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## Race and the Religious Possibilities for Sexuality in Conservative Protestantism

KELSY BURKE, DAWNE MOON, AND THERESA W. TOBIN

The definition of sin has varied through Christian history, but Christians have used sexual behavior (and sometimes feelings) to indicate a person's morality (or immorality) perhaps more consistently than any other indicator. Historian of religion Mark Jordan (2002:78) notes that these sins "have included [. . .] every erotic or quasi-erotic action that can be performed by human bodies except penile-vaginal intercourse between two partners who are not primarily seeking pleasure and who do not intend to prevent conception." What has been *allowed* sexually has, for much of Christian history, been an extremely narrow category, making Christians vulnerable to sexual shame. In the United States today, Christian communities embrace varied understandings of appropriate sexual behavior, and social inequalities affect Christians' experiences of sexual shame and require them to take different paths to overcome it.

Conservative Protestant churches—those that encourage a personal relationship with Jesus, hold a "high view" of Scripture, and adhere to characteristic Evangelical doctrines such as substitutionary atonement (Bebbington 1989)—tend to define same-sex sexuality and variant experiences of gender (being transgender, for instance) as sinful because of their belief in a doctrine known as gender complementarianism.<sup>1</sup> At its core, this doctrine posits that God created two opposite sexes, male and female, for the purpose of completing each other in marriage—either anatomically, reproductively, or in a gender hierarchy (Brownson 2013). In effect, conventional conservative Protestant teachings treat binary gender as a commandment, preceding the Ten Commandments in time and importance, so anything that challenges this doctrine or reveals it to be socially constructed appears as a sinful rebellion against God (Moon and Tobin 2018). Colonialism and White supremacy have been

rationalized in part by suggesting that non-European ways of understanding gender and sexuality are morally deficient compared to European ways.

We draw from two sociological studies to understand how conservative Protestants' experiences of sexual shame are shaped by particular intersections of race, sexuality, and gender.<sup>2</sup> The first is an ethnographic study of conservative Protestants who are engaging in conversations about their churches' spiritual violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex (LGBTQI) people and their routes to reconciliation (Moon and Tobin 2018). Between 2014 and 2018, Moon and Tobin conducted 489 hours of participant observation of LGBTQI Evangelical organizations and conferences, intensive semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of 102 participants (40 of which were conducted with LGBTQ Christians of color by Black, queer, justice educator, and movement participant Alicia T. Crosby), and analysis of published statements (blogs, columns) by participants. Here we focus on the experiences of Black LGBTQ Protestants.<sup>3</sup> The second study is a multi-method examination of the genre of Christian sex advice (Burke 2016), which, as we explain below, is firmly rooted within a White, conservative Evangelical tradition. Burke conducted a virtual ethnography between 2010 and 2012 through in-depth content analysis of a sample of twelve websites (six blogs, one message board, five stores); fifty interviews with mostly White, cisgender,<sup>4</sup> heterosexual website creators and users; and an online survey completed by 768 users of five websites. To supplement online data, she analyzed the content of eighteen published Christian sex advice books and observed three face-to-face conferences related to Christian sexuality.

We analyze and compare data from opposite ends of what pioneering Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls the "matrix of domination," or the social organization of race, class, gender, and sexuality as overlapping hierarchies. By examining the experiences of Black LGBTQ Christians alongside White cis/heterosexual married Christians, we are able to highlight the role that White hetero-patriarchy plays in shaping sexual possibilities for conservative Protestants. We use "White hetero-patriarchy" to specify a system of White supremacy that produces and is produced by heterosexual, male domination. We first examine the experiences of Black LGBTQ Christians to illustrate the role

of sexual shame in America's racialized history. Black LGBTQ Christians must navigate the conflict between relying on the Black Church for support and relief from racist society and being seen as a "race traitor" if they acknowledge their sexual or gender difference. The overwhelming experience of sexual stigmatization produced by racist stereotypes illuminates the peculiar entitlement to sexual pleasure enjoyed by many White, cisgender, heterosexual Evangelicals—particularly men. We then examine the sexual entitlement presented in Christian sex advice that privileges White cisgender heterosexual men's experiences and fosters certain forms of sexual agency for White cisgender heterosexual women. Together, these examples illustrate how race, gender, and sexuality shape American Christians' experiences of sexual shame and sexual entitlement.

### Stigmatized Sexuality: Being Black, Being LGBTQ

Conservative Christians tend to see shame as potentially redeeming; feeling shame over a personal quality that has led someone to violate others' trust, such as lust or greed, can inspire them to become a better person, worthy of relationship. Thus, they see shame as *re-integrating*, aiming to protect relationship and belonging, and often try to dispense it with love, assuring the shamed person that they will once again belong (Braithwaite 1989). Given their complementarian church culture, conventionally conservative Protestants tend to see sexual/gender variation as sinful, so they shame it, intending to inspire change. However, people generally cannot *will* their sexual orientation and gender identity to change, so this shame becomes perpetual. Living in perpetual shame about one's capacity to love others and know oneself impedes *all* relationships. Christians who shame LGBTQI people may intend for them to change and be re-integrated, but that shame perpetually brands them as unworthy (Moon and Tobin 2018).

In predominantly White conservative Protestant churches, being LGBTQI is likely to be treated as an individual problem or pathology. A church may make collective efforts to address it, such as organized prayer teams or ministries for sex addicts or "reparative" therapy, which can at least provide a sense of community for an individual in the depths of shame (Gerber 2011). What's more, many conservative Protestant

churches are beginning to recognize that singling out LGBTQI people comes across not as loving so much as hateful. Even the staunchly anti-LGBTQI Southern Baptist Convention has tried to “show the love of Christ to gay family members or neighbors” and “repent of anti-gay rhetoric” (Ford 2014). But, unlike White Americans, African Americans have been subject to collective sexual shaming through White supremacy, shaping a Black Church culture that produces distinct kinds of shaming experiences.

Since the beginning of European conquest, European Christians have defined non-White and non-Christian peoples as inferior partly on the basis of real or imagined sexual/gender differences (for illustrative examples, see chapters by Sarah Imhoff, and Ashley Garner and Z. Fareen Parvez, in this volume). Racist ideology erroneously associates Black men with sexual violence, Black women with sexual promiscuity and moral corruption, and both as closer to animals’ shameless public sexuality than Whites (Collins 1990, 2005; Douglas 1999). Because Blackness is “read off” of a racialized body, this form of stigmatization generates an experience of perpetual exposure and constant White surveillance and judgment (Harris-Perry 2011:111; see also Collins 1990, 2005; Fanon 1967; Ferguson 2004; Goffman 1963; Snorton 2014). Political scientist Melissa Harris-Perry (2011) defines anti-Black racism in the United States as a form of political shaming whereby the state dispenses shame toward a whole group of people, defining Blackness as malignant and encoding that stigma in law and policy (Alexander 2010; Davis 2003). While some shame may re-integrate people into their community, racist shame does not re-integrate people of color into White supremacist society because racial difference does not violate relationships (racism does), and White supremacy is premised on exclusion and exploitation.

Recognizing that stereotypes of Black sexual deviancy drive racism, the Black Church has long preached “respectability,” especially around marriage and sexuality (Higginbotham 1994). Instead of directly challenging norms about sexual “purity” rooted in White hetero-patriarchy, respectability politics holds Black people accountable for living up to these ideals. In many Black Church contexts, respectability politics may sanction anyone who might be perceived as confirming racist stereotypes about Black sexual deviancy, including people with HIV/AIDS; gay, lesbian, or bisexual people; single mothers; transgender people;

and anyone who might tarnish the Black community's image of sexual morality (Cohen 1999; Collins 1990, 2005; Harris-Perry 2011; Higginbotham 1994; Morrison 1992). Because respectability answers to White hetero-patriarchal norms, it has a distinctive impact on Black women and LGBTQI people. Scholars and respondents alike mention the traditional pattern of churches forcing teenage mothers, not fathers, to publicly apologize in front of the congregation (Higginbotham 1994; Snorton 2014). Other scholars comment on the tendency of Black men *and women* to see Black women as race traitors if they publicly hold prominent Black men accountable for sexual violence (Collins 2005; Crenshaw 1991; Harris-Perry 2011; Morrison 1992).

Black denominations vary in terms of their official teachings and members' politics (Shelton and Cobb 2017), but Black LGBTQ and same-gender-loving respondents from a wide range of churches reported shared experiences not reported by White people. The repackaging of White hetero-patriarchy as respectability in some churches has resulted in particular ridicule of LGBTQI people, even from the pulpit (Collins 2005; Douglas 1999; Snorton 2014). Many Black respondents spoke of a double standard confronting visible sexual or gender nonconformity relative to other sins. Bishop Harold Robinson, recognized as a leader in ending the double standard against LGBT people among Black churches in Chicago, reflected on the climate when he was younger:

It was the one sin where you could laugh—laughingly talk about it and disparage the people in a mocking way. [ . . . ] So you could always get a laugh about sissies or, you know, men sleeping with men or whatever, you'd get a laugh and you could call 'em nasty, you could call 'em filthy. [ . . . ] See, I just have to acknowledge it because you did not mock other people the same way. Whether you preached against it or not, they wasn't mocked, they wasn't shamed, and they certainly wasn't made to feel that they weren't welcome. So fornicator is there and the adulterer's there and the one with the drinking problem is there, and all of that—all of them are there on Sunday morning. None of them feel like that they couldn't come to church except for, like I said, the way that particular community was treated.

Collins (2005:108) reflects on such attitudes: "Holding fast to dominant ideology, many African American ministers believe that homosexuality

is unnatural for Blacks and is actually a ‘White disease.’” She argues that this anti-LGBTQ response paradoxically maintains White hetero-patriarchy as the standard for belonging, for rights, and in the case of the church, for membership in the church and God’s kingdom.

Respectability politics gave hetero-patriarchy a different shape in Black churches than in predominantly White ones. To overcome heteronormative shame to the point of being able to serve God and other people, some White LGBTQ conservative Protestants eventually accept and claim their LGBTQ identities. This allows them to restore relationships, even if they accept their church’s teachings about sex and marriage and pursue celibacy. But under the weight of respectability for Black LGBTQ people, claiming such identities can be particularly fraught: not simply challenging heteronormativity, but at times seeming to justify the White hetero-patriarchal equation of Blackness with sexual deviance.

Respondents who had experienced both predominantly White and Black or multiethnic church settings could make explicit comparisons. Aurora, a Black, twenty-six-year-old trans woman, spoke of having grown up in predominantly Black or multiracial churches and schools until her mother died when she was sixteen, at which point she moved and began attending her stepmother’s predominantly White, Assemblies of God church. As conservative as the White church was, her experience captures the focus on an outward presentation of respectability in predominantly Black churches and multiracial Christian schools she attended. Reflecting on her youth, when others saw her as a feminine boy, she said:

I felt more accepted [at the predominantly White church] because [ . . . ] it seemed as though gender was the currency in the Black spaces. In the White spaces the gender expression wasn’t as big of a deal as the sexuality. What I mean by that is, they didn’t necessarily care that I was more flamboyant in say, my hand gestures or more eclectic in my style of dress, as long as they knew privately that I was not sexually engaging in anything that would be considered deviant. [ . . . ] Whereas, you know, in Black spaces it seemed to be [ . . . ] opposite, [ . . . ] where you needed to have an outward gender expression that was cis[gender], while what you did privately wasn’t as much of a concern. I still didn’t feel liberated because I knew I couldn’t be who I really was. Definitely not openly without being rejected.

This focus on outward display could have the effect of silencing Black LGBTQ Christians or making them invisible. Instead of the ex-gay ministries or church prayer teams that White respondents reported experiencing, Black participants in the movement were more likely to report enduring hours of physical exorcism efforts or a pastor's private efforts to purge their "demon." While many White LGBTQ conservative Christians have been sent to group ministries to seek "repair," Darren Calhoun, for instance, reports having lived for nearly two years in his pastor's out-of-state church building, away from friends and family, fasting twice weekly, sleeping on the altar, and cleaning the building in exchange for \$50 a week in an effort to stop being gay (Keating 2018).

The need to diminish the collective stigmatization of Black people distinctly shaped the experiences of Black LGBTQ Christians compared to White LGBTQ Christians. Black respondents struggled with the desire to cultivate respectability out of love and responsibility for their families. For instance, Imani shared her concern that her bisexuality could bring trouble to her mother, whose prominence in the church meant that they were always in the spotlight, and whose own mother (Imani's grandmother) was highly critical in enforcing respectability:

I was scared of embarrassing my mother. [ . . . ] My parents got divorced when I was a kid, and that got real interesting at church [laughs], and I kind of felt like our family had had enough. [ . . . ] I mean, everybody knew my mother, everybody. [ . . . ] [when] my grandmother was still alive, she went to the church. [ . . . ] all I could think about was the swirling doom that would be, if people found out. [ . . . ] I never even thought for a second that [coming out] was an option.

White respondents also described fear that coming out as LGBTQ would embarrass or bring stigma on their parents, but Imani feared that her whole family's belonging within the community, and indeed her whole community's respectable standing, depended on her remaining silent about her sexuality. Because being LGBTQ in predominantly White churches is treated as an individual pathology, White participants did not tend to describe the same risk that their disclosure would impinge on their families, their churches, or on all White people.

Because racist stigma is based on appearances, community respectability demands silence and invisibility with regard to any variation from dominant gender and sexual ideals. Imani experienced that silence as a child and teenager, trying to make sense of feelings of difference. She recalled:

Because I got all that information filtered through [older relatives], it was still very hushed and words people wouldn't use. And people's partners were their "friend" and, [ . . . ] no matter how clear the people were about who they were and who they loved, everybody else talked about it as if they could create a secret out of something that wasn't a secret. And then [my cousin] who was in the same congregation, came out. Her mama had a fit, and their relationship was so strained *I* didn't even see her for a while.

Under the weight of respectability, Black LGBTQ shame is kept within the individual, preferably, or failing that, within the family, or failing that, within the church, and people who fail to keep it quiet simply "disappear." In fact, Imani feared that if she came out, *she* might "disappear" too, perhaps being exiled by her family. Strikingly, Imani actually grew up in the United Church of Christ, a denomination that officially affirms LGBTQI identities and same-sex marriage. Her pastor even said supportive things about LGBT people from the pulpit, but the politics of respectability superseded denominational policy. Under the weight of respectability, she couldn't hear these things until she remembered them years later, after she claimed her identity as a bisexual person.

In response to this stigma, many "compartmentalize" their racial/Christian identities from their sexual identities, expressing each at different times, which strains both romantic and platonic relationships (Pitt 2010). A gay respondent, Jamal, observed:

[T]here's about four churches that are pretty much known as where all the [Black] gays go in Chicago and they've all been very publicly, actively, politically anti-gay. On any given Sunday somebody might be praying against the spirit of homosexuality or encouraging some hyper-masculine behavior and response to a more effeminate or a less

manly expression. [ . . . ] In those churches I have lots of friends and when I talk to them about [ . . . ] the culture of their church the response I get over and over again is that, “Well, I know they’re going to be that way. I know they’re going to act that way, but I like the music, or I like the sermons, and so when they do that I just tune out.” What I’m hearing them say is that they’re effectively leaving entire parts of themselves and their experience at the door, bottling that up, compartmentalizing it.

Respectability politics leaves many Black LGBTQ people feeling like they must choose which oppression to resist and which to endure. For our respondents, compartmentalizing wasn’t limited to non-affirming churches. When they found LGBTQI-affirming churches, they were often predominantly White communities that failed to minister to them as Black people, sometimes with overt racism or ignorance (King 2016). They experienced a double bind that left them feeling like they had to compartmentalize in any faith community, an experience one respondent described as “spiritual homelessness.”

However, the Black Church’s focus on a God who loves and liberates the oppressed, coupled with the personal relationships with God that many conservative churches cultivate, allowed some to live confident that God made them and loves them just as they are and wants them to share that unconditional love with others. At LGBTQI Evangelical conferences, a number of Black participants testified to hearing God tell them to embrace “who he created me to be,” and one Black Apostolic same-gender-loving respondent from the oversample reflected on God’s response to her marriage to a woman:

I didn’t think that the *church* would be approving, but I always felt that *God* always loved me. Every time I would talk to God, he was never mad at me. He never made me feel like he didn’t love me, or that I was a bad person. So I was able to separate my relationship with God with the teachings of the church. [ . . . ] If I had honestly felt that God told me “This is wrong, I don’t want you to do this,” then I would have had another set of choices to make, but I didn’t feel that God told me that, and I really am being honest. I’m not pretending he didn’t tell me. [ . . . ] He didn’t say that to me. He never has.

She felt somewhat welcome in church when people would ask how her wife was doing, but she was still afraid to ask them to christen her children, lest they say no.

### White Sexual Entitlement and Christian Sex Advice

In contrast to sexualities constrained by racism and heteronormativity, White married cisgender heterosexual Christians can today enjoy a *relatively* shameless sexual existence. Titles of published Christian sex advice books—*A Celebration of Sex* (Rosenau 1994), *The Gift of Sex* (Penner and Penner 1973), *Holy Sex* (Wier 1999)—prominently display the belief that God creates sex as an extraordinary and blessed form of intimacy (DeRogatis 2015). Online, Christians can find blogs and message boards to share their sexual stories, ask questions, and get advice from others. They can find Christian online stores that sell sex toys promising customers that they will not encounter pornographic or other forbidden material but that they will find resources to increase their sexual satisfaction (Burke 2016). Conservative Christians who write about sex, both in print and online, gain access to a contemporary and permissive understanding of sexual identities, practices, and desires, alongside conservative religious beliefs.

Both secular and religious sex advice as an industry emerged in the 1970s and have flourished ever since, reflecting what some scholars call “therapeutic culture,” which prioritizes improving the “self” in order to optimize emotional, physical, and spiritual well-being (Wuthnow 1994). Both promote the idea that good sex is an important part of achieving personal fulfillment. The “goodness” of good sex for Evangelical Christians incorporates dual meanings—*good* as normal, allowed, and sanctioned by God and *good* as feelings of pleasure and satisfaction. For Evangelicals who write Christian sex advice, God created sex to be enjoyed by married couples, regardless of race. As Evangelicals who believe a conversation with God and the Bible should be their sole authorities when it comes to making even the most practical decisions for their lives, their interpretation is influenced by a particular social context. What sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) calls a “White racial frame” influences the stories these authors tell, the emotions and feelings they display, along with their religious convictions. The entitlement to

pleasurable and fulfilling sexuality comes from their racialized perspective and the privileges commonly granted to Whites. And, as Sarah Imhoff illustrates in her chapter on race, sexuality, and American Judaism, White Evangelicals also draw from Protestants' dominance throughout US history to confidently assert their claim to normal sexuality. Both dimensions of "good sex" reflect White and Christian privileges associated with free will, autonomy, and personal taste.

The Whiteness of Christian sex advice as a genre typically goes unmarked. Published books are marketed to the generic "married Christian." Online, users interact without seeing photographs of one another. When Burke observed Pastor Mark Driscoll on a speaking tour for his latest book, *Real Marriage: The Truth about Sex, Friendship, and Life Together* (Driscoll and Driscoll 2012), she wrote in her fieldnotes the following description of the pastor of a megachurch in Georgia who introduced Driscoll: "jeans, polo shirt, muscles, White." For the audience description: "VERY WHITE. Over 1,000 participants. Counting 4 people who are not White from where I am sitting." Over the next two days, she made half a dozen tally marks noting additional people of color she noticed in the audience. This pattern was consistent for all Christian sexuality conferences she attended. For the sample of eighteen Christian sex advice books she analyzed, 100% were penned by White authors.

Many Black preachers have found success in contemporary and mediated forms of Protestantism—from the Christian self-help industry to televangelism (Harrison 2005)—yet their presence in the Christian sex advice industry is virtually non-existent. For example, T. D. Jakes, one of America's most famous Black megachurch preachers, has authored a number of spiritual self-help books that discuss gender and marriage but treat sex and sexuality as peripheral. Though he has made several statements regarding homosexuality (as nearly all celebrity preachers have been asked to do), he does not tend to discuss the act of sex directly. In his book, *Lose that Man and Let Him Go* (1995:78), he playfully writes, "stay out of the missionary position!" to make his point that men should not be "missionaries" who feel entitled to change their wives. Referencing sex euphemistically maintains Black Church "respectability," which is in stark contrast to dozens of books dedicated entirely and directly to improving one's sex life authored by White Evangelicals. Of course, Black Protestants may read these sex advice books by White authors

that are generically marketed to all Christians. Still, on the Christian sex advice websites Burke studied, non-White users appeared to be few. Of the fifty website users she interviewed, 91% were White. For the 768 Christian sexuality website users who responded to her online survey, 92% were White.

The most visible and mainstream celebrations of sex within Christianity are clearly a White phenomenon. Yet, it is only recently that White conservative Christians have claimed sexual pleasure as part of their religious framework, and still many leaders and writers in this tradition avoid the topic. Evangelical purity culture, or the abstinence movement, offers one example of the push and pull of sexual temptations for White, straight believers (Irby 2013). Through groups and organizations led by mostly White Evangelicals, teens are encouraged to pledge to postpone sexual intercourse until marriage and have the opportunity to attend meet-ups and conferences to affirm their commitments and celebrate with fellow believers. Abstinence groups reify gender difference, framing teenage boys' sexual pursuits as inevitable and natural (if undesirable) and girls' sexual activities as shameful and permanently destructive—whether they choose them or not (Diefendorf 2015). These groups frame abstinence as an individual choice that teenagers can make, despite societal pressures to give into sexual temptation (Gardner 2011). Especially for women, US Evangelicals focus on the ways in which abstinence can be empowering—modesty as women's power against men and self-esteem a result of a high self-worth associated with sexual purity. This individualized empowerment narrative reflects a racialized sense of entitlement and agency available to Whites and paves the way for a White entitlement to sexual pleasure within marriage. Amidst stories about the repercussions and negative consequences of premarital sex, abstinence groups frame sex in marriage as both the goal of and reward for premarital chastity (*ibid.*).

Christian sex advice thrives as a market because sexual inhibitions and shame about desires for intimacy—once required to live a Godly life according to Christian beliefs—are hard to shed on or after the wedding day. Evangelical sex advice capitalizes on the paradox of these inhibitions as couples struggle to achieve the sexual pleasure they believe God wants for their marriages. For instance, Dinah, a White *BetweenTheSheets.com* member, says that before she became a Christian, she was sexually

“promiscuous,” participated in sex work, and suffered from low self-esteem. After she married, she was “born again” and learned God’s plan for marital sexuality, but her sex life continued to suffer. She remarked:

My poor husband was lucky if we had sex once every three months. I believe this was because when I was with my husband, I was plagued with memories I didn’t want. I felt that if I ever felt sexual, my husband would lose respect for me. I knew God created sex for enjoyment between husband and wife, but I couldn’t apply it to my life.

Dinah’s story reflects a White hetero-patriarchy that equates female and non-White bodies that are overtly sexual with a lack of respectability. The key for Dinah, who is White, is that she was able to overcome the shame she felt about her sinful past so she could have a successful sex life in marriage.

Online, what users call “sexual awakening stories” are well established in the vernacular of Christian sexuality websites. Like Evangelical salvation narratives or testimonies, they follow a distinct formula: a time of sin and suffering that is overcome by believing in God who has the power to transform believers’ sexual lives. *LustyChristianLadies.com*, a blog written by and for Christian women, offers an instructional blog post, “How to Have a Sexual Awakening,” that describes the experience as “a sudden revelation of God’s intention to have a richer sexual relationship with [one’s] husband.” Blogger Kitty describes the early years of her marriage when she had but a “minor interest in sex” and didn’t communicate about it with her husband. Then, “quite all of a sudden and surprisingly” she experienced a sexual awakening. She credits God with her transformation, and tells her readers that faithfulness is key to achieving sexual fulfillment:

The most practical thing you can do to change is to pray continually for God to change you. He is on your side. He wants your spouse to be free even more than you do. Ask him to make you who you need to be in order to be a blessing to your spouse. Do all that he leads you to do.

While placing change and transformation ultimately in the hands of a divine creator, Kitty also tells her readers to actively pray and that they

must *do* all that God leads them to do—for their husbands. Such public talk of sexuality, even behind the veil of Internet anonymity, would be unthinkable for many Black Christians, given the stigmatization of Black people on the basis of supposed sexual excess. This comparison reveals the Whiteness of these spaces, where Christians feel comfortable speaking openly and frankly about sexual pleasure.

For White women using Christian sex advice websites, sexual awakening stories, like salvation stories, deftly combine a sense of agency with submission to God and their husbands. As historian Virginia Brereton (1991) argues about salvation narratives, conversion requires an *actor*: someone who “accepts Christ” rather than “is accepted by Christ,” giving individuals responsibility for their own eternal fate. How White believers imagine themselves as actors, rather than acted upon, reflects a racialized history whereby they imagine possibilities and opportunities, rather than obstacles. When it comes to sexuality, White women can draw from this racial frame to imagine vast possibilities and overcome shame. Contrast this with Black LGBTQ Christians from Moon and Tobin’s study, who experienced pressures to truncate or compartmentalize their sexual agency in the pursuit of racial justice. Respectability’s extreme emphasis on moral perfection to counter racist stereotypes connects to a Black Church vision of a God who judges racists and other sinners harshly. The fierce liberator God who smites evildoers who perpetuate White supremacy, might just smite the Black person with same-gender attractions or feelings of gender difference for their betrayal of respectability. Under the weight of respectability and accountability to White hetero-patriarchal complementarity, racism works to stifle sexual agency and authenticity.

Christian sexuality websites present language that appears gender-equal but that still privileges White men’s sexual knowledge and experiences. Though formal rules about who is allowed to have and enjoy sex are no different for men or women, men who completed Burke’s survey were more likely than women to report multiple sexual partners and to masturbate. Online discussions on Christian sex advice websites often describe women’s sex appeal as something that women must *do* and men’s appeal as something that men *are*. For instance, LustyChristianLadies bloggers frame women’s sex appeal as something they can accomplish through the right clothes and accessories, asking readers

to respond to the “Fill in the Blank”: “I feel really sexy whenever I put on\_\_\_\_\_.” This is in contrast to the LustyChristianLadies “Fill in the Blank” asking about men’s sex appeal: “My husband doesn’t realize how sexy I find his\_\_\_\_\_.” Readers respond to these statements differently according to the prompts. For women, their sexiness comes from stiletto heels and miniskirts. For men, their sexiness comes from their broad shoulders, biceps, butts, or chests. Men’s bodies, by default, are what women describe as appealing, whereas women describe having to “put on” what makes them sexy. The patriarchal beliefs and practices of Evangelicalism shape how White men and women express sexual entitlement.

Driscoll’s writings and teachings offer an illuminating example of the pervasive but often invisible relationship between Whiteness, patriarchy, and sexual entitlement. He has gained celebrity status with a style that is simultaneously ultra-modern (technologically savvy and stylized), ultra-masculine, and ultra-conservative. For instance, in one sermon quoted in a *Christianity Today* article in 2008, Driscoll defines “real Christian men” as “dudes: heterosexual, win-a-fight, punch-you-in-the-nose dudes” (O’Brien 2008). *Real Marriage*, the sex advice book authored by Driscoll and his wife, tells couples to experiment sexually to find practices that optimize their pleasure, including oral or anal sex or sex toys. They interpret the Song of Solomon as biblical support for a range of sexual acts, including “kissing (1:2), oral/fellatio—her initiative (2:3), manual stimulation—her invitation (2:6), erotic striptease (6:13–7:9), and new places and positions, including outdoors—her initiative (7:11–13)” (Driscoll and Driscoll 2012, 171–172).

Though not without controversy (Driscoll resigned following a scandal at Mars Hills Church, which he founded), Driscoll’s writings resemble the messages presented in most twenty-first-century Christian sex advice forums. On the websites Burke studied, writers commonly referred to Hebrews 13:4 (King James Version): “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled.” The guidelines presented by most Evangelicals who write or talk about sex recognize the subjective nature of sexual desire and, therefore, leave open a vast space of permissible sex within Christian marriages. As popular author Kevin Leman (2002:165) writes, “The Bible is amazingly free in what it allows and even encourages a

married couple to do in bed.” Put another way, one reader of a popular blog, *LustyChristianLadies.com*, comments, “There are far more things that you *can* enjoy together, than those you cannot.”

This White Evangelical sexual logic has broad implications. Consider Driscoll, whose theology reflects a form of Calvinism known as Reformed Protestantism. For Driscoll and others who share this theology, God has chosen his elect to receive salvation and enter into heaven. The idea of “irresistible grace” means that people who have been chosen will come to know that they are chosen as they are guided to live a life of faithfulness and obedience. In other words, some are more worthy than others. Consider this theology alongside the nearly all-White audiences at the three conferences Burke attended, the White authors of Christian sex advice books, and the vast majority of White participants of Christian sex advice websites. Though implicit, the message is clear: It is a group of White, cis/heterosexual believers who share and celebrate the idea that God encourages their sexual pleasure and that God has ultimately chosen them, not others, to inherit the kingdom of God. This seems especially stark when we consider how gender complementarianism has historically rationalized White supremacy. As racism defines Black people in terms of sexual excess and deviance from gender complementarianism, it appears that not even Black married heterosexuals can speak publicly about “sexual awakenings” or the blessing of sexual pleasure, much less the links between sexual oppression and racial oppression (see Douglas 1999).

## Conclusion

As each chapter in this section of the book describes, examining the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality reveals how systems of power shape religious experiences. This chapter brings together two studies to showcase how race and racism remain central to the experiences of cis/heterosexual White Evangelicals and Black LGBTQ Protestants in the United States. In turn, it illustrates how religion is raced, even and especially for those who appear racially invisible in America’s racial system. While sexual sin (and thus experiences of sexual shame) affect both Black and White Evangelicals, the potential to overcome or disrupt

sexual shame is shaped by alignment with White hetero-patriarchal norms. This is why conservative Protestants may celebrate White, cis-gender, heterosexual, married Christians' (particularly husbands') sexual desires, curiosity, and adventurousness, while stigmatizing and marginalizing LGBTQI experiences and relationships. This stigma is especially persistent for Black LGBTQ Protestants who face constraints of racist stereotypes about their sexuality and pressures of "respectability" within their church communities.

Scholars who study Whiteness focus on its supposed racial unmarkedness and neutrality, the privileges it accrues, and the way people treat it as the standard from which others deviate (Desmond and Emirbayer 2009; Feagin 2010). We add to these definitions that even for many Christians who hold conservative beliefs about sexuality, Whiteness includes a sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure, particularly for White men. For these groups, sexual pleasure can be not just acceptable, but pleasing to God. Compared to White heterosexuals, Black heterosexual life appears remarkably devoid of entitlement even from the standpoint of Black LGBTQ people, and any Christian who defies the White complementarian narrative, however unintentionally, is cast as sinful and shameful. The same interlocking systems of power also shape the routes available to acceptance of oneself as a whole person—with unique experiences of sexuality, race, and gender. By examining the social context of these Christian discussions about sexuality, we can observe how conservative Protestantism is both product and producer of White supremacy.

#### NOTES

- 1 While it is possible to be conservative in some ways and still support LGBTQI identities, same-sex marriage, and gender transitions, here we use "conservative Protestant" as a broad umbrella for Protestant religious traditions that support essentialist gender/sexual ideals, including many Black Protestant and predominantly White fundamentalist, Evangelical, and conservative mainline churches.
- 2 Respondents referred to by first name only are given pseudonyms. We also refer to Christian sex advice websites pseudonymously to protect the privacy of users.
- 3 Other racialized/oppressed groups have their own histories of racism and sexual stereotyping, which may share some features with the oppression of Black people. The movement studied is often referred to as LGBTQI, but we do not draw from

the experiences of intersex African Americans and cannot make claims about their experiences here. We therefore use LGBTQ to reference the identities of our study's participants.

- 4 Cisgender refers to people who agree with the sex category they were assigned at birth; i.e., not transgender. We also use "cis" as a common shorthand (e.g., cis/heterosexual).

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