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# Outing the Center: Homophobia in Jamaica

Jamilah King  
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# Outing the Center: Homophobia in Jamaica

Jamilah King

SIT Jamaica: Gender and Development

Project Advisor: Robert Carr

Academic Director: Shirley Campbell



*It is not our differences that divide us, it is our inability to recognize, accept  
and celebrate those differences.*

*Audre Lorde*

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I came to Jamaica with numerous reservations and, while I've faced many obstacles and challenges during my time here, I've been able to have the experience of a lifetime. I owe my personal transformation to those so many.

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## ABSTRACT

Jamaica is a country with a unique historical legacy of slavery and resistance. Once Britain most prosperous colony, Jamaica was also home to the majority of slave uprisings in the New World<sup>1</sup>. This legacy of resistance has created a contemporary climate rife with cultural contradictions; the country's motto, "Out of many one people" belies the many racial, class and gender hierarchies that are omnipresent forces in Jamaican daily life.

Despite the image heralded around the world of Jamaica as a tropical paradise, the country also has the reputation for being fiercely homophobic. How is homosexuality perceived in Jamaican society? Do most Jamaicans perceive homosexuality to be another form of western domination, and are thus resisting against it? My study will analyze how Jamaicans perceive homosexuality in order to provide a more accurate understanding of a potential link between western domination. Through interviews that stretch across the socioeconomic scale, I hope to obtain representative data that offers insight into homophobia in Jamaican society. Ultimately, this study aims to offer a more culturally relevant base from which homophobia can be addressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Horace. Rasta and Resistance. P. 5

## INTRODUCTION

At the February 10<sup>th</sup> seating of the Joint Select Committee dozens of city government officials, church delegations and concerned citizens sat and watched as chairman Senator A.J. Nicholson assured them that the Charter of Rights would *not* allow same sex marriages. The issue of same sex marriages had gained national and international headlines as reactionary politicians feared that a clause in the constitution, permitting Jamaicans a certain degree of privacy, would be challenged to permit homosexuals the right to marry. Yet the irony in the uproar was that homosexuals in the country had not challenged the clause. In fact, during the national debate, Jamaica's gay community remained relatively quiet. In a country in which the very existence of homosexuals is illegal, the gay community was far from even envisioning a fight for legalized marriages.

So why was the country in such an uproar?

In my research I am seeking to uncover the racialized aspects of homophobia in Jamaican society. Is there a link between centuries of Western domination and homophobia in the country? Are Jamaicans acting in opposition to what is perceived as a 'western phenomenon'? Does African retention play a role in Jamaica's homophobia and if so, how? Do gays, lesbians and all-sexuals<sup>2</sup> in the country perceive their sexuality as in any way jeopardizing their racial heritage? Is it true that Jamaican society was more tolerant of homosexuality in the 1970's and, if so, why?

The assumptions of my study are that Jamaicans are intolerant of lesbians, gays and all-sexuals in the society at least in part because they view homosexuality as a "white phenomenon". Given Jamaica's unique history of slavery and colonial subjugation, I assume that in resisting what they view to be a "white phenomenon" they are thereby

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<sup>2</sup> A term coined by the Caribbean Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays that includes all members of the queer community.



empowered by distancing themselves from a perceived white norm. I also expect that gay males receive harsher treatment than lesbians because their existence poses a direct threat to the masculinity of men who, by traditional cultural standards, are supposed to be the breadwinners who have multiple sexual partners and dominate women with their sexuality. By extension, I also expect that the relative invisibility of lesbian females in the society be due to the fact that they too pose a direct threat to the masculinity of Jamaican men, insofar as they are in control of their sexuality and reproduction (except in the cases of rape). Often times their choices to have and raise children are conscious decisions.

This study is meant to address some of the key questions central to understanding a phenomenon of hatred that threatens the lives of numerous lesbians, gay men and people who do not fit traditional norms of sexuality. In order to forge an effective fight for the human rights of homosexuals, it is crucial that the roots causes be explored, interrogated, and then successfully rallied against.

## METHODOLOGY

Feminist theory is one of the guiding methodological principles I have used during my research. “The postulate of value free research”, writes Canadian scholar Naomi Black, “of neutrality and indifference towards the research objects, has to be replaced by conscious partiality, which is achieved through partial identification with the research objects”<sup>3</sup>. Having grown up as a queer black woman in San Francisco, dubbed by many as the ‘queer capitol of the world’, I am accustomed to living a life of cultural contradictions and paradoxes. On the one hand, I have known a wider society that, for the most part, is accepting of homosexuality. I have attended the annual, nationally televised gay pride parade in which women with shaved heads and men in drag march down Market Street; any given week I have my choice of numerous gay nightclubs; and in certain spaces I am not afraid to hold hands or kiss another woman.

However, I am also accustomed to the relative intolerance of communities of color, particularly the black community. Walking around the Castro (San Francisco’s infamous gay section of town) I rarely see faces that look like mine. I have heard from relatives and friends that by ‘choosing’ this ‘lifestyle’ I am merely adding yet another burden to a life already made hard by the fact that I am a Black woman. My family has adopted a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy and so my sexuality has never rarely been addressed. I know well that homosexuality is viewed as a “white phenomenon”, and the spaces known for being gay-friendly are, by extension, white.

Although my personal experience may, on many levels, be similar to queer Jamaican’s, there are also obvious differences. I have never feared for my life or physical

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<sup>3</sup> Mies, Maria. “Towards a Feminist Methodology.” p. 180

safety because of my sexuality. At home, I do not encounter the daily harassment and sexual advances that I've experienced while walking down the street in Kingston. In Kingston, I've had to adopt a heterosexual identity, referring to my girlfriend back home with a male pronoun in order to escape further questioning about why I refuse the sexual advancements of men on the street. The recent controversy over the Charter of Rights and the high profile murders of public officials rumored to have been gay have only fueled the public debate over the evil and moral depravity of 'batty men'<sup>4</sup> and 'man royals'<sup>5</sup>, making it the focus of discussion at my host family's dinner table and among Jamaican friends I have made.

The methodology I will be using is a combination of purposive, snowball and quote sampling, in addition to one focus group discussion. I used purposive sampling in order to locate leading informants in particular aspects of my research, such as the position of the Church. I used a combination of snowball and quote sampling to lead me to people in both Uptown and Downtown communities. In order to get as representative of a sample as possible within the short timeframe I've been given, I interviewed students and lecturers from the University of the West Indies (Mona Campus), patrons at Sovereign Market and vendors and passerby in Halfway Tree. I interviewed one person in the community of Jonestown, however my interviews in Halfway Tree and Sovereign Market garnered responses from people from inner city and garrison communities. In total, I interviewed 18 people, including seven men who participated in a focus group discussion.

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<sup>4</sup> A derogatory term used to refer to homosexual men.

<sup>5</sup> A derogatory term used to refer to homosexual women.

## DEFINITIONS

All-Sexual: A term coined by the Caribbean Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays (C-Flag) network to indicate that it considers all sexual behavior to be part of a sexual continuum in which classifications such as “gay”, “lesbian”, and “bisexual” cannot often rigidly applied. The term refers not only to biological and sexual characteristics, but also to social attitudes related to them.<sup>6</sup>

Queer: A term that has historically been used in a pejorative sense to mean the “abnormality” of a person or group of people. The term has been (re)claimed by the gay community as a source of empowerment, encompassing the wide spectrum of sexual orientations, identities and behaviors of people who do not identify as heterosexual.

Homophobia: Based on Greek translation, it means “fear of the same.” Some researchers, however (who?), prefer the word “homo-sexphobia” which means “fear of the same sex”, but both words are used interchangeably to signify fear or dislike of homosexuality and homosexuals.

Feminist Theory: The inclusion of one’s subjective experience and personal biases as well as an emphasis on non-hierarchical interaction in the search for new knowledge. The ultimate goal of feminist methodology is to engage in action research; that is, research that seeks to interrogate and change the status quo.

Buggery: A law dating back to the European colonial period outlawing sodomy and still used as the legal basis for discrimination and criminalization of homosexual men, in particular.

Cultural Imperialism: Very generally refers to the spread of western cultural values often imposed onto indigenous cultures unwillingly. This term is used interchangeably in this paper with “Western Imposition” and “White phenomenon”

Agency: Refers to one’s position within the economic and social system, which often informs one’s desire to transform society.

Power: One’s ability to define reality and make others believe it to be their own.

Patriarchy: Social organization marked by male figures, subordinating women, children, and those whose genders or bodies defy traditional man/woman categorization. Often defined in terms of its institutional structure to imply that men can also be victims of patriarchal systems of domination.

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<sup>6</sup> Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All Sexuals and Gays [www.jflag.org](http://www.jflag.org) “Definition of All-Sexuals” April 1, 2006

Gender: The ways in which one is socialized to view themselves as either a “man” or “woman”. Gender can also be defined as the sexual division of power in a given society.

West: Although Jamaica is part of the geographic Western world, the term is mainly used to describe Europe, namely Britain, and North American, namely the United States.

Foreign Imposition: Something imposed onto a society against its will, often imposed by the West to imply that the indigenous culture is not of equal measure.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of this paper is to uncover the racialized aspects of homophobia in Jamaican society. Specifically, it is a study examining the link between centuries of Western domination in order to uncover if homophobic Jamaicans are in fact acting in opposition to what they perceive as another form of cultural imperialism. A review of the current literature is necessary to understand how academia understands homophobia and marginalization. It is important to note that there is a significant absence in the literature on how Jamaicans perceive homosexuality and, more importantly, any possible link to western domination. Therefore the literature reviewed here offers a brief glimpse into the myriad of potential causes. Included are arguments in the academic discourse on how homosexuality is studied in African studies, as well as literature historicizing gender relations in the religion, discussions on contemporary gender relations, and analyses of how power is distributed in the society. All of this is necessary when examining the complex structure of how homosexuality is perceived in the society as either deviant to Jamaican cultural norms or complicit in continued forms of western domination.

In *Homosexuality in Africa: Issues and Debates*, Deborah Amory outlines the theoretical disagreements about homosexuality in African studies. “Sexual orientation”, she writes, “has become a cause, or perhaps an excuse, for political persecution and personal violence in diverse African contexts.”<sup>7</sup> There has been a tendency to marginalize queer scholars researching homosexuality in African societies even more ambivalence about studying homosexuality in the greater Diaspora because it is perceived to be a western perversion left from European domination.

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<sup>7</sup> Amory, Deborah, “Homosexuality in Africa: Issues and Debates.” P. 2

One very compelling point raised by Amory is the tendency of western scholars to impose western perceptions of homosexuality when trying to uncover indigenous African homosexualities or in analyzing homosexuality in the Diaspora. In her paper she bracketed the term “homosexuality” in order to “highlight the fact that same sex erotics, practiced by many people in many historical contexts, do not always lead to homosexual identities.”<sup>8</sup> The bracketing was also used to signify that the formation of sexual identities is a fairly recent phenomenon.

French scholar Michel Foucault notes the relatively recent formation of sexual identities. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that with the rise of capitalism in industrial Europe came a shift from what he calls the “deployment of alliance”<sup>9</sup> to the “deployment of sexuality”<sup>10</sup>. This shift signified a greater importance on the nuclear family in order to ensure the reproduction of the labor force as well as the formation of strict gender constructs. “Sexuality” Foucault writes, “must not be thought of as a natural given but...a historical construct great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement of discourse, the formation of special knowledge’s, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.”<sup>11</sup> This analysis is in line with the argument by Amory that the formation of homosexual identities is a historically based, largely Western phenomenon. However it does not attempt to explain the existence of homosexual tendencies prior to the rise of capitalism,

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<sup>8</sup> Amory, Deborah. P. 4

<sup>9</sup> Deployment of Alliance refers to fixed familial and sexual relationships strongly tied to the transmission and circulation of wealth, i.e. marriage

<sup>10</sup> Deployment of Sexuality refers to fluid familiar and sexual relationships not governed by the strict codes of behavior associated with the deployment of alliance. Strongly tied to the body that produces and consumes. Often referred to as more individualistic because of its association with capitalist development.

<sup>11</sup> Foucault, Michel, “The History of Sexuality” Vol. 1. P. 106

and certainly does not delve into the cultural specifics of indigenous “homosexualities” in non-Western societies.

Despite the distinction between homosexual identities and homosexual tendencies, and even despite the ineffectiveness of using the term “homosexual” when interrogating cultural and historical same-sex relationships, many scholars have attempted to unearth homosexual behaviors in indigenous African societies. African homosexualities have continually been dismissed in the discourse on sexual orientation. One of the most prominent and influential works published on homosexuality was *Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, by Gibbons, which attempted to map sexual practices, including homosexuality, around the world. Gibbons excludes the continent of Africa as “originally exempt” from homosexual practices, thereby denying Africa a practice recognized the world over. This ideological thinking helped establish the historical fallacy that black gay people lack a history traceable to indigenous African societies.

In “Homosexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: An Unnecessary Controversy” (1982) Wayne Dynes attempts to refute this fallacy:

In recent years we have heard a good deal of the notion that Sub-Saharan Africa (and especially West Africa, from which the great majority of American blacks stem) was originally free from the “taint” of homosexuality. According to this view, the European conquerors imposed same-sex behavior on black Africa during the colonial era to degrade the subject people. Hence, homosexual conduct among American Blacks must be regarded as part of the lingering burden of servitude, a “white vice” forced on healthy people to drag them down. In fact, a number of our sources enable us to trace this history of same-sex customs back before the beginning of colonial rule. (1982: 20)

He goes on to note,

The homophobia voiced by some contemporary African spokespeople would appear itself to share in the crippling legacy of colonial subjugation that the new



leaders claim to have shed. Undoubtedly, as so often happens, it is the victim – the African homosexual or lesbian –who bears the brunt of disapproval. (1982:20)

While Dynes' argument is compelling in theory, he does not “trace the history of same-sex customs [in Sub-Saharan Africa] back before the beginning of colonial rule”. Instead, he ends his short commentary with a variety of ethnographic sources from which this task can presumably be done. The compilation of these sources is credited to Stephen Wayne Foster who, Dynes points out, “has conducted research on homosexuality in the Third World for a number of years” as if this explanation alone explains or justifies their conclusions.

Central to Dyne's argument is the figuration of insider and outsider. The assumption here is of a dialectical relationship between colonial subject and colonizer. In this case, the outsider consists of European colonizers who either “imposed same-sex behavior on Black Africans during the colonial era” or European missionaries as responsible for mandating that African subjects denounce “filthy practices”<sup>12</sup> (including, presumably, homosexuality) that had been accepted as part of everyday reality prior to European colonization.

Such an analysis is problematic because it is merely a continuation of the sorts of binary classifications that have historically been used to subjugate people of African descent. The experiences of people of African descent, while greatly impacted by European colonization, cannot and should not be defined only in relation to the colonial experience. Studies that have attempted fill this void and trace homosexualities in

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<sup>12</sup> In his work, Dynes points to a number of ironies, one in particular being that “far from forcing homosexual behavior on their colonial subjects, Europeans ---especially Missionaries ---are responsible for teaching them that “filthy practices” that were previously a part of everyday life, were something to be ashamed of.” (20)

indigenous African cultures include Marc Epprecht's "The Unsayings of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe", where the author traces indigenous homosexualities prior to European arrival, but concurs with Dyne in that, "Zimbabwe's indigenous cultures of discretion were almost certainly condoned and probably enhanced by over a century of Christian missionary propaganda..."<sup>13</sup> This suggests that homosexuality did not exist in Zimbabwe prior to European arrival and perpetuates the belief that homosexuality among people of African descent is merely a continuation of colonial subjugation.

In order to gain a true understanding of the nature of homosexuality in people of African descent without falling into the oppressive binary thinking that dictates African homosexualities as "un natural" and "deviant" (classifications that serve as euphemisms for the African as "primitive" and "savage" that have historically been used to implement racist policies) it is imperative that the historical and cultural contexts be examined and people of color recognize their positions as the ones who can create social change.

Pincheon agrees on this point, saying, "Until we begin to hear their voices and self-defined standpoints the descriptive, positivist and inductive/empiricist approaches of researchers remain little more than extensions of the regime of order and control."<sup>14</sup>

Pincheon notes that "If such researchers are truly trying to produce studies that illuminate the conditions of lesbians and gays who are people of color and of the Third World –after all, one does not live by the coloring of one's sexual orientation alone – then theories of sexuality cannot be divorced from the social and material conditions that affect their

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<sup>13</sup> 1998:636

<sup>14</sup> Pincheon, 45.

lives.”<sup>15</sup> He goes on to note that these conditions include homophobia, sexism, economic exploitation, racism and other lived experiences<sup>16</sup>.

In analyzing homophobia in Jamaica, it is extremely important to examine the historical context that has laid the foundation for the contemporary climate. The contemporary Jamaican experience is one built on servitude and exploitation. The indigenous Arawak population was decimated by Spanish and British colonizers, thus the foundation for contemporary Jamaican society was really laid in 1655 when British settlers, consisting mainly of prisoners and people in political exile, began trafficking African slaves to the island. Under this system of legalized slavery Jamaica became Britain's most prosperous colony<sup>17</sup>. Colonial merchants expressed a preference for male labor power since the nature of sugar plantation called for very strenuous physical work that, presumably, came from male laborers. The slave trade to Jamaica delivered a 65% male cargo. In 1800, 55 percent of the slaves in English colonies were situated in Jamaica and over 70% of them were male.<sup>18</sup>

Hilary Buckles, in “Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery” offers a historical overview of the gendered system of legalized slavery in order to suggest that “the conquest and control of the black male body, and the denial of a mind to it, reside at the centre of the dichotomized masculine contest.” Beckles examines how the system of sexual exploitation, namely the rape of black women, left black men disempowered and at a decisive disadvantage to their white male and female counterparts, even after the system of European slavery ended.

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<sup>15</sup> Pincheon, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The colony's chief export, sugar, was produced on massive plantations across the island. According to historian Eric Williams, British exports to Jamaica were nearly one third larger than those to new England.

<sup>18</sup> Beckles, Hilary. “Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery.” P. 229

This analysis of the disempowered black male has been extended to the debate over male marginalization. Originally formulated by Errol Miller, the male marginalization thesis suggests that women are gaining power in the public sphere not by agency, but by white men using black women as buffers to deny black men's power.

Primary school teaching and teacher education shifted from being male dominated to being female dominated as a result of the intention of those holding central positions in the society to restrict black men to occupations related to agricultural and industrial labor; to stifle the possible emergence of militant, black educated men who could possibly overthrow the power structure; to loosen the hold of the church on the education system; and to limit the upward social mobility of black men in a society. In a real sense the black woman was used against the black man. (Miller 1991, 125)

Here, Miller, in line with many marginalization theorists, concludes that it is within the context of men's fight with other (read: white) men for power, wealth and status and the resulting subordination and emasculation of those men who fail in their pursuit of that power that the contemporary emasculation of the black male is to be understood. This argument does not take into account the historical legacy of patriarchy and how it functions in contemporary Jamaican society.

A cursory glance at Miller's argument shows that it is "flawed in its construct, rendering its core assumptions more political than epistemological."<sup>19</sup>: Keisha Lindsay offers a rebuttal to the male marginalization thesis. Lindsay argues that what appears to be male marginalization stems "not from any concrete material reality, but from a gender-biased methodological frame which recognizes some data sources and ignores others." The data sources that Lindsay highlights refers to marginalization theorists' preoccupation with the numbers of women in the higher echelons of society, while

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<sup>19</sup> Barriteau, Eudine. "Requiem for the Male Marginalization Thesis in the Caribbean." P. 75

ignoring the continued plight of the innumerable women in the working class. Even if one considers the argument that men are marginalized from the family, a deconstruction of matrofocality across the region suggests that 18.5 percent of female heads of households are employed in productive enterprise, compared with 20.9 percent of male-headed households. Female-headed households are concentrated instead in service industries far removed from the traditionally male-dominated technical fields.<sup>20</sup> In focusing entirely on the numerical data that suggests that women are outnumbering men in various educational levels, marginalization theorists are not taking into consideration perpetuation of patriarchal sex-role stereotyping. Women in Universities, for instance, are still over-represented in courses that limit them to professions that are mere extensions of conventional gender roles – nursing and social work to name just a few.

In my study I am hypothesizing that Jamaicans' homophobia is a form of resistance against what they perceive to be an imposition from the West, and that this resistance is stemmed in the historical legacy of domination and servitude, namely slavery and continued forms of North American imperialism. Perhaps a parallel can be drawn between other forms of resistance, such as violence. In explaining the resistance responses of the poor in Jamaica to their experiences of domination, Obika Gray observes in "Demeaned But Empowered: The Social Power of the Poor in Jamaica" that:

In this context it is evident that the Jamaican poor possess a social power of their own, and that one of the main circuits for the exercise of this power is the ability to define their personae, to protect it against attack and humiliation, and to defend it against the extractive claims of the state and allied groups in civil society...[I]t is apparent that a large volume of the social power of the poor can be found not so

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<sup>20</sup> Lindsay, Keisha. "Is the Caribbean Male and Endangered Species?" p. 77

much in formal organizations, leaders and political resources, but in “power of the body” and its associated dramaturgy (Gray, in *Social and Economic Studies*, 1994:187).

The influence of religion on the Jamaican people is a significant point of analysis that, once understood, can give a more holistic view of the society. Religion has always been a crucial aspect of the African-Jamaican existence, even prior to European slavery. In *The Story of the Jamaican People* Phillop Sherlock and Hazel Bennett explain how African scholars have traced the special features that characterized many pre-colonial African societies, features that shaped the ethical values that shaped their lives and moral principles that guided their behavior. Life in indigenous African societies was not divided into the secular the sacred, instead, religion informed the whole system of being.

Wherever the African is, there is his religion: he carries it to the fields when he is sowing seeds or harvesting a new crop; he takes it with him to the beer party or to attend a funeral ceremony....Traditional religions are not primarily for the individual but for his community of which he is a part...To be human is to belong to the whole community and to do so involves practicing in the beliefs, ceremonies, rituals and festivals of that community. A person cannot detach himself from the religion of his group, for to do so is to be severed from his roots, his foundation, his context of security, his kinsfolk...to be without religion amounts to self-excommunication from the entire life of society, and African peoples to not know how to exist without religion.<sup>21</sup>

The enslaved African in Jamaica did not lose sense of the importance of religion.

Christianity began to be used in the eighteenth century by the plantocracy as an intricate part of what is known as the Seasoning Process – the process by which African slaves were broken into the system of slavery in the New World<sup>22</sup>. This process included

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<sup>21</sup> Mbiti, John S. *Concepts of God in Africa*, (London: SPCK 1970)

<sup>22</sup> Blassingame, John. *The Slave Community*.

stripping the slave of his or her ancestral heritage by banning religious practices the slave had brought from Africa. Many in the plantocracy were at first reluctant to teach their slaves biblical practices since the moral justification of slavery was often that Africans were immoral heathens. Such a moral justification, however, was used to assuage the consciences of slave masters. Biblical instruction was thus given to slaves however, as John Blassingame notes in *The Slave Community*, “White masters often taught slaves that they did not deserve freedom, that it was God’s will that they were enslaved, that the devil was creating those desires for liberty in their breast, and that runaways would be expelled from the church.”<sup>23</sup> Obedience and servitude were the major biblical themes impressed upon the slave.

Slaves, nonetheless, were able to maintain some aspects of their African religions and form what are known as syncretic religions, which are essentially blends of Christianity and indigenous African religions. Dispersed Africans throughout the New World formed syncretic religions including Condomble and Santeria in Central and South America and Vodun in Haiti. In Jamaica, enslaved Africans often sought comfort in Obi, Myalism and Cumina. Syncretic religions often played the role of trying to reconcile the contradictions of slave society<sup>24</sup>. The religious gatherings for these syncretic religions often took place late in the night in secret locations, far from the eye of the slave master and overseers for whom it was forbade and deemed barbaric and evil. Most importantly, however, these religions enabled enslaved Africans to retain a sense of dignity and community in spite of the atrocious conditions of slavery.

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<sup>23</sup> Blassingame, 17.

<sup>24</sup> Bennett, Hazel. *The Story of the Jamaican People*. P. 39

The bible reached the African-Jamaican people in the 1790's when two black preachers who had been freed from their masters came to Jamaica, George Lisle and Moses Baker. With the help of white Baptist ministers, the bible's influence began to spread among the enslaved Africans who found in it comfort and salvation. Instead of following the principles of obedience and servitude impressed upon them by their masters, enslaved Africans used the bible as a source of empowerment. Most important, however, was the church's role as a place of gathering<sup>25</sup>; indeed, the Church became the planning ground for many uprisings both during slavery and after emancipation.

Today Jamaican society is still very much etched in biblical cloth. An overwhelming majority of the population, upwards of 90% considers themselves Christian, with the remaining population including Rastafari, Judaism and Hindi.<sup>26</sup> A quick walk around any neighborhood in Kingston, particularly those in the inner city areas, one sees numerous churches, revealing the importance the church still plays in the community.

The Rastafari also play a crucial role in Jamaican society. The Rastafari movement rose in the 1930's, and takes many of its ideological principles from Garveyism and Pan-Africanism, two very distinct social movements primarily located within the Jamaican context. A great deal of Rastafari, however, is based on Christian ideology. Indeed. Barry Chevannes, in *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* writes that the Rastafari has "refashion[ed] the symbols and teachings of Christianity into its own

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<sup>25</sup> Campbell, Horace. "Rasta and Resistance." P. 36

<sup>26</sup> CIA Fact Sheet <

<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/jm.html>> May 8, 2006



image.”<sup>27</sup> The interviews conducted by Chevannes indicated that the Rastafari see a Black God, and that the formation of Babylon and Zion is similar to those of the Christian heaven and hell. A distinct difference, however, is the Rastafari Black Nationalist position, which conceptualizes Blacks across the globe as being part of a larger Pan-African community and whose ultimate aim is to repatriate back to Africa.

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<sup>27</sup> Chevannes, Barry. *Rastafari: Roots and Ideology* p. 18

## OUTCOME

### *HOMOSEXUALITY AS PERCEIVED CULTURAL IMPERIALISM*

#### *The Impact of the Institution of Slavery*

One of the most significant themes throughout my research was the perception by most interviewees that homosexuality is a white perversion imposed on people of African descent. In my discussions with students and lecturers at the University of the West Indies Mona Campus, slavery was targeted as the point during which homosexuality was introduced to people of African descent. Ryan, a former student of the University of the West Indies and member of the Pan-African movement, noted that “one cannot deny the history of plantation society and the impact, the sexual roles that were played...the various forms of sexual exploitation that took place that make something like homosexuality very sensitive [for Jamaicans].”<sup>28</sup> The act of anal penetration, of a male dominating another male it signifies the “de-legitimization of the plantation male”. When I asked him to explain this de-legitimization, he stated:

[Homophobia] today has everything to do with plantation society, it was a totalizing kind of society, it changed social norms, it developed languages, it developed everything, and sexual violence on the plantation was rife by the slave master to the slave...let’s look at two things, in plantation society you had men and women working side by side, there was no gender differentiation, in Africa there was gender differentiation. Second, the relationships between men and women were heavily corrupted because there’s a great deal of resentment by African men while under slavery to the kind of wanton abuse of their wives by the slave master, you couldn’t do anything, if you did anything you would face the threat of castration or rape, so you’re talking about the issue of the emasculation of the African male during slavery...

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<sup>28</sup> Williams, Ryan. Interview, April 25, 2006.

Reverend Ernie Gordon, Bishop at St. Mary of the Virgin Anglican Church in Kingston, also shared homophobia being traced back to the trauma of slavery. He responded that homosexuality is not acceptable in Jamaican society because “during slavery the black male was traumatized and raped in front of the black woman who was his wife or girlfriend...so ever since the Jamaican male has a big problem with homosexual tendencies and homosexuals.”<sup>29</sup>

Most interviewees disagreed with the notion that homosexuality could have existed in pre-colonial African societies. Leon, a third year student at the University of the West Indies and also a member of the Pan-African movement replied that homosexuality is unequivocally a “foreign imposition [because] if you look at the different philosophies, the western and the eastern philosophies, you see that they’re very different...eastern philosophy was more sacred, had more symbols in it, not everything was supposed to be individualistic.”<sup>30</sup> Leon noted that with the Zulu and other African tribes there was a concept of “I am because we are”. This position assumes that the main focus of indigenous societies was the nuclear family, or formation of heterosexual unions to produce children. Ryan also shared this view, saying, “you can’t deny the fact that there is a philosophical justification of homosexuality within the western literature...within my understanding of Africa there is no justification of homosexuality.”

Ryan, however, extended this view to demonstrate the patriarchy inherent in western philosophies by adding that “within western philosophy there’s a strong justification for male love and you can go to Plato, and see Plato’s definition of love...in African philosophy you never had that kind of anti-woman thrust you have in western

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon, Ernie. Interview, April 25, 2006

<sup>30</sup> Leon, Interview, April 27, 2006.

society which informs the justification of homosexuality in western societies which is the de-legitimization of the intellectual faculties of the woman and their view that the woman is simply a bodily vessel. Some of those interviewed, however, disagreed with this sentiment. While Reverend Gordon did think that the system of slavery severely traumatized the Jamaican male and has informed most males' views of homosexuality, he contended that homosexuality has "been around for over 10,000 years, if you trace back to Babylon and the Egyptian era."

Most, however, believed that homosexuality was a western imposition introduced to people of African descent during slavery and, thus, a disgrace to the black race, a symbolic reminder of 400 years of servitude and sexual exploitation. Leon responded that "[It's] a disgrace to the black race because it's something that's not coming from our philosophy...if you look at the role of Pan-Africanism it's to make known and advocate for African teachings, to promote what's coming out of Africa and the minds of Africans, not what is coming out of white people and western civilization." Shickell, a man who spends much of his time in Halfway Tree, remarked that homosexuality is definitely a foreign influence and after having traveled to Africa and never having seen a gay African, he knows that "it's not normal for people of African descent"<sup>31</sup>.

### ***Homosexuality and the Black Liberation Struggle***

Related to the discussion on whether or not homosexuality is a disgrace to the black race is the question of the role of the black queer community in the larger black liberation movement. This is significant because a good proportion of my interviewees expressed some interest in black political movements namely, black liberation and Pan-

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<sup>31</sup> Shickell. Interview, May 3, 2006.

Africanism. The individuals who expressed these views were members of the academic community, as well as general community members who had been influenced by the teachings of Rastafari or Black Liberation movements of the past. Allan, a lecturer at the University and active member of the Pan-African movement, considers himself a member of the Pan-African movement and described Black Liberation as “a particular movement to facilitate [the] liberation of black people ...that includes providing adequate food, shelter and education to black people.” He added, “In order for black liberation to be genuine and sustainable it has to be that black people are going to acquire that sense of self to facilitate that process.” He then went on to describe the various institutions that blacks have bought into which are working to impede the progress of black people, such as consumer culture. When asked if he viewed homosexuality to be another one of those institutions, he said “I can’t agree with the statement that homosexuality is impeding the trajectory of black people...on that same token I must admit that I share the view that homosexuality is a white man’s perversion.... it’s a preference and while I do not subscribe to it, one of the things I cannot do is allow another issue to come between the consolidation of our race.”

Some of those interviewed, however, believed the consolidation of the black race could not stand for homosexuals, since they viewed homosexuality in itself to demonstrate how one is complicit in the continued subjugation of black people. Leon lamented that:

You can still do good work if you’re a homosexual in the Pan-African movement, but if there’s a homosexual in my Pan-African organization I would definitely talk to that person, and I would tell that person that this is not coming from African philosophy and if that person is Afrocentric that person will understand why I am against it...they’re adopting white cultural standards and embracing an aspect of

western philosophy and you can't be working toward white standards and be a true Pan-African so it will be unprogressive and does affect the struggle.<sup>32</sup>

Shickell also remarked that if people were to get in touch with their ancestral heritage and “stretch their history farther back than Greece, they wouldn't even think of turning to homosexuality because they'd know it was wrong.”

### ***The Influence of the American Media***

Some interviewees introduced the notion that the influence of the American media is another form of cultural imperialism that, like the institution of slavery in the past, continues to impose western norms of sexuality onto Jamaican society. This was the general consensus of all but one of the eighteen people interviewed. Peter, a man I interviewed at Sovereign Center remarked that he think homosexuality comes from the west “especially cable television.”<sup>33</sup> Orbin, a taxi driver who spent a significant part of his childhood and young adulthood in the United States, said that:

“We [Jamaicans] used to, as we say ‘bun’ that, but now what I find out, internationally, coming from America, coming from England, the pressure's being put on by a lot of these gay rights organizations, these money people...and a lot of our prominent people indulge in that now, so they put a squeeze on the moral part of our culture, for us to say as long as those people aren't doing that tin front of us or in front of our kids, it'd okay. Which it never used to be that way. At one time it wasn't okay none at all. The [western] influence has taken a toll on the mental part of us.<sup>34</sup>

Doreen, a street vendor in Halfway Tree, said that she thought that the American media and culture primarily through cable television and American films had influenced Jamaicans. She noted the recent controversy over the American film “Brokeback Mountain”, a film chronicling the love affair of two men, as evidence of the influence the

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<sup>32</sup> Interview, Leon, April 26, 2006

<sup>33</sup> Peter, Interview May 2, 2006

<sup>34</sup> Orbin, Interview, April 27, 2006

American media has on Jamaican society. She also said “they [Jamaican gays] go there [the United States] and bring it back or they watch it on TV.” Clair, another Halfway Tree street vendor, said that although homosexuality may have existed in Jamaica before the introduction of cable television “it was not so plentiful.”

A group of seven male students from the University of the West Indies who participated in a focus group also discussed the influence of the American media. One participant, Jamal, said that “Jamaica has always been homophobic and the only change in society over the years has been the influence of American culture, which has made homosexuals brave.”<sup>35</sup> When I asked him to expand on this point, other participants in the group chimed in that “now you see more of them out on the streets than you did in the past.” The group then brought up the film “Brokeback Mountain” and that in years past such a film would never have been shown. None of them had seen the film.

#### *Homosexual Tendencies Vs. Homosexual Identities*

Reverend Gordon also extended the impact of Western culture how Jamaicans examine their own sexuality. “Because the media is opening up the definition of sexuality,” he said, “the landscape of sexuality has changed and now you find that many young people have homosexual tendencies and are experimenting with their homosexual tendencies, so people are beginning to question how they feel and how to go about their feelings.” This distinction between homosexual tendencies and homosexual identities is extremely important because many of the people interviewed acknowledged the existence of homosexual tendencies but were willing to accept it on a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ basis. Juggla, a videographer from the inner city community of Jonestown, acknowledged that

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<sup>35</sup> Focus Group, April 26, 2006

although he thought homosexuality was a sickness, but said that “They have...values and they do love and treat people with respect, so that’s why I say ‘keep your thing to yourself, don’t get me involved, and we’re okay.” Allan shared this sentiment, saying “in the community where I grew up in Jamaica we don’t see homosexuals putting these things in your face...they live their lives in a way that suits them and suits the society from which they emerge...normally nobody cares, but don’t put on a show.”

In this instance, homosexual identities refer to deviating from gender norms and, in doing so, posing a threat to not just gender roles, but masculinity in particular. Juggla offered further analysis by saying that “I’ve known people who act the part but are not doing it...they still do the things that suggest they’re gay...more female things [for men] is seen as gay...they tend to grow less facial hair.” Clair, the Halfway Tree street vendor, said that American television has influenced men in Jamaican society who “dress like women, the metrosexuals”, and while she did not think that all metrosexual men in the society were gay, she said that “most are”. Peter remarked that much of the metrosexual style “comes from gay U.S. designers who design what they would want to see a man wearing and be attracted to, and Jamaicans have just adopted it.” Still some, such as Leon, saw homosexual identities and homosexual tendencies as one in the same “if you’re a homosexual you have homosexual tendencies, and vice versa.”

### ***Homophobia as a form of Resistance***

In my discussions I posited the question of whether homophobic attitudes in Jamaica were a form of resistance against the cultural imperialism many of them described. Leon said that such resistance was not directly targeting homosexuality, but “if



by resisting homosexuality I don't think they're 'resisting western philosophy', it just so happens that this is one thing coming from western philosophy that they do not like." He then added, "I think Jamaicans definitely like Western philosophy...people who live in the western part of the world adopt western philosophies [all the time]." Allan, a lecturer at the University of the West Indies – Mona campus in the Social Sciences, said that he definitely thinks that homosexuality is, as he characterized, the "white man's perversion", but added that "I wouldn't say that in resisting homosexuality they're resisting the white man's perversion because in that same breath they've accepted everything else that's been perverted by white people." When asked to expand upon this point, Allan said that he would "attribute that resistance to their fundamental Christian beliefs and conservative, reactionary cultures and lifestyles."

## THE INFLUENCE OF CHRISTIANITY

### *The Prominence of Christianity as a Socializing Institution*

The “everything else” that Allan speaks of mainly refers to the influence of Christianity in the society. Christianity was viewed by most to be the main socializing institution responsible for people’s moral objections to homosexuality. Leon made an important point, however, when he noted, “The way blacks worship Jesus is different from the way whites do...I see a black Jesus.” The significance of Christianity in the black community can be traced, according to Konica, a woman whom I interviewed at Sovereign Center, to slavery. “Blacks”, she said “have always had a strong inclination toward Christianity since slavery in order to survive the terrible treatment.” Peter said that the church is “the most important and influential socializing tools because when the family and schools fail, the church is there.” Clair said that she is against “battymen because the bible speaks against it”, however she admitted that she does not really go to church. Ryan stated, “It’s morally unacceptable because of the entrenched Christian values of Jamaican society.” According to Reverend Gordon, “[Jamaica] is a very Old Testament society [and] you’re going to have a problem when combining the patriarchal influence of the Old Testament with the way in which the Old Testament looks at humanity.” Although Jamaicans have very conservative religious views, Leon pointed out that they’re not just Christians, this includes Rastafarians, Christians, Jews.... all those people are against homosexuality.”

During the focus group, some participants took pride in Jamaica being a homophobic society because they believed it was evidence of the country’s moral character. Jamal said, “Jamaica is known around the world as a very homophobic society,

and we take pride in that because it shows that we are not tolerant of things that go against the bible.” Romaine extended this sentiment by adding “it shows that this country has morals and contradicts the image Jamaica has around the world of being a place where everyone smokes weed and lives in coconut trees...there are some serious misconceptions about Jamaica.” This reaction demonstrates the idea among some that embracing homosexuality would be further marginalizing a society that is already exoticized and seen as “primitive” in the western imagination. Quickly after this point was made, however, Kirk, a second year student at the University of the West Indies, asked “morals? Europe is the mother of all immoral behavior.” All of the men in the discussion group noted that homosexuality goes against their biblical teachings, yet none attended Church regularly.

While the influence of Christianity in Jamaican society cannot be denied, as manifested in the research findings, many of the Jamaicans I interviewed did not attend Church regularly. Brandon, in the focus group discussion, remarked, “As an Anglican, homosexuality definitely goes against my religion.” Brandon admitted to only going to church a couple times a year. Perhaps even more interesting, Reverend Gordon, a minister of an Anglican church, reported, “we are ministers of people who have sexual orientations of any type.” Furthermore, he pointed out that “we are fortunate, as Anglicans, that the Lambith Conference of 1998 had a revolution on human dignity and expressed rights that, although we agree the scripture does not sanction homosexual activity, the Church maintains a pastoral duty toward those who are homosexual.” Brandon reported that he had never heard of the Lambith Conference.

### *Christianity Reinforcing Sexual Division*

Many of the people I interviewed offered critiques of Christianity and some even went as far as to say that Christianity not only condones homosexuality, but also perpetuates it. Orbin agreed that Christianity plays a large role in the lives of most Jamaicans, but said that:

Religion is the divider...this homosexual thing goes back to religion, the majority of our all girls and all boys schools are funded by the church...some might say 'we bun 'dat' because if you check the bigger prominent guys in the society that are involved in certain homosexual activities, when you check their records they come from these schools. [Division] of the sexes is not natural."

Konica and Peter shared Orbin's views. Konica attends St. Andrew's High School for Girls and commented that since the genders are kept from socializing with one another, they begin to experiment with each other. "Teachers in these religious schools", Konica added, "may not be religious, and only the foundation of the school is religious so the Christian teachings are not that firm."

Shickell said that "Christianity, as practiced today, is used to divide people and has historically to kill and pillage." He noted, like Leon, the Black Christians today practice their own form, which isn't what the slave master taught them, even though they still subscribe to the teachings of the white man."

Nonetheless, Allan noted that "Christianity reinforces the family, the educational system, the legal structures, the popular media."

## CLASS DIFFERENCES

Most interviewees highlighted considerable differences in how homosexuality was perceived across social classes in Jamaican society. In comparing Uptown, Kingston's haven for the wealthy and working professionals, with Downtown, the city's impoverished areas, these differences manifested themselves in perceptions of violence versus relative anonymity.

When asked if homosexuality is treated differently Uptown and Downtown, Juggla responded "definitely...you can't be gay and live in a garrison community because they'll kill you." Konica, in her analysis of the differences, said "people in the ghetto's are angrier because they lack the food and money to survive." She concluded that the frustrations of day-to-day living "create a sort of weakness in the people from the ghetto so they attack anything they view as feminine." Doreen, a Halfway Tree vendor, said that if she found out her son or daughter was gay she would kill them because it would embarrass her, her family and be bad for her business.

Reverend Gordon attributed this violent reaction to homophobia in Kingston's inner city areas to a lack of community consciousness. "Even in the country, when we knew there were homosexuals we did not try to kill them" he said. He countered this with what he had seen in Kingston's inner city areas "...it's unfortunate we've let that [community awareness] wane, but before we did provide protection and education, as well as community relationships."

Allan attributed the vehement disapproval of homosexuality downtown to a stronger religious foundation, "the most religious people you find are grassroots people...they're the one's who will tell you that God made Adam and Even, not Adam

and Steve.” Furthermore, Allan argued, “that religion is consolidated by popular cultural and sub cultural movements, for example, the Rasta community is heavily influenced by Christianity on the one hand and a strong black consciousness position on the other, so they view homosexuality as not only a white man’s perversion, but as something that is also against the creator.” Allan continued by saying that the Rasta community is a very dominant sub cultural group that influences a lot of spheres in society.

A lack of exposure to Western cultural influences was also targeted as a reason for the levels of intolerance in the inner city communities. In continuing his analysis of class differences, Allan continued by saying that “identity construction processes in the inner city are not informed by external forces, they’re very myopic.” Juggla reiterated this point by saying “uptown, they’re exposed to more, I think that’s why they have more gays because we don’t tolerate it down here.”

The dominance of western cultural values was targeted as one of the main reasons for higher levels of tolerance among the wealthier segments of Jamaican society. Juggla examined this notion by saying that “the upper-class, financially they’re exposed to more stuff...they’re more adventurous...we in the community, we stick to what we know.” Juggla did not elaborate exactly the community knows, but did say that he viewed being gay as “mainly a New York thing.” Allan reiterated this point, saying, “[the upper-class] certainly reacts differently because they’re more tolerant, they’ve been exposed to more.” Reverend Gordon, in his discussion of how Jamaican society is discovering new sexualities, mentioned travel to Western countries as a key reason.

Despite the fact that Uptown was seen as being more tolerant of homosexuality, or perhaps because of this fact, there was a great deal of resentment targeted toward

Uptown people because of the perception of gays as predators in the society. Marcia pointed to the differences in how homosexuality is treated in what she termed the “ghetto” and “society” was that in the ghetto one would be beaten, so she believed that very few gays were in the ghetto. She continued by saying “most [homosexuals] are in society where they prey on young boys.” Ryan, in explaining the threat closeted homosexuals pose to society, remarked that “it’s upper and middle class males who have dual identities, where they have a wife, they’re upstanding members of society, but they go down to the inner city to get their boyfriends and they engage in the most corrupt form of sexual favors, using their power to get sexual favors from young men in the inner city.” Here, homosexuality is seen to be not only a western perversion, but also a perversion that has been adopted by the most powerful members of Jamaican society, creating a top-down effect where people from the inner city are victims of sexual exploitation, not consenting sexual partners.

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### *The Impact of Slavery*

The impact of slavery was noted by many of my respondents, however this was more prevalent in the academic circles I interviewed. The impact of the institution of slavery has left a lasting mark on Jamaican society. Many of my interviewees pointed to the emasculation of the black male during slavery in order to explain why male homosexuality was viewed as absolutely unacceptable. Hilary Beckles, in *Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery*, writes of the emasculation of black males. In regards to fatherhood and the black males relation to the black family, Beckles writes:

Slaveholders had neither social nor economic interest in black fatherhood. Black children at birth entered into a social relation that was predetermined by the status of their mothers. Legally, it had absolutely nothing to do with the status of the father. Children fathered by free black men or white men were born into slavery if their mothers were slaves. Since white women, by virtue of their race, were not enslaved, their children under all parental circumstances were born into freedom.<sup>36</sup>

Beckles offers further evidence for the emasculation of black men during slavery by noting how they were expected to offer non-violent responses to the social effects of white men's unrestricted sexuality. She writes of how colonial mastery demanded as property right access to the sexuality of the enslaved. She includes an analysis given by Sociologist Orlando Patterson attesting to the authority white men had over black sexualities:

The sexual exploitation of female slaves by white men was the most disgraceful aspect of Jamaica's slave society. Rape and seduction of infant slaves; the ravishing of the common law wives of male slaves under the

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<sup>36</sup> Beckles, Hilary. *Black Masculinity in Caribbean Slavery*. P. 230



threat of punishment, and outright sadism often involving the most heinous forms of sexual torture were the order of the day.<sup>37</sup>

The research findings suggest that the sexual exploitation rife during European slavery has indeed left a lasting impact on gender relations in contemporary Jamaican society. A study entitled *Gender, Contest and Conflict in the Caribbean* found that fathers are expected to be the breadwinners. Additionally fathering children and having multiple partners define manhood.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, based on this analysis, in order to fulfill the markers of manhood, one cannot be homosexual. In addition to findings suggesting the ways in which manhood is defined, the *Gender, Contest and Conflict* study found that there was a general perception among middle-income areas that men earned more than women and therefore had more power. The findings of the study, however, did not support this theory. The same was generally true in inner city communities, and when these expectations were not met, men experienced a loss of self-respect.<sup>39</sup> This position, in effect, assumes that because women achieve material success over their male counterparts, they have replaced men in positions of power.

However, as noted in the theoretical framework of this paper, such an analysis of male marginalization is flawed. Theorists like Keisha Lindsay have pointed out that the theory of male marginalization is based on “a gender-biased methodological framework that recognizes some data sources and ignores others.”<sup>40</sup> The notion of the black male being marginalized by the black female is false because her attainment of material success does not transfer to positions of power. As expressed in the theoretical

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<sup>37</sup> Patterson, Orlando. *The Sociology of Slavery*. London: Mackibbon and Kee, p. 42

<sup>38</sup> Multiple partners is seen as a sign of sexual prowess and reinforces men’s heterosexuality

<sup>39</sup> Baily, Branch, Lee. *Gender, Contest and Conflict in the Caribbean: Lessons From Community Based Research*. P. 6

<sup>40</sup> Lindsay, Keisha. *Is the Caribbean Male and Endangered Species?* p.

framework, although women outnumber men in institutions of higher learning and in some professional arenas, they are still relegated to gender-specific courses of study or occupations. The male marginalization theory denies women of their agency, since it implies that her success, whatever such success entails, is achieved only in relation to her interaction with men.

Similarly, women are denied their sexuality. Homosexuality is viewed largely as a male phenomenon, and female homosexuality is viewed as a non-issue because women are considered sexual beings outside of their relationships with men. As Juggla expressed in his interview, female homosexuality is not as threatening to men because, as he said, “they tend to become gay [because] they have been let down by men...[or] raped, so they resent men.” This assessment denies women agency of their actions, their bodies, and their sexualities are seen only in relation to their interaction with men.

### ***Homosexuality as Perceived Cultural Imperialism***

Homosexuality in Jamaican society is largely regarded to be a white phenomenon, although this was articulated in different ways. Among those in academia, including students and lecturers, the terms “cultural imperialism” and “white perversion” were spoken of often. Similarly, the conceptualization of what constitutes “foreign” was most often synonymous with “American”. The influences of Britain and Canada were rarely touched upon or seen as having any significance to the Jamaican experience. Many of the working class interviewees were not familiar with the term, and when asked if they regarded homosexuality to be a western phenomenon, they disagreed. However, through a method of triangulation I discovered that most interviewees did regard homosexuality

to have originated in the West. Subsequent questioning revealed that they thought increased exposure to the American media had adversely affected Jamaican society in that there was now what they perceived to be a burgeoning of homosexual activity or, at the very least, more accepting attitudes toward homosexuality. Juggla, for instance, did not think that homosexuality was a white phenomenon, but did admit that “it comes from somewhere else, like New York.” Thus, my hypothesis that homosexuality is perceived to be a white phenomenon was confirmed. This difference may be attributed to my wording of the question, as some may have interpreted it to mean that I was asking if homosexuality was only common among whites/westerners and, in contrast, non-existent in Jamaica.

The burgeoning of metrosexual identities serves as an interesting point through which more telling explanations of class reactions to homosexuality. In his article *Old Glass Ceilings and New Looking Glasses* Mark Figueroa writes “many Jamaican men, like their counterparts elsewhere, do not feel shy to attend beauty salons and not just for haircuts, as facials, manicures and pedicures are also on the bill.”<sup>41</sup> This phenomenon can be witnessed both in Kingston’s Uptown and Downtown areas. This is of particular interest in analyzing the inner-city communities, long said to react violently to gender deviation and homosexual tendencies. It can be said, however, that the exact opposite is true. The lack of self-esteem associated with not fulfilling their gender role as breadwinner in the family may lead inner-city men to adopt western styles of fashion often associated with wealth. Likewise, the gun solute, often associated with blatant homophobia, must also be re-contextualized. As Obika Gray writes in his analysis of the social power of Jamaica’s inner cities, “the dominated have the capacity to resist and

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<sup>41</sup> Figueroa, Mark.

often find the means to elude power, constrain its effects on them, bargain with it, and adapt it to conform to some of their needs.”<sup>42</sup> He continues, “Owning a gun reinforced heterosexual notions of manliness and the image of male potency.” Thus, the gun salute signifies a deep-seated insecurity on the one hand, and an expression of social power on the other. The more tolerant attitudes toward homophobia were also supported by my findings, as many respondents backed up the stereotypical notion that established uptown men often traveled into the inner cities to receive sexual favors. This is not to say, of course, that homosexuality is embraced in inner city communities. Instead, it offers a significant insight that challenges the perceived violence and lawlessness in such communities.

Conversely, many of my Uptown responses indicated a deep seeded moral opposition to homosexuality. More interestingly, however, are the high profile murders of gay men in Jamaica’s wealthier communities, such as the recent murder of former ambassador Peter King, long rumored to have been gay<sup>43</sup>. The murder, said to have been particularly gruesome, is said by many to have been retribution for King’s alleged history of sexual exploitation of younger men.

My interviewees did not openly admit that homophobia was resistance to a perceived western imposition, however it must be noted that such an admission would suggest that there was an inherent power in homosexuality. As Allan noted in his analysis of how homosexuals are perceived in society, “Clearly, you see homosexuals as males as beneath heterosexuals...you do not see a homosexual in the same way you see a

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<sup>42</sup> Gray, Okika. “Demeaned But Empowered: The Social Power of Jamaica’s Poor.” P. 3

<sup>43</sup> Sinclair, Glenroy. “Ambassador Peter King Slain.” March 21, 2006.

heterosexual. Therefore, power is garnered in maintaining one's heterosexual identity and subscribing to societal gender roles.

In analyzing if people perceived homosexuality to be a disgrace to the black race, many interviewees responded by noting the effect of homosexuality on the greater black liberation struggle. This discussion is particularly relevant given Jamaica's history of resistance to domination, including being the birthplace of Marcus Mosiah Garvey and Rastafari. These responses were mainly from people in Academia, people who had been influenced by the teachings of the Rastafari, or people who were familiar with and had studied black liberation and Pan-Africanism. The most common responses were that homosexuality is a western imposition and that someone with a homosexual identity could not truly be in tune with the struggle for black liberation because they had accepted a "western perversion". This view was supported by the relevant literature on the topic, which highlights the marginalization faced by many people of African descent working in African Studies. In order to any sustainable form of black liberation to take place, all members of the Black community must be recognized and have their voices heard.

## **Religion**

The influence of religion on Jamaican society cannot be denied. Most of the people interviewed reported that they were Christian, although few of them attended church services regularly. Irregular church attendance, however, should be taken as a sign of blind acceptance of religious principles. The church has, since slavery, played a pivotal role in community activism and organizing. Paul Bogle, in his infamous and celebrated Morant Bay Rebellion, used the church as a staging ground to launch one of

the most infamous uprisings in Jamaican history.<sup>44</sup> In this same vein of resistance and struggle, some denominations of the Christian church have resolved to recognize their homosexual members and maintain their right a pastoral duty to them. The Lambeth Conference of 1998, held in Canterbury, England, which served as a worldwide conference for Anglican Bishops, bringing together 750 Bishops and 650 Spouses from the 37 Provinces of the Anglican Communion. Prior to the conference no province had asked for homosexuality to figure as a major item on the agenda yet, nevertheless, the item was intensely debated. The result of those discussions was a Resolution, passed by a huge majority, that says:

This Conference, in view of the teaching of Scripture, upholds up holds faithfulness in a marriage a man and a women in a lifelong union, and believes that abstinence is right for those who are not called to marriage...[however] the Church also recognizes that there are among us persons who experience themselves as having a homosexual orientation. Many of these are members of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the ordering of their relationships. We commit ourselves to listen to the experience of homosexual persons and we wish to assure them that they are loved by God and that all baptized, believing and faithful persons, regardless of sexual orientation, are full fledged members of the Body of Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Reverend Gordon, who attended the Lambeth Conference of 1998, expressed pride in the Church's decision. Moreover, he expressed a need for more members of the Church to be cognizant of the changing social contexts of the bibles denouncements of homosexuality. "The term 'sodomite'", the Reverend explained, "came into the [bible] in 1946 because of its usage in the culture, and originally referred to be people living in Ancient Sodom...it came to be a cultural word for homosexual rather than its genesis in

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<sup>44</sup> Campbell, Horace.

<sup>45</sup> Lambeth Conference, Section I Resolution I.10. Human Sexuality.

<<http://secure.anglicancommunion.org/lambeth/1/sect1rpt.html>>

terms of its etymology.” Such an understanding is crucial, especially when one takes into account the way in which the bible has been used historically to subjugate enslaved Africans. Despite the teachings of plantocracy, who tried to impose lessons of servitude and obedience onto their slaves through biblical teaching, the bible and the Church became places of resistance.

Many of those interviewed attested to the vast influence the Church yields in Jamaican society, namely that of one of the main socializing institutions in the society, and while groups like the National Church Alliance (NCA) are leading the fight against legislation to legalize homosexuality, some Christians in Jamaican society are asking for transformative position to be taken by the church. In a letter to the *Daily Gleaner* one concerned Christian wrote, ““as a group of people who have been historically discriminated against, and often in the name of Christianity, should not be so willing to impose similar unappealing restrictions on others.”<sup>46</sup> Christianity, like it has done in the past, must regain its transformative power against human oppression.

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<sup>46</sup> Lee, Andre, The Jamaica Gleaner, Letters to the Editor, February 18, 2006

## **CONCLUSION/LIMITATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Homosexuality in Jamaican society, while largely considered to be a western phenomenon, is a complex issue with no linear line of analysis. Multiple approaches must be taken in an attempt to address the varying forms of homophobia that manifest themselves in the society. More than anything, a study on homophobia ultimately becomes an analysis of the wider communities traditionally implicated in the marginalization of queer people, ultimately rendering more information about the complex dynamics of race, class, gender and spirituality than simply the people who become targets of homophobic violence and harassment. Once we understand the history of resistance to domination in Jamaican society and are able to place homosexuality as one of a perceived western imposition, we can more effectively interrogate homophobia from its roots causes and work more effectively toward creating transformative change.

Despite the idealistic expectations I had when I began this study, I ran into numerous limitations. The most glaring limitation was a lack of time both in conducting field research and writing this paper. Five weeks allows one to take a cursory glance into the issues at hand, and while I do believe that many important revelations have come to light in this research, I strongly believe that much more work needs to be done. There is a searing neglect in the literature –in academia and in the wider society – of homosexuality within the black context. Research needs to be conducted that analyzes gender construction in indigenous African societies. Additionally, more research needs to trace how historical systems of domination have formed contemporary gender constructs and expectations for men and women of African descent. Moreover, as expressed in the



literature by Pincheon and Amory<sup>47</sup>, there is a tendency in both African Studies and the Black Liberation struggle to look at Africa as continent with one monolithic culture of patriarchal influence and sexual intolerance. It is imperative that researchers begin to examine Africa in terms of the many diverse cultures that existed previously before European colonization and are in existence today. Moreover, this study dealt specifically with the experiences of people of African descent and, while Jamaica is predominately Black, there is a glaring need to analyze homophobia experienced in other racialized communities, such as the East Indian and Chinese experience. Such insight would add significant parallels that would offer a more holistic view of Jamaican society.

Additionally, there needs to be greater discourse across the African Diaspora. This crucial discourse needs to happen at all levels in order for any systemic changes in the continued oppression faced by many Black communities, and communities of color in general, can adequately be addressed. Too often our gazes are focused only on our immediate environments, but once that gaze becomes one that recognizes the myriad of regional and racial experiences, recognizing both the similarities of their experiences and the distinct differences, institutionalized oppressions can be effectively addressed.

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<sup>47</sup> Both of these writers' arguments are outlined in the literature review, expressing the tendency in African studies to examine Africa as being devoid of cultural diversity.

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## **APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The following are the general interview questions used in this research project:

1. Do you think homosexuality is acceptable? Why or why not?
2. How would you react if your sibling, child or close friend came out as a homosexual?
3. What is your opinion of the following statement:

“Homosexuality is a disgrace to the nation.”

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Explain your answer:

4. Some people say that homosexuality is a foreign imposition from Western (read: white) countries. Do you agree?

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Explain your answer:

5. There is a common view held by certain sectors of the media and the public that homosexuality is a disgrace to the black race. Do you agree or disagree with this statement?

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly Agree

Explain your answer:

6. Do you think you could recognize a homosexual person by looking at them?

7. If so, what are the characteristics you see? How do you know?

6. Do you consider yourself to be a religious person?

7. If so, what denomination are you?

8. How often do you attend church services?

