

Name it, Claim it:
A response to Melvin Butler's "The Spirit of David: Negotiating Faith and Masculinity in Black Gospel Performance"

E. Patrick Johnson—Northwestern University

Melvin's Butler's meditation on masculinity in Pentecostal black gospel performance underscores the complexity of gender, sexuality, black musical aesthetics, and spirituality as they pivot around one another in black communities and black churches. The relationships among these performances and sign symbols provide much fodder not only for scholars of religion, music, and sexuality, but also for parishioners within black churches as they struggle to negotiate traditional [read: conservative] interpretations of Biblical scripture and the contemporary political landscape in which homosexuality is slowly becoming mainstream.

For my response to Butler's essay, I want to address one point that he raises regarding gospel musical performance and gender. Namely, I want to focus on Butler's discussion of the "aural and visual cues" within black gospel performance that, to some witnesses of such performances, signal queerness, or at least queer masculinity.

Butler notes how "the discourses surrounding [gospel artists] are informed by their visual and aural performances." I suggest that these visual and aural performances are a part of a larger camp aesthetic within some black church services. Indeed, despite it being a prescribed place, the black church is a site of contradictions, for queerness abounds and flourishes there. And it is a queerness that thrives off of the general excess of black church aesthetics. What I mean by the excess of black church aesthetics is the ritualized, over-the-top and hyperbolic components of many, but certainly not all, black worship services—from the structure of the service (the aspects of improvisation within structure), the music, the sermon, and the church vernacular, to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit. For within each of these realms lies the possibility of camp

performance, or what Fabio Cleto refers to as “representational excess, heterogeneity, and gratuitousness of reference.”¹ And it is the performance of camp within these sites that not only provides a space for black gay men to express their sexuality, but also for heterosexual male parishioners to perform an otherwise feminized masculinity.

Many scholars on the black church have noted its built-in “theatricality,” its improvisational components and its rituals of performance. Few have made the connection between these aesthetics of the black church—all of which I consider to be a part of its camp aesthetic—and the manifestation of the holy/unholy spirit as a vehicle for queer performativity. Just as the 4/4 time of house music on the gay dance floor generates a feeling of ecstasy, the syncopation of stomping feet and clapping hands, the drums, bass and lead guitar, and tambourine also transport one to the liminal space between the here and now and the beyond, where time is suspended and the body gives way to the hold of the spirit. When the spirit takes hold, the codes of decorum and strictures of bodily comportment become relaxed, exposing the slippage between spirituality and sexuality, heterosexuality and homosexuality, femininity and masculinity. Thus the answer to Butler’s question, “Is it possible to go too far in one’s worship—to ‘let oneself go’ or ‘open oneself up’ to the point of crossing into a less ‘masculine’ form or expression?” is yes.

While it is common for self-identified straight black men to physically and vocally express their faith with an occasional clapping of the hands, “well,” or “yessir,” their expressions of faith rarely reach the extremes reflected in the example that Butler provides of Marshall Petty performing “Jesus Saves.” Nonetheless, heterosexual black parishioners do partake of the fruit from the camp tree every now and again. Whether an animated preacher walking the aisle,

¹ Fabio Cleto, *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1999. 3.

working the fullness of his robe with each and every twirl, or the soloist in the male chorus vamping just a tad longer than usual, heterosexual men in the black church queer their masculinity vis-à-vis the camp aesthetic embodied in the spirit. I want to be careful here not to suggest an essentialist reading of a gender/sex binary in which non-normative gender performance by men is equated with homosexuality or vice versa. What I am suggesting, however, is that within the visual and cultural economy of an institution like the black church, the parishioners are necessarily invested—at least ideologically—in such binaries. My own reading of gender and sexuality in this space, then, is descriptive rather than prescriptive. Indeed, my reading is based on my own experience in the church and on the narratives of informants I have interviewed for my own research; the general conclusion based on these experiences is that self-identified heterosexual black men in the church perform similar forms of hegemonic masculinity to those witnessed in society. Bodily deportment is firm, not loose, rigid and not flexible; expression of emotions other than anger signifies weakness. Butler's reading of Fred Hammond's performance is interesting in this regard, for inasmuch as Hammond's "thick vocal timbre and controlled delivery, together with his heavy-set body type, fuel a stereotypical perception of him as a quintessential male gospel performer," these same attributes could be said of James Cleveland in performance; yet, his sexuality was constantly called into question. In order to reconcile these two heteronormative performances of masculinity that render one performer "straight" and the other "gay," I believe that one must account for the camp theatricality engendered by the spirit that enables a space for slippage between gender and sexuality.

Drawing on Jason King, Butler suggests that there might be a "silver lining" to the silence around sexuality in Pentecostal churches. While I agree that silence may provide a space

to maneuver within the confines of what can otherwise be an oppressive space, ultimately, I do not see such silence as a “silver lining.” It will truly be a day to rejoice when the demons of heteronormative gender and sexual identity are exorcized from the black church body politic. Such an exorcism would not only “save” black queer church members from the emotional and psychological stress of trying to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality, but it would also transform the church into a place where the expression of non-normative gender and sexual identity is accepted and embraced by all members.