

Response to Melvin L. Butler, “The Spirit of David: Negotiating Faith and Masculinity in Black Gospel Performance”

By: Kyle Wagner

Professor Butler’s essay on the complex relationships between the ideal of ‘Davidian masculinity’, homophobic church discourses, and black gospel performance highlights ambiguities, tensions, and contradictions that inform negotiations of gender identity. Providing an analysis of how the Davidian ideal is engaged within black Pentecostalism with respect to musical performance, this essay suggests several possible lines of inquiry for investigations into the construction of black masculinities.

A central question addressed by Butler is why churchgoers seem to be able to appreciate and, in a potentially qualified way, accept male gospel singers who exhibit ‘effeminate’ qualities and are thought to be secretly homosexual. Another way to state this might be: Why is musical performance a more legitimate space within the church in which to challenge heteronormativity? Butler offers two possible explanations, one of which is based on a postulated “ethic of empathy that allows or even encourages the expression of queer identities that disrupt a strict masculine-feminine binary” (16). To test the plausibility of this thesis, several questions remain to be answered concerning the apparent ubiquity of the acceptance of these performers. For example, is this phenomenon more present in urban or rural settings? Does it vary by geographical region? How are these performers, who are ‘expressively homosexual’, received outside of the performance arena by these same churchgoers? Are there any marked differences in the discourse on this issue based on the age of the churchgoers or other factors? Answering questions such as these will allow us to map more accurately the contours of this phenomenon and answer the questions that remain. For example, might it be that what we are seeing are the early signs of a shift within black Pentecostalism that reflects the broader cultural shift toward greater acceptance of homosexuality in the United States?

The second line of explanation Butler follows is, for me, somewhat more intriguing. It involves a discussion of the apparent acceptance of some level of heterosexual impropriety and religious laxity on the part of many male instrumentalists in black Pentecostal churches. This is a curious phenomenon, perhaps suggesting that

because music functions as a primary vehicle for moving people in the spirit, and because God apparently sees fit to use these people for this function, there may be a certain degree to which these performers are given more leeway, as instruments of God, to stray from norms. Something similar may be happening in the case of ‘effeminate’ male gospel singers who are suspected to be gay. Perhaps it is the valuable role these performers play that fosters a level of acceptance that tacitly contradicts the homophobia present in more official realms of church discourse. It is also possible that there is simply something about the nature of musical performance itself that helps to explain this phenomenon, though what that might be is currently unclear to me. While no definitive and singular explanation is present, Butler certainly provides useful lines of inquiry for future scholarship by highlighting these possibilities.

Butler’s analysis of Davidian masculinity serves as a primary basis for his reflections. As someone who grew up attending Pentecostal services (though services where the congregation was almost uniformly white), Butler’s discussion of David being held up as an exemplar of true Christian masculinity resonates with my own experience.¹ I often have thought this idealized David serves as a more traditionally masculine counterweight to a Jesus who exhibits primary characteristics that are commonly indexed as feminine, including humility, forgiveness, gentleness, and compassion. While David exhibits these characteristics to a degree, in him these traits are ‘balanced’ by his structural power, virility, and wealth. Given the differences between the visions of ideal masculinity exemplified by David and Jesus, it may be useful, as a further line of inquiry as this project grows, to compare the discourse on David’s masculinity to the discourse on the masculinity of Jesus. Taken together, these discourses may reveal more ways to think about the tensions present in how ‘true’ masculinity is conceived, with all its attendant ambiguities, within black Pentecostalism.

Butler’s essay, with its focus on tensions and contradictions, also led me to consider more deeply the ways in which a constructive dialogue on gender norms, masculinity, and homosexuality within black Pentecostalism might take place around the

¹ It has also been my experience that, in Pentecostal circles, David frequently serves as an example of someone who properly balanced wealth and righteousness and therefore provides a degree of sanction for patterns of consumption common in modern capitalism. Though not germane to this essay, it is interesting to note David’s varied utility.

issues in gospel performance that Butler illuminates. Butler himself appears somewhat reticent about opening that can of worms, instead wondering aloud whether “silence in these contexts may even be powerful” (17). I wonder, however, if perhaps a little “wrestl[ing] with the theological chaos that might result” might not be such a bad thing. At the very least it might challenge people to address the tensions and contradictions in their own positions. The negative side, of course, is that it might further alienate some closeted homosexuals in the black Pentecostal community who have found, in musical performance, a space in which they can negotiate masculinity in a rebellious but not dangerously revolutionary way. But can things stay that way forever? Should they?

As a secondary note, there is a degree of slippage that occurs throughout the essay between the specific ethnographic context of black Pentecostalism, from which the core examples are drawn, and the more general context of the ‘black church’ and/or black gospel music. For example, the use of “Black Gospel Performance” in the title of the essay situates the reader in the larger context, but the examples primarily come from the narrower context of black Pentecostalism. While it is possible that the observations on performativity and the negotiation of masculinity via musical performance in a Pentecostal setting legitimately might be generalized to black gospel music or the more nebulous ‘black church’, the essay assumes this relationship without actually establishing it explicitly. I would like to see this fleshed out a bit more, perhaps illuminating the ways, if any, in which black Pentecostal gospel performance cannot simply be conflated with black gospel performance in general. I only suggest this line of inquiry because I wonder if there may be something particular about charismatic ritual performance that makes the negotiation of masculinity within black Pentecostal music a phenomenon that is somewhat distinctive. For instance, do the rituals of prophecy, healing, and glossolalia flavor Pentecostal norms of masculinity in a way that should be taken into account when discussing musical performance and gender norms? Despite this small quibble, I found this essay to be quite thought provoking, and I look forward to following where this work leads in the future.