, and published sheet music—codifying a national standard for gospel music that extended beyond the walls of any one church. Dorsey's control over pedagogy, repertoire, and professional development placed him in a central role—not merely as an artist, but as a gatekeeper of the genre.

Central to Dorsey's long-standing influence was his founding of the NCGCC as a nationally coordinated structure that centralized gospel training, pedagogy, and performance under a unified banner. The convention's annual meetings featured mass choir rehearsals, music theory courses, voice training workshops, and performance showcases—setting the standard for how gospel music was to be sung, taught, and organized. Serving as more than a gathering of singers, the NCGCC functioned as a professional development and leadership pipeline, launching countless gospel music careers and shaping the theological and musical foundation of the tradition. Chapters were established across the country but always operated under the centralized authority of Dorsey and the convention's governing structure. These chapters ensured that gospel music, wherever taught or performed, bore the imprint of Dorsey's values and vision. His hand was on every piece of music, every workshop, every choir director. The convention became a living manifestation of his masculine authority.

Dorsey's influence extended beyond organizing singers—he also controlled the means of production and distribution. With the founding of his publishing company, the *Dorsey House of*

[16] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 59.

Music, he became one of the earliest Black gospel music publishers, printing and distributing not just his own compositions but those aligned with his stylistic and theological vision. Through publishing, Dorsey exercised a sense of cultural gatekeeping: determining which songs reached choirs, which artists gained visibility, and which theological messages would circulate in Black churches. This placed him at the helm of gospel not only as a creative force, but as an industry leader. His title as the "Father of Gospel Music" was not merely symbolic—it marked him as the definitive authority, shaping gospel's aesthetic, theological, and commercial trajectory. From its inception as an institutional and professional field, gospel music was framed as male-led, with Dorsey setting the precedent for how gospel would be governed, remembered, and inherited. Women might have sung the songs, but Dorsey wrote the playbook—and owned the press on which it was printed.

Crucially, Dorsey's success was not achieved in isolation. He worked alongside women like Sallie Martin, who helped him promote his music and build the organizational scaffolding of the NCGCC. Martin was a tireless entrepreneur and savvy businesswoman who distributed Dorsey's sheet music, recruited members to the convention, and co-led musical workshops. Similarly, Willie Mae Ford Smith, another key figure in gospel's early days, helped shape the convention's vocal pedagogy and mentored countless female singers. Yet despite their foundational roles, these women were remembered as relational, even subordinate to Dorsey but not as co-founders or peers, and as aides to his singular genius.

This selective memory is compounded when Dorsey's legacy is compared with earlier women pioneers like Arizona Dranes. As Timothy Dodge details in *The School of Arizona Dranes*, Dranes was among the first to popularize the use of piano accompaniment in sanctified

music—well before Dorsey's rise to fame.[17] Blind, Pentecostal, and fiercely creative, Dranes recorded gospel music in the 1920s and brought rhythmic, percussive piano style into holiness worship settings. And yet, despite her tremendous influence, Dranes is largely absent from mainstream gospel historiography.

Moreover, Dorsey's long tenure as music director at Pilgrim Baptist Church in Chicago[18] , a role he held for over four decades, reveals how masculine authority in gospel extended beyond artistic contribution into ecclesial and spiritual influence. At Pilgrim, Dorsey standardized gospel choir performance, introduced emotionally expressive styles of worship, and mentored generations of musicians—nearly all under his direct guidance. As Robert Marovich's *A City Called Heaven* documents, the church setting was a site of cultural production, shaped by post-migration tensions, class conflict, and ideological struggles over respectability.[19] Dorsey's ability to maintain his authority in that space, and later across the gospel music landscape, speaks to how gospel's masculine leadership became naturalized within Black religious and musical life.

In sum, Thomas Dorsey's rise to prominence illustrates how institutional and artistic power in gospel music has been shaped by Black masculine authority. His work as a composer, organizer, publisher, and cultural architect established the infrastructures through which gospel music was taught, performed, and remembered. But it also established the precedent for whose voices are amplified in gospel's legacy—and whose labor remains in the margins. His case challenges us to think critically about how memory is structured, meaning in terms of who is

[17] Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 1, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[18] Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 45.
[19] Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5, ProQuest Ebook Central.

mentioned and who is left out of history narratives and the stories emerging from such narratives. For our purposes, the women who were seminal in establishing gospel music have been left out of the narrative or barely mentioned as co-founders. Dorsey's case also reminds us to think deeply about patriarchal frameworks and how such frameworks continue to define the contours of what we call sacred music history.

Case Study II: All Hail The King—James Cleveland and Institutional Memory

Revered as the "King of Gospel," Reverend James Cleveland, Jr. stands as a towering figure in the industrialization and professionalization of gospel music into the mid-to-late 20th century. Like Dorsey before him, Cleveland wielded power not only through his performances but through his organizational mastery, spiritual authority, and industry innovation. As a composer, producer, pastor, and founder of the Gospel Music Workshop of America (GMWA), Cleveland blurred the lines between musical performance, clerical leadership, and entrepreneurial control—cementing his status as a gatekeeper of gospel music's direction and legacy.

Cleveland's founding of the GMWA in 1967 marked a pivotal shift in gospel music's infrastructure. While Dorsey's NCGCC focused on training choirs and developing musical standards in a largely ecclesial context, Cleveland's GMWA functioned as a national convention, talent incubator, and industry launchpad. Each year, singers, directors, musicians, and producers from across the country converged at the GMWA to workshop new music, learn from seasoned professionals, and network with gospel insiders. The GMWA was not just a spiritual gathering—it was a machine of cultural production, churning out new artists, new sounds, and new theological expressions that reflected the commercial momentum gospel had gained. Through

this platform, Cleveland exercised a remarkable degree of institutional and spiritual control, influencing not only who got heard, but how gospel itself was defined.

The scope and reach of the GMWA reflect the depth of Cleveland's influence. Described as one of the largest musical organizations in the world, the GMWA brought together songwriters, singers, instrumentalists, radio announcers, choir directors, broadcast executives, and teachers from across the globe.[20] With more than 75,000 members and 185 chapters spanning the United States, Great Britain, the West Indies, and Asia, the GMWA was both vast and deeply structured. It held two annual gatherings: a mid-March board meeting and a weeklong summer convention attracting up to 20,000 registrants.[21] These conventions became sacred industry rites—offering workshops, performances, and training across all aspects of gospel music.

And yet, while membership was open, Cleveland remained the singular architect and spiritual anchor. He defined the mission, the standards, and the ethos. About 75 percent of Billboard gospel chart recordings were written, produced, or performed by GMWA members—making it not only a religious organization but a commercial powerhouse.[22] The GMWA's growth reflected Cleveland's vision for a professionalized gospel field, with academic divisions, men's and women's units, and special auxiliaries for everything from fashion to music business education and instrumentation. In sum, James Cleveland's legacy is inseparable from the rise of gospel as both a sacred artform and an industrial complex. Through the GMWA, he institutionalized gospel's infrastructure, codified its aesthetic, and set the terms of recognition and legitimacy.

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[20] "History of the Gospel Music Workshop Of America." Https://Www.Gmwanational.Net/History.Htm. Gospel Music Workshop Of America, INC.,
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

Chapter 2: Confessions—Sexual Conversion Narratives, Gossip and Gospel Media

Testimonies of deliverance for same gender loving men often function as both a tool of disclosure and a mode of protection for Black queer masculinities against scrutiny in gospel media and Black church spaces.[23] These testimonies, rooted in theological frameworks of liberation from sin, often serve as coded expressions of identity that simultaneously reveal and shield queer experiences. Also, testimonies of being delivered from same-gender sexuality often protects one from the looming scrutiny of exposure utilized by rumor mills. Gospel media, the Black religious press, and gossip outlets amplify these narratives, shaping the cultural expectations of gender, sexuality, and moral transformation. In this way, the testimony becomes a strategy for Black queer gospel artists to navigate the tension between authenticity and survival, offering a form of visibility that mitigates the risks of outright rejection or condemnation. This dual function underscores the precarious position of Black queer masculinities within spaces that demand conformity while exploiting vulnerability.

This chapter explores the intersections of deliverance narratives, media-fueled rumor mills, and public outings to examine how Black male gospel artists negotiate their identities within these fraught spaces. It seeks to answer the question: How does the gospel media ecosystem enforce conformity while simultaneously exposing queerness as an ongoing site of moral and cultural tension? By analyzing these dynamics, the chapter seeks to observe deliverance narratives as a tool of survival against the mechanisms of outing and parasocial violence undertaken by religious institutions against queer masculinities.

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[23] Alisha Lola Jones, " 'I Am Delivert!': The Pentecostal Altar Call and Vocalizing Black Men's Testimonies of Deliverance from Homosexuality," in *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 39, accessed April 29, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190065416.003.0002.

Deliverance as Christian Thought

Deliverance, within Christian thought, is fundamentally understood as the process of spiritual transformation and liberation from forces deemed evil or sinful[24]. Ancient Christian practices emphasized deliverance through acts of repentance, prayer, and the casting out of spirits, laying the foundation for what would become the formalized practice of exorcism.[25] In the Roman Catholic Church, exorcism developed as a sacramental act performed by clergy to expel demons or spirits believed to be oppressing individuals. The Rite of Exorcism, documented in the Church's liturgical texts, underscored a theological framework where sin and demonic forces were intertwined, necessitating divine intervention for spiritual liberation.[26]

In Protestantism, particularly following the Reformation, exorcism practices were largely reframed or rejected, though remnants persisted in certain denominations that emphasized personal piety and spiritual warfare. In American Protestantism, deliverance was often reinterpreted as a deeply personal journey of sanctification, emphasizing prayer and fasting as means to overcome sin and spiritual bondage. This was particularly significant in movements such as revivalism and later Pentecostalism, where deliverance narratives became central to the spiritual identity of adherents.

The history of Christian thought has long tied sexual practices, particularly those outside heteronormative frameworks, to sin. Within the Catholic Church, sexual activity not directed toward procreation was historically classified as sinful, with homosexuality specifically condemned as contrary to nature and natural law[27]. Protestant thought inherited these

[24] Naomi Richman, "Deliverance," in *The Routledge Handbook of Megachurches*, eds. Afeosemime U. Adogame, Chad M. Bauman, Damaris Parsitau, and Jeaney Yip (New York: Routledge, 2024), 272.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Rusi Jagose, "Catholic Canon Law and Homosexuality: An Assessment of the Natural Law Justification for Homosexual Intolerance," *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review* 54 (2023): 710.

frameworks but often amplified the emphasis on individual moral accountability. In American Protestantism, the conceptualization of LGBTQ+ sexuality shifted over time—from being categorized as a mental illness to being seen as a moral failing requiring deliverance. This shift enabled the rise of Sexual Orientation Change Efforts[28] (SOCE), where prayer, fasting, and other practices were used in attempts to change one's sexual orientation, perpetuating the notion that LGBTQ+ identities could be transformed through spiritual intervention.

Deliverance in African American religious traditions require steps to become emancipated from certain realities that are negative or is life-limiting. Often the need to be delivered is cited when one is believed to be entangled in a cosmic struggle against an evil force that seeks the bondage of the individual. The idea of a "ministry of deliverance" promotes behavior modification directly informed by a theology of spiritual warfare crafted in evangelical circles, by ministers such as Oral Roberts, as well as Frank Hammond.[29] African American religion has always encompassed a metaphysical cosmological world that include beings such as ghosts and spirits[30] that could be positive or negative, or in some case both, to individuals.

Evil spirits or spiritual bondage are viewed not merely as abstract concepts but as tangible realities that impact daily life. This cosmological retention reflects African traditional spirituality's emphasis on the interplay between spiritual and material realms, where negative spirits could bring harm unless counteracted by protective rituals or divine intervention.[31] These

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[28] American Psychological Association, *APA Resolution on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, February 2021), 1, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/sexual-orientation-change-efforts.pdf.
[29] Naomi Richman, "Deliverance," in *The Routledge Handbook of Megachurches*, eds. Afeosemime U. Adogame, Chad M. Bauman, Damaris Parsitau, and Jeaney Yip (New York: Routledge, 2024), 278.
[30] Elliott J. Gorn, "Black Spirits: The Ghostlore of Afro-American Slaves," *American Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (1984):550.
[31] Ibid.,553.

beliefs have persisted in African American Christianity, particularly in Black Pentecostalism, where the metaphysical struggle between good and evil remains a central theme.

Deliverance as Black Pentecostal practice

Black Pentecostalism places deliverance into the framework of a cosmic battle between God and Satan, or good and evil, where believers are caught in the middle and must choose a side. This theology draws heavily on Pauline scripture, such as Romans 7:21 where Paul declares: “When I wish to do good, evil is always present with me,” to articulate the constant tension between righteousness and sin. Deliverance practices in this context are understood as acts of spiritual warfare, where prayer, fasting, and personal piety are the primary weapons against negative forces.

This cosmic battle is vividly expressed in the lyricism of classical Pentecostal movements, with songs articulating phrases like “Satan on my track, trying to turn me back.” For Black Pentecostals, deliverance is seen as a means of emancipation from evil forces that seek to undermine Black life, body, and soul. Classical Pentecostals often identified Satan or adversarial forces as primary obstacles to achieving the goal of heaven. In contemporary settings, Black Pentecostals and Charismatics have broadened their understanding of adversarial forces to include influences on personal goals, physical realities, and health.

Negative forces are also seen as directly assaulting the body, where bodily limitations and illnesses are perceived as manifestations of oppressive cosmic powers. For early Black Pentecostals, the ministries of healing and deliverance were intrinsically connected, addressing the dual afflictions of the body and spirit. This is exemplified in the ministerial legacies of early

pioneers such as Apostle Arturo Skinner of Newark, New Jersey,[32] and Mother Mattie B. Poole[33] of Chicago. These leaders specialized in exorcism practices within the African American Pentecostal tradition, emphasizing the ministry of spiritual liberation for African American individuals. The first 50 years of African American Pentecostalism, starting with the Azusa Street Revivals up until the mid 60s were filled with evangelistic personalities that would travel across the country emphasizing the values of holiness, piety and being spirit-filled, as well as engaging in charismatic acts of laying hands on the sick and on those who were afflicted mentally or spiritually. Such figures influenced Black Pentecostal theology as it relates to metaphysical realities and thoughts surrounding the invisible world.

Early Black Pentecostal influencers categorized all behavior that deviated from classical Victorian ideals of modesty, and literalist-fundamentalist ideals of piety, as negative cosmic entities that wished to distract the saints. It was the duty of those who wished for holiness and sanctification to rebuke negative forces, by vocally confronting and exposing the temptation and by rejecting it. The mothers and fathers of traditional-Pentecostalism were known for their comments of pleading the blood against all things perceived to be negative. The even extended to the very real reality of a Post-Reconstruction Jim Crow society oppressing Black Americans.

American Protestantism has a long history of emphasizing a divide between the flesh and the spirit. Sexual behavior outside the confines of male-female marriage is identified as "works of the flesh." Any desire and or sexual pleasure outside of the marital bed can be regarded as lust, and thus against traditional Christian ethics. As such, any deviations from heterosexual

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[32] Estrelda Y. Alexander, *The Dictionary of Pan-African Pentecostalism, Volume One: North America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 242, accessed April 7, 2025, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1854398&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
[33] Estrelda Y. Alexander, *The Dictionary of Pan-African Pentecostalism, Volume One: North America* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018), 205, accessed April 7, 2025, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=1854398&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

marital norms were classified by Black Charismatics as inspired by the spirit of lust, a work of the flesh, a satanic distraction. One needed to daily combat against such temptation or predilection to be saved.

Deliverance in other African American religious circles aside from Black Pentecostalism, is thought of more widely as liberation.[34] Liberation as a Black theological and cultural concept has historical basis in the inception of Black religion practiced on North American shores. Liberation as concept, often focuses on the macro-challenges facing the African American community and need for Black persons to be fully emancipated from the ills of white supremacy. For a majority of Black churches whether charismatically inspired or not, there is a belief that the Black American journey is one of bondage striving towards freedom. How to attain such freedom and what freedom looks like is where Black churches differ.

In the Black Church tradition, testimony services have come to signify a form of deliverance holding significant cultural and spiritual weight and serving as rites of intensification that renew faith and communal bonds. Jon Michael Spencer, a leading musicologist explains that testimony emerged as a ritual where "the churched gather to worship"[35] through singing, shouting, and recounting God's deliverance, thereby "intensifying their faith and community for the week just begun". Testimony, Spencer argues, functions as both a rite of intensification and a rite of transition, fostering a "creative regression"[36] that allows the congregation to return to the

[34] Dwight Hopkins, "A Black Theology of Liberation," *Black Theology* 3, no. 1 (2005): 14, https://doi.org/10.1558/blth.3.1.11.65461.
[35] Jon Michael Spencer, "Isochronisms of Antistructure in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Testimony Service," *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2, no. 2 (1988): 5, https://read.dukeupress.edu/black-sacred-music/article/2/2/1/1540025/Isochronisms-of-Antistructure-in-the-Black.
[36] Ibid., 6.

primal source of spiritual renewal[37]. In this space, testimony transforms individual experiences of struggle, hardship, or sin into communal affirmations of God's redemptive power.

Deliverance Testimony as Inclusive Space

For figures like Daryl Coley and Donnie McClurkin, the avenue of testimony provides a performative space to introduce themselves into broader discourses of sexuality within the Black Church. Drawing upon the tradition of testimony as a rite of intensification[38] both artists reframe their experiences of queerness, shifting the narrative from LGBTQ+ individuals being viewed as abominations to being seen as victims of abominable circumstances. McClurkin, for instance, attributes his same-sex desires to early trauma and spiritual brokenness, presenting himself as a survivor of external forces rather than an agent of sin. Similarly, Coley's narrative aligns same-sex attraction with temptation common to artists, positioning it as a struggle rather than an inherent identity. In doing so, both figures introduce a discourse where the Black queer individual becomes a victim—a status that simultaneously garners sympathy while reinforcing the need for deliverance.

This framing allows LGBTQ+ participation in the Black Church to exist within a liminal space, where queerness is neither fully affirmed nor wholly condemned but recast as a condition to be overcome. By appropriating the communal power of testimony, Coley and McClurkin shift attention away from moral failure toward narratives of survival and redemption, aligning their personal struggles with the church's theological emphasis on healing which distracts from their sexual orientation and protects them against negative publicity. However, this framing also affixes victimhood to Black queer individuals, undermining the possibility of full inclusion and

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[37] Jon Michael Spencer, "Isochronisms of Antistructure in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Testimony Service," *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2, no. 2 (1988): 7, https://read.dukeupress.edu/black-sacred-music/article/2/2/1/1540025/Isochronisms-of-Antistructure-in-the-Black.
[38] Ibid., 9.

perpetuating cycles of marginalization. As Spencer notes, testimony services offer both escape and transformation[39], but for LGBTQ+ participants, this escape remains contingent on their alignment with narratives of deliverance rather than acceptance.

Gospel artists in the late 20th to early 21st century began to engage in the practices of self-disclosure and confession as it relates to their fanbase. Such trends towards transparency coincided with the rise of social media, creating personalities who fashioned themselves as persons whose revealed actions would be considered contradictory to values of chastity, piety, and heteronormativity. As the celebrity of a gospel artist grew so did the necessity for one to protect his image against rumor or gossip. The later gospel artist as a moral exemplar is linked to the foundations of the gospel music genre and witnessed in the lives of pioneers such as Thomas Dorsey and Willie Mae Ford Smith, both who emphasized modesty.

Such ideas are featured in the 1954 Dorsey song, "I'm Going To Live The Life I Sing About in My Song." A declaration set to bluesy music, it admonished Gospel singers to live a life of distinction and to practice separation from worldly behavior such as gambling, drinking, cussing, pre-material and same-gender sexual engagement. Deviations from a holy and righteous image or the potential for hypocrisy to be exposed could cost the Gospel artist a decline in influence, bookings, and sales. Media sources were the primary modes for Gospel artists and Black preachers to deliver their music and message. Through Christian television, publications, and radio, the Gospel artist became on par to the clergyperson; some artists would also eventually join the ranks of clergy. This contributed to the ambidextrous talent of preacher-singer or singer-preacher as well as the elevation of the gospel artist as moral leaders. Because of the

[39] Jon Michael Spencer, "Isochronisms of Antistructure in the Black Holiness-Pentecostal Testimony Service," *The Journal of Black Sacred Music* 2, no. 2 (1988): 9, https://read.dukeupress.edu/black-sacred-music/article/2/2/1/1540025/Isochronisms-of-Antistructure-in-the-Black.

elevation of the gospel artist's profile, they also became gatekeepers of Christian morality which was expected to be maintained.

An Analysis of *Score* Magazine Interview's 1994

In 1994, Pastor Daryl Coley narrated his experience with sexual conversion in the gospel magazine, *Score*. In an interview with Teresa Hairston—publisher of Score, later known as *Gospel Today*—Coley attributed his experience of being gay to his artistic nature. He stated, "Artists in general are very sensitive people, who are very open... So, there's not a 'distinction' in feeling for people and for situations."[40] Coley was one of the first gospel artists to publicly disclose his experiences with sexuality, including same-sex behavior. By 1994, Coley had achieved a great deal of success in the music industry, as a multi-grammy nominated Gospel artist. By 1994, he had also been recognized as a premier male Gospel vocalist who shared the stage with 'big named artists' like Patti Labelle[41], and Quincy Jones.[42]

Within the Score publication, he mentioned his encounters with fans and supporters who declared that his testimony had inspired them. He framed his narrative as a challenge to Christians to begin explicitly discussing sex and sexuality. He also addressed his struggle with diabetes, which he claimed to have been healed from. By doing so, he juxtaposed diabetes and same-gender sexuality as significant challenges that one could overcome with God's help. From a queered sociological and historical perspective, it is crucial to note that Coley made his public confession during the mid-1990s—one of the deadliest periods of the HIV/AIDS epidemic

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[40] Hairston, Teresa E. "Daryl Coley: The California-Born Gospel Singer Overcoming Homosexuality and Diabetes." *Cross Rhythms*, February 1,1995. https://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Daryl_Coley_The_Californiaborn_gospel_singer_overcoming_homosexuality_and_diabetes/40250/p1/.

[41] Elziroy Sonny Porter, *Daryl Coley & Patti LaBelle with Michael Jackson – Entertainer of the Year, NAACP Awards 1993*, YouTube video, posted September 3, 2019, accessed April 7, 2025, https://youtu.be/PToyo14Jb-U?si=0SM7WR1hw2EcpFqF.

[42] Mervyn Warren, *Soulful Messiah*, performed by Various Artists, track from *Handel's Soulful Messiah* (Warner Alliance, 1992), Spotify, accessed April 29, 2025.

among Black Americans. By communicating his testimony of deliverance from same-gender sexuality alongside his healing from diabetes, Coley evokes an image of same-gender sexuality as a disease, likening it to having too much sugar. Yet, this type of disclosure afforded him disclosure about his identity while also shielding him from moral failing.

Black same-gender-loving men have often been described as sweet or having sugar in their tanks, a slang and derogatory term characterizing such men as less than masculine. Although being sweet is often considered positive, it is primarily associated with women. As examined in the research of Edita Jodonytė and Palmina Morkienė, "female-associated words become totally derogatory when applied to males."[43] In contrast, men are usually praised for their strength rather than softness.

In his narrative of sexual conversion and healing from diabetes, Coley employs a rhetorical device of signifying, suggesting that the God who can heal the sugar (i.e., diabetes) can also deliver a person from being 'sweet'(i.e., same-gender sexuality). Coley's coming out as ex-gay occurred two years after a 1992 Jet article had published news of James Cleveland being accused of dying of HIV/AIDS[44] and infecting a young man, resulting in a $9 million lawsuit. Coley's interviews must be understood in the historical context of HIV/AIDS being labeled a gay man's disease and of American clergy—both Black and white—preaching that it was God's punishment for same-sex behavior. Engaging in same-sex acts was stigmatized as a quick and certain path to HIV/AIDS infection.

Therefore, Coley's articulation of his deliverance from same-gender sexuality is not just about satisfying a deity who disapproves of gay sex; rather, it suggests that God rescued him

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[43] Palmina Morkienė and Edita Jodonytė, "On Sexist Attitudes in English," *Kalbų Studijos / Studies About Languages*, no. 1 (2001): 49, https://www.ceeol.com/search/article-detail?id=805622.
[44] Ahmad Greene-Hayes, "Black Church Rumor: Sexual Violence and Black (Gay) Gospel's Reverend James Cleveland," *GLQ* 28, no. 1 (2022): 121, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9435697.

from a reality that might have included HIV/AIDS infection and death. His conversion narrative encompasses sexual purity, physical salvation, and spiritual soteriological implications. Coley is saved—saved from his own desires, from potential infection, and from the embarrassment of being outed posthumously, as Cleveland was. Through his disclosure, Coley negotiates how he will be remembered: as one who is delivered and healed.

Donnie McClurkin's deliverance narrative

A person who follows in the tradition of Coley and becomes more prominent in his articulation of sexual-orientation conversion is Pastor Donnie McClurkin. McClurkin, whose story is almost a part of his brand, primarily frames his same-sex attraction and sexual activity as a struggle that was introduced through sexual assault and molestation in his childhood years. McClurkin has shared his story of sexual orientation–conversion, as well as his survival of sexual abuse, in Gospel media publications, and in his own story published in 2000, entitled *Eternal Victim, Eternal Victor.* McClurkin credits the pastorate of Marvin L. Winans, Pastor of Perfecting Church of Detroit, as well as the Winans family, and Black Pentecostal spiritual leaders such as Mother Estella Boyd and Dr. Angie Ray of Chicago, IL, for being the persons who assisted him in his conversion. McClurkin primarily fashions his experiences with same-gender sexuality because of a dysfunctional family structure and being sexually abused.

Through his membership and close relationship with the Winans, Donnie McClurkin engages in a narrative in which he was re-parented by the Winans patriarch, David 'Pop' Winans, and other men at Perfecting who taught him to be a "real man."[45] McClurkin's story draws upon multiple anxieties regarding Black manhood and the Black family: one is that the Black family is dysfunctional without the presence of a cisgendered-heterosexual familial

[45] alphaape1, *Donnie McClurkin Shares His Memories of Perfecting Church Pt. 1*, YouTube video, 9:51, posted March 11, 2010, https://youtu.be/8Qbs1yzo_hM.

structure. McClurkin offers that he was delivered because of being accepted by a cisgendered-heterosexual familial structure in the form of the Winans family, a family made up of numerous descendants, with the male (i.e., David 'Pop' Winans) at the head and the woman (i.e., Delores 'Mom' Winans) at his side. McClurkin was not the only one who wished to be one of the Winans; notably, Whitney Houston claimed to also be a Winans adoptee as well.

McClurkin also describes metaphysical dynamics to his sexual conversion that were primarily undertaken by women. McClurkin does not credit his own prayer prowess or fasting but rather the spiritual surrogacy of older Black women such as Mother Estella Boyd and Dr. Angie Ray. Mother Estella Boyd was an African American Pentecostal preacher and faith healer, widely known as a prophetess "in and beyond Black Pentecostal circles for her special practice of laying on of hands,"[46] which she referred to as "shots of deliverance."[47] Dr. Angie Ray was an African American Pentecostal clergywoman located in Matterson, IL who had an emphasis on prayer, holiness practices, and spiritual warfare. McClurkin, in his account of Dr. Ray, speaks of her sharing an intimate prayer that rebuked "the residue,"[48] a statement alluding to his past of same-gender sexuality.

Donnie McClurkin's testimony became a main tool of the ex-gay movement in African American Christianity. His renunciation, as well as his public articulations of his ideals regarding LGBT members and the church, marked him as a consistent guest on Christian broadcasting television networks such as Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN) and the Word Network. McClurkin also became a figure that African American churches elevated for young people to

[46] Ahmad Greene-Hayes, "Shots of Deliverance: Mother Estella Boyd's Healing Hands and Global Black Pentecostal Reach," *Journal of Africana Religions* 10, no. 2 (2022): 149, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/862326.
[47] Ibid.
[48] SincerePraise, *Donnie McClurkin Testifies about Pastor Angie Ray*, YouTube video, 4:02, posted August 5, 2009, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7RgNzr1RKM.

look upon as a moral figure. His sharing of traditional heterosexual values was deployed as a weapon against an American culture in which gayness was moving into the mainstream, as witnessed with the shows Will & Grace (1998) and Ellen (1994), among displays of queer representation in the media. McClurkin would become a featured guest for COGIC Youth Day, Always Sisters & Forever Brothers, in other youth services, and presented as one who was risqué enough to talk about sex publicly. McClurkin, was not only fashioned as the sexual conversion guru for Black young men, but also unattainable as he became one of the most eligible, and non-eligible bachelors in the Gospel Music industry. To re-affirm his sexual conversion, McClurkin has been vocal about his desire for a wife, his preferences in women, and transparency regarding dating women.

Comparing Coley and McClurkin's Narratives of

Despite their public confessions, Coley and McClurkin's experiences differ. Coley does not associate his queer-sexual experiences with a sexual abuse but rather connects his experience as to a familiar temptation to artists. Coley suggests that "artists are sensitive people"[49] and that the Enemy is subtle, thus artists might retain an Achilles heel in relationship to sexuality, and queer sexuality, more specifically. Coley's deliverance narrative pales in comparison to the triggering narrative McClurkin raises. In the Score 1994 article, Coley himself does not define queer sexuality as a battle although the article does. Additionally, in his interview Coley speaks of prayer and counseling being mechanisms that lead to his non-continuation of queer sexual engagement. Coley does not credit anyone in his article for having a direct result or for being the catalyst that converted his sexual appetite. In fact, Coley fashions his experiences in the "gay

[49]Teresa E. Hairston, "Daryl Coley: The California-Born Gospel Singer Overcoming Homosexuality and Diabetes," *Cross Rhythms*, February 1, 1995, https://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Daryl_Coley_The_Californiaborn_gospel_singer_overcoming_homosexuality_and_diabetes/40250/p1/.

scene"[50] as one that occurred when he is not fully committed to being a Gospel artist, thus his gayness is not associated with the "gospel artist" stage of his life, rather it is a thing of the past by 1994. In the article, Coley articulates there are occasions in which he is tempted into being queer but that he knows "how to deal with it and not be offensive…how to maintain integrity"[51].

In the Score article, Coley also mentions his wife of by that time, 13 years, and having 2 children, proving his deliverance and his steadfastness to heteronormativity as a virtue. Coley presents the idea of full-deliverance, akin to a formerly drug-abusing addict that experiences transformation. Coley does not acknowledge any slip-ups, or any continued attraction to men but rather presents himself as a full family man. In contrast, McClurkin becomes a father but has not made it down the heterosexual marriage aisle, unlike Coley.

For McClurkin, his testimonies of deliverance from queer sexuality always comes as a result of sexual assault[52]. His attraction to men is introduced by violence, and consequently the attraction as well as the acts associated with the sexual orientation are perverted. McClurkin's association with religious figures is proof of deliverance, a full deliverance, but it is not instantaneous. Rather, his deliverance testimony suggests freedom from same-gender sexuality is a process that must be solved both cosmically and socially.

For McClurkin the issue is not only the sexual-engagement or attraction but also the association of black gay men with a stereotyped femininity. Coley focuses more on the behavior than "gayness" persona. Unlike McClurkin, Coley does not get into the complexities surrounding "real" manhood and masculinity. For McClurkin "gayness" is about gender performance. One

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[50] Teresa E. Hairston, "Daryl Coley: The California-Born Gospel Singer Overcoming Homosexuality and Diabetes," *Cross Rhythms*, February 1, 1995, https://www.crossrhythms.co.uk/articles/music/Daryl_Coley_The_Californiaborn_gospel_singer_overcoming_homosexuality_and_diabetes/40250/p1/.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 69.

being a real man means performing masculinity without any trace of deviance. McClurkin's deliverance experience has not yet resulted in marriage, like Coley's, but allows him to claim masculinity, and to claim being primarily attracted to women, as well as to being the biological father of a son.

However, pastoral theologian Horace E. Griffin critiques McClurkin's narrative of sexual orientation conversion in *Their Own Receive Them Not*. He declares in reality "most gay men and lesbians were not raped and are not rapists."[53]Additionally, by equating same-gender attraction and sexual activity to sexual trauma, McClurkin and others portrays Black LGBT+ persons as not only victims but also potential predators. That often directly affects where LGBT+ persons can serve within some churches. For instance, openly or even suspected persons who are same gender loving are prohibited from working in youth ministry reinforcing the homophobic belief that LGBT+ persons are negative influences on children.

Ultimately, the comparison suggests that the range of practices described in the American Psychological Association's manual under Sexual Orientation Change Efforts (SOCE)[54] to convert LGBT+ persons, is problematic. Whether because of temptation or trauma, LGBT+ persons are encouraged to ignore, suppress, and rebuke the attraction that might lead to same-sexual activity. In strivings towards acceptance and acceptability in the Black church and American society, LGBT+ persons via deliverance narratives end up creating dissonances in their identities and only being partially affirmed by the Church and society.

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[53] Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 70.
[54] American Psychological Association, *APA Resolution on Sexual Orientation Change Efforts* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, February 2021), 1, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/sexual-orientation-change-efforts.pdf.

In the next sections, we will consider the role of the black Gospel press and media outlets as discursive vehicles for narratives like that of Coley and McClurkin's and further black Gospel press' dual role in amplifying deliverance narratives as well as shaming and silencing same-gender sexuality.

Gospel Press as a Discursive Vehicle

To properly present the phenomenon of Black gospel media, it is necessary to situate it within the broader context of the Black press, which encompasses both secular and religious publications. The Black press was founded and anchored in religion. For instance, the first African American newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was organized by two Black clergymen. Similarly, the AME Church's, *The Christian Recorder*, stands as the oldest continuously published African American newspaper in the United States. The history of gospel media follows this tradition, emerging from newsletters published by African American denominations. These newsletters served as vital communication tools, promoting music, artists, and events while sharing critical updates with communities.

Before the widespread accessibility of television, especially within African American communities, information often spread through word of mouth and newsletters. Gospel record companies like Savoy extended this tradition by producing newsletters to publicize artists, schedules, and album releases. Under the leadership of Dr. Teresa Hairston, Savoy Records introduced *The Savoy Record*, a newsletter and pivotal development in Black gospel media. Hairston later founded *The Score,* a magazine dedicated to covering gospel music across all labels. *The Score* evolved into *Gospel Today*, which became a premier platform for Black gospel media and a forerunner for contemporary Black religious media in print. Like its contemporaries,

such as *Charisma Magazine*, *Gospel Today* not only highlighted gospel music but also shaped the discourse on Black Christianity, solidifying its role as a key cultural and theological medium.

In contrast to gospel media and the religious press, "Black religious gossip outlets" operate on the fringes—unfiltered, underground, and relentless. These outlets, which include gossip blogs, YouTube commentary channels, social media platforms, and church-based word-of-mouth networks, act as sites of communal surveillance, speculation, and moral policing. They thrive on the tension between the sacred and the scandalous, exposing the fault lines between queerness, respectability, and faith.

Black Religious Gossip Outlets as a Discursive Vehicle

Prominent figures such as William G. McCray III (aka Obnoxious Media) and DeMario Q. Jives (aka Larry Reid Live) are key personalities in this space, celebrated for their storytelling, rumor dissemination, and confirmation of notable figures' sexual identities. These outlets serve as arbiters of "the rumor mill," blending gossip with moral judgment while operating as unofficial watchdogs of Black Christian respectability. Platforms such as *Gay Christian Movement Watch* have also served as policing mechanisms, accusing churches and individuals of being lax in their denunciation of same-gender sexuality and perpetuating harmful narratives of queerness as sin.

The "rumor mill" has always been connected to Black gospel music, as documented by Anthony Heilbut in *The Fan Who Knew Too Much*, which reveals the personal lives, myths, and contradictions surrounding gospel artists during the Golden Era of Gospel Music.[55] This space has historically functioned as a double-edged sword: while gossip perpetuates moral scrutiny and exposes hypocrisy, it has also preserved the truths and legacies of gospel artists that might otherwise have been erased. For Black queer individuals, the rumor mill has operated as a

[55] Anthony Heilbut, *The Fan Who Knew Too Much: Aretha Franklin, the Rise of the Soap Opera, Children of the Gospel Church, and Other Meditations* (New York: Knopf, 2012), 32.

subversive method to combat erasure—a counter-narrative to the silencing efforts of both the Black Church and the gospel music industry. Lovers, partners, and close companions of gospel music stars, often dismissed or hidden from public record, find recognition and visibility through whispered stories and unconfirmed legends.

This paradoxical space simultaneously indicts individuals and institutions for unethical or hypocritical behavior while providing a platform to unmask the marginalization faced by queer individuals. The rumor mill's fascination with scandal reflects deeper cultural anxieties around sexuality and morality, while its enduring existence reveals the irrepressible presence of Black queer lives within the gospel music tradition. As much as the rumor mill exposes, it also immortalizes—keeping alive the myths, legends, and unspoken truths of gospel artists whose prominence in the church made visibility both dangerous and inevitable.

Gossip media within Black religious spaces often intersects with acts of public exposure, including the sharing of intimate videos and tapes of sexual behavior. Such videos are often the result of leaks from people who are participants or wish to expose the individual. These leaks participate in the phenomenon of "outing,"[56] which are acts of violence masquerading as accountability. Such incidents highlight the deeply punitive nature of outing, where the revelation of an individual's private life is weaponized to discipline them for failing to conform to heteronormative expectations.

The leakage of intimate media and its impact on gospel artists reveals the layered dynamics of institutional control and cultural policing. Often these incidents are not isolated acts but part of a broader ecosystem in which gossip platforms serve as arbiters of moral judgment. Gossip outlets take on the role of enforcers, disciplining individuals who fail to uphold the

[56] Marc Lamont Hill, "Scared Straight: Hip-Hop, Outing, and the Pedagogy of Queerness," *The Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies* 31, no. 1 (2009): 29.

polished, sanctified image expected of gospel artists. These platforms amplify harm by turning private violations into public spectacles, reinforcing the idea that deviation from heteronormativity or moral orthodoxy justifies humiliation and professional ruin.

The cultural implications of these leaks extend beyond individual harm, reflecting broader anxieties about sexuality, respectability, and power within Black religious spaces. For some, the exposure of private moments becomes a mechanism for moral regulation, policing the boundaries of who can belong and who must be excluded. At the same time, gossip media's fixation on such scandals underscores the paradox of the Black Church's relationship with queerness: an obsession with controlling and disciplining sexuality that coexists with a pervasive denial of the queerness embedded in its culture. This tension underscores the need to critically examine the role of gossip media in perpetuating cycles of violence, shame, and exclusion under the guise of maintaining institutional integrity.

The Interplay between Gospel Media and Black Religious Gossip Outlets

The interplay between gospel media, and Black religious gossip outlets reveals a collective ecosystem of surveillance, silence, and spectacle. Gossip outlets ignite controversies that gospel media and the religious press must then navigate, often by amplifying deliverance narratives or maintaining calculated silence. When rumors emerge about a gospel artist's sexuality, gospel media tends to publish stories of deliverance as evidence of God's transformative power, while the religious press sidesteps the issue to preserve institutional decorum. This dynamic reflects a broader cultural anxiety surrounding queerness, where exposure becomes a form of moral discipline and social regulation, and deliverance is framed as the only path to redemption.

Together, these platforms create a feedback loop enforcing heteronormative respectability while also making a spectacle of queerness for public consumption. Gospel artists find themselves navigating a precarious landscape where visibility is contingent upon adherence to moral orthodoxy; any deviation invites scrutiny and erasure. The collective power of these platforms highlights the ways in which the Black Church overshadows the public domain remaining a space of both sanctuary and surveillance, where LGBTQ+ individuals are rendered simultaneously hyper-visible *and* invisible. By exposing these tensions, we see how queerness becomes both a source of cultural fascination and a site of theological anxiety, revealing the unresolved contradictions at the heart of Black religious life.

Chapter 3: Autopsy of A Blackball: Tonex, Quareness and Gospel Music Industry

In 2011, Anthony Williams II, former gospel sensation known as Tonex premiered himself as B.Slade after being ostracized from the Gospel Music industry upon self-disclosing his identity as a same gender loving man. As B.Slade, Anthon Williams receives much deserved respect for transforming the ways Gospel music artists are reimagined because of his free expression as a performer.

This chapter argues that a "quare blackpentecostal erotic, ethic and method" disrupted traditional notions of Black masculinity and problematized the limits of Black masculinity within the Gospel Music art form, as represented in the embodiment of B.Slade (aka Tonex). By blending genres, embracing fluid aesthetic choices, and engaging in overt and covert discourse on sexuality, Tonex disrupts the traditional norms of Black masculinity and Gospel artistry. His refusal to be typecasted reflects a broader quare orientation that resists fixed identities and embraces the complexity of Black queer expression. Through his work, Tonex opens new possibilities for Black male artists in Gospel music, challenging the industry to move beyond rigid categories and to embrace a more expansive understanding of artistry and identity.

Tonex's public confession of same-gender attraction during the 2010 Lexi Interview on the Word Network marked a turning point in his career. The interview would be his last appearance on Christian television leading to the loss of bookings and notoriety within the Gospel community. Black Church leadership framed his confession as a betrayal of the social contract between Gospel artists and religious communities, emphasizing the need for sexual purity among those who sing Gospel. However, the backlash against Tonex was not solely a reaction to his confession but rather the culmination of long-simmering tensions.

Tonex had continuously made an effort to queer Gospel music in both genre and aesthetic, pushing the boundaries of how male Gospel artists should look and perform. His gender-queering fashion, genre-blending music, and lyrical explorations of sexuality had long made him a suspect within the Gospel community. The public outrage, therefore, was not just about his same-gender attraction but about his queer embodiment, which threatened the gender stratification of the Gospel music industry and what has come to define, African American Protestantism.

Quare Not *Queer:* Genre Blending and Gender Bending, To

Tonex's approach to Gospel music is not merely innovative—it is quare. Drawing on E. Patrick Johnson's theory of "quare"[57] as "a vernacular rearticulation of queer theory that centers race, class, and gender,"[58] Tonex's work disrupts the traditional norms of Gospel music and Black masculinity. Johnson defines quare as "odd or slightly off kilter,"[59] a term that denotes excess and resists containment within conventional categories of being. Tonex embodies this quareness through gender-bending fashion, genre-blending, and refusal to be categorized as a Gospel artist, instead positioning himself as an artist who makes Gospel music. This quare methodological approach challenges the heteronormative and patriarchal structures of the Black Church and the Gospel music industry, opening new possibilities for Black queer expression.

Tonex's very name, Toe-Nay, is a quare phraseology—a deliberate queering of the traditional name Tony. This linguistic choice reflects his Black queer identity and disrupts standard gender qualifications. As Johnson notes, quareness often emerges from African American vernacular traditions, where language becomes a site of resistance and subversion. By

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[57] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 2, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119.
[58] Ibid
[59] Ibid.,3.

adopting the name Toe-Nay, Tonex queers the English name Tony, shaping it to fit the embodied experiences of a Black queer male. This act of linguistic queering is emblematic of Tonex's broader artistic project, seeking to redefine the boundaries of Gospel music and performance. His debut song, *Pronounced Tonex*, further underscores this quareness, as it challenges the listener to engage with his music on his terms, rather than conforming to traditional expectations of Gospel artistry.

Tonex's Gender Bending: Fashion, Hair, and Ma

Tonex's quareness is also evident in his gender-bending fashion choices, which challenge traditional notions of Black masculinity in Gospel music. His use of boas, lace-front wigs, and makeup disrupts the heteronormative expectations of the Gospel music industry, where male artists are often expected to embody a hypermasculine, patriarchal ideal. As Johnson notes, quareness often involves a rejection of fixed identities and an embrace of fluidity and excess (Johnson, 3). Tonex's gender-bending fashion choices reflected this rejection of fixed identities, as they challenge the notion that a Gospel artist must conform to traditional gender norms. His use of makeup and wigs, in particular, queers the visual aesthetics of Gospel music, creating a space for Black queer expression within a genre that has historically policed gender and sexuality.

Johnson argues that quareness is about creating space for marginalized voices: "Quare studies acknowledges the different 'standpoints' found among lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgendered people of color—differences that are also conditioned by class and gender."[60] Tonex's gender-bending fashion embodies this commitment to creating space for marginalized voices, as it disrupts the heteronormative and patriarchal structures of the Gospel music industry.

[60] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 3, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119.

He embraces fluidity and excess in his fashion choices challenging rigid categories of gender and sexuality.

Tonex's fashion is also characterized by its androgyny and provocativeness, blending traditionally male and female elements in ways that defy conventional expectations. As Alisha Lola Jones analyzes in *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance,* Tonéx "stylistically mixed conventionally female-gendered materials, including boas, wigs, braids, faux locs, high ponytails, and hairpieces with conventionally male-gendered attire such as fatigues, Timberland boots, and A-shirts."[61] This blending of gendered clothing challenges the strict gender norms often found in Pentecostal communities, where attire is typically expected to conform to traditional masculine or feminine roles. Wearing such clothing that transcends these binaries and disrupts the heteronormative framework of gospel music.

Tonex's fashion choices are not merely about personal style; they are a form of "extramusical communication"[62] that signifies his "peculiar identity."[63] His clothing serves as a visual language that communicates his queerness and challenges the audience to reconsider their assumptions about gender and sexuality in the context of gospel music. For example, his use of boas, wigs, and other traditionally feminine accessories is a deliberate act of "queer coding"[64], surreptitiously signaling his identity to those familiar with queer culture while remaining ambiguous to others. This form of "signifying"[65] allows Tonéx to express his truth while navigating the constraints of a conservative religious environment. This fluidity in his fashion

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[61] Alisha Lola Jones, "'Wired': (De)Coding Tonéx's Unapologetic Queer Body Theology," in *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 72, accessed March 14, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190065416.003.0006.
[62]Ibid., 153.
[63] Ibid.
[64] Ibid., 160.
[65] Ibid., 153.

mirrors the fluidity of his musical style, which blends gospel, R&B, hip-hop, and electronic dance music. His fashion was thus an integral part of his overall performance, enhancing the message he conveys through his music.

Genre Blending: The Naked Truth Mixtape and *Pronounced Toe-Nay*

Tonex's quareness, engagement with sensuality and blackpentecostalism is perhaps most evident in his debut album, *Pronounced Toe-Nay* (2000), and his later projects, *Out of The Box and Unspoken*. These works challenge traditional notions of what Gospel music should sound like, incorporating elements of rock and roll, hip-hop, and electronic music while pushing lyrical boundaries that speaks to lived religious experiences that are not usually discussed in the Gospel music genre. Tonex's work embodies excess by blending genres and themes in ways that defy the sanitized, family-friendly image often associated with Gospel music.

Further, in his debut album, Tonex introduces himself as anything but a typical Black Gospel artist—if a Gospel artist at all. The title track, *Pronounced Toe-Nay*, is a bold declaration of his quare identity, featuring lyrics that incorporate both sexual innuendos and references to drug usage. Tonex confidently states that people are "drooling off his beats,"[66] and the "Shekinah glory fumes"[67] make individuals choke. These lyrics are layered with double meanings: while Shekinah glory is a biblical term referring to the divine presence of God, Tonex's use of the word "fumes"[68] and the imagery of choking suggest a more subversive interpretation, evoking the idea of being overwhelmed by something intoxicating or even illicit. This duality—sacred and profane, spiritual and sensual—epitomizes the erotic.

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[66] Tonex, *Pronounced Toe-Nay*, Jive Records/Verity Records, 2000, YouTube video, accessed March 12, 2025, https://youtu.be/MSFst9L2x7Y?si=gRhUgl3YT2xZ9WrT.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid.

Tonex's lyrical imagery and invocation of the Spirit replace the need for an active or passive sexual partner, and in both places offer an interpretation of the erotic based on a spiritual experience. Tonex's creativity must not only be understood as quare, but as a mixture of quareness and Pentecostal spirituality lending itself to a certain kind of erotic performance and embodiment that has everything and simultaneously very little to do with a sexual moment. Embracing fluid interpretations of his genre-bending music allows listeners to hear their own rhema words and messages in and from the music. As such, listening to Tonex's genre-bending renditions of gospel, reminds us that: "Quare denotes excess incapable of being contained within conventional categories of being."[69] Tonex's *debut album* embodied this excess, as it blended genres and themes in ways that interrupted conservative expectations of Gospel music. By incorporating sexual innuendos and drug references into a Gospel album, Tonex pushes beyond the boundaries of what is considered normal or acceptable in the genre, creating a space for Black queer expression.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of Tonex's quare methodology is his refusal to be categorized as a Gospel artist. Instead, he positions himself as "an artist who makes Gospel music," rejecting the inflexible categories imposed by the Gospel music industry about what Gospel music is. This refusal reflects a quare orientation, as it resists fixed identities and embraces the complexity of Black queer expression. By refusing to be categorized as a Gospel artist, Tonex carved out space for Black queer expression within a genre that has historically excluded it. This act of resistance is a key component of his quare methodology, as it challenges the domineering boundaries within Gospel music industry.

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[69] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 6, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119.

"Quare" rather than "queer" serves as a more appropriate definition for the work of Tonéx because of the intersectionality of race and sexuality that his artistry embodies. Tonéx's work is deeply rooted in African American culture and the lived experiences of Black queer individuals, both within religious and secular contexts. The term "quare,"[70] as coined by scholar E. Patrick Johnson, expands on queer by explicitly incorporating the racial dimensions that are often overlooked in mainstream queer theory. "Quare" rather than "queer" acknowledges specific cultural, linguistic, and spiritual contexts – ones shaped by Tonex's artistry.

"You Wear a Boa": Receptions of Tonex, Black Gospel Blackball

Tonex became a controversial figure within the Gospel Music industry and Charismatic Black circles because of his gender-blending fashion, genre-bending, and linguistic expressions. He was not new to being the center of controversy, however public backlash against him intensified with the release of *The Naked Truth* mixtape, which contained profanity, anger toward Black Pentecostal traditions, and cover art depicting his naked back. He later issued a formal apology to his denomination[71], the Pentecostal Assemblies of the World. While Tonex had always been considered edgy and innovative by pushing the boundaries of gospel music, his artistic defiance became too extreme for traditional black church culture. Nevertheless, his story mirrors that of many Black queer folx in Black Church spaces—celebrated for their creativity and passion until their honesty becomes too apparent, until the sweet tea is clocked, and until the signifier is no longer hidden.

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[70] E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (2001): 11, https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119.
[71] JFuzion, "Tonex's Public Apology for *The Naked Truth*," last modified September 2007, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.jfuzion.com/2007/09/tonexs-public-apology-for-naked-truth.html.

Moreover, while Tonex was a major commercial success, public reception of him by traditional gospel audiences were at an all-time low because Tonex did not look like your typical gospel artist, with a Caesar fade, and 3-piece suit. He was described by Bohemian, and edgy.[72] Commenting on this Gospel magazine editor, Christopher J. Pierce asserts in a 2006 article, "Tonex Vs. Everybody": "It was a look I found off-putting in a Christian artist not only because I couldn't possibly imagine Jesus wearing such a thing, but because it seemed so unoriginal and derivative. I thought, well, here's some kid trying to be Prince."[73] Tonex actively went against dress codes and fashion standards common not only to Gospel but also to Black religious life and professional classes. Gospel artists have historically tailored their wardrobe to align with a certain sense of modesty. The theopolitical categorizations of what is modest or not within Black religious spaces and Gospel music spaces is historically tenuous; yet there is a dress standard and Tonex defied those standards.

For instance, pioneering Gospel artists like Willie Mae Ford Smith and Sallie Martin both on-stage and off-stage donned hats, dark colored suits with the occasional white dress, or black robes. Male gospel artists in the early days of Gospel were mostly within quartets, and therefore wore a particular uniform – dinner jacket, white shirt and dark pants. Not until the golden era of Gospel, 1950s-60s, did Black male soloists, as in case of Professor Alex Bradford and the Alex Bradford Singers, wear robes by putting their own spin on them, and by featuring multi-color scapulars, over white robes. In the late 1960s into the 1970s, Gospel male artists such as Edwin Hawkins started to deviate from the typical Gospel wear but still dressed and wore fashion styles of the era, featuring bell-bottoms, fitted shirts and afros. Edwin Hawkins and The Hawkins

[72] PraiseNet, "Tonex," accessed March 14, 2025, https://praisenet.org/legacy/06/tonex/.
[73] Ibid.

family thus liberated the Gospel image for both males and females, expanding the possibilities of what Gospel artists could look like.

Tonex and his contemporaries, Detrick Haddon and others, went even further and pushed the male Gospel image through their embrace of hip-hop and neo-soul fashion, polished off by sunglasses, corn-row braids, and self-evident body-positivity. By 2006, Tonex had retired from Gospel Music stating he was removing himself from "an industry and religion that has completely stripped and cut and scarred his heart to the point he [felt] there's no repair."[74] However, before his 2006 retirement he had gotten a divorce and "soon after, he was sued by Zomba/Verity Records for one million dollars after announcing publicly that the label was 'mistreating' him with 'unfair business practices' that caused him to be cheated out of monies owed."[75] After his lawsuit and divorce, he had released an independent Christian album, *Oak Park 921'05*, which according to him was "the first Christian-artist album to carry a parental advisory sticker."[76] Yet, *Oak Park 921'05* has been considered by fans to be one of his finest masterpieces, engaging in a sonic autobiography highlighting young adulthood experiences. At that time and in a review by Rapzilla, a Christian hip-hop online magazine, *Oak Park 921 '05* was considered an "essential recording for all Tonex fans."[77]

By 2009, Tonex left the Gospel Music industry and started recording on the Hip Hop label, Battery Records. His releases were mostly music with Christian themes and his fan base continued to be Black Church and Gospel music audiences, even though he was an artist who performed Gospel music and no longer a Gospel music artist. His fan base still credited him with

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[74] Justin Camacho, "Tonex Announces Retirement," *Christian Post*, January 30, 2006, https://www.christianpost.com/news/tonex-announces-retirement.html.
[75] San Diego Reader, "Tonex," accessed October 30, 2023, https://www.sandiegoreader.com/bands/tonex/.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Rapzilla, "Review: Tonex – Oak Park 92105," January 2005, accessed March 14, 2025, https://rapzilla.com/2005-01-review-tonex-oak-park-92105/.

being influential to them as youth and young adults. Interestingly, also by 2009, Tonex was pastoring the church once led by his father, District Elder Anthony Williams Sr.—Truth Apostolic Church in San Diego.

In a later interview with Lexi Allen, she challenges Tonex who, by that time, had changed his name to B.Slade, about being identified as Pentecostal and being reared Pentecostal. The Lexi Allen interview with Tonex is broadcast on The Word Network, also known as The Word, a religious broadcasting network that claims to be the largest African American religious network in the world. The Word Network widely aired African American Pentecostal and Charismatic preachers such as Bishop G.E Patterson, Bishop George Bloomer, and Pastor Jamal Bryant into homes all over the country. The Word Network also would broadcast mass African American Pentecostal gatherings such as The COGIC Holy Convocation, P.A.W Summer Convention, and Full Gospel Baptist International Conference. Thus, the interview was framed by the viewers watching, many of whom expressed the conservative sexual ethics of their denominations.

While discussing his mixtape, *The Naked Truth*, Lexi poses questions about the album's content, which included Tonex revealing information about his molestation.[78] Tonex makes clear that his molestation did not serve as a catalyst for consensual sexual exploration. Lexi, however, asks Tonex directly if he struggled with homosexuality. Tonex refutes struggling with his sexuality and/or sexual experiences. However, what is apparent is Lexi is attempting to guide the conversation in such a way that conservative Christians with homonegative beliefs will be empathetic to Tonex and/or tolerant of him.

[78] Lexitelevision, "The Lexi Show (Tonex) Part 3," YouTube video, posted September 10, 2009, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/970nMJ_nhIg?si=vhRdFHIi2R8uy7w3.

Some of the most notable rhetorical ways same gender loving people in homonegative spaces have gotten to engage in discourses about sexuality while also protecting themselves, their jobs, and their livelihoods is by claiming sexual conversion, celibacy, or unwanted sexual desire. Even though Tonex makes no mention of these in the Lexi Allen interview, he like Daryl Coley and Donnie McClurkin, touched on deliverance in his commercially successful release *Out of the Box (2004),* subtly implying he had received deliverance – from same sex desires. His song lyrics point this out: "Ahhh…you say you were born that way... My God doesn't make mistakes... So quit putting all the blame on other people... Ahhhh, you just gotta make a change."[79] Though deliverance does come up at an earlier stage of life, Tonex later (2010) actively engages in discourse around the LGBT+ movement and with gay-thought advocates to suggest same-gender attraction is a matter of biology and not choice. While he refutes being gay, he further refuses to boil his sexuality down to a bodily bedroom practice and expands the conversation into one regarding sexual ethics and orientation and being a "matter of energy, people's honesty and a matter of love."[80]

Tonex conveys an ethic of responsibility, honesty, love and respect, as well as a fluidity that is subversive to binary thinking in both heterosexual and homosexual circles. Additionally, Tonex articulates more of a concept about the erotic than of sexual action, by raising the idea that the erotic rather than pornographic energy[81] should fuel human interaction, including sexual relationships. Within American Christianity, sexual fluidity is often not on the table, either one is

[79]Tonex, "The Children's Bread," on *Out of the Box*, Verity Records/Nureau Ink, 2004, YouTube video, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/rAChV7fHka8?si=So-BBngZbTRabVyb.
[80] Lexitelevision, "The Lexi Show (Tonex) Part 1," YouTube video, posted September 10, 2009, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/970nMJ_nhIg?si=vhRdFHIi2R8uy7w3.
[81] Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1978).

straight or gay, and if one is gay, one needs to become straight. Bi-sexual erasure is often a feature of sexuality discourse in both secular and religious spaces.

Tonex delivers the message that his sexuality cannot be labeled or be confined to gay or straight. Like his approach to music, Tonex's approach to sexuality is an extension of "quareness." Quareness refuses to be reduced to a simple formula. It resides in the complexities of a racialized sexual life. Tonex requires a more expansive conversation about sexuality—*his sexuality*. For Tonex, categorization itself is a mechanism of control that must be resisted, even if the risk is misunderstanding and ostracization.

One of the most notable public decries of Tonex came from Pastor Donnie McClurkin at the COGIC Holy Convocation in November 2009, in which he admonished the young people in the audience that "God has not called you to such perversion."[82] In a recent interview, Tonex now known as B.Slade, declares that McClurkin is one who had a direct hand in him being blacklisted from Gospel music circles. Seemingly, the tension between them is not merely theoretical or theological but personal.

Tonex's decline to fit within heterosexual and homosexual frameworks is offensive to McClurkin's work as Tonex constructs a new paradigm for thinking about the gender and sexuality of male Gospel music artists. Before Tonex, a new framework was unimaginable. An out-male gospel artist contradicts the McClurkin-Coley model demanding same-gender male gospel artists renounce their attractions, engage in a process of sexual conversion and testify about the experience. In his 2010 interview with Lexi Allen[83], Tonex states that he had tried to engage in deliverance practices but that it had not worked. Ultimately, he deemed the spiritual

[82] Williams Temple COGIC, "Donnie McClurkin and Joyce Rodgers Talk to the Youth COGIC," YouTube video, posted January 28, 2011, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/gJEonFztD0w?si=miojSUjNOAld5sKj.
[83] Lexitelevision, "The Lexi Show (Tonex) Part 1," YouTube video, posted September 10, 2009, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/970nMJ_nhIg?si=vhRdFHIi2R8uy7w3.

issues that he needed assistance with were pride, lust, envy as well as other things but *not* same-sex desire.

After McClurkin's suggestion about Tonex's sexual orientation at the 2009 COGIC Holy Convocation, he made an altar appeal for anyone struggling with same-sex desire or who had engaged in same-gender sexual encounters, and the altar was full of young people with hands lifted begging God to be changed. McClurkin, while a very public example, was not the only Gospel figure that stood against Tonex. Over Twitter, Tonex's contemporary, Deitrick Haddon also stood against him, to claim "not all Gospel singers are gay."[84]

What made Tonex's 2010 interview and self-confession acute and so intensely felt across gospel and black church communities is the presence of social media channels, such as Myspace and Twitter. Upon researching the aftereffects of the interview, I found numerous abandoned chatrooms and comments left on gospel magazine websites regarding Tonex's numerous controversies pre-2010 and the definitive Lexi Allen interview moment. The popularity of Tonex combined with the interview going viral on YouTube, catapulted the topics of sexuality, same-sex attraction, and the presence of LGBT+ persons in Gospel Music and Black Church leadership to the top of the discussion que at youth conferences and services. Even McClurkin responds to Tonex's 2010 interview with Lexi Allen during World Youth Day at the 102nd COGIC Holy Convocation.[85]

McClurkin's presence at the COGIC Holy Convocation was not novel, for he had been a continual special guest specifically for World Youth Day. However, with Tonex's public self-

[84] Kelefa Sanneh, "Revelations," *The New Yorker*, January 31, 2010, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/08/revelations-3.
[85] Williams Temple COGIC, "Donnie McClurkin and Joyce Rodgers Talk to the Youth COGIC," YouTube video, posted January 28, 2011, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/gJEonFztD0w?si=miojSUjNOAld5sKj.

disclosure combined with anxieties about the normalization of homosexuality amongst youth and young adults, McClurkin came with an even more heated, stringent, and emotive response. His response was not the exception but the rule for Black Church leaders, especially African American Pentecostals. Additionally, after the Lexi Allen and Tonex interview, she posted an addendum to the conversation that stated she believed that "a man was made for woman, and a woman made for man...that the Bible speaks very clearly about this, but as a journalist it is my job to tell the story and as a Christian it is my job to love absolutely everybody unequivocally, and unapologetically."[86] In a *New Yorker* magazine article after the uproar, Tonex admitted that there were gospel artists who would have wanted to support him "…but they can't,"[87] inferring support and/or alignment with him and his views on gender and sexuality would cost a person their livelihood in the gospel music industry.

The broad assumption of Gospel music industry heads is that Gospel music is primarily listened to and funded by Black Christians and for the most part Black Christians belonging to un-affirming and/or non-inclusive congregations and denominations. Still to this day, there is not one historically black denomination that doctrinally affirms the rights and identity of same gender loving people. In fact, the largest African American Protestant denominations, ranging from Methodist, Baptist to Pentecostal to Baptiscostal all vehemently oppose same-sex marriage and are theologically against same-gender sexuality.

As public figures, gospel singers have had a hand in liberalizing Black Church theology on a range of social issues whether those concern divorce, re-marriage, modest apparel, genre blending, gender bending or a variety of other subjects. However, in the case of Tonex, pushing

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[86] Lexitelevision, "The Lexi Show (Tonex) Part 3," YouTube video, posted September 10, 2009, accessed March 14, 2025, https://youtu.be/970nMJ_nhIg?si=vhRdFHIi2R8uy7w3.
[87] Kelefa Sanneh, "Revelations," *The New Yorker*, January 31, 2010, accessed March 14, 2025, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/02/08/revelations-3.

sexual boundaries and gender-politics goes beyond institutional and into black ontological problems. Homophobia and queerphobia are not purely the machinations of the Black church, though the institutional Black Church has a strong hand in propagating certain theo-social beliefs about gender and sexuality. Such beliefs surpass non-churchgoing black people and get into the black community to include Black secularists who believe Black men and women should comport themselves and behave in particular ways.

"What Are You Doing?": Tonex's Reflections and Transition to B.Slade

One question that Lexi Allen asked Anthony Williams II, also known as Tonex, towards the end of his interview was: "What are you doing?"[88] This question stuck with me, because as one writing about gender and sexuality by conducting research into Williams' trajectory as a gospel artist, it is not clear what Williams intends to do. What is clear, however, is his deliberate participation in honest discussions about experiences that are prevalent in Black religious life within the United States. Tonex, now known as B.Slade, in his 2016 single release "Conversation," discussed the aftermath of his blacklisting yet declared: "It's about time we have a conversation."[89]

Tonex has been having such conversations since the dawn of his career. He has consistently involved audiences, resistant or not, in addressing themes not only about same gender attraction, but molestation, consumerism, death, grief and a plethora of other topics. Through his artistic approach, B.Slade has privileged lived experiences, and especially the embodied realities of black LGBT+ persons. He has not allowed their experiences to be flattened, repressed, or labelled perverse. He has expanded the discourse on sexuality within

[88]Lexitelevision. "The Lexi Show (Tonex) Part 2." YouTube video. Posted September 10, 2009. Accessed March 14, 2025. https://youtu.be/Yg5EhnbZqkA?si=Imy0t7GG4hbj-yYG.
[89] goldenchildholdings, *B.Slade Conversation*, audio, accessed March 14, 2025, https://soundcloud.com/goldenchildholdings/bslade-conversation?in=dessyt/sets/my-fav.

Black religious spaces to be inclusive of persons who identify as gay or—straight. Tonex's work of expanding conversations, reimagines what black male gospel artists can look like, sound like, talk about, and live out. He embraces and delivers on the challenging work of "quare-ing" the fields of Gospel music and Black music, more generally.

Chapter 4: Where Have All the Choir Directors Gone?

The year is 2025. When I walk into the sanctuary now the choir loft that used to be filled to the brim with colorful suits, shades of brown, ebony, hues of gold, with voices raised in full vocality exerting mystic power that could only be responded to by fits of frenzy, has now been replaced with a giant tv screen, upheld by two steel poles. On the tv screen are different images, scriptures and lyrics, pictures of waves, graphics of the sermon that have been curated by the media team. But I can't help but remember the image of the lanky choir director that would be the chief commander of the voice of the choir. The choir would sing when he would move, conveying a sense of his mythical authority that would cause us to ask what manner of man is this? That even the sopranos would obey him. An individual that could command sound by the movement of his body. And now the choir director, a figure that was present in a great deal of black churches has either been replaced or their role/power has been scaled back.

The choir director is a figure of power; they are the authority on matters of music within Black church space. They choose the songs to be sung, sometimes even arranges them, is responsible for interpretation of songs, and selects the soloist if there is a need for them—all of these being functions that come under the purview of the choir director. Choir directors are masters of sound for Black churches. Often being the Minister of Music, choir directors not only direct the choir but also instruct the church band on the tempo, how the music is to be played, when to come in to start playing, and when to stop playing. The choir director is the rhythmic and sonic authority within the Black Church. Rhythm and voice are not only features of Black Church culture, but also a part of the spirituality of the Black Church.

The director is not only a cultural icon within Black churches but also the spiritual authority on music, teaching choirs how to interpret a song and conveying the words with

conviction. Replacing choirs are praise teams, and with that replacement the mega-role of the Choir director within Black Church space has been reduced. The praise and worship leader is now the person who carries the sound and spirit of Black church spaces. In response to this evolution, there is a great amount of discussion of whether one is "team choir" or "team praise and worship," added to that is the hashtag and Black church movement declaring *"Bring the Choir Back."* These efforts are feats of recovery at reintroducing choir music to the popular culture of Black Church, so that such legacy will not be lost.

This conversation is not merely about preferences but also about the cultural memory of Black Gospel music sounds in black church halls. How we remember a thing creates a feeling of satisfaction. Hence, the choral eras of Black Gospel music ranging from the late 1960s to the early 2000s is not complete; there is still so much more work left to do. The question of the matter is what ended such an era, what were the motivations to move away from the choir. To properly have a conversation that remembers the Black Gospel choir, I believe we must revisit historical moments and sociocultural movements where they reigned.

While traditional choral music is still part of gospel music, it is now a subculture with its own fanbase significantly less than the likes of Maverick City Music. Yet, with all its technicality, Maverick City Music does feature a choir, as does The Choir Room, and even Kanye West's Sunday Service Choir. However, these groups are not out of the tradition of Milton Brunson & Thompson Community Choirs, Charles G. Hayes & Cosmopolitan Choir, The Institutional Radio Choir, and so many more. They are not named as members of the Black choir tradition despite being ensembles. Not only that but their directors, when they have them, are not viewed as Choirmasters. They are just there.

Where have all the choir directors gone? Other than dwindling numbers, between the late 20th century and early 21st century, a generation of male Gospel artists disappeared. Black gospel music was defined by the black brilliance and virtuosic compositions of such choir directors. They were flamboyant. They were emotive. And they queered the genre through visual performances, vocal arrangements, and vibrant fashion style. Yet in an instant, in a moment- as fast as their careers soared-they disappeared from the Gospel music scene and from life all together.

The Choir Director: Male Authority, Gendered Terrains

In 1931, the first modern gospel choir was formed by Thomas A. Dorsey at the Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church in Chicago, IL[90]. Through this historical legacy, gospel choirs became linked to the premiere of the Gospel music genre. Dorsey in his role as Minister of Music at Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church, would compose and arrange music for the gospel choir for the purpose of worship at the Chicago church. Dorsey would later as one of the founders of Gospel Music in 1933 organize with the help of Sallie Martin the National Convention of Gospel Choirs and Choruses[91], the first gospel convention within the United States. Choirs are not only special to Gospel, but they are also foundationally linked to the history of the genre, as a featured component from its very start. Male choral directors hold a special significance in Gospel choirs, standing as its leader, functioning as music arranger, as well as primary administrator of logistical matters.

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[90]Michael W. Harris, *The Rise of Gospel Blues: The Music of Thomas Andrew Dorsey in the Urban Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 78, accessed March 14, 2025, https://search-ebscohost-com.proxy.library.emory.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=169747&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
[91]Robert M. Marovich, "One of These Mornings: Chicago Gospel at the Crossroads," in *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 83, accessed April 7, 2025, https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252039102.003.0018.

Choral directors carry the burden of having to embrace rigid sociocultural understandings of gender in a patriarchal black church institution while also delivering passionate, empathetic, spiritually sensitive performances that will cultivate an atmosphere of praise and worship. This leads to the suggestion that: "…there are two archetypal male figures that are heavily scrutinized for their masculinity or sexuality at Sunday service: the musical or choir director and the pastor or preacher."[92] Both positions of great authority carry the cultural, social and spiritual weight of the religious community.

Choir directors, male Ministers of Music, male Praise and Worship leaders, and male Gospel soloists represent male spiritual and religious authority within black church tradition. However, all of these positions of authority are frequently stereotyped to be filled by a gay male. This phenomenon has been observed by ethnomusicologist, Alisha Lola Jones in her 2016 article, *Are All The Choir Directors Gay* where she explores the theopolitical terrain of stereotypes and rumors levied upon black male gospel artists and musicians. Her article cites philosophical and social ethicist Victor Anderson who states "…male gospel singers and especially choir directors are often stereotyped as soft, feminine, or queer, notably when they use their entire body to demonstratively and emphatically guide the musical flow of performance during worship."[93] Anderson recounts the way that the male gospel singers and choir director's body is read as masculine or feminine within the act of performance.

Conjoining this insight with Butler's assertion that gender itself is not entrenched but made legible and understood by performance, Black church members who observe or surveil choir directors, end up looking for the performance within the performance. Congregants and

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[92] Alisha Lola Jones, "Are All the Choir Directors Gay?" in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, ed. Portia Maultsby and Mellonee Burnim (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 218, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[93] Ibid.

audience members are not just enjoying the music, because cultural stratifications of gender and sexuality continue to be at work, in the background or foreground, during the worship moment. Those watching identify the choir directors or singers' bodily movements as "flamboyant"[94] and/or "charismatic."[95] Choir directors and male Gospel artists are rebuffed for a gender performance which is considered by African American musician, Dr. Tony McNeil as "anything that draws attention to the person instead of the content of the message being conveyed."[96] But Jones recognizes the fine line constructed within African American religious culture between "flamboyance"[97] and "charisma"[98].

McNeil does not consider flamboyance as having to do with sexuality, however "most people when they hear that term do have an automatic association [of the term] with being gay."[99] However while interlocutors within Jones 2016 article presents the characteristic of flamboyance as something that can be disconnected from gender and sexual performances, the idea of flamboyance being something that draws attention away from the message and to the person points to a moral politic that governs gospel and also governs bodies within Gospel. Like the unspoken rule of never becoming the story that you are writing in journalism, Gospel artists are encouraged to create space between themselves and the message that they are attempting to convey, which might result in one's disassociation from the art. The question, then, for Gospel Music is: "How might the body itself be the message, especially in light of a Gospel that engages a God that became incarnate for the purposes of redemption?"

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[94] Alisha Lola Jones, "Are All the Choir Directors Gay? Black Men's Sexuality and Identity in Gospel Performance," in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation*, ed. Portia Maultsby and Mellonee Burnim (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 222, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Ibid.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

For instance, this is the case of Ricky Dillard, who most notably participates in energetic, embodied performances that can be read "as voguing and duckwalking,"[100] "gestures that resemble queer performance cultures such as the house music associated with black and Latino gay Ballroom culture on the international music scene."[101] Additionally, Dillard is most known for his embodied involvement with the 1990 hit *More Abundantly* in which he splits the choir into multiple parts as the chorus sings, "Joy!" In that moment, Dillard, arms pointing at the choir to sing "Joy!" becomes the arbiter of joy, and he, as the choirmaster becomes an embodied presentation of the message itself.

The Unholy Cocktail: Silence, Black Church Rumor and The Church Cancer (AIDS)

In a related matter and due to labelling Black men who participate in church choirs, music ministries, and Gospel artistry as "queer," the AIDS epidemic signaled posthumous outings of "perceived black gay men" within sexually conservative, and homonegative spaces.[102] Take for example, his 2022 article *Black Church Rumor*, where Ahmad Greene-Hayes writes a cultural critique of the black church's reception of Rev. James Cleveland as a queer figure while also paying close attention to allegations against Cleveland of his enacting sexual violence upon young men.[103] The reception of Cleveland as a queer figure is not because of self-disclosure. In fact, Cleveland rarely, if ever, talked about his dating or sexual preferences. Ascription of queerness to Cleveland correlates to the rumor and the lawsuit launched against his estate alleging that Cleveland was responsible for HIV exposure of young men he was supposedly

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[100]Alisha Lola Jones, "Church Realness: The Performance of Discretionary Devices and Heteropresentation in the House of God," in *Flaming? The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 130, accessed April 7, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190065416.003.0008.

[101] Ibid.

[102] Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 10, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[103] Ahmad Greene-Hayes, "Black Church Rumor: Sexual Violence and Black (Gay) Gospel's Reverend James Cleveland," *GLQ* 28, no. 1 (2022): 121, https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-9435697.

involved with as lovers, and after his death. Cleveland's story reminds us that HIV/AIDS within the Black Church began to pick up "queer" coded language as Black men's physical appearance began to change and when they began to die suddenly. That is when HIV/AIDS rumors turn scandalous.

Further, AIDS within Black Protestant spaces became known as 'church cancer'. Church cancer is not to be confused with actual cancer diagnosis but instead when the cause of Black men that were passing from AIDS-related complications was discussed with surviving family members, and friends within church spaces, it became all too frequent to hear the cause of death as being cancer. As written in Darius Bost's book *Evidence of Being* , the cause of death for AIDS victims were a contested space for not only the victims, but the families left behind, and church communities that wished to avoid the subject completely.[104] Death and dying from AIDS became a theopolitical subject, due to association of the illness with ideas of moral failure and divine judgement. Some churches would not even hold funerals of persons who died as a result of AIDS-related complications, denying young Black men within their ministries the privilege of a Church-homegoing.

Families of Black gay men who passed from AIDS would list or announce contrasting causes of death in obituaries. The contrasting causes would be different than what was listed on the death certificate or known within queer communities. For example, in *Evidence of Being*, Bost recounts "Haitian-born poet, performer, playwright, dancer, and activist Assotto Saint (born Yves François Lubin)"[105] protested at his friend and literary contemporary Donald Woods's funeral by publicly declaring that Woods was gay and died of AIDS. This action was done in

[104] Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 6, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[105] Ibid.,10.

response to Wood's 1992 obituary in the *New York Times*, where Wood's "family listed the cause of his death as cardiac arrest, and at the funeral denied his contributions to the black gay community."[106] Saint's protest at Woods' funeral is an anomaly within Black Queer history, the queer/quare contemporaries of Black Gay men that passed of AIDS, at that time, would often hold their own rituals, and memorials that would function as alternative-memory. Further, black churches that would hold the funeral of Black men who died from AIDS-related complications would often ignore the cause of death during and after obsequies, leaving congregants to wonder, figure it out, or speculate on their own.

Necropolitical Shifts Towards Praise and Worship: A Pure Sound

Calls for chastity, sexual purity, and strict gender conformity became even more dominant within both Black Protestantism and Gospel Music in the late 20th century and early 21st century. The height of the AIDS epidemic is considered by epidemiologists to be 1980s - 1990s, with its peak being in 1995[107]. However, HIV/AIDS ranked 10th as a cause of death for African Americans[108] and "became the leading cause of death…for African American men between the ages of 35 and 44"[109] in 1990. HIV/AIDS would continue to disproportionately affect Black Americans as one of the leading causes of death for African American males well into the 1990s. As a result of homonegative stigma and immorality claims attached to the disease, the echoes for sexual purity became more of a dominant fixture within Black Protestant pulpits.

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[106] Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[107] KFF, "The HIV/AIDS Epidemic in the United States: The Basics," accessed April 7, 2025, https://www.kff.org/hivaids/fact-sheet/the-hiv-aids-epidemic-in-the-united-states-the-basics/.
[108] D. K. Smith, "HIV Disease as a Cause of Death for African Americans in 1987 and 1990," *Journal of the National Medical Association* 84, no. 6 (1992): 481.
[109] Ibid.,481.

The 1990s was a time when singles conferences and gender specific conferences focused on Christian lifestyles within Black America and began to rise in influence and attendance. Conferences such as *Manpower* hosted in 1994, and *Woman Thou Art Loosed* hosted in 1996 by Bishop T.D Jakes platformed speakers like Juanita Bynum and Brian Keith Williams. Speakers explicitly preached on sex, sexuality, and sexual ethics from Black Pentecostalism positions. These messages re-affirmed conservative principles of abstinence and celibacy as Christian virtues.

The rise of Praise and Worship music came with this black Pentecostalist push for the exercise of Christian virtues. The Praise and Worship genre, forerunner to Gospel Christian Contemporary Music began as a burgeoning art form with the leading of Andrae Crouch, writer of the praise song, "Halleluiah." Andrae Crouch in 1971, wrote this hymn-like song that did not feature a soloist, but a soft-singing ensemble, repeating the word, *hallelujah*. Crouch's song unlike most gospel music, did not feature a verse, or a bridge, but rather a chorus with one word.

The rise of Praise and Worship music and its ultimate dominance is the response to anxieties around secularism introduced in the Golden Age of Gospel Music, the 1950s and 60s, where secular audiences and non-black audiences took an interest in the art form, creating more of a footing for Gospel singers within popular culture. Secularist anxieties did not only circulate around non-church platforms Gospel artists began to occupy like the Newton Jazz Festival, Flip Wilson Show, and other programs and events. Secularist anxieties became most prominent within the "rumor mills" associated with the personal lives of black male Gospel artists. Reinforcing this behavior was arguments about the moral punishment of HIV/AIDS victims and laced with arguments against secularism and liberalism as it related to sex and sexuality.

Rising conservatism in America, a response to the social and political progress of Black Americans, women, and LGBT+ communities was elevated even further and alongside the devastating effects of HIV/AIDS on gay men and African American communities. Conservative evangelicals, black and white alike, pointed to the illness as God's punishment for sinful lifestyles and the need for America to repent, to turn away from liberalism, and to embrace social and theological conservatism. Inherent to the Praise and Worship genre is a critique of previous Gospel art forms as not being spiritual, being carnal, and with not keeping Jesus at the center. The Praise and Worship movement functioned as a conservative response and alternative to the flamboyant Gospel choir and its director.

Epilogue. The Haunting: Gospel, Memory and Re-Memory in the Wake of AIDS

In August of 2023, artist and scholar, Ashon Crawley premiered his piece, *Homegoing,* as a part of the *Beyond Granite: Pulling Together* exhibition on the National Mall in Washington D.C. Crowley's piece, *Homegoing* was a powerful memorial and tribute to Black queer musicians that have passed away from the AIDS crisis in the late 20th and 21st century. Crawley's presentation included 3 parts—Procession, Sanctuary and Benediction. In his presentation, Crawley demonstrates a liturgical requiem steeped in Black Church culture, for those who died during the AIDS epidemic. Drawing from Hortense Spillers analysis of Blackness as vestibular culture, *Homegoing* was created to honor the Black church's sonic and hidden influences of Black Islam and Black queer musicians that died of complications of HIV/AIDS[110]. In the Procession sequence, Crawley had the names of 305 persons who had died of AIDS-related complications whispered over the sounds of strings and a Hammond organ. Crawley stated that his intention for the music is to curate recognition of "a solemn and sacred

[110] Dagmawi Woubshet, "Let This Prayer Be Accepted: A Conversation with Ashon Crawley about His Installation *Homegoing*," *Transition* 136, no. 1 (2024): 134.

occasion"[111]. This was a place to behold within the nation's capital, the Black lives lost as a result of AIDS epidemic. People who have been marginalized both in the life and memory.

In life, Black queer people are doubly marginalized by both race and homonegativity, within their private and public lives, as well as in sacred space. In the process of remembering, in cultural memory, Black Queer people are marginalized as persons who have died because of irresponsibility, being gay, or worse, being cursed by God. In *Evidence of Being* by Darius Bost, he recounts in his introduction the last speech of Black gay writer, Melvin Dixon in 1992 before dying of AIDS[112]. Dixon in his speech gives an example of his friend and former student Greg, a black gay man who had died of AIDS[113]. Dixon noted that Greg's siblings refused to be named in his obituary, which was published in a prominent newspaper, because of the shame attached to being connected with someone who had died of the disease."[114] At Greg's funeral, his family refused to acknowledge his sexuality and the cause of his death. To redress these silences, his lover and friends held a second memorial service. Dixon also spoke of the threat of historical erasure of Black gay men as a result of the AIDS crisis, and the necropolitics of memory within Black and White spaces.

The historical erasure, also named by Dixon as the double cremation of Black queer persons, is evident not only in the individual and situational, but is institutionally reinforced by church spaces, academic disciplines, and music industry. "Double cremation signals how the obliterating forces of antiblackness and anti-queerness doubly mark the black gay body for social

[111] Dagmawi Woubshet, "Let This Prayer Be Accepted: A Conversation with Ashon Crawley about His Installation *Homegoing*," *Transition* 136, no. 1 (2024): 134.
[112] Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[113] Ibid.,7.
[114] Ibid.

and corporeal death"[115]. Dixon names this phenomenon as a one that threatens gay men, and black gay men more specifically, requiring such groups to leave a legacy of writing perspectives on gay and straight experiences. "Our voice is our weapon,"[116] Dixon further states. While HIV/AIDS was an epidemic that affected a numerous amount of Black Gay men within Black Churches, such evidence came with the clearing of choir stands in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. African American gay men that served in music ministry specifically had begun to contract and pass away from HIV/AIDS complications at alarming rates.

Crawley's exhibit on the National Mall welcomes students, lovers, and scholars of the Black Church and Black Gospel Music to consider the intersections of the AIDS epidemic, Gospel Music, and its legacy today. A generation of vibrant, young, vigorous, and brilliant black men had been wiped out by an illness that seemingly was targeted, and passed on by drug usage, exchange of fluids, and/or transfusion. Gospel Music was especially hit hard due to it being a place where African American gay and bisexual males participated in large numbers. Crawley's exhibit was curated for the purpose of moving through time and space, from church vestibule to church sanctuary, and back to the church vestibule, with the intention of honoring Black male bodies that were brought into Black churches but were carried out too soon.

Crawley's exhibit calls us not only to think about death, but also the interplay of legacy and memory. It encapsulates the question and answer offered by Christina Sharpe's "In The Wake," and summed up by the following questions and answer: "What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black Dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people,

[115] Darius Bost, *Evidence of Being: The Black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Politics of Violence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 8, accessed April 7, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[116] Ibid.,2.

always living in the push toward our death? It means work."[117] Crawley's artistic work offers the power of memory and defends against queer erasure. *Homegoing* functions as its own theopolitical-ethical manifesto, proclaiming Black Queer lives matter but so does Black Queer death.

The anecdote that begins this thesis "is not a personal story that folds onto itself"[118] but rather as described in Saidiya Hartman's words "it's really about trying to look at historical and social processes and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them. (Saunders 2008b, 7)."[119] This project has as much to do with memory as it does with gender performativity, for the ways in which we frame performance or rebel against it is indeed a project of memory retention. Reading the Gospel Music genre as a gendered category, avails the student and lover of Gospel Music a way into "quareness and queerness" and the ways that both have subverted dominant, heteronormative, and patriarchal narratives within Gospel Music. Through understanding gender performativity and queer resistance to bifurcated systems of gender, the genre can be re-membered and pushed into being more expansive and creative.

[117] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 10, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1134g6v.3.
[118] Ibid.,10.
[119] Ibid.

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