"Come the Final Throwdown, What is s/he First, Black or Gay?": Revolutionary Arguments in Randall Kenan's *A Visitation of Spirits* and Me'shell Ndegeocello's *Cookie: the Anthropological Mixtape*

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Abstract

Resumen

Keywords: homophobia, non-heterosexual, race, African-American.

Palabras Clave: homofobia, no heterosexual, raza, afroamericano/a.

Cheryl Clarke writes in "The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community," that "we cannot rationalize the disease of homophobia among black people as the white man's fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to transform ourselves" (197). The very transformation of which she speaks is that of accepting, acknowledging, and in a revolutionary way, celebrating the sexual desires of all those within the Black community. Clarke sees the current lack of acceptance of non-heterosexuals by black society as monumentally destructive within a group whose members are inextricably, immediately, and perpetually, despite the other ways by which they are identified, foremost signified as "Black." Due to the fact that "white" is the default racial signifier of American identity, white individuals have the privilege—indeed, seemingly the right—to identify themselves as hetero/homo/bisexual without being forced in any real way, to take into consideration the issue of race. However, in their discourse, black individuals must deal with their blackness prior to any productive discussion or understanding of racially charged, black sexuality. Thus, when dealing with the matter of sexual difference, Kenyatta Dorey Graves duly notes in "Are Love and Literature Political: Black Homopoetics in the 1990s," that "whiteness must be engaged because so many African Americans equate it with gayness" (184). Indeed to many outsiders, non-heterosexual identification is the "white man's disease."

In *A Visitation of Spirits*, through the central character of Horace Cross, Randall Kenan presents the possibility that in opposition to the all too commonly held belief that homosexuality is in some way at odds with blackness, African American same gender sexual unions may in actuality be a salvific force and the ultimate profession of Black self-love. Similarly, Me'shell Ndegeocello, through both the lyrics of her album *Cookie: the Anthropological Mixtape* as well as in her self-proclaimed bisexuality, makes the case that regimented heterosexuality is, like materialism and Christianity, merely a product of the black community's internalization of white society's ideas of normality. The artist views both racism and heterosexism as equally detrimental to the black, American psyche and "[draws] parallels between her own personal narrative and the early-american slave trade claiming, "anywhere you feel trapped is a plantation" (Psaroudis). Notably, neither Kenan nor Ndegeocello places the blame for the black community's problematic relationship with its non-heterosexual members on the shoulders of white America, but rather locates this conflict within the community's continual need to model itself on that of the dominant and dominating culture which equates heterosexual manhood with agency. Phillip Brian Harper argues in *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* that "Subscription to black identity itself bespeaks a masculine status because the courage thus to claim social autonomy is precisely what constitutes conventional manhood, no matter what the racial context" (68). In an attempt to provide an alternate route to black identity, as if performing a literary call and response, *Visitation* and *Cookie* act in concert to discredit this notion of heterosexual male centered blackness: *Cookie* calls out the warning; *Visitation* provides the unavoidable response if that warning goes unheeded.

Within the text of *Cookie*, Ndegeocello through her multi-layered lyrics shamelessly confronts many of the issues that plague black America and ultimately all of American culture. and "set the stage for her unapologetic self-identification as an African American, bisexual, female rock star" (Psaroudis) However, her willingness to challenge the black community's ideals through both her lyrics and her lifestyle has had its consequences for the artist. As Mark Anthony Neal notes of the singer/songwriter in "Afterbirth: Me'shell Ndegeocello, the 'Comfortable' Woman,"

> Part of that re-connection [with herself] is coming to terms with *Cookie* and coming to terms with *Cookie* means coming to terms with Ndegeocello's almost outsider status among black audiences. Part of that distance, both real and imagined, between Ndegeocello [and her black audience] is due to her willingness to speak the hard and the truthful about black life in these times.

Indeed, *Cookie* is riddled with indictments of black America's insistence on proving its "normality" as well as the tendency to condemn white society for black troubles, which Ndegeocello refuses to enact in her music. By doing so, she like Clarke, demands that black individuals assume responsibility for their own situations and choices and does so despite the reaction of her audience: "'I'm always gonna say, what I'm gonna say," she proudly pronounces, "it doesn't make me fit in, it doesn't make me seem more this way or that'" (Neal).

In addition to Ndegeocello's insistence on Black's agency in all areas of their lives, the musical artist's sexual ambiguity must also strike a nerve in a community that is noted for its aversion to same-sex, non-reproductive practices. "Blurring the lines of sexuality and musical genres, Ndegéocello posed a threat to the status quo of the music industry" and black society (Psaroudis). The reasons behind the black community's repugnance towards sexual deviation have been the subject of much speculation. Graves links this problematic relationship to a history of racial brutality when he writes,

> [. . .] because there is a long history in the United States of black men suffering physical violence or murder for even the insinuation of an interracial sexual encounter, the topic typically draws strong opinions in black communities...I am suggesting here that part of what fuels tension in black communities over sexual orientation is the intersection of black folks' collective memory of this history of violence against black men with the association of gayness with whiteness. (184)

Graves effectually argues that because of the fact that homosexuality has been historically allied with the white body, and because that white body has been designated as off limits to members of the black community, all homosexuals become that which is loathed and feared, despite their individual racial affiliation. On another front however, Clarke views the conflict as the black community's overidentification with white racial rhetoric in regards to black sexuality and its attempt at moral redemption when she argues, "We have expended much energy trying to debunk the racist mythology which says our sexuality is depraved" (199). Both Kenan and Ndegeocello struggle against this historical concept of black sexual depravity and socially "problematic" family structures, in effect rejecting white culture's definition of black sexual identity and reclaiming black sexuality for black individuals. In her postscript to "trust" Ndegeocello writes, "'Can you truly see my soul or is this just what we are told love/sex is? Could you or I handle what we'd see if we let go of what the world tells us this space should be?'" Seemingly, this is a sexual space that the artist wishes to define on her own terms without being confined to socially constructed ideals of normality.

In her work "Living at the Crossroads." Rhonda M. Williams cites the long standing non-traditional kinship formations of African Americans as a leading cause of racialized sexuality. She notes that "the architects of cultural and (social) scientific racism historically have represented black communities, and black bodies as the bearers of stigma, disease, danger, violence, social pathology, and hypersexuality" (140) Notably, Kenan represents virtually all of these elements within the text of *Visitation*. He does so not as a means of buttressing the destructive stereotypes too often applied to the black community, but rather as a means of demystifying Horace's homosexuality. In exposing the transgressive lives of each of the members of the Tims Creek community, Kenan minimizes the difference between individual sexual practices. Notably, many of the Cross's have participated in socially unsanctioned sexual relationships. In effect, the repression—both psychologically and physically—of these sexualities is a common thread that links family members and the larger black community as a whole. Williams, explains the black community's need to promote heterosexuality as a product of the need to counter claims of "unhealthy" black family structures. "Black families have long functioned as markers in the public imagination," she writes, "they generally signify and manifest a morally problematic sexually agency, a cultural degeneracy" (sic 140). Thus, the black community's heterosexism is a direct result of the racialized rhetoric of sexuality in general. What is seldom noted in this racialized rhetoric however, is the way in which the system of slavery made impossible the "normal" family structures among enslaved Blacks.

Kenan argues this point rather specifically in *Visitation* by means of a conversation between Jimmy and his then future wife Anne who contends, "'Love'? Come on preacherman.

Don't you see? Your idea of 'love' is a foolish Western concept the white man has created to enslave—who? Me. Woman. No, sir, Mr. Man, I'm my own woman'" (176). In her refusal to accept Jimmy's "white" terminology and all that it implies, Anne is enacting a redefinition of black relationships and black sexuality, reclaiming and reinscribing black sexual practices. Unfortunately, this is a step Horace, as a homosexual male is never able to make.

Notably, this need to renounce the dominant culture's rigid designations is equally felt among *all* those whose sexual practices are outside that which is deemed normal. Jonathon Dollimore posits in "Desire and Difference" that, "For homosexuals more than most, the search for sexual freedom in the realm of the foreign has been inseparable from a repudiation of the 'Western' culture responsible for their repression and oppression" (26). Further, "unlike their white counterparts, African Americans live without the benefit of an assumed familial and sexual wellness" (Williams 147). For Ndegeocello and Kenan alike, the desire for blackness must be located in this desire for the "foreign." While this may seem a little difficult to comprehend, ultimately, the foreignness of black/black desire seemingly derives its "foreign" status from a black society that is so filled with self-loathing that its ultimate goal is whiteness as is evidenced in its insistence upon obtaining all of the trappings of the white way of life. In "dead nigga blvd," Ndegeocello's words provide a striking commentary:

> somebody said
> our greatest destiny is to become white
> but white is not pure
> and hate is not pride. (12-15)

Co-opting and then (re)inscribing language used frequently in the Gay Rights movement, Ndegeocello in effect equates and conflates the issues of blackness and non-heterosexual practices. The artist, then denounces what she perceives as black society's obsession with material possessions and the "young motherfuckers" who drive down [dead nigga blvd] in [their] fancy cars" (21-22) and wear "diamond watches / from african slave mines" (47-48). Ndegeocello returns to this theme on successive tracks, seemingly attempting to make peace with the desire to have material wealth, but well aware of the pitfalls of allowing it to control one's life. As she writes in the postscript to pocketbook one must "search for a balance."

In *Visitation* Kenan, rather than dealing directly with black/white social issues, like Ndegeocello, turns his gaze inward to black culture and in doing so inadvertently to the economic motivations of the black community of Tims Creek and more specifically to the Cross family, which serves as a microcosm of black society. Importantly, as Guy Hocquengham points out in *Homosexual Desire,* the means by which the concept of the "modern family" asserts its control on individual sexuality has undergone a sea change due to economic transformation:

> The place of the family is now less in the institutions and more in the mind. The family is the place where sexual pleasure is legal, though no longer in the sense that everybody has to marry in order to take their pleasure within the law; far from putting an end to the exclusive function of reproductive heterosexuality, the actual dissolution by capitalism of the functions of the family has turned the family into a rule inhabiting every individual under free competition. (79)

Notably, despite the lack of emphasis on economically dependent reproduction, this "rule" of the family remains committed to heterosexual norms, which necessarily excludes non-heterosexuality with its apparently "anti-family" values and largely illegal status. Additionally, issue of family becomes compounded by non-white skin, which is already historically posited as antithetical to normal relational structures. As evidence, Joseph Beam, in "Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart," an autobiographical work laments,

> When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply. (284)

In focusing on the Cross family and its destructive emulation of whiteness and white culture, the author highlights the black community's familial failings as it deals with the homosexuality of one of its own. Horace early on becomes fascinated with things other than his American blackness due to his realization that he does not belong:

> He found himself seduced by this new world, awed by all the many things it held—there were homes, houses, palaces, small and vast, grand and dismal, dotting this great blue planet in countries (Russia, Ethiopia, Japan, Greece, England, Argentina) peopled by races of men and women who worshipped odd and different gods in strange and unusual places—so unlike Tims Creek and First Baptist and the Crosses, so astonishingly, refreshingly, captivatingly different. It all called to him, the numbers, the governments, the history, the religions, speaking to him of another, another, another...though he could never quite picture that other, the thing that called him so severely. Yet he labored and longed for it; as if his very life depended on knowing it; as if, somehow, he had to change his life. (88)

Horace's need to "change his life" is a direct result of the realization of his non-acceptable, non-productive sexuality. Early singled out as the "chosen nigga," Horace struggles with his identity as both a productive black male and a homosexual. Because of the expectations placed upon him by the Cross family, who have positioned themselves in relation to the white society they imitate, he is unable to embrace his non-heterosexual self. Horace fully realizes his inability to negotiate the competing signifiers when "suddenly he became aware of his responsibilities as a man, and the possibilities of his being a homosexual frightened him beyond reason" (Kenan 156). In the family's continual insistence upon stereotypically white defined modes of being, as is evidenced in its wholesale adoption of its religion, materialism, attempted family structure, and his aunts' "hair straightened with not a hair out of place" (91), there remains no place for those individuals who deviate.

Like Horace, Jimmy's mother Rose is considered a deviant by the black community of Tims Creek. Her love of pleasure and unwillingness to be limited by her family's rules causes her to be excluded from the circle. Notably, despite the fact that she realizes her mistakes and wishes to reenter the fold, in the eyes of her sisters "Rose had turned her back on the family, flaunted her sins, and smeared their name in midnight gutters and liquor-scented backseats" (119). It is Roses refusal of the Cross family's adherence to white cultural norms that seals her fate as an outcast.

Kenan highlights the irony in the black community's infatuation with white culture. For despite their white-like aspirations, the Blacks of Tims Creek both despise and fear white individuals:

> [Horace] had heard the menfolk around the barber shop and in the fields talk about the white man; he had heard his aunts and the womenfolk hiss and revile

> the name of whites; he had heard his grandfather lecture and spin yarns about how black folk had been mistreated at the hand of the white man. (89)

Notably, Horace, the outsider, does not internalize these feelings towards whites, realizing early on that he feels no connection to his blackness "never really personaliz[ing] their anger, remaining more curious than mad, more intrigued than bitter" (90). Significantly, the character's lack of identification with the black community is aligned with his homosexuality. When the character shows up late to Thanksgiving dinner with his ear pierced, his family immediately accuses him of looking like a pervert and of not possessing "no better sense than to go on and follow whatever them white fools do" (184). It is then explained to him by his aunt Johnnie Mae that he simply does not understand how whites have treated Blacks and that he "spend[s] too much time with those boys" (185).

Conversely, Ndegeocello vociferously claims that white society cannot be blamed for the black community's denial of its own. In "dead nigga blvd" the artist provides in a critique and call to awareness:

> no longer do I blame the others
> for the way that we be
> cuz niggas need to redefine
> what it means to be free
> i can't even tell my brothers and sisters
> that they're fine
> this absence of beauty in their heart and mind. (32-39)

While clearly originating in the white culture's ideal of Anglo-American beauty, which necessarily excludes African Americans, the artist perceives the black community's continued adherence to these aesthetic principals as a shortcoming that leads to self-hatred.

Tellingly, this self-hatred is an experience shared by black heterosexuals and homosexuals alike. Although Ndegeocello exhibits no restraint her explicit use of racial as well as sexual terminology, her calculated ambiguity in certain tracks speaks volumes. She writes in "barry farms," that "she couldn't Love me without shame/she only wanted me for one thing" (37-39). Her lines can be either sexually coded, racially coded, or both. The artist's decision not to be explicit about the origin of the female subject's shame allows the listener to provide her own interpretation. The song, couched as it is within an album that directly addresses issues of both blackness and sexuality, in addition to being delivered by a black, female singer to an unidentified female subject demonstrates the way in which Ndegeocello slides between the signifiers of race and sexual orientation. Without question, Ndegeocello may be addressing both blackness and non-heterosexuality simultaneously, for the one is further problematized by the other. This problematization as Jonathon Dollimore points out is common:

> [H]omophobic prejudice is particularly dangerous for the black lesbian. Hers is a vulnerable yet crucial role as negotiator between differences: typically, she is one who refuses to outcast herself from the black community and family, because aware of its value and importance, yet by virtue of that same fact subjected within them to sexual discrimination. (34)

Like Ndegeocello, Kenan in *Visitation* shows the consequences of the denial of same gender love among black individuals. Horace's refusal to accept that the answer to his issues of identity—an identity he cannot find within the heterosexual black community in which he resides—lies in the fact that he cannot "love" black men and thus brings about his self-destruction. Echoing Christ's offer of salvation to all that follow him, the exchange that takes place between the two naked Horaces near the end of the narrative provides the thesis of Kenan's text:

> His reflection stood there, his hand extended. I'm your way, he said.
>
> Give me a break.
>
> I'm serious. And you know it. I'm what you need.
>
> You? Me, you mean.
>
> Exactly.
>
> Bullshit.
>
> You can follow this demon if you want. It's your choice.
>
> Horace looked at his hand. His hand. Never had he felt such self-loathing, and by and by his depression became anger as he glared at the spirit. (234-35)

In the character's conversation with his doppelganger, black society's rejection of non-heterosexual relationships is exposed. The locus of this inability to accept non-heterosexual relationships is in the black community's inability to love itself outside of what white society has deemed acceptable. Kenan drives the point home when just following this exchange, the "real" Horace shoots his twin in the chest and his double with "his eyes full of horror, but in recognition too [looks at him] as if to say: You meant it didn't you? You actually hate me?" (235). The character's hatred of this black, male body that is himself is in itself a commentary not just on Horace's hatred of his homosexuality, but also of the black community that has denied him, and itself, the possibility of loving blackness.

Kendall Thomas's "Ain't Nothin' Like the Real Thing," provides an enlightening discussion of racial and sexual politics employed in commentaries following James Baldwin's death in which Baldwin's homosexuality was downplayed in order to emphasize his blackness. He argues that,

> [. . .] the homophobia and virulent masculinism that underwrites the politics of black authenticity in the current conjecture are best understood as the displaced expression of internalized racism...the jargon of racial authenticity is an ideological symptom of a sexual anguish and alienation in black America of almost epidemic proportions. (123)

The issue of authenticity lies at the heart of the black community's refusal to embrace its homosexual members. Harking back to my earlier argument, one cannot be authentically black and non-heterosexual. Non-heterosexuality is deemed sexual deviance and deviancy has historically been associated with black sexuality through the ill-conceived tropes of black males' unquenchable desire for white women and black women's ongoing sexual relationships with white men during the institution of slavery for which the females were held responsible.

Jimmy to whom Horace asks for advice about his attraction to other males reflects upon what led to his cousin's destruction and concludes that it is the condemnation by the community at Tim's Creek in specific and I argue the larger black community in general that is the cause of Horace's death:

> He, just like me, had been created by this society. He was a son of the community, more than most. His reason for existing, it would seem, was for the salvation of his people. But he was flawed as far as the community was

> concerned. First he loved men; a simple normal deviation, but a deviation this community would never accept. (188)

As is evidenced in the similar plotlines of the stories as well as both narratives' reliance upon Christian terminology and serving as a testament to the ongoing impossibility of same-sex love within the black community, Horace's self-destruction had been foreshadowed some forty-eight years earlier in James Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain* when the character John, who like Horace, realizes his attraction to other black men. In asking about Christ's sacrifice and yet conflating his passion for the savior with that for another male, John asks Elisha, the object of his affections, "'That song they sing...*if it costs my life*—is that the price?'" Unaware of John's real meaning Elisha responds, "'Yes...that's the price'" (212). John realizes that he must sacrifice his life among the black community along with his soul if he chooses to embrace his homosexual desire for the older black male. However, just as John is unable to admit his feelings for another male when "he wanted to stop and turn to Elisha, and tell him...something for which he found no words" (Baldwin 213) out of fear of being cast out of the black community, Horace in contemplating his physical transformation early in *Visitation*, notes that he cannot become a cat, because "He had to stay here" (Kenan 111). By virtue of their blackness, neither John nor Horace can forsake the black community, for they have no place to turn in an otherwise white society.

The exclusion of black non-heterosexuals from the black community poses additional problems to black survival. Notably, sexually transmitted diseases affect a larger percentage of the black community proportionately and Ndegeocello sees this inability by black individuals to embrace their non-heterosexual orientation as the main cause: "'I'm just very aware that so many people are becoming infected from shame and ignorance," she states, "and if I can be any kind of person to shed light on that—don't die from being ashamed" (Neal). She further argues "'I think promiscuity in the gay and lesbian community is because we're made to feel ashamed of who we are. No one should be able to judge you in that way" (Neal). As testament to this, Ndegeocello's 1996 album *peace beyond passion* includes "leviticus: faggot", for example, [which] traces the tale of a young man forced onto the streets by unaccepting parents" (Psaroudis).

Kenan and Ndegeocello present in their works a revolutionary argument that takes into consideration the overemphasis on skin color that exists in American Society. Importantly, while homosexuals regularly participate in what could well be considered the ultimate "passing narrative"; racial "cross-dressing" is less easily accomplished. Thus, as a means of survival and as a way of resisting white constructed ideals of normality, Kenan and Ndegeocello offer same-sex, black unions, which should be embraced as a meaningful and defining element of black culture and community.

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