

**The Futures Outside:
Apocalyptic Epilogue Unveiled as Africana Queer Prologue
by Eric A. Thomas**

published in *Sexual Disorientations: Queer Temporalities, Affects, Theologies*
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2017)

For those of us who live at the shoreline
standing upon the constant edges of decision
crucial and alone
for those of us who cannot indulge
the passing dreams of choice
who live in doorways coming and going
in the hours between dawns
looking inward and outward
at once before and after
seek a now that can breed
futures
like bread in our children's mouths
so their dreams will not reflect
the death of ours:

For those of us
who were imprinted with fear
like a faint line in the center of our
foreheads learning to be afraid with our
mother's milk for by this weapon
this illusion of some safety to be
found the heavy-footed hoped to
silence us

For all of us
this instant and this triumph

We were never meant to survive.

Audre Lorde, A Litany for Survival
(excerpt)¹

¹Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival" in *The Black Unicorn: Poems by Audre Lorde* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1978) 31.

Thinking and Feeling New Heavens

*And I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth passed away... (Rev. 21:1)*²

This essay examines the epilogue of Revelation (22:8-21) as an intervention for new imaginations of, and actions toward, a new heaven and new earth that can be realized now in the present. It names the ways that Revelation (and therefore the Bible) is used as a means to make outsiders of queer people, and proposes that the author/narrator John is not the only one who can be filled with the spirit on the Lord(e)'s day in order to envision a new heaven and a new earth. This position has particular resonance for same gender loving (SGL)³ and transgender people of African American and African descent because Revelation is part of the theo-cultural bases of innumerable articulations of liberation, divine vindication, and eschatological salvation that stem from postcolonial and post-Emancipation people of African descent. However, for the most part Africana queer experience is sealed beneath those articulations. Instead, our experiences and very being are objects of damnation. We find ourselves literally and metaphorically "living in doorways coming and going" in our own kinship groups, and have come to internalize the message that in the last days, we were never meant to survive.⁴ By foregrounding Africana queer lived experience in re-reading Revelation, I disidentify with those external and internalized messages and use my own loud voice to proclaim that Revelation's apocalyptic epilogue can be

² Translations from the Greek text are my own.

³ Same/similar gender loving or SGL in this context is associated with the work of Black activist Cleo Manago in the 1990's. It is a culturally affirming identity that decenters the concept of a white, male, middle-class, Western world subject as the starting point for everyday queer experience. This definition is multiply articulated by contemporary SGL scholars and activists who add to, contest, and elaborate upon it – including more fluid subjectivities that seem to be erased in it. See <http://www.bmxnational.org/what-is-bmx/> (accessed August 31, 2015). I locate myself as a Black SGL man of Africana queer experience in solidarity with LGBTQ people in Africa and throughout the African diasporas.

⁴ Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," 31.

an Africana queer prologue in which to think, feel, and take actions towards alternative futures that can begin now.

Disidentifying with Tribulation and Patient Endurance

*I, John, your brother and co-participant in the tribulation and reign
and endurance in Jesus Christ, was on the island called Patmos
on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus (Rev. 1:10)*

The theoretical grounding of this essay is constructed from queers of color critique. José Esteban Muñoz writes that “the here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there*....a doing for and toward the future.”⁵ As the last book of the Christian Bible, Revelation’s message has been given powerful authority by believers to determine the following: the worthy and the unworthy, insiders and outsiders; those who gain a heavenly reward, and those who are left behind. Consequently, it is an example of the terms set forth by Muñoz: a text that exists for the future that thinks and feels a *then and there*, but in ways that risk turning the *here and now* into a prison house. It is in its own way a totalizing rendering of reality. We can disidentify with patiently enduring abjection and persecution. Instead, we can decide that Revelation’s vision of the future may also be read alternatively, and transformed via Muñoz’ strategy as an opportunity for outsiders to live into new ways of being, doing, and flourishing.

Disidentification according to Muñoz, “permits the spectator, often a queer who has been locked out of the halls of representation or rendered a static caricature there, to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity.”⁶ This re-imagining of world is enacted by cultural workers as a survival technique by which the queer

⁵José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010). 1 (his emphasis).

⁶José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) 1.

subject works within and outside of the dominant sphere simultaneously.⁷ Disidentification is neither an argument for assimilation into an oppressive structure nor a direct counter to the structure since for Muñoz this act sets up a binary of “good” and “bad.” Rather, disidentification creates an alternative way towards “a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.”⁸

Whereas Muñoz gives examples of disidentifications through the realm of queer performance, I apply his concepts to contextual biblical interpretation. My Africana queer reading of Revelation is inspired by the association of LGBTQ persons with heteronormative Christian-based cultural imaginations of hell – the place that according to them all queer people will surely go.⁹ My alter-interpretation responds to the practice of using biblical texts to support homophobia and violence, particularly to Africana queer folk by hetero-superior people of African descent. Following Jafari S. Allen, Lyndon K. Gill, and the scholar-activists of the black/queer/diaspora project,¹⁰ I bring the use of ethnographic and empirical data as techniques of black queer studies and queers of color critique.¹¹ My cultural examples are curated from lived experiences as a preference to literature to emphasize that actual bodies are affected by socio-cultural hegemony. As Allen notes:

⁷Ibid, 5.

⁸ Ibid, 11-12.

⁹ This surety is an example of Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of *chrononormativity*, “a technique by which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts.” Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) 3.

¹⁰ The slashes that separate the categories are indicative of the separate yet porous boundaries of each construction, especially as Africana queer folk cross them.

¹¹For examples of queers of color critique, in addition to the above mentioned works by José Esteban Muñoz, see Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Towards a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005); and essays in “Black/Queer/Diaspora,” ed. Jafari S. Allen, special issue, *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 18, nos. 2-3 (2012), doi: 10.1215/10642684-1472872.

This [collection of data from real life] brings us closer to providing verbs to animate the continuation of the black radical intellectual tradition, as well as a name – or more precisely, a number of names – *lesbian, transgender, bisexual, gay, batty bwoi, masisi, bulldagger, two-spirited, maricón, same gender loving, buller, zami, mati working, dress-up girls, bois, butches, femme or butch queen, gender insurgent, marimacha, branché, bugarrón*, ...etcetera [which we] of Africa(n descent) call ourselves. Of course, some eschew explicit naming, preferring to live their verbs, as for example, simply *am, is, are, been, being, be* – or *interrupt, invent, push, question, refuse, serve*, or *shade*, in some cases.¹²

The futures I am imagining as a Black American SGL man with my fellow Africana queer folk are relative to, and therefore must be imagined and activated from, our multiple social locations throughout African diasporas – the African continent, the Caribbean, South and North Americas, and all points between and beyond.¹³ The imaginative strategies I employ from my geographical and social position in the northeast United States as a biblical scholar-minister-activist will be different from that of my Black lesbian teacher in South Africa, or my homeless transgender sister in Kingston.¹⁴ However, we can recognize and gain strength from our shared histories of oppression and the potentialities for our brilliance that are as individual as they are collective. I am thinking with the idea of an Africana queer *subterranean convergence* already conjured in Edouard Glissant's imagination of diverse Caribbean histories that counteract the concrete linearity of a single [heteronormatively Western-based] history.¹⁵

¹²Jafari S. Allen "Black/Queer/Diaspora at the Current Conjuncture," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 18, nos. 2-3 (2012): 213.

¹³ I pluralize *diasporas* to note movements to and from the African continent, as well as to and from the multiple geographical locations where people of African descent reside, emigrate from/to, and traverse (e.g. the Jamaican diaspora).

¹⁴ My purposeful use of the possessive symbolizes my solidarity with and my practice of the ideal that my freedom is linked to the freedom of my LGBTQ sisters and brothers and all people of African descent.

¹⁵ Edouard Glissant, "History-Histories-Stories in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J Michael Dash (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1989; original in 1981) 61-95; quote on 66.

To this concept I add the African philosophical term *Sankofa*, associated with the symbol of “a Sankofa bird that flies forward while facing backward, while holding an egg, its future offspring in its beak – a reminder that we must understand the past in order to move the present forward into a viable future.”¹⁶ In the Akan language, Sankofa gives the imperative to “return to the source, go get it and bring it here.”¹⁷ Linda Thomas writes, “As a Sankofa people, African Americans are called to remember the unadulterated abuse suffered during the days of chattel slavery, and through this act of deliberate – and *deliberative* – retrieval live into our eschatological determination to move forward toward the *kin-dom* of God.”¹⁸ This process of returning, remembering, and re-visioning can be embodied and pleasurable. It can inspire the practice of (re)constructing erotohistoriographies.

Queer theorist and English professor Elizabeth Freeman explains erotohistoriography as the queer practice(s) of encountering and documenting a past centered on pleasure – particularly sexual pleasure; “the potential for collective queer time – even queer history – to be structured as an uneven transmission of receptivity rather than authority or custom, of a certain enjoyably porous relation to unpredictable futures or to new configurations of the past.”¹⁹ As a practice of resistance, erotohistoriography:

allows us access to a counterhistory of history itself – an antisystematic method that informs other, much later artistic productions traveling more explicitly under the sign of queer... And it uses the body as a tool to effect, figure, or perform that encounter. Erotohistoriography admits that contact with historical materials can be precipitated by particular bodily dispositions, and that these connections may elicit bodily responses,

¹⁶ Linda E. Thomas, “A Womanist Conjure on We Have Been Believers” in James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed, ed. Stephen G. Ray, Jr. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012) 185.

¹⁷ Cecil Conteen Gray, *Afrocentric Thought and Praxis: An Intellectual History* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2001) 28.

¹⁸ Thomas, “A Womanist Conjure,” 185, her emphasis in the original.

¹⁹ Freeman, *Time Binds*, 109.

even pleasurable ones, themselves a form of understanding. It sees the body as a method, and historical consciousness as something intimately involved with corporeal sensations.²⁰

Connecting these terms (Sankofa and erotohistoriography), an Africana queer practice of pleasurable and embodied remembering (and re-remembering) enables us to create alternative futures that include new ways of being community, practicing dignity, and making visible histories and hurts that have been hidden (or sealed).²¹ We need to discover the power based on our experiences and our potential to imagine a *then and there* to change our *here and now*. I suggest this power comes from the embodiment of erotic subjectivity.

Lyndon K. Gill refers to erotic subjectivity as “at once an interpretive perspective and a mode of consciousness; it is both a way of *reading* and a way of *being* in the world.”²² It is a dissolution of the body/spirit binaries where sexuality is “bad” and piety is “good” in preference to an integration of the two resulting in political empowerment. Informed by Audre Lorde’s essay “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,”²³ Gill writes:

My articulation of the erotic expands beyond being mere euphemism for sexual desire and reaches simultaneously toward a political attentiveness and a spiritual consciousness. This tripartite political-sensual-spiritual awareness makes possible and desirable a more broadly and deeply conceived articulation of love. And it is this love that so often provides the motivation for political action, sensual intimacy, and spiritual hunger – together constitutive elements of an erotic subjecthood.²⁴

²⁰Ibid, 95-96.

²¹ Cf. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014; original in 1981) 102: “History is what hurts, it is what refuses desire and sets inexorable limits to individual as well as collective praxis, which its ‘ruses’ turn into grisly and ironic reversals of their overt intention.” See also Freeman, *Time Binds*, 10.

²² Lyndon K. Gill, “Chatting Back an Epidemic: Caribbean Gay Men, HIV/AIDS and the Uses of Erotic Subjectivity” in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Special Issue: Black/Queer/Diaspora), 18 nos. 2-3, (2012): 279.

²³ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” in *Sister Outsider: Essays & Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 2007; Orig. 1984) 53-59.

²⁴ Ibid.

Gill's political-sensual-spiritual re-construction of erotic subjectivity is a resource for the agency to become Sankofa people as alternative futures are imagined to change the present. Returning to José Esteban Muñoz, erotic subjectivity is what empowers the getting from the *here and now* to a *then and there*. Gill adds the verbs *reading* and *being* to Muñoz's *doing* for the future.

Revelation 22:14-15 reads: "Highly honored (blessed) are the ones who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and sexually exploited and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices deceit."²⁵ The threat of being excluded from heaven (the New Jerusalem) presented by the text of Revelation and its homophobic heteronormative interpreters in the *future* is moot for Africana queer people whose lives as the result of homo- and transphobic violence and rejection are a living hell in the *present*. From the standpoint of "those outside" (Rev. 22:15), those who absorb the brunt of the negative lived experiences of Africana queer subjects, I use my own loud voice to proclaim that alternative visions of the future can be imagined and embodied.²⁶ Throughout history and in the present, many queer people struggling to survive in contemporary African diasporas have been and are "outside" of community ("Outside [*exō*] are the dogs..."). We are outside of the histories of independence, social-cultural concepts of blackness, and religious acceptance, among other exclusions, in our multiple geographic locations.

²⁵ I define πόρνοι "as the ones who are sexually exploited" as opposed to "fornicators (NRSV)" or "sexually immoral (NIV)" to name the fact that in the 1st century, this group includes male and female slaves and other subordinates who did not necessarily have agency over their bodies, and the fact that there can be no supply if there was no demand. As reception histories are constructed through time, the moral and spiritual responsibility (blame) is placed on those who could be victims, as opposed to the perpetrators. In modern understanding, we assume that fornicators and the sexually immoral can choose to be so, which makes it easy to put this context onto the sexually marginalized (i.e. contemporary homosexuals). My definition disidentifies with this practice.

²⁶Cf. Revelation 1:10; 5:2; 6:10; 7:2, 10; 8:13; 11:12, 15; 12:10, 14:7, 9, 15 18; 16:1, 17; 19:1, 17; 21:3. Although I am writing in my own voice, it is amplified with energy from my ancestors who have gone to their eternal rewards before me (especially my queer ancestors) and with the energy those yet to be born.

In Africa more than fifty countries have anti-homosexuality laws. More than ten Caribbean countries have anti-sodomy laws which carry over the “anti-buggery” laws of British colonization. Most recently, contemporary Western tolerance of homosexuality has created the myths that homosexuality is un-African or is the result of Western European influence. This stance reifies the fallacies that all queer people and their allies are white, and all “real” Africans and people of African descent are heterosexual. In reality “one could argue that at least in some African contexts, it was not *homosexuality* that was inherited from the West but rather a more regulatory *homophobia*.”²⁷ This regulation largely comes from the religious industrial complex: colonial missionaries, Western televangelism, and contemporary Council(s) of Church(es), diaspora re-constructions of postcolonial masculinities and femininities, and internalization of hyper-masculine “dangerous Black man” tropes constructed in white and Black popular culture. In addition to being false, these myths erase, obfuscate, and eliminate Africana queer people from cultural contributions, and recognition as citizens, family members, and kin.²⁸ Of the latter problems listed, Gaurav Desai notes, “Simon Nkoli, an important South African gay activist, suggests that for him the most difficult aspect of ‘coming out’ as a Black man in South Africa was the rejection that one felt from one’s own ethnic community as well as the racism inherent in the white gay community.”²⁹

²⁷Gaurav Desai, “Out in Africa,” in *Post-Colonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001) 148.

²⁸ James Cone incorporates the thought of Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin in his recent book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* without acknowledging they were gay Black men. Cone’s is an example of how gay and lesbian contributions are appropriated while ignoring or erasing sexual difference. See James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) esp. 93-119. Cf. A.B. Christa Schwartz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003) 48-87; William J. Spurlin, “Culture, Rhetoric, and Queer Identity: James Baldwin and the Identity Politics of Race and Sexuality,” in *James Baldwin Now*, ed. Dwight A. McBride (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999) 103-121. On the subject of Africana citizenship, see M. Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas.” *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 5-23.

²⁹Desai, “Out in Africa,” 157.

What is at stake for this critique is a means by which to unveil on the one hand, intra-group conflicts within African diaspora based on post and neocolonial responses to normalizing factors of race, gender (particularly performance of masculinity and femininity), nationhood, and sexual orientation that put queer people in conflict with their own kinfolk. On the other hand, it critiques intra-group conflicts in LGBTQ communities where Western (white) gay and lesbian politics and ideologies cast as “backwards” the strategies for negotiating identity and sociality used by U.S. racial-ethnic LGBTQ people and queer people of color in diasporas.³⁰ Thus, alternative visions of the future must be imagined, subverting the apocalyptic text and contested contexts that make the here and now into a prison house. We need to envision futures that bring what is useful from our past in order to equip ourselves with the courage and hope to alter our present.

To the Legendary Houses of LaBeija, Extravaganza, Muglier, Latex, Mizrahi, Ebony, and Omni:³¹

“Write therefore, the things you saw, and the things you are seeing, even what is about to happen after these things...” (Rev. 1:19)

Revelation is perhaps the grand narrative *par excellence* of eschatological time-telling. It is narrated by a self-proclaimed prophet named John, who directed his message to seven churches located in the Roman province of Asia Minor, around the late first century C.E. Revelation’s teleological tales of “what was, is, and what is to take place after these things”

³⁰ See Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin F. Manalansan IV, “Introduction: Dissident Sexualities/Alternative Globalizations” in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2002) 1-12.

³¹ I’m substituting the houses of the Black and Latino/a ballroom community made (in)famous in Jenny Livingston’s documentary “Paris is Burning” for the seven churches of Asia Minor to which Revelation was addressed. See Jennie Livingston, “Paris is Burning” DVD (Miramax Films, 1990); Edgar Rivera Colón, *Getting Life in Two Worlds: Power and Prevention in the New York City House Ball Community*, PhD dissertation (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2009); Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Detroit, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

(1:19). Revelation presents a vision of the (only) future where one day God will wipe away the tears from the eyes of the faithful (21:4), and we will “walk in Jerusalem just like John.”³² In his vision John witnesses the conquering of the satanic beast and its followers by a white horse-riding, multiple-diadem wearing, sword-in-mouth-wielding Jesus (19:11-21). John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and a New Jerusalem, a holy city coming down out of heaven from God. There, death and mourning will be no more, for the former things have passed away (21:1-4).

John’s message is sent to seven churches in Asia Minor putting them on notice of what they must do in order to gain access to the new heaven, new earth, and New Jerusalem. Entrance into the New Jerusalem is the great reward for those with ears to hear its message – “those who conquer” (2:7, 11, 17, 26, 3:5, 12, 21). However, “*outside are the dogs and sorcerers and sexually exploited, and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices deceit*” (22:15).

With the possible exception of the Syrophoenician (aka Canaanite) woman’s reply to Jesus in the gospels of Mark and Matthew (“even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” – Mk 7:25-30, Matt 15:21-28), both biblical testaments use “dogs” as a negative trope. Dogs lick open sores, eat human flesh, and scavenge for food.³³ In some interpretive circles, scholars have suggested that “dogs” is a pejorative term that early Christ followers employed to malign (other) Jewish people.³⁴ Dogs in the ancient world were in some cases companions for hunting as well as domesticated pets – just as in contemporary times.³⁵

³² Traditional African American spiritual (“I Want to be Ready”).

³³ See, e.g., Exod. 11:7; 22:31; 1 Kings 6:4; 14:11; 21:19, 23-24; 22:38; 2 Kings 9:10, 36; Job 30:1; Psalm 22:16; 68:23; Isa. 56:10-11; Jer. 15:3; Matt. 7:6; Luke 16:21; Phil. 3:2.

³⁴ See especially Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Reversal of Jews Calling Gentiles ‘Dog’ (Philippians 3:2): 1600 Years of an Ideological Tale Wagging an Exegetical Dog?” *Biblical Interpretation* 17 (2009): 448-482. I am grateful to Joseph A. Marchal for bringing Nanos’ article to my attention.

³⁵ Ancient Greek examples of many characteristics of ancient dogs are listed in Henry George Liddel, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th ed.; Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1996), s.v. “κύων.” Also see the various references to dogs in Ingvald Saelid Gilhus, *Animals, Gods and Humans: Changing Attitudes to Animals in Greek, Roman and Early Christian Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

Several biblical scholars conclude that “the dogs” (*hoi kunēs*) in Rev 22:15 refer pejoratively to homosexuals, although there is no textual evidence to support their claims.³⁶ Bruce Metzger for example, calls the dogs “sodomites.”³⁷ David Aune suggests that “dogs” is a metaphor meaning “the wicked” and links it to the fornicators and prostitutes in the long list of vices. The array of unsavory character types in 22:15 are typical of many vice lists found in New Testament and other ancient writings.³⁸ In other words, the lists are socio-rhetorical constructions strategically used by ancient writers to describe the attributes of acceptability and abjection for their respective contexts. In modern contexts, biblical vice lists only seem to have spiritual authority and moral currency when the objects of the lists are considered to be homosexuals or queer people. In most cases biblical vice lists are not invoked as polemics against murderers, drunkards, or ones who are deceitful, for example. Instead they are deployed as “clobber texts” against LGBTQ people.

The propensity of certain biblical scholars and many more non-scholarly biblical interpreters to associate the “dogs” of Revelation 22:15 with sexually and socially deviant persons may be contextualized by Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe’s numerous claims that homosexuals are “worse than pigs and dogs.”³⁹ During a speech celebrating his 88th birthday Mugabe urged his fellow Zimbabweans to shun Western values including homosexuality. He

³⁶ Among them are: J. Massyngberde Ford, *Revelation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 345; Bruce M. Metzger, *Breaking the Code* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1993), 106; Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1995), 507; Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998) 408; David E. Aune, *Revelation 17-22* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers 1998), 1222-23. I am grateful to Stephen D. Moore for bringing these sources to my attention.

³⁷ Metzger, *Breaking the Code*, 106.

³⁸ In the New Testament, see, e.g., Matt. 15:19; Mark 7:21–22; Rom. 1:29–31; 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10–11; 6:9–10; 2 Cor. 6:9–10; 12:20–21; Gal. 5:19–21; Eph. 4:31; 5:3–5; Col. 3:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:9–10; 2 Tim. 3:2–5; Tit. 3:3; Jam. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3, 15; Rev. 9:21; 21:8; 22:15.

³⁹ See Max Fisher, “Mugabe says of Obama’s gay rights push, ‘We ask, was he born out of homosexuality?’” *Washington Post*, July 25, 2013 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/07/25/mugabe-says-of-obamas-gay-rights-push-we-ask-was-he-born-out-of-homosexuality/> (accessed September 9, 2013).

stated: “We reject that [homosexuality] outright and say to *hell* with you.”⁴⁰ In the United States the claims that “AIDS is God’s curse” and “fags go to hell” are slogans on the signs of several anti-LGBT protestors reflecting how Revelation’s message is (mis)appropriated to suborn hatred and violence against LGBTQ people.⁴¹ Rather than disavowing the connection made between dogs and homosexuals, I disidentify with its use by thinking with the “dogs outside” New Jerusalem as a kind of queer failure and rationale for radical erotic subjectivity from the margins.⁴²

Looking at the issue another way, Ken Stone, reading Derrida and Levinas regarding “the question of the animal” and its potential for exploration in biblical studies, invites us to explore the “oppositional limits that configure [and complicate] the human and the animal.”⁴³ The dogs of Exodus 11 are silent, and do not bark to alert the Egyptians of the escaping Israelite slaves. In contradistinction the dogs of Revelation in my reading are not so compliant. In unveiling and deconstructing the oppositional limits between animal and human, vice and virtue, the dogs outside will neither bark in the service of Empire nor of the “Israelites” inside the New Jerusalem. We have seen, and are seeing the hypocrisy by which we are cast as outsiders so that

⁴⁰ Stewart Maclean “‘To hell with you:’ Robert Mugabe in rambling anti-homosexual rant at David Cameron’s call for global gay rights,” *Daily Mail*, February 26, 2012 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2106720/Robert-Mugabe-rambling-anti-homosexual-rant-David-Camerons-global-gay-rights.html> (accessed September 13, 2014).

⁴¹ Jeff Chu, “My Day at Westboro Baptist: ‘Yes, Jesus Hates You,’” Sunday, March 24, 2013 http://www.salon.com/2013/03/24/my_day_at_westboro_baptist_yes_jesus_hates_you/ (accessed September 12, 2015); James Michael Nichols, “ATLAH, Anti-gay Harlem Church to be Protested by LGBT Activists,” March 26, 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/26/anti-gay-harlem-church-protest_n_5035773.html (accessed September 12, 2015).

⁴² See Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) 1-8; bell hooks “The Politics of Radical Black Subjectivity” in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1990) 15-22.

⁴³ Ken Stone, “The Dogs of Exodus and the Question of the Animal” in *Divinanimality: Animal Theory, Creaturely Theology*, ed. Stephen D. Moore (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014) 36-52; quote on 43.

others can convince themselves that they are insiders. In the transition from persecution to survival to flourishing, the dogs outside will bark for our own pleasure.⁴⁴

Mistaken (I)de(nt)ity

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship before the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me, 'Do you not see that I am a fellow-slave with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book? Worship God'! (Rev. 22:8-9)

The epilogue of Revelation is a summative statement of what has been communicated to the seven churches and the text's wider audience. It confirms Jesus as the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end; and the one who is surely coming soon to reward the faithful (22:12). No one is to add to or take away from the prophecy detailed within his book, lest they risk the plagues described in it. All who hear and are thirsty are bid to come by the Spirit and the bride to partake and participate in the vision.

John attests that his vision is true. However after describing the arrival of the rider on the white horse, the final battle(s), the bride, and the New Jerusalem in meticulous detail, he falls on the ground to worship at the feet of the angel who showed these things to him (22:8). This angel happens to be one of the seven angels having one of the seven bowls of the seven last plagues (17:1). The first-person narrator of the Apocalypse worships the wrong deity making it necessary for his fellow-slave (*sundoulos*) to re-direct his worship to God (22:9). This detail is explained away by some biblical scholars as typical of the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic genre and is ignored by believers for whom Revelation is authoritative.⁴⁵ John worships the wrong deity (each time the angel accompanying John in the vision) not once but twice (19:10; 22:8).

⁴⁴ Cf. Halberstam's concept of the "unexpected pleasures" of failure: Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) 2-4.

⁴⁵ Brian K. Blount quoting Aune writes, "The motif of the angel who refuses worship from a seer in the context of an angelic revelation (as in Rev. 19:10 and 22:9) is a *literary motif* with many parallels in apocalyptic literature,

These facts from the text lead me to conclude that the dejection, demonization, and damnation of queer folks are caused by believers worshipping the wrong deities: heteronormativity, totalizing concepts of proper masculinity or femininity, liberation that only frees certain members of the community, and respectability politics, among others – practices which by the way make them idolaters and those who love and practice deceit (22:15). While the “dogs outside” are compared to homosexuals doomed to hell, and are the cause (according to popular televangelists) of hurricanes, tsunamis, and other natural disasters, we should not miss the fact that the angel of the seven bowls and seven plagues is *inside* the New Jerusalem with John. The seven plagues are *inside* heaven, Reverend Robertson, et al!⁴⁶

From my Africana queer standpoint, even as I imagine my own version of the last days, I notice that John himself was outside – exiled on the island of Patmos (1:9) – yet he wrote himself into the victorious space of the narrative. There is nothing, besides perhaps the threat of adding to John’s prophesy (22:18-20), preventing any of us outside from writing our own visions of the future, including an ultimate, fabulously happy end that includes a deity that knows who we are. Why worry about enduring and conquering the apocalyptic *here and now*, if the *then and there* is always already outside in “*God’s garbage can*,” the lake of fire and sulfur (Rev. 20:10, 15)?⁴⁷ We can disidentify with these messages, querying and naming what “gods” our detractors are worshipping, and suggest that they tend to the issues inside their own constructions of New Jerusalem instead of forecasting the futures of Others.

though the motif is not restricted to the apocalyptic.” *Revelation: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009) 347-348; cf. Aune, *Revelation 17-22*, 1036, his emphasis in the original.

⁴⁶ E.g. *Advocate*, “It’s All Our Fault! 10 Disasters the Gays Supposedly Caused,” October 21, 2012, <http://www.advocate.com/politics/2012/10/31/10-disasters-gays-were-blamed-causing> (accessed September 12, 2015).

⁴⁷ Cf. Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York, NY: Rutledge, 1996); idem, *God’s Beauty Parlor and other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

John, “the one who heard and saw these things (22:8),” is clearly not the only one capable of being in the spirit on the Lord’s Day with something to say to the churches about persecution, and the kingdom, and patient endurance, and exile (1:10). Other apocalypses attributed to Paul, James, and Peter (among others), were circulating contemporaneously with John’s apocalypse by the second century C.E.⁴⁸ Among Africana queer folks there are lots of *revelations* to share on the one hand regarding what it means to be called a *faggot* from a pulpit, or molested by a deacon, called demonic by religious organizations, and written out of national histories. On the other hand, we have dreamed of “flinging our arms wide in some place in the sun,” and are already articulating our longings for alternative racially-queer futures.⁴⁹ Can I get a witness?⁵⁰

Lambnesia: The Silence of the Lamb

But the throne of God and the Lamb will be in it, and his slaves will worship him. (Rev. 22:3)

The heavenly throne room (Rev. 5-6) is a contentious site of origin for the intersection of LGBT, Asian, Rastafarian, African American and Africana queer appropriations of Revelation. Queer theologian Patrick Cheng links the symbol of the rainbow (Rev. 4:3; 10:1; cf. Gen. 9:9-17; Ezek. 1:28) with queer, Asian and African queer theologies.⁵¹ Margaret Aymer in an article

⁴⁸ See Marvin W. Myer, Elaine H. Pagels, *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures: The International Edition* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2007) 313-20; 321-42; 487-98.

⁴⁹ Cf. Langston Hughes “Dream Variations,” *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes: The Poems 1921-1940*, Vol. 1 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2001) 33; various essays in Juana María Rodríguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014)

⁵⁰ This question signifies on the notice that there is no evidence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or queer people in Brian Blount’s African American church or community. See Brian K. Blount, *Can I Get a Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). Also, Lee Edelman notes that fantasies of the future include the eradication of the abjectness that is named by queerness. He writes “...every political vision as a vision of futurity must weight on delineation of a queer oppositional politics. For the only queerness that queer sexualities could ever hope to signify would spring from their determined opposition to this underlying structure of the political...” Lee Edelman, “The Future is Kid’s Stuff” in *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004) 1-32; quote on 13-14/

⁵¹ On African theologies, Cheng writes, “the rainbow is a symbol of gender fluidity in the Yórua and Santería traditions. The rainbow deity is called Oshumaré and sie [sic] is an androgynous serpent figure with both female

remarking on Rastafarian alter-empire praxis in the Little Five Points section of east-Atlanta notes how foundations of Jamaican Rastafarianism are constructed with religio-cultural appropriations of Revelation's "Lion of the tribe of Judah" (Rev. 5:5), the fall of "Babylon" (Rev. 18, associated with the demise of colonialism), and "New Jerusalem (Rev. 21-22).⁵² Brian Blount in the context of the Black Church uses the imagery of the Lamb standing as if slaughtered (5:6) to argue for "an active ministry of resistance that would witness to the singular lordship of Jesus Christ."⁵³

For marginalized believers, the throne room is a volatile contact zone for multiple and combative articulations of theological meaning. John is called to the presence of the throne and the one seated upon it surrounded by a rainbow (4:1-3; cf. LGBTQ and Asian). The Lion of the Tribe of Judah has conquered so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals (5:5; cf. Jamaican Rastafarianism). The Lamb standing as if slaughtered opens the seals, revealing the souls under the altar who are given white robes as reward for their testimony of the word of God (6:1-11; cf. African American). In his commentary on Revelation, Brian Blount writes, "the dazzling robes mark the souls as defiant witnesses who actively engaged in testimony to the lordship of Christ."⁵⁴ These are they who are among the blessed ones who wash their robes.

For SGL people however, the blessings on the ones who wash their robes (Rev. 22:14) are tantamount to destroying the evidence of the violence against Africana queer folks. Black

and male elements." Patrick S. Cheng, "The Rainbow Connection: Bridging Asian American and Queer Theologies" *Theology & Sexuality* 17:3 (2001): 238.

⁵² Quoting Ennis Barrington Edmonds, she writes, "...the use of the term *Babylon* constitutes a symbolic delegitimation of those values and institutions that historically have exercised control over the masses of the African diaspora [...] the most immediate referent is the gut-wrenching experience of suffering, hardship, and estrangement faced by the underside of Jamaican society. It is not only the pain of economic hardship, *but a sense of not belonging, of cultural alienation. It is a feeling of uprootedness and of being "out of whack" with one's environment.*" Margaret Aymer, "Empire, Alter-Empire, and the Twenty-First Century," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 59, nos. 3-4 (2005): 144; Ennis Barrington Edmonds, *Rastafari: From Outcasts to Culture Bearers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 44.

⁵³ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?* 88.

⁵⁴ Blount, *Revelation*, 135. Blount makes the connection between the souls in 6:9-11 with those from the great tribulation 7:13-14 and "our comrades" 12:10-12.

queer folks are among the souls under the altar who had been murdered asking Jesus (in the form of a Lamb standing as if slaughtered) “how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?” (6:9-11). In contemporary times, (white) robes are given to SGL believers so that while they wait for spiritual vindication, dignity, and justice, they can sing in their respective church choirs. Brian Blount argues that “according to John, God’s victorious way is the slaughtered way; it not only *describes* the path God’s Son took, it *prescribes* the path God’s people will take on their way to the new heaven and new earth their combative effort will help God create.”⁵⁵ However it is difficult to accept the homophobia-arousing evil that has been *ascribed* to Africana queer folks. From our multiple standpoints we are still asking how long transgender women like Islan Nettles and innumerable un-named others will be beaten to death in the daylight of their own neighborhoods?⁵⁶ How long will it be okay for reggae dancehall artists to write songs encouraging the murder of queer folks (e.g. Buju Banton’s “Boom bye bye in a Batty bwoi head)?”⁵⁷ How long will it be that lesbians from various African countries like Ugandan-born Aidah Asabaare are forced to apply for asylum in Europe and Canada for fear of being raped and killed?⁵⁸ How long will African Americans sing their national hymn “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing” while ignoring the fact that the *blood of the slaughtered they treaded their path through* was often times that of their own SGL, queer, and

⁵⁵ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness?* 70.

⁵⁶ In addition to transphobic violence, Nettles was a victim of chrononormativity in that she walked through her neighborhood in the daytime, not the night when transgender women are stereotypically assumed to be “productive.” Her failure to pass, as a credible “woman,” and to traverse the distance between her attackers and her destination in the contact zone of the queer and Black communities epitomized by Harlem, warrants erotohistoriography to ensure her death will not be forgotten. See Christian Fuscanno, “Islan Nettles’ Murder and the Shameful (Non-) Response of LGBs,” HuffPost Gay Voices, November 20, 2013 (Updated January 25, 2014) http://www.huffingtonpost.com/christian-fuscarino/islan-nettles-murder-and-the-shameful-non-response-of-lgbs_b_4310858.html (Accessed July 5, 2015).

⁵⁷ See Donna P. Hope, “‘Dons’ and ‘Shottas’: Performing Violent Masculinity in Dancehall Culture,” *Social and Economic Studies* 52 nos. 1 & 2 (2006): 115-131; idem, *Inna di Dancehall: Popular Culture and the Politics of Identity in Jamaica* (Kingston, JM: University of the West Indies Press, 2006) 79-85.

⁵⁸ Cf. Fred McConnell, “Home Office to Review Gay Ugandan Woman’s Deportation Order,” *The Guardian*, May 23, 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/may/23/home-office-review-ugandan-lesbians-deportation-order> (Accessed July 5, 2015).

transgender children, family members, and kin? True to Christian and neo-colonial chronormativity, we will have to “rest a little longer until the number of those yet to be killed is complete” (Rev. 6:11), and “tell God all of our struggles when we get home.”⁵⁹ Until then, “let the unjust one still be unjust, and the filthy one still make things filthy, and let the righteous one still be righteous, and the one who is holy still be holy (22:11)” – while we wait.

According to Judith Halberstam, Black (gay and SGL) lives do not even warrant the attention of white gay and lesbian activists because the victims are neither Matthew Shepherd nor Brandon Teena.⁶⁰ In July 2014, a person of transgender experience was brutally assaulted in the very Atlanta neighborhood (Little Five Points) reported by Margaret Aymer above. Rather than calling police, onlookers recorded the attack on their cell phones, posting their videos to the internet.⁶¹ Pleas for justice from the souls under the altar were made to the lamb that was standing as if slaughtered – surely a Jesus who “knows all about our struggles”⁶² – among the ancient seven churches in Asia Minor and onward through time to our present day. The slaughtered lamb eventually transforms into the conquering warrior on the white horse (19:11-16), and reverts to the lamb once more in the climatic vision of the New Jerusalem (21:22-23; 22:1, 3). However, the transformation of the lamb into the avenging warrior apparently causes the lamb to develop *lambnesia* in the New Jerusalem.

Thus, in the apocalypse of John, queer folks are confronted with a God who is not necessarily on the side of all the oppressed, and a lion of Judah that condones murder in John’s

⁵⁹ Cf. African American spirituals and hymns: “I’m Gonna Tell God All of My Struggles,” “Glory, Hallelujah (When I Lay My Burdens Down),” “Have a Little Talk with Jesus,” “I Must Tell Jesus.”

⁶⁰ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2005) 30.

⁶¹ Patrick Saunders, “Trans Woman Attacked in Little Five Points,” *The GA Voice*, July 3, 2014. hegavoice.com/trans-woman-brutally-attacked-little-five-points/ (accessed July 13, 2015).

⁶² Johnson Oatman, “No, not one!” (Christian hymn) http://www.hymnary.org/text/theres_not_a_friend_like_the_lowly_jesus. (accessed August 30, 2014).

apocalypse and in Jamaican (Rastafarian) culture – *a Jesus who does not save*.⁶³ We cannot wash the blood evidence off our robes. We owe it to the ones who were lost in the tribulation as a result of violence, politics, or respectability politics to remember their names. Disidentification and erotohistoriography require us to speak the names of Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, when talking about Stonewall and look for the liberation yet to come for racial-ethnic transgender persons. We must remember that “Brother Outsider” Bayard Rustin organized the March on Washington, making it possible for the world to hear Martin Luther King’s apocalypse-vision in 1963. We must talk about the work of J-FLAG in Jamaica, Uganda’s David Kato, and others who sought to conquer on behalf of Africana queer folks. We can disabuse ourselves of the myths that queer intersections with Africana culture begin in the 1960s and originate in the United States.⁶⁴ These acts of remembering are part of the Sankofa project of world re-visions for Africana queer folks.

We Will Make Our Own Future Texts: Africana Queer Codices

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person’s share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book. The one who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen (Rev. 22:18-21)

For many Africana queer folks, Revelation as a Christian canonical text endures as a religious-cultural object through which homophobic, heteronormative misogynist believers (and

⁶³ In his preface to the 1997 edition of *God of the Oppressed*, James Cone wrote, “Building on my previous work in *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), I sought to deepen my conviction that the God of biblical faith and Black religion is best known as the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage.” James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (2nd edition, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997; original 1975). Also, Lee Edelman names how queerness will always be ascribed to some groups of people even if it is thrown off others. See Edelman, “The Future is Kid’s Stuff,” 24-31. Thanks to Kent Brintnall for pointing out these connections.

⁶⁴ See for example Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 1998); Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

non-believers) justify their prejudice against queer folks “from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). It is one of the many ways that the Bible is deployed to justify hatred in the name of the “surely coming soon” Jesus (22:20). To question, critique, or ignore it is to be damned and left outside of community (“Outside are the dogs...” [22:15]). Revelation’s placement as the last book of the biblical canon acts to seal the authority of the other sixty-five texts chosen to represent the Christian God’s teachings for believers. This power position strengthens other texts deployed as weapons against queer people. This religio-social condition creates a crisis for those deemed ineligible to share in the tree of life and in the holy city (22:19). It is a crisis both of religious fundamentalism and of internalized homophobia. One way to mitigate this crisis is to co-opt and confront the Bible as one text that is part of a larger queer canon.

Jacqueline Hidalgo notes that Cherrie Moraga’s “Chicano Codex” includes Revelation as part of “*our* book of Revelation,” along with script written on the walls of the barrio, and the L.A. riots.⁶⁵ In response to Hidalgo, Lynn Huber suggests that “the project of queer biblical hermeneutics involves assembling, revealing, claiming a ‘Codex Queer.’”⁶⁶ According to Huber, Codex Queer “is not simply about recalling the past or envisioning a future, but it is about drawing together in the present those who have an oblique relationship to the Bible, strengthening and comforting them as they resist its social sway.”⁶⁷ I suggest that cultivating a Codex Queer allows us to disidentify with histories of scholarship that limit and exclude the possibility for meaning making in scriptural or other texts. Lived queer experiences of the past

⁶⁵ Jacqueline M. Hidalgo “*Our* Book of Revelation...Prescribes Our Fate and Releases Us From It: Scriptures as (Dis)Orientation Devices in 1990s Queer Chican@ Literature,” paper delivered at the Fourteenth Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium, Drew Theological School, September 27, 2015.

⁶⁶ Lynn R. Huber, “Apocalyptic Orientation: A Response to Jacqueline Hidalgo’s ‘Scriptures as (Dis)Orientation Devices,’” paper given at the Fourteenth Transdisciplinary Theological Colloquium, Drew Theological School, September 27, 2015.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

and present can be brought into dialog with texts and interpreting communities. We don't have to add to or subtract from the Apocalypse of John. Following Ishmael Reed and Vincent Wimbush, "we will [continue to] write our own future texts;"⁶⁸ texts, and performances, documentaries, and re-tellings of historical narratives that explore worlds beyond the here and now. Brian Blount reminds us that "when the voices of cultures 'from below' [or outside] take themselves seriously enough to propel themselves into the exegetical, hermeneutical, and interpretive debate, the imperium claimed and held by dominant cultures is broken."⁶⁹

From my Black SGL standpoint, employing erotic subjectivity with the concept of Sankofa, *our* Africana queer book of Revelation recognizes forbearers including those listed above (i.e., Rivera, Johnson, Rustin, Lorde, Cullen, Hughes, Baldwin, and others, as well as the un-named and unknown "souls under the altar") alongside heavenly and earthly co-laborers in the project of practicing honor, liberation, and transformation.⁷⁰ It reclaims pre-colonial African ancestors who lived in sexual and gendered fluidity. It imagines Africana queers yet to be born who are *fierce*, resourceful, and confidently aware of their intrinsic value, into a world that celebrates their difference.

As a starting point for enumeration, I posit that Africana Codex Queer includes the historical contributions of Black queer folks throughout African diasporas: in the construction of Black church aesthetics since Emancipation; the impact of their artistic and political contributions to the Harlem Renaissance; Baldwin's participation (alongside Senghor, Césaire, and others) at the in the first Congress of Black Writers and Artists in Paris (1956) to articulate

⁶⁸Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1972); Vincent L. Wimbush, "We Will Make Our Own Future Text: An Alternate Orientation to Interpretation," in *True to our Native Land: An African American New Testament Commentary*, ed. Brian K. Blount (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007) 43-53.

⁶⁹ Blount, *Can I Get a Witness*, 24.

⁷⁰ On sacred textures in biblical texts, see Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 1996) 120-131.

the launch of the Negritude movement; the wisdom of radical women of color from anthologies like *This Bridge Called My Back* and *Homegirls*; the publication of anthologies and writings by Black Gay Men like *In the Life, Sweet Tea: Gay Men of the South*, as well as queer anthologies from the diasporas including *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces*; *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Gay and Lesbian Writing from the Antilles*, and the *Queer African Reader*; along with blogs, essays, and social media postings by the queer organizers of the #blacklivesmatter movement.⁷¹ As Vincent L. Wimbush states, “For Black and subaltern critical consciousness there is no meaning in any Western-translated narrative, script, text, and tradition unless such is first ripped, broken, and then ‘entranced,’ blackened, made usable for weaving meaning.”⁷²

By engaging Africana codices queer, I can pleurably counter-narrate historical and cultural erasures (cf. erotohistoriography) while having improper relations with biblical texts in the practice of queer scripturalization. In doing so, I can privilege African ancestral lineages over Foucauldian genealogies to explore and unveil systems of power and knowledge on behalf of my community of accountability. “The eroticism of affective historiography allow[s] us to think that history is not only what hurts but what arouses, kindles, whets, or itches...we might [even] say that history is what pleasures.”⁷³ Rather than focusing on Revelation’s Christ as conqueror-

⁷¹ James Baldwin, “Princes and Powers” in *Nobody Knows My Name* (New York, NY: The Dial Press, 1961); Cherrie Morraga, Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York, NY: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York, NY: Kitchen Table/Women of Color Press, 1983); Joseph Beam, ed., *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1986); E. Patrick Johnson, ed. *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008); Juana María Rodríguez, *Queer Latinidad: Identity Practices, Discursive Spaces* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003); Thomas Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008); Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas, eds., *Queer African Reader* (Dakar, SN: Pambazuka Press, 2013); Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement,” *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014 <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> (accessed July 24, 2015). This list is by no means complete, but its contents serve as examples of resources from an Africana Codex Queer.

⁷² Wimbush, “We Will Make Our Own Future Text,” 51.

⁷³ Freeman, 117.

amnesia victim, I can choose to think of the African Christological trope of Christ as Ancestor.⁷⁴ Recognizing the Christ in the book of Revelation as ancestor, I claim the angels that corrected John (19:9-10; 22:9) as part of our Africana queer lineage.⁷⁵ I can now pleurably and improperly co-opt the heavenly beings as “angels watchin’ over me”⁷⁶ on behalf of Africana queer folks outside.

Furthermore, since Countee Cullen is my gay ancestor from the Harlem Renaissance, I can employ his sexual status in order to be *improper* with James Cone’s argument in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* for the theological implications of this move. Cone foregrounds Cullen’s poem “Christ Recrucified” as a discursive pillar (cf. Rev. 3:12; “if you conquer I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God...”) in his claim that “in the United States, the image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent Black victim, dangling from a lynching tree.”⁷⁷ Cone helps us to see that Michael Brown lying on a Ferguson street for four hours is a lynching. We help Cone (and others) see that the mob who murdered Black transgender woman Islan Nettles, dragging her dead body to a Harlem police station was a lynching. Seeing things John’s way (with a nod to David deSilva),⁷⁸ Islan is considered one of the abject, along with us on the outside. The angels prevent interpreters from worshipping the deity of conquering hegemonic

⁷⁴ See Clifton R. Clarke, *African Christology: Jesus in Post-Missionary African Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2011) 35-41. Clarke notes that Jesus-as-Ancestor Christology has two trajectories – one intercultural, and one associated with a liberationist approach. “This latter approach is linked to North American Black Theology and is also influenced by Latin American theology of liberation.” (35).

⁷⁵ Cf. Womanist readings of the character of Hagar for implications in the contemporary lives of African American women. See, e.g. Renita J. Weems, “A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy (Hagar and Sarah)” in *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women’s Relationships in the Bible* (Philadelphia, PA: Innisfree Press, 1988) 1-22; Delores Williams, “Hagar in African American Biblical Interpretation,” in *Hagar, Sarah, and their Children: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives*, eds. Phyllis Trible and Letty M. Russell (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 171-184.

⁷⁶ “All Night, All Day (Angels Watchin’ Over Me My Lord),” African American spiritual. These angels can be contemporary guides that can include Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, or the deceased gay uncle many of us had, among others.

⁷⁷ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 93.

⁷⁸ Cf. David deSilva, *Seeing Things John’s Way: The Rhetoric of the Book of Revelation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).

homophobia. Counterbalancing John's error, the angels direct us to worship God: the God of oppressed queer folks, the Jesus as Ancestor who saves, and they direct us to the community of our fellow-servants in the struggle for honor, justice, liberation, and transformation.

Africana Queer Prologue

See, I am making all things new. (Rev. 21:5)

John's apocalyptic epilogue can become an Africana queer prologue to imagine a *then and there* that will transform our *here and now*. The potential of the futures we image are relative to our willingness to develop erotic subjectivity, our ability to become Sankofa people managed against our socio-geographical constraints. Its doing must become a praxis deployed by queer folks that is visible, translatable, and teachable. Freeman tells "unbinding time and/from history means recognizing how erotic relations and the bodily acts that sustain them gum up the works of the normative structures we call family and nation, gender, race, class, and sexual identity, by changing tempos, by remixing memory and desire, by recapturing excess."⁷⁹ I have attempted in this essay to demonstrate some of these examples by suggesting that endings (like the epilogue of Revelation) can inspire beginnings. I have interrupted some historical narratives that locate Africana queerness in a post-Stonewall era, and claimed transformation for those whose kinship groups disqualify from liberation. I have located my story in the book of other stories that until now were sealed, and call for Africana queer stories yet to be told. We do not need to wait until the apocalypse to imagine futures outside of the prison house of the here and now. We can begin today.

John in his apocalypse made the error of cementing what utopia will be. As soon as utopia is articulated, it ceases to become utopia. However since all of our socio-geographical

⁷⁹ Freeman, 173.

locations are different, we can begin activating multiple versions of the future from our multiple standpoints. The Africana queer futurity formula I propose is another way of working toward Muñoz's concept of queerness that is on the horizon born of "hope spawned out of a critical investment in utopia."⁸⁰ It is the promise of hope for those who were never meant to survive. As we reconstitute ourselves to build communities of support and accountability, we must learn the lesson not to create "dogs outside" to our newly found social inside(s).

When necessary we need to employ our oppositional gaze towards Revelation and those who use it to persecute us while not turning into oppositional gays towards another subaltern group. This was the sin of our Africana communities: to claim independence from colonial oppressors, by the providence of a God who is on the side of the oppressed, that sanctions abjection, violence and murder of their own queer people. As we cruise Africana queer utopias, we can re-claim who we are in all of our difference – as Sankofa people with a past worth reclaiming – as erotic subjects capable of changing our conditions and our world. Ultimately, we will call ourselves home to a new heaven and a new earth having reconciled with families of origin simultaneously cultivating families of choice. That is my queer hope.

Perhaps that is also the hope of the final invitations of Revelation's epilogue. Revelation is not known as a text of reconciliation. You obey and endure, or you disobey and perish. However, a disidentification in Africana queer context might imagine the invitation of the Spirit and bride that all who hear and all who are thirsty should come to take the water of life as a gift (22:17), as the potential to repair damaged relations with ourselves and our communities. Might this be how we co-create the making of all things new? After the cosmic battle, and the destruction of the beast, and the outside, what is the significance of the summons of verse 17 to "come?" Only the futures outside can tell.

⁸⁰ Muñoz, 12.

While we wait, we will learn from Ntozake Shange and her colored girls to find the God inside ourselves and *love her* fiercely.⁸¹ Instead of singing songs by the rivers of our respective Babylons in the strange land outside, we should dance. And since “hard times require furious dancing,”⁸² we will take our shirts off in the Paradise Garages of our imaginations, chanting to Gloria Gaynor’s “I Will Survive” – we will vibe to house music all night long.⁸³ As Jafari Allen writes,

The Black gay club may in fact be the only place a trans person, gay man, or lesbian—shut out from other spaces of divine communion—may witness or participate in a vision of beloved community. This vision is not a substitute for church any more than it is a substitute for organizing. In fact, it represents a more ecumenical, democratic, honest, and expansive ethic of humanity than religion or formal politics. Classic house club refrains implore the dancer to “free your body,” “move your body,” “give it up,” and “let yourself go” which may be interpreted as sexual innuendo, and is also understood in the space of the dance club as an exhortation to a deeper psychic and spiritual freeing that only takes place through the pleasures of the body.⁸⁴

We are the beloved community we’ve been waiting for. Surely, our change is coming soon!

The grace of the (Audre) Lord(e) be with all saints. Amen (Rev. 22:21).

⁸¹Ntozake Shange, “A Laying on of Hands,” in *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide /When the Rainbow is Enuf* (New York, NY: Scribner Poetry, 1997; original 1975.) 87.

⁸² Cf. the title of Alice Walker’s recent collection of poetry *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing: New Poems* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010).

⁸³ The Paradise Garage was a popular dance club in New York City from the disco era until its closing in 1987. The Garage (as it was known) was one of the only night spots where people of all genders and sexualities (gay, straight, and fluid) partied together, with music as their unifying force.

⁸⁴Jafari S. Allen, “‘For the Children’ Dancing the Beloved Community,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society*, 11:3 (2009): 311-326, DOI: 10.1080/10999940903088945 (Accessed July 4, 2015).