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## Can the Queen Speak?

### *Racial Essentialism, Sexuality, and the Problem of Authority*

Dwight A. McBride

The gay people we knew then did not live in separate subcultures, not in the small, segregated black community where work was difficult to find, where many of us were poor. . . . Sheer economic necessity and fierce white racism, as well as the joy of being there with black folks known and loved, compelled many gay blacks to live close to home and family. That meant however that gay people created a way to live out sexual preferences within the boundaries of circumstances that were rarely ideal no matter how affirming. In some cases, this meant a closeted sexual life. In other families, an individual could be openly expressive, quite out.

. . . Unfortunately, there are very few oral histories and autobiographies which explore the lives of black gay people in diverse black communities. This is a research project that must be carried out if we are to fully understand the complex experience of being black and gay in this white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society. Often we hear more from black gay people who have chosen to live in predominately white communities, whose choices may have been affected by undue harassment in black communities. We hear hardly anything from black gay people who live contentedly in black communities.

—bell hooks<sup>1</sup>

I speak for the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race. Their ordi-

nary kisses of sweet spit and loyalty are scrubbed away by the propaganda makers of the race, the “Talented Tenth.” . . .

The Black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race has depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The “chosen” history. But the sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home.

It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can't become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal.

—Essex Hemphill<sup>2</sup>

THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION driving this essay is, who speaks for “the race,” and on what authority? In partial answer to this query, I have argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that African American intellectuals participate, even if out of political necessity, in forms of racial essentialism to authorize and legitimate their positions in speaking for or representing “the race.” This essay is in some ways the culmination of a tripartite discussion of that argument. Of course, the arguments made here and in those earlier essays need not be limited solely to the field of African American intellectuals. Indeed, the discursive practices described in these essays are more widely disseminated. Nevertheless, because I am quite familiar with African American intellectualism and am actively invested in addressing that body of discourse, it makes sense that I locate my analysis of racial essentialism in the context of a broader discussion of how we have come to understand what “Black” is.

My essay moves from an examination of African American intellectuals' efforts to problematize racial subjectivity through black antiracist discourse to a critique of their representation, or lack thereof, of gays and lesbians in that process. I will further have occasion to

observe the political process that legitimates and qualifies certain racial subjects to speak for (represent) “the race” and excludes others from that very possibility. I use three exemplary reading sites to formulate this analysis. First, I examine bell hooks’s essay “Homophobia in Black Communities.” I then move to an exchange, of sorts, between essays by the controversial Black psychiatrist Frances Cress Welsing and the late Black gay poet, essayist, and activist Essex Hemphill, “The Politics behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality” and “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing,” respectively. Finally, I consider two moments from the documentary on the life and art of James Baldwin entitled *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*.

In her now oft-cited intervention into the 2 Live Crew controversy of a few years ago, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,”<sup>4</sup> Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw asserts that the danger in the misogyny of the group’s lyrics cannot simply be read as an elaborate form of cultural signifying as Henry Louis Gates, Jr., argues in his defense of 2 Live Crew. On the contrary, Crenshaw maintains that such language is no mere braggadocio. Those of us who are concerned about the high rates of gender violence in our communities must be troubled by the possible connections between such images and violence against women. Children and teenagers are listening to this music, and I am concerned that the range of acceptable behavior is being broadened by the constant propagation of anti-woman imagery. I’m concerned, too, about young Black women who, together with men, are learning that their value lies between their legs. Unlike that of men, however, women’s sexual value is portrayed as a depletable commodity: by expending it, girls become whores and boys become men.

My concerns are similar in kind to those of Crenshaw. Having come of age in a small rural black community where any open expression of gay or lesbian sexuality was met with derision at best and violence at worst; having been socialized in a black Baptist church that preached the damnation of “homosexuals”; having been trained in an African American Studies curriculum that provided no serious or sustained discussion of the specificity of African American lesbian and gay folk; and still feeling—even at the moment of this present writing—the overwhelming weight and frustration of having to speak in a race discourse that seems to have grown all too comfort-

able with the routine practice of speaking about a “black community” as a discursive unit wholly separate from black lesbians and gay men (evidenced by the way we always speak in terms of the relationship of black gays and lesbians to the black community or to how we speak of the homophobia of the black community); all of this has led to the conclusion that, as a community of scholars who are serious about political change, healing black people, and speaking truth to black people, we must begin the important process of undertaking a truly more inclusive vision of “black community” and of race discourse. As far as I am concerned, any treatment of African American politics and culture, and any theorizing of the future of Black America, indeed, any black religious practice or critique of black religion that does not take seriously the lives, contributions, and presence of black gays and lesbians (just as we take seriously the lives of black women, the black poor, black men, the black middle class) or any critique that does no more than render token lip service to black gay and lesbian experience is a critique that not only denies the complexity of who we are as a representationally “whole people” but denies the very “ass-splitting truth” that Essex Hemphill referred to so eloquently and so very appropriately in *Ceremonies*.

I mean this critique quite specifically. Too often, African American cultural critique finds itself positing an essential black community that serves as a point of departure for commentary. In other cases, it assumes a kind of monolith in general when it calls upon the term “black community” at all. Insofar as the position of such a construct might be deemed essential to the critical project, it is not that gesture to which I object. Rather, it is the narrowness of the vision for what is constitutive of that community that is most problematic. If we accept the fact that the term “community,” regardless of the modifier that precedes it, is always a term in danger of presuming too much, I favor making sure that our use of the term accounts for as much of what it presumes as possible.

At present, the phrase “the black community” functions as a shifter or floating signifier. That is, it is a term whose meaning shifts in accordance with the context in which it is articulated. But, at the same time, the phrase is also most often deployed in a manner that presumes a cultural specificity that works as much on a politics of exclusion as it does on a politics of inclusion. There are many visions and versions of the black community that get posited in scholarly

discourse, in popular cultural forms, and in political discourse. Rarely do any of these visions include lesbians and gay men, except perhaps as an afterthought. I want to see a black antiracist discourse that does not need to maintain such exclusions in order to be efficacious.

Insofar as there is a need to articulate a black antiracist discourse to address and to respond to the real and present dangers and vicissitudes of racism, essential to that discourse is the use of the rhetoric of community. Perhaps in the long term it would be best to explode all of the categories having to do with the very notion of "black community" and all of the inclusions and exclusions that come along with it. That is a project the advent of which I will be among the first to applaud. However, in the political meantime, my aim here is to take seriously the state of racial discourse, especially black antiracist discourse and the accompanying construct of "the black community," on the very irksome terms in which I have inherited it.

As I think again on the example of the exchange between Crenshaw and Gates over the misogyny charges against 2 Live Crew, it also occurs to me that similar charges of homophobia or heterosexism could be waged against any number of rap or hip-hop artists, though this is a critique that seems to have been given very little attention.<sup>5</sup> If similar charges could be made, could not, then, similar defenses of heterosexism be mounted as well? The argument would go something like this: what appears to be open homophobia on the part of black rap and hip-hop artists is really a complicated form of cultural signifying that needs to be read not as homophobia but in the context of a history of derisive assaults on black manhood. This being the case, what we really witness when we see and hear these artists participate in what appears to be homophobia is an act involved in the project of the reclamation of black manhood that does not really mean the literal violence that it performs. This is, in fact, similar to the logic used by bell hooks in her essay "Homophobia in Black Communities" when she speaks of the contradiction that is openly expressed homophobia among blacks:

Black communities may be perceived as more homophobic than other communities because there is a tendency for individuals in black communities to verbally express in an outspoken way antigay sentiments. I talked with a straight black male in a California com-

munity who acknowledged that though he has often made jokes poking fun at gays or expressing contempt, as a means of bonding in group settings, in his private life he was a central support person for a gay sister. Such contradictory behavior seems pervasive in black communities. It speaks to ambivalence about sexuality in general, about sex as a subject of conversation, and to ambivalent feelings and attitudes toward homosexuality. Various structures of emotional and economic dependence create gaps between attitudes and actions. Yet a distinction must be made between black people overtly expressing prejudice toward homosexuals and homophobic white people who never make homophobic comments but who have the power to actively exploit and oppress gay people in areas of housing, employment, etc.<sup>6</sup>

hooks's rhetoric here is at once to be commended for its critique of the claims by many that blacks are more homophobic than other racial or ethnic groups and to be critiqued as an apology for black homophobia. For hooks to offer as a rationale for black homophobia, as in her anecdote of the "straight black male in a California community," the fact that "bonding" (since it is unspecified, we can assume both male and racial bonding here) is the reason he participates in homophobic "play" is both revealing and inexcusable. This is precisely the kind of play that, following again the logic of Crenshaw, we cannot abide, given the real threats that still exist in the form of discrimination and violence to gays and lesbians. While hooks may want to relegate systemic discrimination against gays and lesbians to the domain of hegemonic whites, antigay violence takes many forms—emotional, representational, and physical—and is not a practice exclusive to those of any particular race. Furthermore, it seems disingenuous and naive to suggest that what we say about gays and lesbians and the cultural representations of gays and lesbians do not, at least in part, legitimate—if not engender—discrimination and violence against gays and lesbians.

The rhetorical strategy she employs here is a very old one, indeed, wherein blacks are blameless because "powerless." The logic implied by such thinking is that, because whites constitute a racial hegemonic block in American society that oppresses blacks and other people of color, blacks can never be held wholly accountable for their own sociopolitical transgressions. Since this is sensitive and volatile

territory upon which I am treading, let me take some extra care to make sure that I am properly understood. I do not mean to suggest that there is not a grain of truth in the reality of the racial claims made by hooks and sustained by a history of black protest. However, it is only a grain. And the grain is, after all, but a minute particle on the vast shores of discursive truth. For me, any understanding of black oppression that makes it possible and, worse, permissible to endorse at any level sexism, elitism, or heterosexism is a vision of black culture that is finally not politically consistent with liberation. We can no more excuse black homophobia than black sexism. One is as politically and, dare I say, morally suspect as the other. This is a particularly surprising move on the part of hooks when we consider that, in so many other contexts, her work on gender is so unrelenting and hard-hitting.<sup>7</sup> So much is this the case that it is almost unimaginable that hooks would allow for a space in which tolerance for black sexism would ever be tenable. This makes me all the more suspect of her willingness not just to tolerate but to apologize for black homophobia.

There is still one aspect of hook's argument that I want to address here, which is her creation of a dichotomy between black gays and lesbians who live in black communities and those who live in predominately white communities. It is raised most clearly in the epigraph with which I began this essay. She laments that "often we hear more from black gay people who have chosen to live in predominately white communities, whose choices may have been affected by undue harassment in black communities. We hear hardly anything from black gay people who live contentedly in black communities."<sup>8</sup> This claim about the removal of black gays and lesbians from the "authentic" black community is quite bizarre for any number of reasons. Is it to say that those who remain in black communities are not "unduly harassed"? Or is it that they can take it? And is undue harassment the only factor in moves by black gays and lesbians to other communities? Still, the statement is problematic even beyond these more obvious curiosities in that it plays on the kind of authenticity politics that are under critique here. hooks faults many black middle-class gays and lesbians, and I dare say many of her colleagues in the academy, who live in "white communities" in a way that suggests that they are unable to give us the "real" story of black gays and lesbians. What of those experiences of "undue harassment"



that she posits as potentially responsible for their exodus from the black community? Are those narratives, taking place as they do in hook's "authentic" black community, not an important part of the story of black gay and lesbian experience, or are those gays and lesbians unqualified because of the geographical locations from which they speak? It appears that the standard hooks ultimately establishes for "real" black gay commentary here is a standard that few black intellectuals could comfortably meet any more—a by-product of the class structure in which we live. In most cases, the more upwardly mobile one becomes, the whiter the circles in which one inevitably finds oneself circulating—one of the more unfortunate realities of American society.<sup>9</sup>

The logic used by hooks on black homophobia is dangerous not only for the reasons I have already articulated but because it exists on a continuum with thinkers like Frances Cress Welsing. They are not, of course, the same, but each does exist in a discursive field that makes the other possible. Therefore, hooks's implied logic of apology played out to its fullest conclusion bears a great deal of resemblance to Welsing's own heterosexist text.

Welsing's<sup>10</sup> sentiments are exemplary of and grow out of a black cultural nationalist response to gay and lesbian sexuality, which has most often read homosexuality as "counterrevolutionary."<sup>11</sup> She begins first by dismissing the entirety of the psychoanalytic community that takes its lead from Freud. Freud is dismissed immediately by Welsing because he was unable to deliver his own people from the devastation of Nazi Germany. This "racial" ineffectualness for Welsing renders moot anything that Freud (or any of his devotees) might have to say on the subject of sexuality. The logic is this: since the most important political element for black culture is that of survival and Freud didn't know how to do that for his people, nothing that Freud or his devotees could tell us about homosexuality should be applied to black people. The idea of holding Freud responsible for not preventing the Holocaust is not only laughable, but it denies the specific history giving rise to that event. Furthermore, if we use this logic of victim blaming in the case of the Jews and Freud, would it not also follow that we would have to make the same critique of slavery? Are black Africans and the tribal leaders of West Africa, then, not also responsible for not preventing the enslavement of Blacks? It is precisely this sort of specious logic that makes a very

articulate Welsing difficult and frustrating when one tries to take her seriously.

But take her seriously we must. Welsing continues to speak and to command quite a following among black cultural nationalists.<sup>12</sup> We have to be concerned, then, about the degree to which Welsing's heterosexist authentication of blackness contributes to the marginalization of Black gays and lesbians. For Welsing, black Africa is the cite of an "originary" or "authentic" blackness. At the beginning of her essay, Welsing makes the following statement:

Black male passivity, effeminization, bisexuality and homosexuality are being encountered increasingly by Black psychiatrists working with Black patient populations. These issues are being presented by family members, personnel working in schools and other social institutions or by Black men themselves. Many in the Black population are reaching the conclusion that such issues have become a problem of epidemic proportion amongst Black people in the U.S., although it was an almost non-existent behavioral phenomenon amongst indigenous Blacks in Africa.<sup>13</sup>

From the beginning, Welsing describes homosexuality in a language associated with disease. It is a "problem of epidemic proportion" that seems to be spreading among black people. This rehearses a rhetorical gesture I mentioned earlier by speaking of the black community as an entity wholly separate from homosexuals who infect its sacrosanct authenticity. Of course, it goes without saying that Welsing's claim that homosexuality "was an almost non-existent behavioral phenomenon amongst indigenous Blacks in Africa" is not only unsupported by anthropological study,<sup>14</sup> but it also suggests the biological or genetic, to use her language, link which nonindigenous blacks have to indigenous black Africans. Welsing more than adopts an Afrocentric worldview in this essay by positing Africa as the seat of all real, unsullied, originary blackness. In this way she casts her lot with much of black cultural nationalist discourse, which is heavily invested in Afrocentrism. For further evidence of this, we need look no further than Welsing's own definition of "Black mental health":

The practice of those unit patterns of behavior (i.e., logic, thought, speech, action and emotional response) in all areas of people activ-

ity: economics, education, entertainment, labor, law, politics, religion, sex and war—which are simultaneously self- and group-supporting under the social and political conditions of worldwide white supremacy domination (racism). In brief, this means Black behavioral practice which resists self- and group-negation and destruction.<sup>15</sup>

Here, as elsewhere, Welsing prides herself on being outside the conceptual mainstream of any currently held psychiatric definitions of mental illness. She labels those the “‘European’ psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud.”<sup>16</sup> She seems here to want to be recognized for taking a bold, brazen position as solidly outside any “mainstream” logic. This is because all such logic is necessarily bad because it is mainstream, which is to say, white. One, then, gets the sense that homosexuality too is a by-product of white supremacy—and, further, that, if there were no white supremacy, homosexuality would not at best exist or at worst be somehow okay if it did. The overriding logic of her argument is the connection between white supremacy and homosexuality. The former is produced by the latter as a way to control black people. Hence, it follows that the only way to be really black is to resist homosexuality.

From this point on, Welsing’s essay spirals into an ever deepening chasm from which it never manages to return. For example, she argues that it is “male muscle mass” that oppresses a people. Since white men understand this fact and the related fact of their genetic weakness in relation to the majority of the world’s women (women of color), they are invested in the effeminization and homosexualization of black men.<sup>17</sup> She also states that the white women’s liberation movement—white women’s response to the white male’s need to be superior at least over them—has further served to weaken the white male’s sense of power, “helping to push him to a *weakened* and *homosexual* stance” (my emphasis—the two are synonymous for Welsing). Feminism, then, according to Welsing, leads to further “white male/female alienation, pushing white males further into the homosexual position and . . . white females in that direction also.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, she suggests that it is black manhood that is the primary target of racism, since black men, of course, are the genetically superior beings who can not only reproduce with black women but who can also reproduce with white women. And since the offspring of such unions,

according to Welsing's logic, are always black (the exact opposite of the result of such sexual pairings for white men and black women), black manhood is the primary target of a white supremacist system. Welsing's words are significant enough here that I quote her at some length:

. . . Racism (white supremacy) is the dominant social system in today's world. Its fundamental dynamic is predicated upon the genetic recessive deficiency state of albinism, which is responsible for skin whiteness and thus the so-called "white race." This genetic recessive trait is dominated by the genetic capacity to produce any of the various degrees of skin melanation—whether black, brown, red or yellow. In other words, it can be annihilated as a phenotypic condition. Control of this potential for genetic domination and annihilation throughout the world is absolutely essential if the condition of skin whiteness is to survive. "White" survival is predicated upon aggressiveness and muscle mass in the form of technology directed against the "non-white" melanated men on the planet Earth who constitute the numerical majority. Therefore, white survival and white power are dependent upon the various methodologies, tactics and strategies developed to control all "non-white" men, as well as bring them into cooperative submission. This is especially important in the case of Black men because they have the greatest capacity to produce melanin and, in turn, the greatest genetic potential for the annihilation of skin albinism or skin whiteness.<sup>19</sup>

This passage demonstrates, to my mind, the critical hazards of privileging the category of race in any discussion of black people. When we give "race," with its retinue of historical and discursive investments, primacy over other signifiers of difference, the result is a network of critical blindnesses that prevents us from perceiving the ways in which the conventions of race discourse get naturalized and normativized. These conventions often include, especially in cases involving—though not exclusive to—black cultural nationalism, the denigration of homosexuality and the accompanying peripheralization of women. Underlying much of race discourse, then, is always the implication that all "real" black subjects are male and heterosexual. Therefore, in partial response to the query with which I began

this essay, only these such subjects are best qualified to speak for or to represent the race.

Unfortunately, Welsing does not stop there. She continues her discussion of black manhood to a point where what she means by the appellation far and above exceeds her mere genetic definition. Though she never clearly defines what she intends by black manhood, we can construct a pretty clear idea from the ways that she uses the term in her argument. "The dearth of Black males in the homes, schools and neighborhoods," Welsing proclaims,

leaves Black male children no alternative models. Blindly they seek out one another as models, and in their blindness end up in trouble—in juvenile homes or prisons. But fate and the dynamics of racism again play a vicious trick because the young males only become more alienated from their manhood and more feminized in such settings.<sup>20</sup>

It is clear from this statement that black manhood is set in opposition to femininity and is something that is retarded by the influence of women, especially in female-headed households. She describes the effect of effeminizing influences on black men as the achievement of racist programming. This achievement is, in part, possible because of the clothing industry as well, according to Welsing: "The white run clothing industry is all too pleased to provide the costumes of feminine disguise for Black male escape. However, they never would provide uniforms or combat gear if customers were willing to pay \$1000 per outfit."<sup>21</sup> She also faults television as "an important programmer of behavior in this social system" that "plays a further major role in alienating Black males (especially children) from Black manhood."<sup>22</sup> The examples she cites are Flip Wilson's persona Geraldine and Jimmy Walker's character, J. J., on the 1970s television series *Good Times*. "These weekly insults," she maintains, "to Black manhood that we have been programmed to believe are entertainment and not direct racist warfare, further reinforce, perhaps in the unconscious thinking of Black people, a loss of respect for Black manhood while carrying that loss to even deeper levels."<sup>23</sup> Most telling, perhaps, is that the clinical method she endorses for "disorders" of "passivity, effeminization, bisexuality, homosexuality" is to have the patients "relax and envision themselves approaching and opposing, in actual

combat, the collective of white males and females (without apology or giving up in the crunch)."<sup>24</sup> Again, there is an essence to what black manhood is that never receives full articulation except implicitly. But what is implied could be described as monstrous, combative, and even primitive. There is certainly no room for a nurturing view of manhood here. To be a man is to be strong. And strength, in Welsing's logic, is the opposite of weakness, which can only signify at best as effeminacy or passivity and at worst as bisexuality or homosexuality. Still another of the vexatious implications of this logic is that, in a world devoid of racism or white supremacy, there would be no black male homosexuality. The result is that black male homosexuality is reducible to being a by-product of racist programming. Once again, this is the function of an argument that privileges race discourse over other forms of difference in its analysis of black oppression.

Let me turn my attention for a moment to Essex Hemphill's response to Welsing's troublesome essay. Hemphill's rhetoric demonstrates how even in a very astute and well-wrought "reading" of Welsing—and it is fair to say that Hemphill "reads" her in both the critical and the more campy sense of the word—the move is never made to critique the structure (and by "structure" here I mean the implied rules governing the use of) and function of race discourse itself. It is clear to me, as I have tried to demonstrate, that this is precisely what is missing from hook's logic, which undergirds her discussion of homophobia in black communities as well. Hemphill's response to Welsing is thoughtful and engaging and identifies the faulty premises upon which Welsing bases her arguments. Still, Hemphill's own essay and rhetoric falls prey to the conventions of race discourse in two very important ways. First, in order to combat Welsing's homophobia/heterosexism, Hemphill himself feels the pressure to legitimize and authorize himself as a speaker on race matters by telling his own authenticating anecdote of black/gay experience at the beginning of his essay:<sup>25</sup>

In 1974, the year that Dr. Frances Cress Welsing wrote "The Politics behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality," I entered my final year of senior high school.

By that time, I had arrived at a very clear understanding of how dangerous it was to be a homosexual in my Black neighborhood and

in society. . . . Facing this then-limited perception of homosexual life, I could only wonder, where did I fit in? . . .

Conversely, I was perfecting my heterosexual disguise; I was practicing the necessary use of masks for survival; I was calculating the distance between the first day of class and graduation, the distance between graduation from high school and departure for college—and ultimately, the arrival of my freedom from home, community, and my immediate peers. . . .

During the course of the next sixteen years I would articulate and politicize my sexuality. I would discover that homo sex did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate my racial identity or constitute a substantive reason to be estranged from my family and Black culture. I discovered, too, that the work ahead for me included, most importantly, being able to integrate all of my identities into a functioning self, instead of accepting a dysfunctional existence as a consequence of my homosexual desires.<sup>26</sup>

While Hemphill's personal anecdote demonstrates his access to the various categories of identity he claims, it is not a critique of the very idea of the categories themselves. In fact, he plays the "race/sexuality" card in a way that is similar to the way in which Welsing plays the "race" card.

And, second, while his critique of Welsing is thorough and extremely insightful, it does not move to critique the methodological fault Welsing makes in her analysis—that is, the fact that much of what is wrong with Welsing's argument is a result of the privileging of "race" over other critical categories of difference. Instead, Hemphill treats Welsing's heterosexism itself as the critical disease, instead of as symptomatic of a far more systemic critical illness.

One of the most noteworthy things about Hemphill's anecdotal testimony is that, while it insists, and rightly so, upon the integration of what Welsing has established as the dichotomous identities of race and homosexuality, it also participates in a familiar structural convention of race discourse in its necessity to claim the racial identification as a position from which even the black homosexual speaks. In other words, part of the rhetorical strategy enacted by Hemphill in this moment is that of claiming the category of racial authenticity for himself as part of what legitimizes and authorizes the articulation of his corrective to Welsing's homophobic race logic. The net result is

the substitution of heterosexist race logic with a homo-positive or homo-inclusive race logic. Still the common denominator of both positions is the persistence of race as the privileged category in discussions of black identity.

The first clue we get of Hemphill's failure to identify the larger systemic problem of Welsing's argument is his comparison of Welsing and Shahrazad Ali:

Dr. Welsing is not as easily dismissable as Shahrazad Ali, author of the notorious book of internal strife, *The Black Man's Guide to Understanding the Black Woman* (Philadelphia: Civilized Publications, 1989). . . . By dismissing the lives of Black lesbians and gay men, Ali is clearly not advocating the necessary healing Black communities require; she is advocating further factionalization. Her virulently homophobic ideas lack credibility and are easily dismissed as incendiary.

Dr. Welsing is much more dangerous because she attempts to justify *her* homophobia and heterosexism precisely by grounding it in an acute understanding of African-American history and an analysis of the psychological effects of centuries of racist oppression and violence.<sup>27</sup>

Hemphill is right in his reading of Welsing, though his reading does not go far enough: Ali is not more easily dismissable than Welsing. In fact, Ali's ideas are rooted in a history of sorts as well, a history shared by Welsing's arguments—that is, the history of race discourse itself, which, in its privileging of the dominant category of analysis, has always sustained the derision or exclusion of black gays and lesbians.

Another such moment in Hemphill's essay comes when he identifies what he seems to understand as the central problem of Welsing's text. He writes:

Welsing refutes any logical understanding of sexuality. By espousing Black homophobia and heterosexism—imitations of the very oppressive forces of hegemonic white male heterosexuality she attempts to challenge—she places herself in direct collusion with the forces that continually move against Blacks, gays, lesbians, and all people of color. Thus, every time a gay man or lesbian is violently



attacked, blood *is* figuratively on Dr. Welsing's hands as surely as blood is on the hands of the attackers. Her ideas reinforce the belief that gay and lesbian lives are expendable, and her views also provide a clue as to why the Black community has failed to intelligently and coherently address critical, life-threatening issues such as AIDS.<sup>28</sup>

Hemphill's statement is true. Welsing's logic does imitate that of the oppressive forces of white male heterosexuality which she tries to refute. The difference is that Welsing does not view the latter category as crucial to her analysis. The problem with Welsing's argument does not end where Hemphill supposes it does. Much of race discourse, even the discourse of racial liberation, participates in a similar relationship with hegemonic antigay forces. This is especially the case, and some might even argue that it is inevitable, when we consider the history and development of black liberationist or antiracist discourse with its insistence on the centrality of black masculinity (in the narrowest sense of the term) as the essential element of any form of black liberation. If racial liberationist discourse suggests at best the invisibility of homosexuality and at worst understands homosexuality as racially antagonistic, Dr. Welsing radically manifests one of the more unseemly truths of race discourse for blacks—the demonization of homosexuality.

The critical blindness demonstrated by Hemphill does not alone express the extent of what happens when a gay black man takes up the mantle of race discourse. Another example worth exploring is that of James Baldwin. In the documentary of his life done in 1989, *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, there are at least two moments to which I want to call attention. The first is a statement made by Amiri Baraka, and the second is a statement made by Baldwin himself from interview footage from *The Dick Cavett Show*. I turn to these less literally textual examples to demonstrate that, in our more casual or less scripted moments, our subconscious understanding of the realities of race discourse is laid bare even more clearly.

Baraka's regard for Baldwin is well documented by the film. He talks about how Baldwin was "in the tradition" and how his early writings, specifically *Notes of a Native Son*, really impacted him and spoke to a whole generation. In an attempt to describe or to account

for Baldwin's homosexuality, however, Baraka falters in his efforts to unite the racially significant image of Baldwin that he clings to with the homosexual Baldwin with whom he seems less comfortable. Baraka states the following:

Jimmy Baldwin was neither in the closet about his homosexuality, nor was he running around proclaiming homosexuality. I mean, he was what he was. And you either had to buy that or, you know, *mea culpa*, go somewhere else.

The poles of the rhetorical continuum that Baraka sets up here for his understanding of homosexuality are very telling and should remind us of the earlier dichotomy set up by bell hooks between homosexuals who live somewhat closeted existences in black communities and those who do not. To Baraka's mind, one can either be in the closet or "running around proclaiming homosexuality" (the image of the effete gay man or the gay activist collide here, it would seem). What makes Baldwin acceptable to enter the pantheon of race men for Baraka is the fact that his sexual identity is unlocatable. It is neither here nor there, or perhaps it is everywhere at once, leaving the entire question an undecided and undecidable one. And if Baldwin is undecided about his sexual identity, the one identity to which he is firmly committed is his racial identity. The rhetorical ambiguity around his sexual identity, according to Baraka, is what makes it possible for Baldwin to be a race man who was "in the tradition."

Baldwin himself, it seems, was well aware of the dangers of, indeed, the "price of the ticket" for trying to synthesize his racial and sexual identities. He understood that his efficacy as race man was, in part at least, owing to his limiting his activism to his racial politics. The frame of the documentary certainly confirms this in the way it represents Baldwin's own response to his sexuality. In one interview, he makes the following statement:

I think the trick is to say yes to life. . . . It is only we of the twentieth century who are so obsessed with the particular details of anybody's sex life. I don't think those details make a difference. And I will never be able to deny a certain power that I have had to deal with,

which has dealt with me, which is called love; and love comes in very strange packages. I've loved a few men; I've loved a few women; and a few people have loved me. That's . . . I suppose that's all that's saved my life.

It may be of interest to note that, while Baldwin is making this statement, the camera pans down to his hands, which are fidgeting with the cigarette and cigarette holder. This move on the part of the camera undercuts the veracity of Baldwin's statement here. In fact, it suggests what I think of as a fair conclusion about this statement. That is, Baldwin himself does not quite believe all of what he is saying in this moment. From the 1949 essay, "The Preservation of Innocence,"<sup>29</sup> which he wrote and published in *Zero*, a small Moroccan journal, Baldwin knows just how profoundly important sexuality is to discussions of race. But the desire registered here for sexuality not to make a difference is important to recognize. When we understand this statement as spoken in a prophetic mode, it imagines a world in which the details of a person's sex life can "matter" as part of a person's humanity but not have to usurp their authority or legitimacy to represent the race.

If Baldwin's statement raises the complications of speaking from a complex racial/sexual identity location, the following excerpt from his interview on *The Dick Cavett Show* illustrates this point all the more clearly:

I don't know what most white people in this country feel, but I can only conclude what they feel from the state of their institutions. I don't know if white Christians hate Negroes or not, but I know that we have a Christian church which is white and a Christian church which is black. I know, as Malcolm X once put it, "The most segregated hour in America is high noon on Sunday." That says a great deal to me about a Christian nation. It means that I can't afford to trust most white Christians and certainly cannot trust the Christian church. I don't know whether the labor unions and their bosses really hate me. That doesn't matter. But I know that I'm not in their unions. I don't know if the real estate lobby has anything against black people, but I know the real estate lobby keeps me in the ghetto. I don't know if the board of education hates black people, but I know the textbooks they give my children to read and the

schools that we go to. Now this is the evidence! *You want me to make an act of faith risking myself, my wife, my woman, my sister, my children on some idealism which you assure me exists in America which I have never seen.* [emphasis added]

Interesting for both the rich sermonic quality and the vehement tone for which Baldwin was famous, this passage is also conspicuous for the manner in which Baldwin assumes the voice of representative race man. In the very last sentence, when Baldwin affects the position of race man, part of the performance includes the masking of his specificity, his sexuality, his difference. And in race discourse when all difference is concealed what emerges is the heterosexual black man “risking [himself], [his] wife, [his] woman, [his] children.” The image of the black man as protector, progenitor, and defender of the race—which sounds suspiciously similar to the image fostered by Welsing and much of black cultural nationalism—is what Baldwin assumes here. The truth of this rhetorical transformation—the hard, difficult, worrisome truth—is that, in order to be representative race man, one must be heterosexual. And what of women? They appear, in the confines of race discourse, to be ever the passive players. They are rhetorically useful in that they lend legitimacy to the black male’s responsibility for their care and protection, but they cannot speak, any more than the gay or lesbian brother or sister can. If these are part of the structural demands of race discourse, the erasure of subtlety and black difference, it is time to own up to that truth. As black intellectuals and cultural workers, we have to demand, insist upon, and be about the business of helping to create new and more inclusive ways of speaking about race that do not cause even good, thorough thinkers like hooks, Hemphill, and Baldwin (and there are many others) to compromise their/our own critical veracity by participating in the form of race discourse that has been hegemonic for so long. Race is, indeed, a fiction, an allegory, if you will, with an elaborate linguistic court. Knowing that, more needs to be done to reimagine race; to create new and inclusive mythologies to replace the old, weather-worn, heterosexual, masculinity-centered ones; to reconstitute “the black community” as one that includes our various differences as opposed to the monolith to which we inevitably seem to return.

For far too long the field of African American/Afro-American/Black Studies has thought about race as the primary category of

analysis for the work that proceeds from the field. The problem with such work has always been, and continues to be, that African Americans and African American experience are far more complicated than this. And it is time that we begin to understand what that means in the form of an everyday critical and political practice. Race is not simple. It has never been simple. It does not have the history that would make it so, no matter how much we may yearn for that degree of clarity. This is a point I have argued in a variety of venues. The point is that, if I am thinking about race, I should already be thinking about gender, class, and sexuality. This statement, I think, assumes the very impossibility of a hierarchy or chronology of categories of identity. The point is not just one of intersection—as we have thought of it for so long—it is one of reconstitution. That is, race is already more than just race. Or, put another way, race is always already everything that it ever was, though some of its constitutive aspects may have been repressed for various nefarious purposes and/or for other strategic ones. Either way, it is never simple, never to be taken for granted. What I say is not revolutionary or revelatory. The theory, in this way, has gotten ahead of the critical practice. Almost all good race theorists these days will recognize the merit of this approach; the point is that the work we produce has not fully caught up. That explains why it is still possible today to query: what does a race theory, of which all of these categories of identity are constitutive, look like? And, more important, how do the critiques, the work informed by such theory, look different from what we now see dominating the field? I have great hope in the future for the work of scholars like Lindon Barrett, who are beginning to theorize racial blackness in relationship to the category of value, with all the trappings of desire, commodification and exchange inherent in that operation. This may be just the kind of critical innovation needed to help us reconstitute our ideas about “race” and race discourse.<sup>30</sup>

Of course, it is not my intention in these reflections to suggest that there are not good heterosexual “race men” and “race women” on the scene who have progressive views about sexuality and are “down” with their gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. In fact, quite the contrary. In many instances, it adds an extra dimension of cachet and progressivism to hear such heterosexual speakers be sympathetic to gays and lesbians. So long as they are not themselves gay or lesbian, it would appear on the open market to enhance their “coolness”

quotient. The issue that needs more attention exists at the level at which we authenticate our authority and legitimacy to speak for the race as representational subjects. In other words, there are any number of narratives that African American intellectuals employ to qualify themselves in the terms of race discourse to speak for the race. And, while one routinely witnesses the use of narratives of racial discrimination, narratives of growing up poor and black and elevating oneself through education and hard work, narratives about how connected middle-class black intellectuals are to “the black community” or “the hood,” we could scarcely imagine an instance in which narrating or even claiming one’s gay or lesbian identity would authenticate or legitimate oneself as a racial representative. And, as we see in the case of James Baldwin, when black gays and lesbians do don the racial representational mask, they often do so at the expense of effacing (even if only temporarily) their sexual identities.

Given the current state of black antiracist discourse, it is no wonder that even now there is only one book-length critical, literary investigation of the work of James Baldwin, by Trudier Harris;<sup>31</sup> it is no wonder that Langston Hughes’s biographer, even in 1986, felt the need to defend him against the “speculation” surrounding his homosexuality; it is no wonder that, even to this day, we can still say, with Cheryl Clark and bell hooks, that there exists no sustained sociological study of black lesbians and gays; and it is no wonder that among the vanguard of so-called black public intellectuals there is the notable near absence of openly gay and lesbian voices. Lamentable though this state of affairs may be, we cannot deny that part of the responsibility for it has much to do with the limits of black antiracist discourse, that is, what it is still considered appropriate to say about race, and the policing of who speaks for the race.

## NOTES

1. bell hooks, “Homophobia in Black Communities,” in *Talking Back* (Boston: South End, 1989), 120–26.

2. Essex Hemphill, “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing,” in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (New York: Plume, 1992), 52–62.

3. See my two essays “Speaking the Unspeakable: On Toni Morrison, African American Intellectuals and the Uses of Essentialist Rhetoric,” *Modern*

*Fiction Studies* (Fall/Winter 1993): 755–76, and “Transdisciplinary Intellectual Practice: Cornel West and the Rhetoric of Race Transcending,” *Harvard Black-Letter Law Journal* (Spring 1994): 155–68.

4. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Beyond Racism and Misogyny: Black Feminism and 2 Live Crew,” *Boston Review* 16, 6 (December 1991): 6, 30.

5. Thinkers like Kobena Mercer at the Black Nations/Queer Nations Conference in 1995 represent a few of the exceptions to this claim. Still, such critique of homophobia has not been a part of the more public debates about the objectionable qualities of rap and hip-hop.

6. bell hooks, see note 1, at 122.

7. See, for example, any number of hooks’s essays in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End, 1990) and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End, 1992).

8. bell hooks, see note 6.

9. This is not to say that those of us who exist (at least professionally) in predominately white circles do not interact with the “Black community.” It is to suggest that our interaction is, in a sense, constructed.

10. For a fuller discussion of how homosexuality is counterrevolutionary, see Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968). The chapters entitled “The Allegory of the Black Eunuchs” and “The Primeval Mitosis” are especially noteworthy. In order to relate this to the earlier discussion of Crenshaw and Gates’s exchange over 2 Live Crew, it is interesting to note the point made by Essex Hemphill in his essay on Welsing, that she has been a highly “sought-after public speaker, and in recent years, her ideas have been embraced in the re-emergence of Black cultural nationalism, particularly by rap groups such as Public Enemy” (53–54).

11. Welsing herself is no exception to this rule. The last sentence of her essay reads as follows: “Black male bisexuality and homosexuality has [*sic*] been used by the white collective in its effort to survive genetically in a world dominated by colored people, and Black acceptance of this position does not solve the major problem of our oppression [read here the race problem] but only further retards its ultimate solution.” Frances Cress Welsing, “The Politics behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality,” *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (Chicago: Third World, 1991), 92.

12. Even as recently as a few weeks ago at the time of this writing, Welsing appeared on National Public Radio speaking about her famous Cress Theory of race. The theory is based on the genetic inferiority of whites to blacks. Since whites have knowledge of this, they fear genetic annihilation. This fear, according to Welsing, has been the cause of the history of racism as we know it.

13. Welsing, see note 11, at 81.

14. For some preliminary discussion of anthropological evidence of the

existence of homosexual practices among certain African cultures and other peoples of color, see Pat Caplan, ed., *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality* (London and New York: Tavistock, 1987).

15. Welsing, see note 11, at 82.

16. Ibid.

17. Welsing, see note 11, at 83–84.

18. Welsing, see note 11, at 85–86.

19. Welsing, see note 11, at 83.

20. Welsing, see note 11, at 89.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Welsing, see note 11, at 90.

24. Welsing, see note 11, at 91–92.

25. See my essay “Transdisciplinary Intellectual Practice: Cornel West and the Rhetoric of Race-Transcending,” where I argue that one of the essentializing gestures in which African American intellectuals participate in order to legitimate themselves as speakers for the race is to relate racially affirming anecdotes from their own experience. Also, in fairness to Hemphill, his use of the anecdotal gesture of self-authorization is somewhat different from the usual race-based model. His narrative authority derives from the simultaneity of his gay and his black experience. He insists upon them both. Still, the need to narrate the two side by side, indeed, to narrate his story at all, is interesting to note as a response to Welsing’s very problematic position.

26. Hemphill, see note 2, at 52–53.

27. Hemphill, see note 2, at 54.

28. Hemphill, see note 2, at 55.

29. James Baldwin, “Preservation of Innocence,” *OUT/LOOK* 2, 2 (Fall 1989): 40–45.

30. See Lindon Barrett’s forthcoming book, *Seeing Double: Blackness and Value* (Cambridge University Press).

31. I am also aware of the work-in-progress of Maurice Wallace at Yale entitled *Hostile Witness: Baldwin as Artist and Outlaw*.