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**“WILL THE BIG BOYS FINALLY LOVE YOU”
The Impossibility of Black Male Homoerotic Desire
and the Taboo of Black Homosexual Solidarity in
Thomas Glave’s “Whose Song?”**

by Éva Tettenborn

“Had the sinful thoughts left him? Had he become normal? Had he changed? There was nothing to change . . . his mind said. You’re normal.” (161)

—Randall Kenan, *A Visitation of Spirits*

Thomas Glave’s short story collection *Whose Song? and Other Stories* incorporates a series of elaborate sketches of black gay identities, identities which seem fragile and delicate at best. From a powerful political perspective, *Whose Song?* points to a heteronormative and homophobic society as the cause of the trauma inflicted upon the black gay characters portrayed in several of the stories. As readers, we learn of the broken relationships of black men, the habitual homophobic cultural and social violence surrounding them, and the often severe reactions of these men to the continuous violation of their African American masculine identities. Glave’s title story, “Whose Song?,” works in this manner: at first glance, it claims to portray three heterosexual rapists who assault a black lesbian because she is sexually inaccessible to men and, hence, deemed highly desirable. The story depicts in painful and unflinching detail how the three underprivileged black men, Robbie, Bernard, and Dee, rape the fifteen-year-old black lesbian Cassandra. They frame their crime with aggressive sexist discussions while suppressing their private homoerotic thoughts, memories, or fantasies. In so doing, the three men imitate the behavior of the stereotypical heterosexual black rapist and thus aim to place themselves within the framework of societal normalcy. The normalcy they strive for includes specific behavioral codes and norms for specific crimes, and the three men aim to comply with such expectations. I argue that while the story poses as a tale of a heterosexual crime, it actually offers the most shocking portrayal of assaulted black gay masculinities in Glave’s collection. “Whose Song?” problematizes the effects of a continuous cultural attack on black gay identities by showing the extreme to which three young black men are willing to go in order to assure their environment, each other, and themselves of their “normalcy,” i.e., a heterosexual black male identity.

Since this narrative of a rape pays extended attention to the criminals and comparably little attention to the victim, the question arises why one should embrace a story that remains so silent about Cassandra's suffering and listens so closely to her rapists. In its speculative tone, the story offers far more insight into the experiences of the three men than into the suffering of Cassandra, thus searching for victims other than the tortured girl. From a feminist perspective, it may seem objectionable at first glance to take an interest at all in why the men commit the crime, rather than focusing on how the victim survives this traumatic experience and how she copes with its emotional and physical aftermath. However, "Whose Song?" takes its distinctive, non-apologetic, narrative approach precisely because the story seeks to locate the one source that has inflicted pain on Cassandra as well as her rapists. The story names as this source a society marked by specific forms of heterosexism and racism, and this society discriminates against both black gay men and lesbian women.

Without adopting an apologetic position that seeks to diminish the atrocity of this specific crime, I suggest that Cassandra is not the only victim of this rape. "Whose Song?" emphasizes that Robbie, Bernard, and Dee have been victimized by a white and black hetero-patriarchal society that has crushed their black gay selves, and the story serves as a dramatic critique of such identity politics. Resorting to brutish violence, I argue, the three rapists abuse Cassandra's body as a point on which their sexual pleasures convene in lieu of the free expression of homoerotic desires for other men, including each other. Simultaneously, in raping another human being, they reenact what has happened to them on a physical or social level and act out their feelings of self-loathing in a black homophobic environment, transferring their self-hatred onto Cassandra. I suggest that, beyond exposing the revolting nature of rape, Glave's story bemoans the fact that here, black gay and lesbian identities are prevented from bonding in solidarity because of the heteronormative values the three perpetrators have come to accept. It is within this prevented solidarity that the story locates the catastrophic dimension of this crime, as the stunted attempt to forge a bond of black homosexual activism across the genders destroys more than just the life of one girl: it harms both male and female homosexual identities.

A post-positivist realist critical position is useful in order to map out the conflicts responsible for the violent crime committed by Robbie, Bernard, and Dee. The three men cannot see themselves as simultaneously black, male, *and* gay. Instead, they have been conditioned by their experiences to compartmentalize their identities so as to be able to repress "undesirable" traits (like homosexuality) on demand.¹ Post-positivist realist Michael R. Hames-García argues in "'Who Are Our Own People?' Challenges for a Theory of Social Identity" that we must no longer accept traditional, flat models of identity that view individuals as belonging to either one social group or another. Instead, Hames-García offers a new definition of self-formation in the face of multiple identity markers, such as an individual's gender, race, class, or sexuality. This novel definition takes into account the interaction of a person's many identity markers:

Membership in one group [. . .] means something different in the context of some simultaneous group memberships [. . .] than in others [. . .]. The totality of these relations in their mutual constitution comprises the self. One important consequence of

this fact is that one cannot understand the self as the sum of so many discrete parts [. . .]. The whole self is constituted by the mutual interactions and relations of its parts to one another. [. . .] These various categories of social identity do not, therefore, comprise essentially separate “axes” that occasionally “intersect.” They do not simply intersect but blend, constantly and differently [. . .]. They expand one another and mutually constitute each other’s meaning. (103)

The logical consequence of this model is that if an individual attempts to repress a certain marker of his or her identity, this will unquestionably affect his or her other identity markers, as they are intertwined with the trait that is to be closeted. Hames-García further suggests that, rather than subscribing to the idea that a person’s “‘identity’ is reduced to and understood exclusively in terms of that aspect of her or his self with the most political salience” (104), it is crucial to look for new ways of understanding identity. These new ways should be built on “solidarity and understanding,” as they strive for people “extending beyond narrow conceptualizations of themselves, beyond their own experiences, beyond their immediate group identification” (105). Put differently, people should ideally be able to express solidarity for groups other than their own, based on the sharing of certain identity markers that may not always be highlighted by the society seeking to categorize these groups and their individual members. Neither Robbie, Bernard, nor Dee are allowed to experience what it means to be a black man within the simultaneous context of being a gay man or a man with homoerotic desires, and not one of them is encouraged to identify with black women. The three young men have never been allowed to perceive themselves in terms of multidimensional identities that thrive on the many interactions of their components (e.g., masculinity, homosexuality, poverty, blackness). Hames-García’s fluid identity model is rendered impossible by the social environment of the three rapists portrayed in “Whose Song?.” To the contrary, the three young men have grown up with ideals that conditioned them to view their identities as consisting of various discrete parts that can be incorporated or expelled as necessary. That is, they try to embody an image of African American masculinity that does not embrace, but rather abjects, any homoerotic desires and any possibility for building a well-developed and adjusted form of black gay identity. The mere idea of being gay seems to assault their received models of black masculinity.

Robbie, Bernard, and Dee perceive gay identities as a catastrophic threat to the integrity of their selves, as they equate being gay with lacking in masculinity. As Phillip Brian Harper writes in *Are We Not Men? Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African American Identity*: “[t]he broader culture [. . .] conceives African-American society in terms of a perennial ‘crisis’ of black masculinity whose imagined solution is a proper affirmation of black male authority” (x), and this proper affirmation can only be conceived of in terms of patriarchal heterosexual identity models. Harper uses the term “anxious gynophobia” to refer to any process that seeks to eliminate gay or feminine components from African American male identities (x). This “anxious gynophobia” views gay identities not only as un-manly but can even equate them with being a woman. Robbie, Bernard, and Dee are very much “anxious” to escape any

comparison to a woman, and this motivates them to continuously mimic the behavior of stereotypical black heterosexual men. In *One More River to Cross: Black and Gay in America*, Keith Boykin sums up the problem black gay masculinity faces in America:

Perhaps because of their multiplicity of identities, black homosexuals seem less likely than white homosexuals to be openly gay or to consider themselves out of the closet. [. . .] [Black homosexuals] already live with an added layer of difference from the dominant group by virtue of their race. For black homosexuals, sexual orientation can often be just another example of their otherness [. . .]. (90)

I argue that it is in this cultural, social, and psychological context that we have to understand the atrocity committed by Robbie, Bernard, and Dee, all of whom are heavily tormented by a compartmentalized understanding of their selves.

Thomas Glave does not offer "Whose Song?" as a mere study of selected individual characters. His portrayals of gay men who are not always aware of their internalized conflicts make a political statement regarding the manner in which a black man's personal conduct occurs as a result of his social and political history. Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin illustrates this idea in "'Black Gay Male' Discourse: Reading Race and Sexuality between the Lines": "Black gay male subjecthood or subjectivity is necessarily a political and poetic enterprise" (469), and Glave joins the ranks of those writers who sharply critique the homophobic, racist social and cultural status quo. In so doing, Glave's story "Whose Song?" points to the non-symbolic as well as metaphorical pain suffered by black gay men and black lesbian women prevented from bonding over acknowledged homoerotic desires.

Because of the political dimension of Glave's collection, I find it necessary to briefly sketch out the context in which "Whose Song?" is placed. Regarding *Whose Song?*, Thomas Glave has expressed his wish that "the chapters will work in concert, but maybe also in disharmony" in an interview conducted by the *Indiana Review* (99). Certainly in this case, the authorial intention has carried over into the reader's response. In stories like "Commitment" or "The Final Inning," Glave provides the heterosexist cultural and social background for the crime portrayed in the title story. "Whose Song?" echoes like a sharp cry in the mind of the reader, and the stories which precede it raise the question of exactly what kind of cultural ideals can be blamed for Cassandra's traumatic sexual assault. The song to which the title refers is not only the song of Cassandra's rape but also the song of Robbie's, Bernard's, and Dee's destroyed identities.

Glave draws extended attention to the effects of enforced heteronormativity in his story "Commitment." Ricky, a young black gay man, is forced to get married to Renee who is expecting his child. The pregnancy is the result of Ricky's disappointing sexual experimentation that led him to court Renee despite his conviction that he must be gay. His is supposed to be a literal shotgun wedding, for Ricky's father perceives his son's suspected gay identity as so threatening that he makes Ricky choose between dying as a bachelor or "living" in a marriage, a marriage that feels like another form

of death to the groom. At one point, Ricky attempts to confide in his fiancée in the presence of his father. Ricky intends to save both himself and Renee from an impossible situation, a marriage grounded in denial and lies. This attempt is reason enough for his father to threaten Ricky's life while Ricky addresses Renee:

—I got to tell you something.—Looking her straight in the face.
 His father raising the gun. [. . .]
 —What, Ricky? [. . .]
 Daddy Malcolm's gun pointed directly at his son's back. A
 click from the trigger.
 Ricky turning. Gazing at his father.
 —You really would, wouldn't you. (Glave 50)

"Commitment" asserts that an openly acknowledged black gay identity has the power to condemn the subject to social or even physical death in the eyes of his community (or to "commit" him to an asylum of sorts), and not even Ricky's family offers him a safe place to live out his full identity. In fact, his family and community are the last stations to which he can turn for support. The threat of this social death angers Ricky to the point of brutally attacking his fiancée in an attempt to assuage his self-loathing (52–53). Homophobia is thus linked directly to misogyny in "Commitment," and "Whose Song?" elaborates on precisely this cause-and-effect relationship.²

Glave offers an equally impressive example of the social death sentence for black gay men in "The Final Inning." In this story, a young black gay man, Duane, has died from AIDS. However, he is buried by his relatives as if he had passed away from cancer, marked by the effects of chemotherapy. At the funeral, Duane's gay friends disrupt the family's attempt to cloak, closet, and cleanse his actual identity. One of Duane's friends shouts, "YOU'RE KILLING US you won't STOP you keep right on KILLING US," illustrating the destructive effects of orthodox heteronormative values (Glave 171). These effects possess a strength that reaches beyond the grave. In "'Couldn't Find Them Anywhere': Thomas Glave's *Whose Song?*, (Post)Modernist Literary Queerings, and the Trauma of Witnessing, Memory, and Testimony," Gene Jarrett points out that Glave in fact based this story on a true anecdote he heard from Assotto Saint, who attended the funeral of black gay poet Donald Woods. Woods' funeral digressed into the spectacle depicted by Glave in "The Final Inning" (1248). It seems therefore that this story, too, serves to underline the enormous pressure under which the three brutal rapists of "Whose Song?" must form and define their respective masculinities in the face of the threat of being cancelled out.

It is this homophobic and racist atmosphere in which men like Robbie, Bernard, and Dee are raised, always confronted with the fact that homoerotic desire condemns one to death, socially or even physically. Hence, I suggest that Glave politicizes Cassandra's rape beyond an honest and obvious feminist intention to openly condemn violence against women. Glave seeks to illuminate the motivation behind the three perpetrators' hatred of Cassandra and builds an impressive and convincing argument for the idea that homophobia and its implicit imperative that men must

desire women actually breeds misogyny and, ultimately, results in crimes against the selfhood and humanity of women.

While many of the stories in *Whose Song?* focus on black men, Glave draws attention to the title story's homoerotic theme with the portrayal of two female lovers, initially offering the story as the tale of a black lesbian. However, the story stops short of offering insights into Cassandra's suffering from her perspective. Instead, through the free indirect discourse that narrates "Whose Song?," the story's focus quickly shifts from the portrayal of a fulfilling lesbian relationship to the heterosexual assault Cassandra has to endure because the black gay identities of three young men have been continuously eroded.³ The story takes great pains to foreground the identity struggle of the three rapists before it begins to depict their crime. "Whose Song?" clearly speaks of identities that are lacking when it portrays the three men as people who have the burning "unconscious conscious wish to obliterate through vicious dreams who they were and are, have been, and are not. [. . .] Have been and are, might still be, and are not" (240). While such utterances seem largely cryptic, I argue that the story locates the primary lack in the identity of the three men in their socially encouraged hatred of their homoerotic desires that are rendered impossible, unmentionable, and unacceptable. Cassandra has found a fulfilling relationship in her love to Tanya. I want to suggest that it is this fact that angers Cassandra's three rapists to the point of disregarding their own and her humanity. The two girls function as symbols of what the three black men cannot and must not ever be: homosexual human beings. Moreover, their internalized self-loathing causes them to transfer their hatred of homosexuality onto the girl. Ultimately, they rape themselves in Cassandra.

From the very beginning "Whose Song?" refuses to draw clear lines between the victim and the rapists. Without offering an excuse for the crime committed against Cassandra, the story introduces the three perpetrators as men who have been victimized in various ways. Thus, the story seeks to look beyond this specific rape when searching for those who are to blame. The short story bemoans the loss of the perpetrators' voices when it asks about them, "Who who knew would sing through the veil the words of [their] song, about the someone-or-thing that had torn out their insides and left them there [. . .]?" (Glave 238). That is, the story builds on a loss of testimony for which it continues to search in its speculative approach to the three men's motivations.⁴ The communal free indirect discourse reflects on who the three men were:

Three boys, three boys. In a car. Long legs, lean hands. In a car. Bitter mouths, tight asses, and the fear of fear. Boys or men and hard. In their car. [. . .] Three boys, fretful, frightened, angry. In a row. The burning rope had come to them long ago in willed and willful dreams, scored mean circles and scars into their once-gorgeous throats. (Glave 237)

As this passage illuminates, the three rapists were traumatized in the past by their social environment, and they also carry the traumatic history of their enslaved or possibly lynched ancestors with them. As Glave stated in a reading of his short story,

the circles around the necks of the men establish a literary kinship to the ex-slaves portrayed in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as they signify the special burden with which the three boys grew up as impoverished black children. However, I do not only read the circles as an image commenting on the effects of racism. Rather, I want to suggest that "the fear of fear" dominating the three perpetrators is also significantly motivated by the stress they experience while trying to conceal their identities as black gay men. None of them wants to be termed gay in the eyes of his community, and Cassandra's rape is supposed to reaffirm their conforming, ironically "non-threatening," heterosexuality. Cassandra's victimization takes place in the dark where "all are hidden now, and all are hard" (244). The victim's forced exposure is cruelly ironic in so far as it serves to prevent the feelings of the perpetrators from being exposed to themselves or each other. Hence, the three men *mask* their "fear of fear" with an emblem of heterosexist masculinity: the *exposure* and invasion of a female body.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this criminal form of coping with identity loss is Robbie's rape of Cassandra. Robbie is actually aware of being gay but cannot come out to his friends. His sole motivation in raping the girl is his desire to prove to himself and to his friends that he is in fact a man conforming to stereotypical concepts of African American heterosexual masculinity. Gene Jarrett has suggested that "[t]he rape serves partially to *de-lesbianize* Cassandra, through which the men try to reaffirm their blackness, heterosexuality, and masculinity" (1254). Not only does the rape "de-lesbianize" the victim, it also "de-homosexualizes" the perpetrator, who may have ambivalent feelings about engaging in heterosexual violence. I argue that Glave portrays the rape as a crime that is not only terrifying from the perspective of the victim. Robbie is conflicted about forcing Cassandra to submit to him as the rape goes against his sexual attraction to men:

For now he must be a man for them. Must show his steel. Robbie don't be fronting, he prays they think, Robbie be hard. Will they like you better, Robbie, then if you be hard? Will the big boys finally love you, take you in, Robbie, if you be hard? (Glave 242)

While the passage points to Robbie's humanity, it simultaneously demonstrates to what extent his humanity and selfhood have been stained: not one of his thoughts is for the victim; he only focuses on the pain he feels because of concealing his gay identity. His personal "fear of fear" seems to be justified in his mind. Ultimately, his two friends reward him for his behavior as a rapist when they pass a redeeming verdict that absolves him of all suspicions regarding his sexuality: "He a man, all right. Robbie! Ain't no faggot, yo. Not like we *heard*. They laugh" (243). That is, for Robbie, ironically the abnormal behavior of committing a rape constitutes a mimicry of his desired normalcy, i.e., the ability to be a heterosexual black man.

Robbie trades his black gay self for the identity of the stereotypical black rapist. The story juxtaposes his violent rape of Cassandra with the tender thoughts to which he "can't go back" (243). What Robbie tries not to recall is his freedom in a relationship with another black man: "All up in his arms . . . one of [his] boys, Darrel J. In his arms. Where nobody couldn't see. Didn't have to be hard" (242). The hardness Robbie feels

during the rape not only comments on masculine sexuality but also alludes to the difficulty Robbie has with this situation. While his new rapacious masculinity makes him an accepted member of his group, he has to sacrifice the unity of his self to occupy the position of the closeted black gay man acting as a straight rapist. Robbie's only memory of himself as a person with a whole self and a strong identity is tied to his long-lost relationship with Darrell J.: "*and I was I was Robbie Robbie Robbie Darrel J. together we was*" (243). It is only with the help of these eroticized memories that Robbie can motivate himself to perform the sexual act that deeply violates both Cassandra and himself.

The character of Robbie particularly astounded its creator, Thomas Glave. Glave remarks to Gene Jarrett in "A Song to Pass On: An Interview with Thomas Glave":

Robbie's denial of who he really is, and his obsessive insistence that he is not *that awful thing*—homo whatever—results in—what? Horrendous violence enacted upon someone else: rape as a performance and confirmation of ultimate and absolute heterosexual maleness, [. . .] [Robbie is] deeply troubled by the fact that he's a black male, coded by a racist society to be exactly what he turns out to be, a rapist. [. . .] I found that discovery truly fascinating—that someone would prefer to be a gang-rapist [to being] a homosexual. But in a patriarchal, misogynist society, violence against women in order to prove one's manliness will probably prevail every time over the vileness of being "like" a woman, that is, homosexual. (1230)

That is, Glave makes it very clear that his story politicizes the "anxious gynophobia" plaguing a black community pressured by racism, sexism, and heteronormativity and that one cannot merely read Cassandra's rape in "Whose Song?" as an isolated, independent incident of violence. Rather, Cassandra's rape becomes symptomatic of a black culture forced to be at odds with the successful integration of all possible identity markers, including homosexuality.

The portrayal of Bernard's rape of Cassandra also points to the young man's deep insecurity regarding his sexuality. However, as opposed to Robbie's doubts, Bernard's conflicts are based on different experiences. While Robbie at one point willingly entered into a relationship with a man he loved, Bernard was sexually abused by the older boys in his childhood foster home. For him, Cassandra's rape becomes a ritual of washing himself clean of any suspicions that he might, in fact, harbor homoerotic desires, as these desires are tragically bound up with his experience of abuse. At the same time, he reenacts his own rapes in an attempt to rewrite his own history: instead of seeing himself as the rape victim that he is—a casualty of a dysfunctional black family in a racist world—he destroys the potential he has to sympathize and empathize with Cassandra, thus forsaking any promise of solidarity among identities that are not based on the exact same markers shared by two people or groups. Rather, he manages to compartmentalize his identity to the point of viewing himself only as the rapist of a woman.

Cassandra's situation mirrors Bernard's childhood experiences to a great degree. However, because Bernard is conditioned to perceive his environment in strongly gendered terms, he refuses to acknowledge any parallels between his experience and her suffering. He denies himself access to his own childhood image of being termed a "faggot ass punk" by the boys who raped him repeatedly (244). His memories of being "[o]n the floor. Under the bed. Under. Bleeding under" anticipate Cassandra's condition of being "ripped open" after the rape (245, 247). While Bernard seeks to eradicate his own memories of being abused by older boys, he only manages to rekindle them. Ultimately, his participation in this crime reinscribes his own trauma, and his cruel effort to rid himself of his childhood memories is destined to fail.

In many ways, Bernard's actions speak to the stereotypical assumption that all homosexual contact comes about willingly, especially in the case of black men. Glave has asked in his interview conducted by Jarrett, "Is the rape of a man ever newsworthy, beyond spectacle? Or, God knows, the rape of a black man, who can't be raped, but can only be a rapist?" (1235). Society does not acknowledge Bernard's victimization. It seems, therefore, that Bernard seeks to rewrite his own position as a black man who was raped as a child, but whose rape never happened officially, as black men are not allowed to expose a facet of their identity that may define them as *victims*. Such a move would demand too much sympathy from a society which believes in stereotypes to the point at which these stereotypes function as self-fulfilling prophecies. Thus, Bernard seeks to comply with racist heteronormative ideas by willingly identifying himself with the figure of the black rapist (who is deemed hyper-masculine), rather than the black rape victim (who is coded as hyper-feminine).

"Whose Song?" not only problematizes Cassandra's rape in conjunction with actual homosexual experiences. Gay fantasies also figure large in this story about make-believe straight black masculinity. Dee represents the figure of the seemingly heterosexual man who does not admit to having homoerotic fantasies. Unlike Robbie, Dee has never known the love of another man. His rape of Cassandra suggests that he uses her body to live out his repressed homoerotic fantasies in the face of a hyper-masculinized official identity. Dee's life depends on his image as an invincible heterosexual black man who is not afraid to commit murder in retaliation for being "cut up" by another black man (Glave 246). Like Robbie and Bernard, Dee is also characterized as a deeply traumatized human being before he is shown to be a cruel rapist. As we learn, Dee "was discouraged, led into tunnels, and then of course was cut" by the racist social conditions that placed him on the bottom rung of society (246).

The last one to violate Cassandra during this crime, Dee appears to rape his victim anally. He is thrilled to find the body cavity that seems to him "so tight, down there" (246). His rape of Cassandra therefore mirrors possible homoerotic sexual practices. Dee masks his fascination with the possibly most masculine part of Cassandra's anatomy—and potential associations with homosexual intercourse or fantasies—with open insults of her sexual orientation. As he tells his friends while he sodomizes the victim, it is "[t]ime to bang the bulldagger out of her" (246). That is, Dee can only justify his homoerotic sexual fantasies within a hyper-masculine heterosexual framework. By raping Cassandra anally, he claims to actually uphold the laws of heteronormative desire, while in reality breaking them.

I want to suggest that within the framework I have established, Cassandra's rape does more than fulfill the individual and isolated fantasies Robbie, Bernard, and Dee have in conjunction with homoerotic desires. The atrocity they commit together, the seemingly casual gang rape, is in and of itself a homosocial activity as it paradoxically renders the maximally exposed female victim invisible under the "turpentine rag" that gags her (247). Beyond that, I argue, the three men see the gang rape as an acceptable heteronormative outlet for living out homoerotic desires while simultaneously cloaking and closeting them as purely heterosexual acts. All three rapists demand and find temporary satisfaction in the same place that they seek out on Cassandra's body. The victim's body thus becomes a corporeal map on which the three men inscribe their unconscious desires to be sexually active with other men. Cassandra's body becomes a vessel containing the abjected desires of Robbie, Bernard, and Dee. In a sense, the three men are sexually active together, yet not quite with one another. Each one of them seeks satisfaction where the others have just found it or will look for it: in and on Cassandra's appallingly violated body.

Thus, I suggest, there is an additional, homoerotic, dimension to the nervous feelings of Robbie, Bernard, and Dee after they have finished their crime: "Focusing on flies, not meeting each other's eyes" and feeling "shame" (247), the three are not only disturbed by having committed an officially punishable crime. They also feel shamed by their silent recognition of the fact that they have just lived through a homoerotic sexual experience that was actually meant to cancel out any kind of homoerotic desire in them. The three rapists are thus caught in this paradox: the attempt to strengthen their heterosexual masculinity through the gang rape ends up undermining the strength of their convictions.

While this recognition comes to the three men after the crime, I want to suggest that the homoerotic dimension is very much part of the rape from the beginning. The story sets up the rape as the logical consequence of racist patriarchal desires. Robbie, Bernard, and Dee have been taught to desire Cassandra as she is "Lightskinned, lean. Lovelier to them for the light. [. . .] The darkskinned ones aren't even hardly what they want. They have been taught, have learned well and well" (235). Since Cassandra "Hasn't known a man yet," she meets all the criteria of what white patriarchy has coded as a desirable woman (235). Initially the three men thus select her as a victim following racist patriarchal ideas, acting on impulses they were socially trained to have.

Having established that the three men use the rape as a covert exploration of homoerotic desire, I want to suggest that they actually target Cassandra as a rape victim for reasons beyond the color of her skin or her virginity. The three rapists single out the fifteen-year-old lesbian deliberately as she represents many things they cannot be. Dee mocks his gagged victim by blurting out, "They be saying this bitch done got into some bulldagger shit" (245). In light of the limits imposed on the masculinity of the three rapists, it appears that they envy Cassandra for expressing her love for an individual of her own gender. While Robbie, Bernard, and Dee cannot even consider the idea of being gay, Cassandra is in love with "Tanya, girlfriend, sixteen and fine" (235). Raping Cassandra, I argue, the men do not actually want to possess the girl, but her brazen desire for her own gender. It is this quality they seek in her, and it appears that raping the girl is one way of coming close to homoerotic desire by covering it up with heterosexual violence.

The mythology of the ancient Greek Cassandra also sheds light on the crime the contemporary black female character has to endure. The mythological Cassandra possessed the gift of seeing the future. Ironically, the Cassandra of "Whose Song?" meets her misfortune "[a]lone that day, the day after, yellow girl, walking out by the golden grayswishing Sound, higher up along the Shore Road way and higher, higher up where no one ever walks alone, higher still by where the dead bodies every year turn up," not being able to foresee the dangers she may encounter in the area in which she walks (238). It is, however, possible that Robbie, Bernard, and Dee assault her for fearing that, as a lesbian, she is able to identify their secret homoerotic longings. They would thus punish her for her suspected gift of "seeing" who they really are: black men insecure of their sexualities. "Whose Song's?" black Cassandra meets a fate that is very similar to the mythological Cassandra's. The mythological Cassandra is raped during the fall of Troy, and Cassandra of "Whose Song?" is violated even more brutally. However, while mythology has preserved the tale of Cassandra and her rape in Troy, black Cassandra's rape "will not appear on tomorrow's morning news" (248). Her African American identity deems the crime unspectacular, especially as it is not infrequent. As the story insists, the "song," or the recounting of the crime, is also meant to speak "for that yellow girl, dark girl, brown girl homely fine, everygirl displaced, neither free nor named" (237). Through his writing, Glave forges a link between ancient mythology and contemporary identity politics, emphasizing a black feminist perspective on Cassandra's experience and stressing the different ways in which black and white victims are received by their society.

"Whose Song?" is therefore far more than a narrative recounting a crime that is frequent among the likes of Robbie, Bernard, and Dee. The story makes a concerted effort to locate an isolated incident within a larger sociopolitical framework that has prevented three black men from discovering or embracing their true sexual identities. The fact that "Whose Song?" focuses so little on Cassandra serves not to undermine her importance. Rather, it points to the idea that Cassandra, while targeted for certain reasons, is raped not only because she is a lesbian. Instead, her immense suffering connects her with other black women who also became the victims of men who were unable to understand the full extent of their own identities. Glave's short story ultimately tries to locate society's involvement in crimes like the one portrayed. In his *Indiana Review* interview, Glave has remarked about the communal free indirect discourse in which he wrote many of the stories in *Whose Song?*:

And so often, too, those 'we' voices seem to speak out of a sense of collective responsibility. They address, perhaps, the lack of responsibility, the lack of accountability that would often result in tragedy. Where were the eyes that were watching? Where were the hands that were necessary to prevent this? Where was the consciousness necessary to prevent these events? *What accountability do we all have?* (95; emphasis added)

In the end, "Whose Song?" is a story that reads the harm inflicted by Robbie, Bernard, and Dee on Cassandra as a repetition of the social, political, and historical harm

inflicted upon black men like them. The tragic and violent social compartmentalization of the identities of Robbie, Bernard, and Dee ultimately eradicates any potential for solidarity that transcends the confines of their own group. To feel for Cassandra would mean to be equated with her most prominent identity marker, her homosexuality. In a racist society ruled by “anxious gynophobia,” the three men feel compelled to adopt a stereotypical black form of masculinity to avoid being associated with gay identities, identities they have been trained to view as bringing social death.

NOTES

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1. For a post-positivist realist approach to the assessment of homosexual identities, see also Éva Tettenborn’s “Empowering the Past: Mourning and Melancholia in Twentieth-Century African American Literature.”
2. Gene Jarrett also notes a parallel between the two short stories (1254).
3. Here I draw on Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s landmark definition of African American free indirect discourse as proposed in *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*.
4. For an extended discussion of the cause-and-effect relationship between unspeakable trauma and lost testimony, see also Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.

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