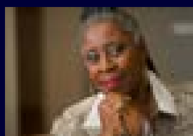
HIDDEN HISTORIES

FAITH AND BLACK LESBIAN LEADERSHIP



MONIQUE MOULTRIE

HIDDEN HISTORIES

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Hidden Histories

Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership

MONIQUE MOULTRIE

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Durham and London
2023

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Project editor: Bird Williams
Designed by A. Mattson Gallagher
Typeset in Adobe Text Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Moultrie, Monique Nicole, [date] author.
Title: Hidden histories : faith and Black lesbian leadership / Monique Moultrie.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2023. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2022040850 (print)
LCCN 2022040851 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478019114 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478016472 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478023746 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: African American women clergy—Interviews. | African American lesbians—Interviews. | Womanism—Religious aspects. | Leadership—Moral and ethical aspects—United States. | Sexual orientation—Religious aspects. | BISAC: social science / Ethnic Studies / American / African American & Black Studies | SOCIAL SCIENCE / LGBTQ Studies / General | LCGFT: Oral histories.
Classification: LCC BT83.9 . M67 2023 (print) | LCC BT83.9 (ebook) | DDC 230.082—dc23/eng/20221228
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022040850
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022040851

Cover art: (top to bottom, left to right) Dr. Pamela “Ayo” Yetunde (photo by Miriam Phields); Reverend Dr. Deborah Johnson; Reverend Dr. Cari Jackson; Bishop Tonyia Rawls; Reverend Naomi Washington-Leapheart (photo by Zamani Feelings Photography); Elder Darlene Garner; Dr. Sylvia Rhue.
All photographs courtesy of their subjects.

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To the memory of my grandmother,
Mildred Crews Carter

To the memory of my husband,
Rev. Eugene James Se'Bree

I am forever changed because
you both loved me.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has many origin points, such as my cultivated love of women's storytelling passed down to me by my mother and my maternal grandmother. My mother, Tommie Crews, was the first in our immediate family to earn a college degree, and she and my aunts recounted tales from college and their adventures in the workforce to a precocious womanish girl who hung on their every words. My grandmother, Mildred Carter, raised me to appreciate a good story and to recognize the value that our stories had in educating us about how our past, present, and future were intertwined. I learned from the women in my family that our stories tell the world that we were here and that we mattered.

Because of this awareness, when I was asked in 2009 by Mark Bowman, executive director of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN), to conduct a few interviews for its website, I leapt at the opportunity to conduct oral histories and hear people's life narratives. Little did I know that a task I took as a graduate student would captivate me so many years later. Honestly, it took me a while to appreciate the gift that I had been given—access to these women's life stories—and to feel comfortable enough that I should be the one to amplify them via a book-length study. I will forever remain grateful that during a lunch with Dr. Rosetta Ross, she asked me what new research I could present to the Spelman College community, and I mentioned that I had conducted a few really interesting interviews that I would love to share. This was the first time that I tried weaving their stories together into a cohesive narrative for others, and the community was gracious toward my nascent theorizing, which propelled me to conduct further research.

Further research required further funding, and I am ever grateful for the numerous funders' financial support for this project over the years. The

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American Academy of Religion awarded me an individual research grant that funded my initial eight interviews. Likewise, I received support to continue conducting interviews from the Auburn Seminary/Cross Currents Coolidge Scholars Summer Colloquium (where I was brilliantly steered in the direction of making this a book about Black lesbians), the Georgia State University Humanities Center, and my college and department's resources.

When shaping this work, I was also fortunate to receive generous support and a scholarly community in the form of the Harvard Divinity School's Women's Studies in Religion Program. WSRP provided me physical space and allowed me to teach this content as I was completing the manuscript, and Anne Braude and my cohort (Alicia Izharuddin, Monica Mercado, Jyoti Puri, and Kerry Sonia) were invaluable interlocutors who asked me early on to keep amplifying the women's stories so that their lives became the theory for the larger project. In my Leadership and Womanist Moral Traditions course the students and I wrestled with how to balance our scholarly commitments with our passions to let the women whom we interviewed shape our arguments. I am also thankful for the numerous opportunities to practice getting this balance right with academic communities: the American Academy of Religion, the Association for the Study of African American Life and History, the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, the American Studies Association, the Oral History Association, the Queer History Conference, Brandeis University, Emory University, and Georgetown University's Berkley Center. My desire and intention to get their stories right meant I also solicited help from editors extraordinaire Ulrike Guthrie and Raedorah Stewart.

My personal thanks to Miriam Angress and the team at Duke University Press for their validation of this work. I would also like to thank my colleagues at Georgia State University (and especially Lou Ruprecht) for reading various stages of this project and to thank my graduate research assistants (Elizabeth Shuford, Shey Miller, Clifvette Webb, and Pedro Alvarez) for all their help. When I was gifted another opportunity to research in Cambridge, Barbara Revkin again provided me with a room to write in and with company while we were sheltering in place because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Being in Cambridge again also offered me the opportunity to continue to be mentored by Bernadette Brooten and Clarissa Atkinson, whose faith in me is a blessing. I am also grateful for the sage counsel of my former graduate adviser Victor Anderson, whose initial conversation on how to write a second book broke through my writer's block. For the continued reminders to keep up

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my writing practice, I am appreciative of the Sister Scholars' (astutely led by AnneMarie Mingo) writing space.

During the decade of collecting interviews and writing, my circle has become smaller. My in-laws Harvey and Callie Epperson both passed away before seeing the text take form. My biological mother died, and then the rock of my family passed away as I was finalizing the manuscript. Losing the light that was Mildred Carter is an immeasurable loss, and each celebration is less sweet because I am unable to share it with her. Despite these losses, I am reminded that saying their names and telling their stories show the world how much they meant to me. I am eternally grateful for my forever friends and family who made these losses manageable (Nichole Phillips, Ipsita Chatterjea, Haywood Harvey, and Jason Cogswell). Albert Smith's check-ins and ability to be a sounding board provided the organizational structure of the book. TL Gray reminds me that the world is too big not to spread my wings more. Almeda Wright and James Logan were my lifelines in a year where grief and sadness could have engulfed me. As my family circle grew smaller, our friendships grew wider and sustained us through trials and joys.

I conclude with my biggest thanks reserved for my interviewees for their trust in my intentions and gratitude for their ability to be forces of good in the world. May they continue to teach us how to be brave, authentic spiritual leaders. Finally, to my half-Bre, half-amazing partner, Rev. Eugene James Se'Bree, only you have witnessed the inner workings of this project from its earliest iteration to the final product. You have trusted that our sacrifices would all be worthwhile as we endeavored to be examples for Chandler and Jioni. You bring us back to our better selves and have always believed in our greatness. You are a constant reminder that finding a partner to share an entire life is worthwhile work. Our love is a story for the ages, and it matters that we chose daily to live in its abundance.

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Introduction

That Their Living Will Not Be in Vain

Being an open lesbian in the Black community is not easy, although being closeted is even harder.
—AUDRE LORDE, "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich," in *Sister Outsider*

Sexual stories about Black women are all around us, but they almost always rely on key myths, while few stories told by Black women about their own sexual lives are available.
—TRICIA ROSE, *Longing to Tell*

When I was growing up in my rural Virginia Baptist church, I was taught a conservative biblical worldview that promised fire and brimstone as punishment for same-sex attraction. The words *lesbian* and *gay* were spoken in shushed tones, and the only "out" members of our local LGBTQ community were the white gay florists in town. We seldom heard sermons or received education that discussed sexuality in any form, but when we did, heterosexuality was idealized. I was also taught that God loved everyone, and as the hymn we often sang taught us, we were to "treat everybody right."

Wrestling with this irony in practice and praise was one of the reasons I became a questioning Christian. I needed a way to deal with the castigation I was expected to direct at my lesbian and gay family and friends while simultaneously showing them Christian love. In a way, this book starts with my curious struggles with the messages I received from my Christian tradition about sexuality, and it hopes to offer the next generation of spiritual seekers a possible alternative to the domination of heterosexism.

My scholarship explores how religion, race, and sexuality intersect with gender prescriptions and normative claims within Christian contexts. In my

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first book, I investigated how Black women were targeted by faith-based sexuality ministries and exerted their own sexual agency. Here, by responding to the erasure of Black lesbians' sexual and sacred lives I am examining how sexual and religious actors exert agency in religious spheres. Taking seriously cultural critic Tricia Rose's assertion that sexual stories about Black women are all around us but that they rely on key myths, this text offers data based on Black lesbian women's actual stories about sexuality and faith. *Hidden Histories: Faith and Black Lesbian Leadership* examines oral histories of Black lesbian religious leaders as an exploration of womanist ethical leadership. It addresses their social justice orientation while theorizing how their models of leadership can be instructive for future generations.

As far as I can tell, this book is the first collection of oral histories of Black lesbian religious leaders in the United States. My intention is to elevate the stories of Black women who proudly claim a lesbian *and* religious identity. I recognize the dearth of scholarship on Black lesbians of faith, so my first goal is to preserve their stories for posterity. Beyond that worthy goal, I also seek to make a larger contribution to the canon of African American religion by expanding it to include the diversity of lesbian experiences in Black religious communities. The last twenty years have seen scholarship on Black LGBTQ identity that discussed religion, and there is even some recent work that focuses specifically on Black lesbians and faith. Yet these works are not typically produced by scholars trained in African American religion, and they are not often published or cited by scholars of African American religion. Whether they are ancillary because their authors are from other disciplines or whether "the gods are afraid of Black sexuality," the result is a lack of new knowledge that takes seriously the sexual identities of its leaders and participants.[1] This is particularly unfortunate when one considers the queer history that is being lost and how this erasure misshapes the subdiscipline of African American religion. Thus, the oral histories that I gathered and present here offer a genealogical bridge to interpret twenty-first-century African American religion.

I am pursuing this project to answer three main questions as I theorize on womanist ethical leadership: How are Black lesbian religious leaders incubators for social justice activism? How does spirituality animate their social activism? And how can these leaders function as models for ethical leadership for future generations? My concern with their social justice activism is correlated to my interest in their leadership styles because I contend that ethical leadership requires concern for the greater good and even the

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holistic well-being of the planet and its inhabitants. By examining these leaders' social justice orientation, the text ultimately explores the benefits of collaborative leadership, endeavoring to link these contemporary figures to a longer genealogy of Black female leaders for whom religion is a catalyst for their work. This historical placement also amplifies and diversifies the field of African American religion and expands current discourse on ethical leadership models.

Ultimately, I explore these questions by considering the lives of eighteen Black lesbian religious leaders whose oral histories I gathered for this project and for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN). The LGBTQ-RAN is a virtual archive project, and at the time of this publication it is a program that preserves LGBTQ religious histories on its website, https://lgbtqreligiousarchives.org. Initially, my work as a consultant for LGBTQ-RAN involved identifying and interviewing four Black gay and three lesbian religious leaders (including two Muslim leaders, a Pentecostal bishop, a Baptist clergyperson, a Seventh Day Adventist leader, a Unity Fellowship of Churches bishop, and a Metropolitan Community Churches elder) for the website's oral history project. After the untimely death of one of my initial participants, I realized the urgency of gathering these oral histories and decided to expand the project to concentrate only on Black lesbian religious leaders.

First, the stories of "out" Black lesbian religious leaders are valuable because in my interviews I noticed a marked difference in the leadership styles of Black gays and lesbians. These distinctions will be further explicated in chapter 5, but what I noticed was that unlike some of the men interviewed, the women's leadership and activist orientations went beyond institution building and a sole focus on the LGBTQ community. Women were certainly involved in empire building and even sat at the pinnacles of denominations, but their interests were more expansive and communally oriented. In general, Black gay men tended to establish open and affirming religious communities, and they were often tasked with the daily activities of keeping these organizations running. By contrast, Black lesbians' path to hierarchical leadership is historically more constrained such that their leadership flourishes beyond established power structures—for example, they are heralded in the community or local arenas, making their leadership often most closely aligned with community needs.

In reflecting on this dynamic, I was struck by how these female religious leaders experienced sexism, racism, and heterosexism intersectionally. Despite

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FIGURE I.1. *Coalesce*, by Frederick Moultrie Jr., 2021. Used by permission.

Black women statistically being the most numerous participants in heterosexual faith communities, they are seldom the organizations' leaders. Thus, I wanted to understand how Black lesbians animated by religion or spirituality were deemed leaders in their communities. At its core, this pursuit of the narratives of Black lesbian faith leaders was an exercise to look at the some of the most ostracized persons on the margins of our religious and secular societies.

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Sample Rationale

When I began collecting interviews, I was following the suggestions of the LGBTQ-RAN director on whom I should interview. Those recommendations included religious leaders at the pinnacle of their careers. Yet as I expanded the project, I realized I wanted to follow a more versatile criteria for my own work, so I included a variety of demographics and leadership positions. At the most basic level my interview pool looked for women who held some kind of leadership position—for example, they were in some position of power or authority in a religious space. Yet I found that even this simple requirement was too amorphous. I pondered whether a leader is someone who is "tied to larger aspirations for Black empowerment and social change," someone who is "fueled by a vision that [is] sustain[ed] over time," or someone who is in another category in between.[2] In the end, I asked to interview Black lesbian women who were actively integrating their spiritual and religious beliefs into their social justice activism or efforts to bring about social change. Although a few of the women were children of immigrants, all were reared in the United States and currently lived across the continent. I narrowed the selection pool by deciding to interview only cisgender women of African descent. Initially, this was a result of my snowballing sample, in which cisgender leaders referred me to other cisgender leaders, but I did not extend my research to amplify transwomen's voices. This limitation acknowledges how the absence of transgender religious leaders means that this study of cisgender female leaders is just a starting point and that it can and should provide a model for others to consider ethical leadership among transwomen religious leaders.

I interviewed only women who publicly claimed a lesbian, same-gender-loving, or queer identity because the purpose of this study is to explore Black lesbian religious leaders who were living authentically and working for social justice. Although all the participants admitted a period of life of living in the closet—being aware of their same-sex sexual attraction but not admitting this publicly—by the time I interviewed them, each woman had been self-identifying publicly as a lesbian for decades (except for the two youngest interviewees, who were in their mid-thirties and had been out on average for a decade).

Their Black lesbian identity matters to this project because Black women and especially Black lesbians are not typically chronicled in the annals of Black moral leadership. In a tradition that privileges individual male leaders, it is rare for female agents' stories to be told. In fact, when I started this project, I had

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a difficult time even crafting a basic genealogy of Black women leaders who happened to be lesbian, much less Black religious leaders who were lesbians. Although scholars have attempted to expand historiography to include the lesbian identity of women such as Rebecca Cox Jackson (1795–1871), Dr. Mary Evans (1891–1966), Sister Rosetta Tharpe (1915–1973), or even Pauli Murray (1910–1985), none of these women were self-identifying Black lesbians, which means that the historical record fails to help us in our contemporary pursuit of Black lesbians' past leadership.[3] Thus, the project centralizes Black lesbian identity as essential to understanding their leadership styles.

Their Black lesbian identity is instrumental to understanding the magnitude of oppressions they have overcome to break the "stained-glass ceiling" within their religious spaces. They have learned to advocate for themselves despite biases against women, Blacks, queers, and even religious persons. Their intersectional identity is key to how they approach the leadership task because they are always aware of the multiple communities to which they must be accountable. The Audre Lorde quotation at the start of the chapter references how hard it is to be out in the Black community; Lorde notes that some identities are deemed to be in conflict with one another. For example, loyalty to the Black community has presumed fidelity and perhaps even submission to Black men; thus, activism that does not privilege male concerns can cause intraracial trauma. As women who were motivated by deep religious ideologies, this is often deemed antithetical to their queer identity, for some see religion as solely a source of harm for the LGBTQ community. Those who deem women (and especially queer women) to be unworthy of religious calling challenge female leaders who are not following heteronormative leadership structures that allow for women in leadership as companions to males. Thus, women who claim their authentic voice to speak from their particular identities are also reflections of Black women's self-determination and agency.

In addition, gleaning from the lives of Black lesbian religious leaders is important because it disrupts the popular depiction of Black religion as overtly hostile to LGBTQ persons. Chapter 1 will discuss more of the publicized homophobia in Black religious communities, but the decision to research Black lesbians who were active religious leaders is a twofold response to the assertion that the Black community is less tolerant of gays and lesbians and to the research of gay male authors whose work discerns that religion does not hold as significant a role for Black lesbian women as it does for Black gay men. Performance scholar and oral historian E. Patrick Johnson's *Black.Queer. Southern.Women* reports his surprise that the women he interviewed did not

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enjoy going to church or find it to be a refuge, contrary to what many of his gay Black male interviewees had experienced.[4] Johnson's texts revealed women's disavowal of Black churches and their seeking women-centered alternative spiritualities instead. In *Their Own Receive Them Not*, pastoral theologian Horace Griffin contends that there is not an expectation of finding "out" Black lesbians in Black congregations because, stereotypically, lesbians have not been associated with religious attendance. My interviewees and their communities contradict such studies by demonstrating that Black lesbian religious leaders purposely work within religious spaces and find in Black religious spaces joy and space to flourish. Chapters 1 and 4 will unpack the many ways that gay male scholars miss the point of Black lesbians' religious identities, but this research is significant because it makes these varied racial and religious identities central to the theorizing of their leadership.

Research Subjects

After conducting the initial seven interviews for LGBTQ-RAN, I created a "dream list" of twenty-five potential interviewees by snowball sampling names from my participants.[5] I contacted my university IRB office and was told that my study would be exempt from IRB review because oral history activities are designed to create records of specific historical events via open-ended questions that focus on particular individuals and are thus not generalizable knowledge. I was then able to start the process of recruiting potential interviewees by either asking for a referral from a previous interviewee or by "cold contacting" the potential participant. Because the first three interviews were Protestant Christians, the sample pool was predominantly Christian. I diversified these results by conducting additional research, and this resulted in an interview with two spiritualists, a Jewish rabbi, and a Buddhist lay leader. I broadly targeted women over the age of twenty-one to explore at minimum a decade of living and working as a self-identifying lesbian religious leader. Given the focus on established Black female leadership, most of the sample pool was over the age of fifty and had a variety of leadership experience inside and outside of religious spaces. From the initial slate of twenty-five names, twenty accepted my invitation to be interviewed, and I was able to conduct eighteen interviews.

The interviewees ranged from ages thirty-seven to seventy-two. Most of the interviews were of women over the age of fifty, except for two outliers, Rev. Naomi and Rev. Kentina Washington-Leapheart, a couple who were

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thirty-seven and thirty-nine, respectively. Geographically, the interviewees represented the West Coast, Pacific Northwest, Midwest, Southwest, Southeast, and Northeast. I conducted the earliest three interviews in 2010 and 2011 (and updated these in 2019) and the remaining fifteen interviews between 2017 and 2019. Most of the interviews lasted an hour and a half, with five interviews lasting almost three hours. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, with the exception of two of the earliest interviews, and most interviews took place at a neutral location such as a hotel meeting room, office, church, or local library. I conducted two interviews in women's homes at the request of the participants. None of the interviewees are anonymous: the purpose of gathering their stories was for posterity. Each of the interviews was audiotaped and transcribed. The interviewees received the audio and transcript for approval, and all the interviews are housed on the LGBTQ-RAN website. I provide a biographical introduction to each interviewee the first time she appears in the book. In subsequent appearances I provide a bit of background information to refresh the reader's memory and sometimes relevant notes from our interview. Excerpts of some narratives may appear in more than one chapter. I introduce the women via the titles they preferred. Most wanted me to use their professional title rather than referencing them by their first names.[6]

As a heterosexual ally who was not a religious leader, I often found myself in an "outsider/within" scenario, as it was important for me to acknowledge that I was entrusted with these stories as a noncommunity member but also to note that there were many ways in which we were in the same community.[7] Much like E. Patrick Johnson's critical awareness regarding his male privilege, when interviewing Black queer southern women I remained vigilant about my heterosexual and class privileges as a heterosexual woman with Ivy League degrees.[8] Thus, the basic questions remained the same for all interviewees in an attempt to control any missteps that would be complicit with heterosexism or classism. Taking cues from archivist Laura Micham, director of the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University Libraries, regarding the ethical responsibility of the interviewer my intentions were to be a "responsible documentarian," one who was "knowledgeable about the community, but never to make the assumption . . . that you're a member of the community."[9] My efforts to be aware of when my subjectivity as a Black woman with deep faith commitments was relevant and when it was not comparable was tested with each interview. Some conversations lapsed into colloquial conversations, such as when Bishop Tonyia Rawls and I reminisced for fifteen minutes over our experiences some twenty years apart

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as Black female undergraduates at Duke University or the shared experiences with womanism that Rev. Kentina Washington-Leapheart and Bishop Yvette Flunder and I spent time discussing. Because these interviews often took place with only a formal introduction from someone in their inner circles, I spent time while we were not recording giving details about myself, sharing identity markers that I thought would be useful, as well as discussing why I as a heterosexual woman wanted to capture their stories. I did not use a script for these self-reflections, so I am sure the information given to each participant varied; however, I was constant in my cautiousness not to lead with my heterosexual identity too early in the conversation to avoid either privileging my story or distancing my story from their own. For the eighteen years I have been with my current partner, I seldom give pronouns and rarely used the term *boyfriend* or *husband* to describe him, yet through this project I became more sensitized to my "coming out" narrative and paid more attention to how/when/with whom I disclosed the gender identity of my partner and thus of my sexuality. This self-awareness, along with my stated womanist agenda, informed my ethical approach to conducting my oral history interviews.

Methodology

I chose to explore the lives of Black lesbian religious leaders through oral history for several reasons. First, I agreed with Rose's assertion that our knowledge about Black women's sexual lives rely on key myths instead of facts told from their own perspectives. This is doubly true for conversations around Black leadership, for it's important to hear about Black leaders' lives from their own perspectives, which in the case of this study demands a methodology that highlights Black lesbian religious leaders' stories.[10] According to the Oral History Association, "Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people and communities."[11] It allows a researcher to amplify the experiences of a diverse group using open-ended techniques such as semi-structured interviews concentrated on everyday experiences shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, and religion. Because I am invested in how and why these women became religious leaders, oral history offered a means to access their thoughts, feelings, and activities.

Throughout my personal and academic career, I have placed the highest premium on listening to Black women tell their stories. Whether that was from being mesmerized by testimonies from my conservative Christian upbringing,

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receiving personal accolades for my public speaking, or even the experiences of hearing my grandmother weave together a story merging lessons from an earlier time with whatever instruction she was currently imparting, hearing Black women's lived truths through speech has remained significant for me. As an undergraduate African American studies student, I learned about the griot tradition and how it survived as an Africanism passed down from slavery to current generations. The import of the oral tradition is so significant that some "scholars even argue that African and African American autobiographers build upon this *griot* tradition specifically establishing connections between themselves and their communities, rather than focusing on their individual story."[12] Testifying is never just for you but to show those in your community how you have weathered the storm. I wrote a dissertation and my first book about Black women's ability to testify about their sexual lives and their faith because their stories were harbingers in their communities for past, current, and future realities. The women from my prior study refuted the "culture of dissemblance" that encouraged their silence and submission. Instead, they preferred to use their own resources of resistance against tropes that castigated their sexuality and their gender.[13] Likewise, by being interviewed and sharing their life histories, Black lesbian religious leaders shattered silence and subjugation. As these religious leaders exercised their voices, it became apparent to me that linguist Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis was accurate in saying that "it is oral narrative that is ideally suited to revealing the 'multilayered texture of Black women's lives.'"[14] Most of the Black women's oral histories that have been gathered are of heterosexual women, which made this study even more relevant and urgent.

I was also drawn to oral history because of its reputation as a method that centers the histories of persons who have been marginalized and excluded from dominant historical records.[15] In Alex Haley's famed retelling of his ancestry in *Roots*, audiences were able to learn from those whose stories had never been privileged. Following this logic, oral history offered other marginalized groups equal access to being included in the historical narrative. Ensuring the inclusion of these Black women's histories in the telling of the queer religious story was one of the reasons I wanted all the interviews to be housed on the LGBTQ-RAN website. As the African proverb states, "Until the lions have their own historians, tales from the hunt will always glorify the hunter." One cannot expect a heterosexist society or a racist and sexist community to be concerned with stories that subvert its authority. The human rights organization Voice of Witness acknowledges oral history's

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great capacity to produce subversive social change. It finds oral history to be a "medium that gives primary agency to the person whose story is being told, which makes it an ideal form for amplifying the stories of those who have been marginalized, disenfranchised, or harmed."[16] This is especially true for queer oral history, whose very identity markers place its stories on the fringes of history. However, capturing these stories is complex. In *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, Nan Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez wisely note that there is no guarantee that our efforts will result in the emergence of a diversity of queer experiences and desires.[17] In fact, they argue that queer storytelling has the potential for great social change but that it is methodologically tricky because we do not all inhabit the same sexual consciousness—for example, an interviewee may be proudly self-identifying now and vehemently in the closet in their earlier life. Yet a benefit of queer oral history is that it brings to the reader the endless possibilities of looking at a religion, a community, or a leader in a fully embodied way.

When I started this project, I was sure of the suitability of oral history as the main methodological focus, but this does not mean that I chose this method in a vacuum. I am aware that oral history by its nature is reliant on the interviewee for the "truth" and is dependent on that interviewee's memory of events. Thus, it is potentially a faulty enterprise if one is interested only in fitting these women's stories into what dominant culture has deemed to be history. Because their stories were never meant to be historical, there may be moments of what ethicist Katie Cannon called "structured amnesia." Oral history is nonetheless useful because even with its potential faulty memory, its "anecdotal evidence does a lot to reveal the truth as to how oppressed people live with integrity."[18] As a general rule, I took the interviewees' narratives at face value—although I had done prior research to make sure that I was at least asking questions that were based on their documented history. I also gave each interviewee the right of refusal, and I sent them their audio and transcript to make any excisions they deemed necessary.

I use my oral history lens with social justice in view, so just like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa's commission of oral histories after apartheid ended, one of the goals of my research agenda is to pursue a healing and restorative history that includes those whose stories have been overlooked. Thus, rather than reflect a historical record simply of oppression, these oral histories will reveal a purposeful journey that also includes survival and thriving. The goal is not to present a legendary, larger-than-life lesbian religious leader. Instead, the aim is to highlight individual narratives and to

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analyze how these individuals' revelations and revolutions were intertwined with historical moments in religious and national communities. As such, the eighteen oral histories that I conducted were excluded from IRB review because they are not generalizable.[19]

Although similar questions prompted all eighteen interviews, because of the ebb and flow of conversation and time limitations I used flexibility in getting through my questions. I gave interviewees the opportunity to skip any questions that they did not want to discuss. The text highlights their leadership styles while also recording their journey to self-awareness of their sexual, racial, and religious identities. I allowed myself to be questioned in the interview process and found myself vulnerable in certain circumstances as I recounted my shameful past of Christian intolerance of same-sex attraction. I was equally made vulnerable by holding their stories of sexual abuse and domestic violence. Although the recordings do not often show the imprint that their sharing had on me as I kept up a dogged questioning pace, I left each interview emotionally exhausted and often unable to return to the transcripts until some time had passed.

I made some editorial decisions regarding the placement of the transcripts in this text, with full awareness that the transformation of oral speech to text necessarily involves changes in the performative and chronology of the interview.[20] I have edited for clarity but have tried to retain the cadence and rhythm of the participant's speaking style while removing some of the colloquial phrases such as "you know" and "like." Unless the interviewee requested these be permanently removed, they remain in the full transcript that is housed on the LGBTQ-RAN website so that the text matches the audio. Most importantly, I have made sure that the edits do not alter the speaker's original meaning.

Womanist Historiography

Given the interest in conveying their stories in their own words, this text also has a womanist orientation. Just to be clear, I am not stating that these leaders are womanist or would even be comfortable with me associating them with womanism. I concur with womanist ethicist Emilie Townes, who notes that although womanism is confessional, it can be used to describe a theorist or practitioner.[21] Thus, I am arguing that the framework for my interpretation of their stories is womanist. This project highlights women who used their experiences as marginalized outsiders to retain a critical posture to the structures in which they participate. Thus, to analyze their oral histories I partner

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with womanist historiography. This is a methodological lens taken from Alice Walker's four-part definition that describes a womanist as a "woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually . . . appreciates and prefers women's culture . . . loves the spirit . . . [and] is to feminist as purple is to lavender."[22] This womanist analysis comes from my situatedness as a third-generation womanist scholar trained by a womanist anthropologist to value the stories of living Black women. It is also bolstered by my understanding of psychologist Layli Phillips Maparyan's definition of womanism, which she identifies as the "social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday method of problem solving in everyday spaces." She characterizes womanism as having five features: (1) intentionally anti-oppression, (2) concerned with everyday experiences, (3) nonideological, (4) communal, and (5) spiritual.[23] Womanist theorizing relies on the everyday experiences of Black women, and because religion is so central to the lives of the Black women I interviewed, womanist thought takes seriously their spiritual concerns. Using both methodological lenses offer insight to illuminate the faith activism of Black lesbians who resist cultural invisibility and religious irrelevancy by serving as powerful religious leaders.

Womanist historiography is also a useful framework because it reflects on living agents, not fictionalized women's realities.[24] Following womanist ethicist Katie Cannon's theorizing of womanist emancipatory historiography as a "method of investigation that involves a critical, socio-ethical analysis of the past, undertaken by examining who has been silenced, marginalized, and excluded in specific historical records in order to achieve a more profound understanding,"[25] this method is automatically responsive to the voices and experiences of Black lesbian Christians who have been silenced and marginalized. Attending to the moral agency displayed by these women in spite of their marginalization gives a glimpse of the underside of history, and their histories would be incomplete without capturing not only their relegation but also their resistance to this denial of their full humanity.

Womanist Ethical Leadership

Finally, womanist historiography offers a means of interpreting the narrative histories in a way that illuminates what I see as an underlying womanist leadership structure. In her formative article "What's So Special about Women? Women's Oral History," oral historian Sherna Gluck contends that because of the creation of a new validation of women's experiences, women's oral history

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can be a feminist encounter even if the interviewee is not a feminist, and I assert that my interviewees are engaged in a womanist leadership style that is shaped by their intersectional identities.[26] Building on the various theories of womanism, I read their life histories as being communally oriented, justice seeking, spiritually rooted, and reflective of the fact that ethical leadership often stems from everyday acts of morality. Just as the scholarship on Black leadership points toward the griot and oral tradition as a means of understanding the charisma and clarion call of contemporary leaders, so through examining these women's oral histories I argue that their leadership also stems from womanist ways of knowing that include lessons learned from other women on similar journeys.

Business executive consultant Debora Jackson sees Black women leaders as embodying womanist values such as "survival, liberation, wholeness, spirituality, empowerment, family, community, reciprocity, egalitarianism, and extended family," and she advises that Black women seeking to lead from a womanist standpoint should embrace the stories of the women who shaped them as a means of learning from the experiences of those who were marginalized and resisted.[27] When I looked over their stories, the themes of resistance through social justice activism, spirituality, authenticity, and cooperative leadership came to the forefront. These themes were present in almost every interview, yet their narratives also demonstrated each of the tenets that Jackson presents as womanist values. In light of this, I was left to question what difference their queer identity made to their womanist leadership styles. I discovered that their lesbian identification often triggered a cooperative and holistic justice style of leading that was not always apparent when compared to heterosexual Black women's leadership. Queer Black religious leaders used intersectional frameworks for leading their groups that seemed to be elevated by their increased awareness and empathy for other perspectives. Thus, a womanist ethical leadership model that is patterned after these Black lesbian religious leaders would emphasize leadership strategies that are nonhierarchical, para-institutional, and intergenerational, allowing for leaders at any age or stage of life.

Overview of the Book

Before the book can present these eighteen interviewees as models of womanist ethical leadership, it begins by engaging some of the challenges facing these Black female religious leaders. Chapter 1, "Shattering Stained-Glass Ceilings:

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African American Queer Storytelling," discusses their theological journeys through various Christian denominations or other religious traditions to land as religious leaders in particular contexts. Given that their institutional contexts vary, this chapter highlights some of their shared experiences while overcoming racial and gender oppression in religious spaces before delving into specific ecclesial circumstances where they had to deconstruct the "stained-glass ceiling." This chapter introduces all eighteen interviewees, many of whom will then reappear in more detail in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2, "Going to Hell for My Authenticity: Existence as Resistance," examines the theme of womanist authenticity or existence as resistance by exploring how these women used the power of their authenticity to navigate ecclesial leadership structures and to amplify their calls for justice in their communities. This chapter highlights the significance of integrating their lesbian identity with their racial and religious selves, recognizing that by standing in their truths they were able to advocate for others. Drawing on philosopher Charles Taylor's theorizing on the ethics of authenticity and womanist ethicist Stacey Floyd-Thomas's theory of radical subjectivity, the chapter presents womanist authenticity as a key step in building a womanist ethical leadership model.

Chapter 3, "Justice Is Spiritual: Interrogating Spiritual Activism," focuses on the activist orientation of Black lesbian religious leaders. It illustrates how individual and collective acts of activism demonstrate larger social movements that have religious impetuses. Using Maparyan's theory of womanist spiritual activism to interrogate these leaders' faith activism, the chapter demonstrates the various ways that social justice activism is anchored within a faith leader's spirituality. By emphasizing their everyday acts of rebellion and collective community building, the chapter reflects their refusal to be relegated to obscurity and their commitment to the recognition of the full humanity of all.

Because not all of the women in the study are Protestant Christians, chapter 4, "Mighty Causes Are Calling Us: Expanding Womanist Spiritualities," examines the spiritual foci of the interviewees who were Buddhist, spiritualists, Jewish, and New Thought practitioners. Their narratives are juxtaposed with the womanist spiritualities of Diana Hayes, Emilie Townes, and Melanie Harris to help reveal that theistic connection to humanity is an important marker for womanist ethical leadership.

Although chapter 5, "Doing the Work Their Souls Must Have: Cultivating Womanist Ethical Leadership," illuminates the specific competencies required in womanist ethical leaders as reflected by my interviewees' lives, the book

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concludes by charting a new path for womanism and for those in leadership studies. The main aim of this chapter is to highlight specific skill sets and behaviors expressed in these Black lesbian religious leaders' lives as illustrative of some of the specific competencies required in womanist ethical leaders. The chapter provides examples from their cooperative leadership styles, noting that unlike some of the Black gay religious leaders whose leadership style has focused on institutional building and concern for assisting those impacted by HIV/AIDS, these women's religious impetuses propelled them into social justice activism that was intersectional and dependent upon coalitions.

The book's conclusion, "Leading from the Margins," challenges womanist theorizing to include a more pluralistic vision of Black female leaders that will include lesbians by pushing womanists to use living texts/living women as valid sources for analysis. The conclusion addresses current scholarship on ethical leadership in Black religious spaces and contends that ignoring Black lesbian religious activists' organizing impoverishes the scholarship and ethical models presented. The epilogue continues the expansion of scholarship noting the impact of online archives to democratize knowledge. Throughout this text I highlight the benefits of looking toward queer leadership as models for ethical management, positing that these lives are examples of the leadership required for sustained social change.

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NOTES

Introduction

1 "Are the Gods Afraid of Black Sexuality: Religion and the Burdens of Black Sexual Politics" Conference, Columbia University Center on African-American Religion, Sexual Politics, and Social Justice, October 23–24, 2014, www.carss.columbia.edu/blog/are-gods-afraid-Black-sexuality-conference-re-cap.

2 Leffler, *Black Leaders on Leadership*, 12; King and Ferguson, "Introduction," 11.

3 This speaks to the issue about using materials from archives because some types of relationships are left out of official public documentation. According to archivist Brittany Bennett Parris, massive archives such as the Schlesinger Library avoid "assigning lesbian-related subject headings to materials unless the women in the documents in question are indeed 'forthright lesbians,'" instead using a term like *friendship*. See Parris, "Creating, Reconstructing, and Protecting Historical Narratives," 18.

4 Johnson, *Black.Queer.Southern.Women*, 165.

5 I am aware that my sample is too small to make any generalizable statements. I wanted to provide an in-depth exploration of Black lesbian religious leaders' lives and to diversify historical records on Black women's leadership. My "dream list" was compiled by looking for religious diversity and variety in leadership experiences, and factoring in whether I could reach these women to conduct the interview in person.

6 The use of titles by Black women has a history tied to the denigrations of white supremacy, which denied our ancestors the ability to be referenced with respect. Black culture teaches younger Black women to show deference to older Black women and never to call an older woman by her first name. As the interviewer, this logic prevented me from being at ease referring to any of the participants who were older than me by anything other than their titles. As they reviewed their transcripts to approve them for my use, many of them corrected the transcribers' use of just their first names.

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7 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 11–13.

8 Johnson, *Black.Queer.Southern.Women*, 9.

9 Laura Micham, quoted in DiVeglia, "Accessibility, Accountability, and Activism," 85.

10 Leffler, *Black Leaders on Leadership*, 3.

11 Oral History Association, "Oral History Defined."

12 Leffler, *Black Leaders on Leadership*, 19.

13 Hine, "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West," 915.

14 Etter-Lewis, "Black Women's Life Stories," 43.

15 Historian Gary Okihiro determined that oral history thus acted as a tool for recovering history, but specifically a more complete history that included the "common folk and the dispossessed." See Okihiro, "Oral History and the Writing of Ethnic History," 209.

16 Voice of Witness, "History on a Human Scale," 13.

17 Boyd and Ramírez, "Introduction: Close Encounters," 7.

18 Cannon, "Structured Academic Amnesia," 21.

19 See the 2015 US Department of Health and Human Services recommendation that oral histories be excluded from institutional review boards because oral history already had its own code of ethics involving informed consent. www.oralhistory.org/2018/07/06/institutional-review-boards-and-oral-history-an-update.

20 Salazar, "Third World Women's Text," 98.

21 Townes, "Ethics as an Art of Doing the Work Our Souls Must Have," 36.

22 Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, xi–xii.

23 Maparyan, *Womanist Idea*, xx, xxvi.

24 There are varieties of womanist methodological frameworks employed by different disciplines. Womanist theologian and anthropologist of religion Linda Thomas's analysis of womanist theology and ethics reports that their sources include fiction, poetry, and historical narratives but that there has been a historical lack of research engaging the lives of poor Black women. This critique of womanist theology and ethics was also waged by Patricia Hill Collins, who noted that there is a relative mismatch between what privileged Black women in the academy and everyday Black women identify as important themes. Daphne Wiggins's ethnographic study of everyday Black church women also reveals a mismatch of cultural values in that the lived concrete realities of these Black women's lives did not seem to match the language or theory of womanist theology and ethics. See Thomas, "Womanist Theology"; Collins, "What's in a Name?," 15; and Wiggins, *Righteous Content*.

25 Cannon, "Emancipatory Historiography," 81. Womanist emancipatory historiography takes its definition from ethicist Beverly Harrison's "dance of redemption," which asserted that the methods for human liberation must be historical

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and therefore acknowledge human agency and resistance. See Harrison, *Making the Connections*, 249.

26 Gluck, "What's So Special about Women?," 217.

27 Jackson, *Meant for Good*, 17.

1. Shattering Stained-Glass Ceilings

1 Talvacchia, *Embracing Disruptive Coherence*, 7.

2 Arguably, one could search for early markers of intersectional analysis in the work of Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Beal, and Patricia Hill Collins.

3 "Combahee River Collective Statement," 22–23.

4 Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 140.

5 Flunder, *Where the Edge Gathers*, 5.

6 Black Protestantism or the Black church is widely understood to include seven majority Black Protestant denominations: the National Baptist Convention, the National Baptist Convention of America, the Progressive National Convention, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, and the Church of God in Christ. See Lincoln and Mamiya, *Black Church in the African American Experience*, 1.

7 Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 18.

8 Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 24.

9 Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 26–28.

10 Lyons, "Breaking through the Extra-Thick Stained-Glass Ceiling," 79.

11 Collier-Thomas, *Daughters of Thunder*, 29.

12 Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women*, 46.

13 Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 113.

14 Dickerson, *African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 526.

15 Human Rights Campaign, "Stances of Faiths on LGBTQ Issues"; "Response to Criticism of Faith in Human Rights Declaration." Church of God in Christ, "General Assembly Declaration and Apologetic of Marriage." Accessed February 28, 2022. www.cogic.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/FINAL-DRAFT-OF-RESPONSE-TO-CRITICISM-OF-FAITH-IN-HUMAN-RIGHTS-DECLARATION.pdf

16 Brown Douglas, "Heterosexism and the Black American Church Community," 184.

17 Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," 136–37. Hammonds notes that the historical narrative about Black female sexuality has tended to avoid discussion of the lesbian or queer subject, often deeming her dangerous and potentially even traitorous to the Black race.

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