

Yale Divinity School

STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT MISOGYNY, HETEROSEXISM, AND HOMOPHOBIA

May, 2008

By Gustav Spohn
Director of Communications and Publications

The question was pretty straightforward: “What are the effective strategies for eradicating the misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia in Black communities in the African diaspora?” But the responses to the question put to panelists for “Conversation Number Five” of the *Middle Passage Conversations* conference were every bit as straightforward. It was a time of truth-telling, straight talk and self-examination for the Black church community.

What became clear during the course of the April 5 panel discussion, held at Yale University’s St. Thomas More Chapel and Center, was that the process of eradication must be grounded in a clear acknowledgement of the problems. That was a point articulated plainly by the first of the speakers, Yale Law School Professor Harlon Dalton, who told the packed audience, “The first strategy is to tell the truth—to stand up for what we believe in and not trim our views out of concern, even in a pastoral situation, out of concern for what others might feel.”

Kelly Brown Douglas, a professor of religion at Goucher College, chided the Black church community for what she termed its “notorious” lack of responsiveness to the HIV/AIDS crisis—linked, she argued, to homophobia and a list of “isms” that, when adopted by the Black community, help “feed the agenda of white male hegemony.”

Another panelist, Tracy C. West, professor of ethics and African American studies at Drew Theological School, grappled with the question of how Martin Luther King Jr. and some other powerful Black male religious leaders can, at the same time, be both revered for their leadership and held to account for sexual transgressions against women that she said sometimes rise to the level of ministerial misconduct.

Celebrated author and biblical scholar Renita Weems focused on how the Black community might move forward, given some of the problems laid out by the other panelists.

Weems argued for a conversation that includes, and takes seriously the positions of, one’s opponents. “We think that we could do it by ourselves, and we cannot do it by ourselves,” said Weems. “We would much rather change them from afar and not be in conversation with [our] oppressor.

“Jesus would call radically different people who despise, who despise one another,” she pointed out, citing Matthew, a tax collector, and Simon the Zealot. “He calls the betrayer of his own people to sit at the table with a Maccabean, a revolutionary, a militant.”

Dalton, like the other speakers, pointed to some specific issues he believed must be addressed head on—in his case, the issue of homosexuality. “Particularly in the Black church, we act like we’ve never seen a gay man in our lives,” said Dalton, who is also adjunct professor of law and religion at Yale Divinity School.

West and Douglas both sought to place the issues under discussion within a broader context—for West, the linkages between forms of violence in the Black community to those outside the Black community; and, for Douglas, the “intersecting realities” of “a social-political narrative of power . . . part of white, patriarchal, imperialistic, capitalistic power.”

West raised the issue of mistreatment of women around U.S. military bases: “How do we respect our soldiers, when we talk about the use of Iraqi women, Okinawa women, I mean, do those lives matter around those military bases, is that part of your womanism, of your Black feminism, or your Black liberationist philosophy/perspective?”

And the failure of Black male clergy to step forward and stand up for the rights of gays, lesbians and transgendered persons, she said, is a betrayal of the values the Black community itself asserts in fighting violence against its own: “Betrayal is an important notion in Black communities. . . How do we talk about the betrayal of Black male clergy who testified against hate crimes? I’m talking about Black males who in the history of this country have been the victims of some of the most heinous, ritualized, community-based hate crimes . . . testifying against the idea that the killing, maiming, assault of gay and lesbian and trans-gendered people would be considered a hate crime.”

She had strong words, too, about the use—and misuse—of power by some of the iconic figures in the pantheon of Black male leaders.

“We need to come up with a strategy for both revering, revering, and respecting, and really seeing a sense of, well this is someone that I really care about and whose leadership I want to learn from, and, at the same time, rejecting, penalizing. Renouncing the treatment of women as sexualized Kleenex. How can we have both respect and, at the same time, a rejection of certain kinds of behavior?”

Then West got specific: “We’re going to need to talk about Rev. Henry Lyons (former president of the National Baptist Convention). We’re going to need to talk about Ralph Abernathy (former president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference).” Then, lowering her voice to almost a whisper, she added, “We’re going to need to talk about . . . Martin Luther King.

“And Martin Luther King as someone we revere, respect . . . I’m not talking about adultery. He and Coretta are working that out in heaven. I’m talking about sexual misconduct. Clergy sexual misconduct. This idea of treating women as kind of sexualized Kleenex, that this is something that comes with heterosexual male leadership. How do we critique that?”

“Misogyny, heterosexism, and homophobia are indeed not only attacks upon people, but they are attacks upon our very Blackness,” Goucher’s Douglas said. “And if we perpetuate, participate or invest with sacred value the agendas of gender and social identity and injustice and oppression, then that means that we are betraying indeed what it means for us to be Black.”

“As long as we perpetuate misogyny, homophobia, and heterosexism within our communities,” warned Douglas, “not only have we taken up the master’s tools, but we are using them to help him build his house.”

She concluded with a plea for the Black church community to embrace the prophetic tradition of self-critique: “The prophetic tradition is a tradition that does not simply critique the injustices out there, no. The power of the prophetic tradition is that it is a tradition that signifies and critiques its very community.”
