

Feminist Sexual Ethics Project

Literature Review by Carly Daniel-Hughes

Kelly Brown Douglas. *Sexuality and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1999.

Kelly Brown Douglas is Associate Professor of Religion at Goucher College. She is also an ordained priest in the Episcopal Church.

Utilizing Foucault's analysis of sexuality as a discourse that is primarily concerned with power, Kelly Brown Douglas shows that historically "White culture" has delineated Black sexuality as a means to control and dominate Black people. Douglas claims that White culture attempted (and continues to) define Black sexuality for two reasons. First, White economic privilege has relied on the exploitation of Black people, "initially as free and later as cheap labor" (p. 23). Second, White culture has viewed Black physiognomy as antithetical to White physiognomy, resulting in a dangerous and simultaneous interest in and fear of Black bodies as Other (p. 24).

Beginning with slavery, White culture promoted the notion that Black people were inherently salacious, thereby protecting the integrity of White sexuality (particularly White women's sexuality) and supporting the notion that Black people must be controlled. The cruel realities of slavery only supported and fueled this idea—Black women and men stripped naked on sale blocks, their bodies treated as reproductive machines and receptacles for their masters' sexual whims (pp. 35–50). The representation of Black women and men as lustful and licentious did not end with slavery, but left a legacy that has been translated into a variety of forms: "welfare queens" who produce countless children while lazily collecting welfare checks; Black men viewed as rapists or as overly physically endowed (p. 56).

This discourse about Black sexuality has permeated the lives of Black women and men in devastating ways. Black women and men often internalize this hegemonic discourse, resulting in disdain for themselves and their bodies. Black sexuality has so persistently been used to dominate Black women and men that the Black community is rendered silent, unable and unwilling to discuss matters of their own sexuality (p. 68). Douglas is particularly concerned about the silence of the Black church on this issue. She notes that the church often reifies the White representation of Black women's sexuality by attempting to circumscribe their sexual behavior while saying little or nothing about men's sexuality. Further, the Black church has commonly treated Black gay and lesbian persons with contempt, considering homosexuality to be a threat to the stability of Black families and the Black community at large (p. 89).

Douglas suggests that issues such as homophobia and sexism in the Black church and community—clearly a response to the virulent and dominant White exploitation of Black sexuality— threatens the ability of the Black community to dislodge the White presentation of Black sexuality from its hegemonic position. Further, sexism and

homophobia deny the full humanity of Black women and gay men. Douglas calls upon the Black church and community to end this dangerous silence and to participate in a “discourse of resistance,” a discourse which challenges this hegemonic presentation of Black sexuality and encourages all Black women and men to “love their embodied Black selves” (p. 75). Douglas posits that the very incarnation of Jesus prompts and supports this discourse.

Douglas notes that although Christianity historically saw sexuality as negative (due to the influence of Platonic thought that sees flesh and spirit as distinct, one corruptible and the other pristine, p. 25) the incarnation of Jesus Christ suggests a very different interpretation of the body, and ultimately, of human sexuality. Douglas states that “the fact that Jesus was embodied calls us to appreciate the human body as a gift of God” (p. 115). The body is a locus for human interaction with God. Christ’s death, his passion, was aimed at preserving life. His passion reminds Black women and men that “human passion,” which can be expressed through sexuality, “is God’s passion bursting forth from the human being as an insatiable desire to foster life in all aspects of one’s living” (p. 120).

Douglas ends her book pragmatically by suggesting some ways a “sexual discourse of resistance” might be encouraged within the Black church. She suggests for example, reading groups focusing on novels, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, because both books engage issues of Black sexuality, particularly the damaging effects of the sexual exploitation of Black women by their families and their communities. Another suggestion is the formation of discussion groups focused on the representation of Black sexuality in Black popular culture. Douglas suggests that these are “safe” and “unthreatening” ways to encourage conversation. Second, she suggests Bible study courses that make use of the work of Black biblical scholars and theologians who engage with the text from a Black perspective, particularly scholars who consider issues of Black sexuality as it relates to the text. Third, Douglas asserts that the stories, histories, and experiences of Black women (who make up 70% of the Black church) must be told and valued, for “White exploitation of Black sexuality” can only be subverted when those most oppressed by this discourse can claim their full humanity (p. 137). Finally, Douglas exhorts the Black church to relinquish behavior that does not support the “life and well being” of all members of the Black community. Douglas hopes that the Black church (and community) is ready to take on her challenge. She writes, “Only when the taboo of sexuality is discarded will Black women and men be free to experience what it means to wholly love and to be loved by the God that became flesh in Jesus” (p. 143).

Douglas’s book is carefully written and researched. This book is the most recent work in the area of black sexuality by a womanist scholar, and it is perhaps (as Douglas suggests) the most comprehensive to date. Her emphasis on issues like homosexuality and sexism within the Black church reveal that, although these problems plague the White Christian community as well, the persistence of these issues in Black communities arise from a particular historical experience of exploitation. This is critical information suggesting the importance of context when engaging issues of heterosexism and sexism. On this point, Douglas has more practical suggestions for ways to introduce discussions of sexuality in

black churches. (Perhaps Douglas's thoughts might be tried out in interviews with black parishioners and clergy? Her presentation of the incarnation might also be interesting to discuss in interviews.) Though Douglas is quite thorough, she points to areas where further research might be pursued and suggests that "it will be important to explore how Black attitudes toward sexuality have impacted the response of Black churches to domestic violence and sexual misconduct among clergy" (p. 141). Perhaps Douglas will continue this work herself, but certainly it will be interesting to see if other scholars heed her suggestion.

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