

Tales from the Crypt: A Same Gender Loving (SGL) Reading of Mark 5:1-20 – Backwards

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Abstract

This article presents an interpretation of Mark 5:1-20 employing the method of reading backwards, a narrative technique introduced by Randall C. Bailey. It foregrounds the lived experiences of same gender loving (SGL) people of African descent, naming hegemony, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy among the legion of the unclean spirits of Empire which must be exorcised. I argue that once the man is clothed and restored to his right mind (5:15), he is redeployed by Jesus not only to proclaim what the Lord has done, but he also has the obligation to tell the stories of those who do not survive (or choose to remain in) their own caves as a result of Empire. I do so from the lens of my SGL lived experience which emerges from the intersection of African American, Queer, and Postcolonial biblical interpretation.

Many Thousands Gone

The late African American activist and essayist Essex Hemphill wrote, “I speak for the thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of men who live and die in the shadows of secrets, unable to speak of the love that helps them endure and contribute to the race.”² This article employs the concept of Reading Backwards – a narrative technique introduced by Randall C. Bailey³ – to read Mark 5:1-20 on behalf of the communities Hemphill is speaking of; communities in which I am part of in the U.S., and in solidarity with around the world. In response to the challenge presented by Bailey, Vincent Wimbush and others that African American biblical interpreters should foreground our lived experiences when

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² Essex Hemphill, “Ceremonies,” quoted in Dwight A. McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 35.

³ Randall C. Bailey, “Reading Backwards: A Narrative Technique for the Queering of David, Saul, and Samuel” in *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon*, eds. Tod Linafelt, Timothy Beal, & Claudia V. Camp (London, UK: T&T Clark International, 2010) 66-84.

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approaching the text,⁴ I read the character of the man who had the legion as a case study representing the experiences of many same gender loving (SGL)⁵ people in the U.S. and throughout African diasporas.⁶ Contrary to the hegemonic, neo-colonial, and ecclesial practices of power that would ignore, erase, and disqualify us, I propose that Black SGL people of faith are called to be disciples and are therefore part of the “beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ (1:1).” Furthermore, I suggest the man who had the legion demonstrates that challenges of exile, (un)belonging, and home are particularly situated among the existential concerns of Africana subjects in general, and Black SGL folks in particular. I argue that the man’s story teaches SGL and other marginalized disciples that our responsibility as we “proclaim how much the Lord has done... (5:19)” is to also tell the stories of those who did not survive life (or who chose to remain) in the tombs, and to tell them in ways that do not reinscribe the influence of Empire. My method of approach to this task is borrowed from Randall C. Bailey’s narrative criticism technique of Reading Backwards.

Bailey introduces his essay by calling attention to the fact that all interpreters of biblical texts bring our own biases and meaning-making strategies along with us. He writes that we all “come to texts with personal, cultural, gender, sexual, class, and race understandings and questions.”⁷ Historically, the understandings and questions of SGL

⁴ See e.g.: Randall C. Bailey, “The Danger of Ignoring One’s Own Cultural Bias in Interpreting the Text” in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (London: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988) 66-90; Vincent L. Wimbush, “Interrupting the Spin: What Might Happen in African Americans Were to Become the Starting Point for the Academic Study of the Bible,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, 52 nos. 1-2 (1998) 61-76.

⁵ Same/similar gender loving or SGL in this context is associated with the work of Black activist Cleo Manago in the 1990’s. It is a culturally affirming identity that decenters the concept of a white, male, middle-class, Western world subject as the starting point for every day queer experience. This definition is multiply articulated by contemporary SGL scholars and activists who add to, contest, and elaborate upon it. See <http://www.bmxnational.org/what-is-bmx/> (accessed August 31, 2015).

⁶ I use diasporas in the plural to include movements to and from the Caribbean, the Americas, and Europe by people of African descent (i.e. the Jamaican diaspora), as well as for those subjects whose circumstances prevent travel.

⁷ Bailey, “Reading Backwards,” 66. Furthermore, he writes, “It appears that we have all been trained, reared, developed with the notion that either the Bible is

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people have been denied, ignored, and/or limited to and disqualified by other people's stances of "what the Bible says" about homosexuals. As such, some SGL people have jammed the round pegs of their experiences into the square holes of their heteronormative Christian communities in order to "stay in the club, even when the cost of doing so is internalized oppression."⁸ This essay is an exercise of resistance to those assumptions and other limitations that prevent SGL and other marginalized voices to be heard. I assume the risk of reading differently – Backwards.

Reading Backwards, according to Randall C. Bailey, is noticing that the narrator has embedded clues to deeper meanings within the text of a character as her or his trajectory advances the plot. The data in the text is supplied as if to say, "Oh yes, and by the way..." Because this deeper data can be shocking and even embarrassing, the reader reads on, not backtracking to explore the implications of the data. Rather than ignoring this information, Bailey suggests "the reader should stop, retreat, and reevaluate the implications of the data in order to get a fresh look on what is being said, especially as regards what has previously been stated in the text."⁹ As is idiosyncratically Bailey, cues in the text are illuminated to demonstrate possible homoerotic undertones embedded within. Thus, he invites us into the David-Saul-Jonathan *ménage a trois*, complete with naked and frenzied prophets, under the gaze of a voyeuristic YHWH. Bailey's investigation of the Hebrew shores *hps* in the contexts of Esther 2:14 and 1 Samuel leads him to the conclusion that "...in Reading Backwards, one sees that there is more evidence for the claim of a homoerotic reading to the engagement between David and Saul around the bride price of Philistine foreskins. Taking the baton (as it were) from Bailey, I see his homoerotic reading and raise an argument that through Africana queer hermeneutics, a resistant reading of the man in Mark 5:1-20 can be advanced.

I construct Africana queer hermeneutics beginning with my lived experience as a Bronx-born Black same gender loving man; seminary trained and midway through a progressive New Testament and Early Christianity PhD program, with commitments to the Church, and invested in the liberation, transformation, and wholeness of people of

against same gender sex or that there are only six passages in the text which speak to some form of same-gender sex and they have been misinterpreted." Ibid, 69.

⁸ Ibid. 70.

⁹ Bailey, "Reading Backwards," 72.

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African descent – particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people of African descent. As such, my approach to biblical texts is informed by and rooted in African American, LGBTQ, and postcolonial biblical hermeneutics. In the traditions of these aforementioned approaches to biblical interpretation, I see real lives as a basis from which to inform the making of meaning in biblical texts. Lived experiences assist interpreters to explore the ideological, political, and spiritual implications in the multiple meanings that can arise from the texts.

Pamela Lightsey's term *bhomophobia* (the h is silent) is useful in this reading to describe the multiple and particular forms of harm, hatred, and hypocrisy Black heterosexuals have for Black homosexuals.¹⁰ The particular intra-racial homophobia performed by Blacks and Latinos on their own people is blhomophobia. Heeding Emilie Townes's call to be "expansive in our particularities,"¹¹ I am thinking not only from my standpoint as a Black SGL man from New York, I am thinking of my SGL and transgender sisters and brothers on the African continent, in the Caribbean, and throughout the African diaspora for whom even the suspicion of non-heteronormativity warrants corrective rape, physical violence and even death. These issues are among the factors that comprise the legion of unclean spirits possessing SGL people today – sadly, at the hands of our communities of origin. This issue brings us to the intersection of African American, queer, and postcolonial interpretive concerns in biblical interpretation.

Following Stephen D. Moore's postcolonial reading of Mark 5:1-20, I am identifying Jesus' command to "go home" (5:19) as a hermeneutical key with which to think about the man who had the legion in a different way.¹² In other words, Reading Backwards from 5:19

¹⁰ Pamela Lightsey, "Inner Dictum: a Womanist Reflection from the Queer Realm," in *Black Theology: An International Journal*, Volume 10 Issue 3, (November, 2012): 339-349.

¹¹ Emilie Townes, "The Dancing Mind: Queer Black Bodies and Activism in Academy and Church," 2011 Gilberto Castañeda Lecture. Chicago Theological Seminary, April 28, 2011. <http://vimeo.com/24032682#at=0> (accessed September 16, 2013).

¹² In common with other scholars, Moore identifies Mark 5:9 where the demons say "my name is Legion..." as a hermeneutical key by which to recognize colonial occupation in the text, and as a means for a postcolonial reading of the

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allows me to critique the imperial effects of colonialism *vis a vis* Black nationalistic homophobia as an opportunity for Africana queer radical subjectivity. My reading resists reaching an overly simplistic conclusion that *Jesus saved the possessed crazy man and now he's better*, without closer scrutiny of the circumstances that made him a “caved” man – a living person in a dead place. This man serves a unique role in Mark’s gospel, which can be read as an allegory for the lived experiences of many Black SGL folks.¹³ While several postcolonial and empire critical readings of Mark 5:1-20 ably expose the Markan polemic against Roman Empire with satirical significations of its soldiers (the legion), I want to add that underneath the imperial polemic of the text is a man who has endured a number of traumas sanctioned not only by Empire but also by those complicit with it – his home community, host community, or both. As Musa Dube states, “Postcolonial theories show that these struggles are usually not only between the colonizer and the colonized but also between various interest groups of the latter, which try to gain power to define the national cultural identity of the colonized.”¹⁴ Putting it another way, Black U.S. and postcolonial masculinity is constructed in a manner that in defying white colonial masculinity, justifies the subordination of Black women, and the evisceration of SGL and queer folks.¹⁵

Noting the ease with which interpretations focusing only on liberation might set up the oppressed to become the new oppressors, attention must be paid to how biblical texts themselves might be complicit with Empire by simply replacing Jesus and the reign of God with the emperor and the Roman Empire. The limitations of liberation hermeneutics for postcolonial biblical interpretations are associated with

pericope. See Stephen D. Moore, “My Name is Legion, For We Are Many: Representing Empire in Mark” in *Empire and Apocalypse*, 24-44.

¹³ Ibid, 27.

¹⁴ Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis, MO: Chaltee Press, 2000) 127.

¹⁵ See Amy Agabu Ongiri, “We are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination,” *College Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Queer Utilities: Textual Studies, Theory, Pedagogy, Praxis (1997): 280-294; 281 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25099642> (Accessed June 24, 2015). Also see Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

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arguments proposed by R.S. Sugirtharajah among other scholars.¹⁶ “Liberation hermeneutics,” for Sugirtharajah, is largely prevented by its Christian presuppositions and investments from seeing the Bible as at once a source of emancipation and a source of oppression, and from respecting truth claims of other religious traditions, even when those traditions are the characteristic religious expressions of the poor; while it conceives of oppression in turn in terms that are too exclusively economic, neglecting other forms of it based on gender, sexuality, or race/ethnicity.”¹⁷

Taking this critique seriously, I problematize the stigmatization of the text which neither provides nor restores the man’s actual name, and with the demonization of SGL people by “concerned” church and family members who think they’re doing God’s will by (r)ecting their children. These problems reveal the interpretive potential of the Mark 5:1-20 narrative to be as oppressive as it can be a source of emancipation. The difference lies in what changes we make in our communities as a result of our interpretations. SGL people throughout the African diasporas have had to create numerous strategies to subvert, resist, and endure the surveillance of our oppressors – particularly when the oppressors in question are our own communities of origin. Techniques of resistance and flourishing include but are not limited to the agency to confront our perpetrators, reclaim the sacredness of our bodies, speak our truths, and participate in our own sense of justice, wholeness, and well-being. We will practice these techniques without recourse to an Other’s permission, understanding, or tolerance.

Notes of a Native Son

In the narrative of Mark 5:1-20, Jesus intervenes in the trauma of a tormented man living among the tombs in the countryside of the

¹⁶ See for example Tat-siong Benny Liew, “Tyranny, Boundary, Might: Colonial Mimicry in Mark’s Gospel,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Vol. 21, No. 73 (1999) 7-31 and Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*.

¹⁷ R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Bible and the Third World*, pp. 203-75, as summarized by Stephen D. Moore, “And So We Came to Rome: Mapping Postcolonial Biblical Criticism” in *Empire and Apocalypse*, 3-23; quote on 16. Also see *ibid*, footnote 44.

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Gerasenes by freeing him of his demonic possession. The man has been living among the tombs, unsuccessfully restrained by those who would bind him, and harming himself as a result of the unclean spirits that controlled him (vv. 1-6). The unclean spirits beg Jesus not to torment them as Jesus commands them to come out of the man (vv. 7-10). Rather than to be sent out of the country, the demons request to enter into a great herd of swine which were feeding in the distance (vv. 11-12). The demons rush into the swine causing the herd to cast themselves into the sea. The drama of the scene signals to the audience that the power of God is greater than the power of Satan (in the form of the Roman Empire), and that just as the Israelites were saved from the armies of Pharaoh, so will the followers of Jesus be saved from the legions of Rome (5:13). The swine herders and townspeople, upon seeing the man who had the legion sane, clothed, and in his right mind, become afraid and ask Jesus to leave their area (vv. 14-17). The man asks to accompany Jesus and the disciples (who are mute witnesses to the action), but instead Jesus commands him to go home and tell his friends what the Lord has done and what mercy he has shown. The man goes into the Decapolis proclaiming, and everyone is amazed (vv. 18-20).

This scene is an example of Jesus' power over unclean spirits (symbolized by the Roman legion), and is categorized as one of the miracle/healings of Jesus.¹⁸ The man's story can be read as a narrative of liberation because Jesus frees him of his demons, redeeming him to tell a story of deliverance. In the gospel of Mark he is among the first to preach the gospel besides Jesus.¹⁹ Throughout the ages, many who read the story of the man with the legion are programmed to say "thanks be to God" and continue on to the next story in the gospel text.

Taking note of the command to "go home to your people (*hypage eis ton oikon sou pros tous sous*; 5:19)" sparks a Bailey-like "aha" moment that helps attentive readers recognize that even though the narrator introduces him as a man who had a dwelling in the tombs (*hos*

¹⁸ Adela Yarbo Collins, *Mark: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007) 265; Ben Witherington, III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001) 178; Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: a Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 186-94.

¹⁹Tat-siong Benny Liew, "The Gospel of Mark" in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 112.

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tēn katoikēsiv exein en tois mnēmasin; 5:3), the tombs themselves are not his home. After the dramatic exorcism he does not return to the place where we first encounter him. Many readers fail to register this fact because the conflict has been resolved and Jesus' authority has again been established. The concluding result that "everyone was amazed" (*kai pantes ethoumazon*; 5:20) once the man goes to preach in the Decapolis lets us know that his future is bright. We are ready to get back in the boat with Jesus and the silent disciples while the man goes to find his friends at home.

Home is a contested site for many SGL people, especially those who are forced out of their homes. *There are many of us* who heard "no son of mine will be a faggot" or "I don't want a dyke for a daughter, get out!" *Many of us* have been made into social pariahs by our families, our churches, and our communities with the result of home becoming a four-letter word for us. In New Kingston, Jamaica, a group of homeless LGBT youth created make-shift homes in the city's sewer system, prompting outrage from gay activists and legal intervention.²⁰ According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, of the approximately 1.7 million homeless youth in the U.S., as many as 40% of them identify as LGBTQ.²¹ An estimated 65% of LGBTQ homeless youth (approximately 330,000) are people of color.²² Emily Bridges reports that the combination of racism and homophobia leads to negative sexual outcomes.²³ A common solution for (r)jected youth is to relocate to a major city (i.e. New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.) away from smaller towns in order to find communities of support. Some remain where they are on the margins, and learn to deal with the abuse from community and congregation. Even fewer make and maintain new kinship bonds in the Black gay house ballroom community infamously

²⁰ J. Lester Feder, "Why Some LGBT Youths in Jamaica Are Forced to Call a Sewer Home," *BuzzFeed News*, December 18, 2013 <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lesterfeder/how-jamaicas-sodomy-laws-drive-gay-teens-into-the-sewers-of#.cqJR8qO5P> (accessed July 21, 2015).

²¹ National Coalition for the Homeless, "LGBT Homelessness," <http://nationalhomeless.org/issues/lgbt/> Accessed July 6, 2015.

²² Emily Bridges, "The Impact of Homophobia and Racism on GLBTQ People of Color," June 2007/ http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/documents/ImpactofHomophobiaandRacism_000.pdf. Accessed July 6, 2015.

²³ *Ibid.*

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depicted in Jennie Livingston's documentary "Paris is Burning,"²⁴ and ethnographically chronicled by Edgar Rivera Colón and Marlon M. Bailey.²⁵ Black and Latino/a "house families" become families of choice that replace families of origin.

A contemporary heteronormative reading through African American experience might suggest that the demons to be exorcised should be demons of homosexuality. Perhaps if the SGL man left his "gay lifestyle" in the tomb, or let it die with the swine, he would be welcomed back home with open arms. I am arguing something different. In my Black SGL experience, the unclean spirits of hegemony, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy practiced against SGL people *in the name of Jesus* are the demons to be exorcised. A socio-theological stance that names "homosexuality demons" is an example of Western colonial and Christian missionary practices of patriarchy, misogyny, and homophobia which have been mimicked by postcolonial (and post Emancipation) subjects throughout the African diasporas. The problem of homophobia has contributed to the divisiveness of U.S. African American communities, as well as violence against the sexually marginalized throughout the Caribbean, in several African countries, and in other parts of the world where Africana queer subjects are dispersed. For Christian believers this colonial mimicry subsequently makes a mockery of contemporary constructions of the gospel of Jesus Christ - constructions which are allegedly liberating for all who teach, preach, and follow them. As Mark 5:1-20 indicates, those unclean hegemonic spirits need to be exorcised.

The (r)jection of SGL people from their communities of faith in the U.S. has been explored in monographs by Gary David Comstock and Horace L. Griffin respectively.²⁶ Some SGL persons insist on remaining

²⁴ Jennie Livingston, "Paris is Burning" DVD (Miramax Films, 1990).

²⁵ Edgar Rivera Colón, *Getting Life in Two Worlds: Power and Prevention in the New York City House Ball Community*, PhD dissertation (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2009); Marlon M. Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit* (Detroit, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

²⁶ See Gary David Comstock, *A Whosoever Church: Welcoming Lesbians and Gay Men into African American Congregations* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); and Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2006).

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in hostile religious environments. E. Patrick Johnson notes three basic responses from Black gay men born and raised in the U.S. south on why they remain in homophobic Black churches. The first is a psychological separation of the homophobic message from the physical space, preferring to focus on their individual relationship with God rather than with the preacher and/or other authority figures. The second is acceptance of homosexuality as a “sin” along with drinking, adultery, cheating, and stealing. The third is a hope by those who have not reconciled their sexuality with their spirituality that God will take their homosexuality away.²⁷ Joseph Beam illustrates SGL alienation from home in this way:

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or I am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts me deeply.²⁸

At the intersection of Africana and LGBT contexts, home can be a site of double non-belonging for Black SGL people. “The very concept of diaspora has been extracted from peoples' lived experiences and then molded into metaphors for alienation, outsidersness, home, and various binary relationships such as alien/native.”²⁹ Exile-at-home from Black communities (including Africa and the African-Latino/a-Caribbean diasporas) and white gay communities (particularly at the barriers of race, class, and political priorities) leaves SGL people of color in a

²⁷ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2008) 182-184.

²⁸ Joseph F. Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart” in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph F. Beam (Boston, MA: Alyson Publications, 1986) 230-242; quote on 231.

²⁹ Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, “Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World,” *African Studies Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, Special Issue on the Diaspora (2000): 11-45; quote on 20.

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constant state of homelessness at home. It is a state of un-belonging among our own kinfolk.³⁰

The man with the legion might have had to seek an alternate dwelling in the tombs of Gerasa because of rejection by his community. Considering this possibility we might imagine that prior to his appearance in 5:1, something so significant happened (we can assume it was his demonic possession), that he was forced out of his community of origin into the land of the Gerasenes. If this is the case, we can also imagine the situation of the man's invasion by unclean spirits to be even more substantial than those of the man in the synagogue (1:23-27), the possessed Galileans (1:32-34), the Syrophenecian woman's daughter (7:24-30), and the boy with a spirit (9:14-29). All of these victims of demonic possession were restored in the physical place and with the social support of their respective communities. In Mark 1, members of the community participated in seeking out the wholeness of those under demonic attack in their care. In the latter two cases, parents – a mother and a father – appealed to Jesus on behalf of their children (7:24-30; 9:14-29). There is something different about the man who had the legion. He has no community to advocate for him. Randall C. Bailey helps us to see that in the command to go home (5:19) the implied author was communicating to us “and by the way, the tombs aren't where the man's story begins.” In this context, let us Read Backwards.

Going to Meet the Man

In the previous chapter, after Jesus was teaching with many parables (4:1-34), and before the calming of the sea episode (4:35-41), he told the disciples “let us go across to the other side (*dielhōmen eis to peran*; 4:35).” When we meet the man in Mark 5:1-20, we learn that he lived among the tombs on the other side, or as Manuel Villalobos Mendoza demonstrates, *del otro lado*.³¹ It seems clear that at the level

³⁰ Cf. the “outsider within status” of Black lesbians. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991) 192-196. Also, Cheryl Clarke, “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community” in *Homegirls: a Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith, 197-208 (New York, NY: Kitchen Table-Women of Color Press, 1983).

³¹ Manuel Villalobos Mendoza, *Abject Bodies in the Gospel of Mark* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012) 2 ff. Here, *del otro lado* means both “to the

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of Markan narrative, Jesus's mission was specifically to meet the man who had the legion.

Mendoza, reading Mark's gospel through his Mexican queer experience tells us that *del otro lado* was a pejorative term for a certain kind of homosexual. To be *del otro lado* means "not [only] gay, but *pobre, puto y pendejo*."³² His misery and ordinariness do not fulfill the conditions to have a livable life [Judith] Butler uses the term 'abjection' to refer to those legions of bodies that are not subjects and are deemed 'unlivable.'³³ From Mendoza's experience, to be called gay was a *step up* from being called *del otro lado*! Bihomophobia represents a rehearsal of abjection by outside agents onto SGL people that repeats and reinforces that they are less than – in churches, in communities, and in culture. These are the demons faced by *many of us*. By engaging in *disidentification*,³⁴ we can re-contextualize that the motive of Jesus's travel from Galilee to the country of the Gerasenes was this: *por causa de un hombre del otro lado, Jesús se fue del otro lado* (for/because of a queer man Jesus went to the other side). Or, we can join in the chorus as Donnie McClurkin sings, "Just for me, just for me, Jesus came and did it just for me..."³⁵ The gospels report many instances in which on the narrative level, Jesus' attempts to get away from the crowds for his own self-care result in encounters in which he teaches or heals.³⁶ In the case of Mark 5, once the conflict with the man's demons was resolved, Jesus went back to the other side to be intercepted by Jairus, the crowds, and the hemorrhaging woman (5:21-43). The concept of Jesus who "knows all about our struggles" is fitting, given that the experiences of many SGL persons are fraught with abuse and rejection by those closest to them. André St. Clair Thompson relates this memory:

other side" and a pejorative term for homosexual (which has varying related definitions throughout the U.S., the Spanish-speaking Caribbean and Latin America).

³² Ibid, 24-25. I translate this term as "poor, unmanly, and worthless." The colloquial meaning is much terser and culturally insulting.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, Cultural Studies of the Americas (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

³⁵ John C. Popper, "Just for Me" (cf. Donnie Mc Clurkin, "Live in London" audio recording), Universal Music Publishing, 2000.

³⁶ E.g. Matt 19:1.

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It became difficult for me to form friendships, but what had affected me most were my developing feelings of attraction to boys that I tried to hide. What I could not hide, however, was my effeminate nature... To a group of boys in my school and my neighborhood (in East New York, Brooklyn) I was a ‘batty boy’ that needed to be shot, as Buju (Banton) himself had urged in [his song] ‘Boom Bye Bye (in a Batty Boy Head)...’ I am gay, Daddy. Translated from his Jamaican patois into English, what he said to me in response was this: ‘If you were still in Jamaica, I would have somebody kill you, you see, boy.’ My father disowned me and told me not to step foot back in his house ever again.³⁷

This is an example of how *many of us* have been demonized by our own families. These are the kinds of experiences that make the abject(ed) and reject(ed) act out, and self-soothe by bruising themselves with stones. What other response is there after having your own father threaten your life? The “stones” many SGL persons choose can include drugs, alcohol, and other substances; as well as anonymous and unprotected sex which may or may not include sexual trafficking. Some people upon learning of their HIV positive status refuse to seek medical treatment because they have internalized messages that say that their condition is God’s punishment. Internalized bhomophobia is another demonic effect that sends its victims out of community, to become living people in dead places (5:2-3); “caved” by messages from their own society. There were people either from the man’s home community or from his host community (or both) invested in keeping him “caved” and chained in his circumstances (5:2-4). Just as the Roman imperial forces took steps to keep colonial subjects in their place and in compliance with the status quo, there are neocolonial forces that implement societal norms to keep people in line with the respectability politics established by the community. The ancient man with the legion and his contemporary

³⁷André St. Clair Thompson, “Many Rivers to Cross” in *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, Coming Home*, ed. Keith Boykin, 229-240 (New York, NY: Magnus Books, 2012). Quote from 231, 238.

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queer cohort are fine, as long as they stay in their place – on the other side.³⁸

The Devil Finds Work

It would seem that the presence of the demonized man on the countryside of the Gerasanses somehow contributed to the harmony and economy of the area. There is a connection between his demonic, self-harming state and the normativity of the swine herding community (cf. drug corners, liquor stores, and underground sex clubs in most cities). In Gerasa the man learned a mode of un-living that would help him survive his circumstances: howling and breaking chains, and displaying his strength. As Keith Clark states, “black maleness and thereby black male subjectivity are circumscribed by a type of hypermasculine ethos and performance, engendered by America’s historical demonization of black men and some men’s attendant internalizing of that demonization.”³⁹ This “demon performance” becomes the man with the legion’s new persona, his *lived un-livability*, and he learns to use his body as currency for food, shelter, and attention.⁴⁰

Warren Carter in a recent essay argues that a gender reversal takes place when the legion of demons submit (unman themselves) to Jesus’s hegemonic authority by kneeling before him. They recognize him as their new commander by adjuring him not to send them out of the territory; requesting to enter the pigs instead.⁴¹ Carter, as many empire-critical and postcolonial scholars do, notes how the implied author of Mark signifies upon the Roman Empire by mocking its source of strength – its military. Thus, according to Carter, while verbs like “I send” (*apostellō*; 5:10), “to permit;” “to dismiss” (*epitrepein*; 5:13); and “I put in motion;” and “I charge” (*ormaō*, 5:13) have multiple meanings,

³⁸ An argument to the contrary might suggest that if he was not a sexual deviant he would not be in this circumstance. To this stance I suggest that sexual deviance is defined by the oppressor.

³⁹ Keith Clark, *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, (Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.

⁴⁰ Cf. “Homo-thug” personas in African American, Latino, and LGBTQ popular culture.

⁴¹ Warren Carter, “Cross-Gendered Romans and Mark’s Jesus: Legion Enters the Pigs (Mark 5:1–20),” *Journal of Biblical Literature* Vol. 134 no. 1 (2015):139-155.

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the military context would not be lost on the ancient audience – especially with a demoniac named Legion. As such, the request of the unclean spirits to “enter into” (*eiserchomai*) the pigs has both military and sexual meanings in the LXX as well as in Greco-Roman literature.⁴² Armies *enter into* foreign lands to conquer them upon command.⁴³ “The verb [*eiserchomai*] appears in contexts of forcible sexual penetration, situations that contemporary readers would identify as ‘rape’ in which a woman’s consent is absent. Forcible penetration (rape) is, of course, a long-practiced tactic of occupying armies in humiliating women and subjugating an enemy.”⁴⁴

The noun “pig” in Greek in addition to being an animal associated with the Roman army (the boar) is also a euphemism for female genitalia. Carter suggests that the implied audience of Mark’s gospel would also understand the mockery in the idea that Jesus sent the Roman army to “go fuck itself.” However, through my Africana queer experience, I connect the request of the unclean spirits to engage in militaristic rape in the ancient context with my contemporary lesbian sisters in South Africa and elsewhere in the African continent; threatened by the trope of curative/corrective rape by their own kinsfolk and countrymen. In wresting with the realities of sexual violence towards women, Zethu Matebemi argues that South African lesbians are in a “complex and difficult position:” while activists employ the term curative/corrective rape as a trope to create awareness around the problem of violence towards lesbians, it also limits them as “special victims” who are located outside of the wider gender, class, sexuality and racial struggles of social justice.⁴⁵ It also calls to mind the opportunistic practice of sexual predators of youth (females and males) in African American and Caribbean communities; those who use their power and authority (not always their sexual orientation) to sexually seize (*to possess*) the bodies of their victims. In other words, some “straight” identified men violate “straight” identified men because they have the

⁴² Ibid, 150.

⁴³ Ibid. 149, n41.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Zethu Matebemi, “Deconstructing Violence Towards Black Lesbians in South Africa,” in *Queer African Reader*, eds. Sokari Ekine and Hakima Abbas (Fahamu, KE: Pambazuka Press, 2013) 344-347.

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power, influence, or authority to do so.⁴⁶ This practice remains taboo to discuss, especially among Christian male heterosexuals, leaving victims to manage their internal demons of hegemony, homophobia, and hypocrisy, in tombs of their own making.

The people upon seeing the spectacle of the herd rushing to its death ran to tell the others in the city and the country (5:14). When Jesus makes it so that he is clothed and in his right mind (5:15), they became afraid (*ephobēthēsan*). In contrast, when he is sent by Jesus to preach in the Decapolis, everyone became amazed (*ethaumazon*). Apparently, when the man was naked and crazy, the people were annoyed but unafraid. What is it that causes fear when Black and Latino queer men are clothed and in their right mind? We are *visibly invisible* unless we are entertaining (i.e. leading praise and worship), and if we act outside of the norms of public space we are *caved*. It is this state of fragmented identity and agency that SGL persons manage daily, which we ironically share with our heterosexual brothers. Fragmented identity caused Ralph Ellison to feel like an *Invisible Man*, and E. Lynn Harris to live *Invisible Lives*. When the man in the cave was the Other, the society was fine. When he became just as “normal” as they were, clothed and in his right mind, it caused a trauma that made them ask Jesus to leave. The man became visible to them, and they could not deal with it.

Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son

Jesus redeploys the man (now clothed and in his right mind) to preach what the Lord has done and what mercy he has shown (5:19), however he will always be referred to as “Legion the demoniac.” This is an existential problem shared by marginalized people. When and where they enter, then and there, all of their former demons enter with them.⁴⁷ Even in the moment of his liberation, the narrator refers to him as “the man who had the legion.” Most liberation, empire-critical, and postcolonial interpretations of Mark 5:1-20 miss or explicitly ignore that this is a man who once was someone’s son; particularly in context to the

⁴⁶ Cf. actions of certain military, police officers [Amadou Diallo], and Christian ministers. These actions are exceptional, but they do happen. See Will Storr, “The Rape of Men: The Darkest Secret of War” in *The Guardian*, July 16, 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2011/jul/17/the-rape-of-men> (accessed September 6, 2015).

⁴⁷ Paraphrased from a statement by Anna Julia Cooper, 1892.

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other demoniacs healed in community in the gospel of Mark. He is our son. He is a man who was once part of a kinship group, and African-centered tenets of sociability dictate that he should be remembered. Adela Yarbro Collins calls attention to the synonyms used in 5:2-3: *mnēmeiov* (monument, memorial/grave, tomb) and *mnēma* (sign of remembrance/grave, tomb). While Collins surmises the implied author used similar words “for the sake of variety,” I suggest the man’s release from the tombs give us cause to remember the ones buried there – the ones who did not make it out.⁴⁸ James Baldwin writes, “It took many years of vomiting up all the filth I’d been taught about myself, and half-believed, before I was able to walk on the earth as though I had a right to be here.”⁴⁹ Taking the psycho-socio-spiritual steps to live *livable* lives includes but is not limited to claiming the agency to share our stories, confront our perpetrators, reclaim our bodies, speak our truths, and participate in our own sense of justice, wholeness and well-being – on our terms. We have the responsibility to re-write ourselves into histories that ignore and erase us, mindful that there are still *many of us* living in caves and dead places in African diasporas and throughout the world.

The Price of the Ticket

Returning to the issue raised by R. S. Sugirtharajah that liberation-based interpretations have the potential both for emancipation and oppression, on one hand, the man clothed in his right mind can proclaim “My story proves that God can use me. Deliverance is my testimony. You don’t know... my story!”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the possibility exists that the now liberated man can become the future oppressor of others. He could mimic the messages he learned and use them to demonize others, now that he has been *delivert*.⁵¹ If he does not

⁴⁸ Collins, *Mark*, 267.

⁴⁹ James Baldwin, “They Can’t Turn Back” in *The Price of the Ticket: Collected Non-Fiction 1948-1985* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985) 215-228; quote on 227.

⁵⁰ John P. Kee, “Life & Favor (You Don’t Know My Story),” *Life and Favor*, Kee Music Group, ASIN: B008N9AAZK, 2012, compact disc.

⁵¹ Yesha Callahan, “Man at COGIC Convention: ‘I’m Not Gay No More; I Like Women, Women, Women,’” *TheRoot.com*, November 12, 2014, http://www.theroot.com/blogs/the_grapevine/2014/11/man_at_cogic_convention

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connect his freedom to working to improve the plight of others who are not yet free, he becomes almost the same yet not quite like those who sent him to the cave in the first place. Therefore through an Africana queer context, the hope is that the man's transformation and wholeness under Jesus' deployment gives him courage to cast out the unclean spirits of hegemony, homophobia, and hypocrisy in others (cf. 6:7-13). The man's narrative calls the community of Christ followers to repent of the sins of (r)ejection and homophobia, and believe the gospel of release from our individual and collective tombs (cf. 1:15; 5:1-20; 16:5-6).⁵²

As we celebrate the man's individual liberation we must also re-evaluate the fact that in his intervention on the other side Jesus did nothing to change the social circumstances that sent the man to the cave in the first place. Healing and miracle gospel narratives if not closely reflected upon can construct characterizations of a Jesus who intercedes to make people "normal" to fit into an able-bodied heteronormative society – rather than a Jesus (or a God) that says "shame on the society for marginalizing their own people and strangers." This is an important consideration for those of us claiming allegiances with marginalized communities. As interpreters, sometimes we must manage our ambivalence with these characterizations by naming the injustice to the marginalized and reconstruct more just acts of the deity *in spite* of the text. Ultimately, we all must answer the questions: where is *home after homelessness* for people who have overcome their demons? When will so-called disciples take the authority in the text given by Jesus Christ to exorcise unclean spirits instead of being megaphones for the hetero-patriarchal Empire? How will African American Christians live into the hashtag that Black lives matter that includes SGL and transgender lives, especially considering the queer leadership in the movement?⁵³

[i_m_not_gay_no_more_i_like_women_women_women.html](#) (Accessed July 11, 2015).

⁵² See Darnell L. Moore and Nyle Fort, "An Open Letter to the Church: Homosexuality Isn't a Sin but Homophobia Is," *The Root*, July 24, 2015 http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2015/07/an_open_letter_to_the_church_homosexuality_isn_t_a_sin_but_homophobia_is.html (accessed July 24, 2015).

⁵³ See Alicia Garza, "A Herstory of the Black Lives Matter Movement," *The Feminist Wire*, October 7, 2014, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/> (accessed July 24, 2015).

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As for the man, what do we think happened? Did he return to his parents, “Kool Moe Dee-style” and say “*how ya like me now?*” Did he go to his family of origin to confront and *read* them for sending him away from community, or did he have to shake the dust off his feet and create a family of choice elsewhere – the way that *many of us* contemporary Black SGL people have done? In actuality, the man has the potential to reach people as a result of surviving his cave experiences which the other disciples could never reach. He has the opportunity to flourish. Whether home is a return to family of origin or to a radically inclusive community of choice, the man who had the legion’s freedom demonstrates that opportunities for transformation, reconciliation, and hope abound. This is the potential for SGL people liberated from the unclean spirits of hegemony, heteronormativity, homophobia, hatred, and hypocrisy.

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