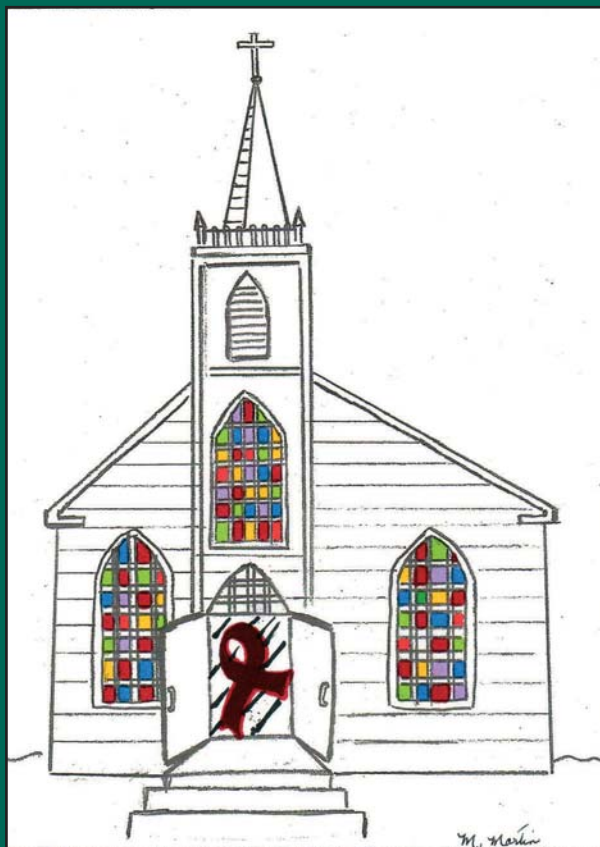


MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MEMORIAL STUDIES IN RELIGION,
CULTURE, AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

AIDS, SEXUALITY, AND THE BLACK CHURCH

MAKING THE WOUNDED WHOLE



ANGELIQUE HARRIS

AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church: Making the Wounded Whole is a revealing account of AIDS activism within Black churches in New York City. AIDS has taken a devastating toll on the Black community. Blacks make up approximately 13% of the total United States population, but almost half of all those infected with HIV in the U.S. are Black. Previous research has claimed that these high rates are due, in large part, to the lack of an immediate response by Black Church leaders and officials when AIDS first began to strike Blacks in the early 1980s. The Black Church can play a major role in providing AIDS education to its parishioners and community. However, feeling uncomfortable with addressing sexuality and homosexuality, many Black churches have simply avoided addressing AIDS believing that such conversations were inappropriate for church. As a result, The Balm in Gilead was formed in 1992 to encourage AIDS awareness among Black religious institutions. The Balm in Gilead is now the largest organization to work exclusively with the Black Church to promote AIDS education and awareness.

In *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church*, Angelique Harris examines the formation of the Black Church AIDS movement and the organizational development of The Balm in Gilead. This research begins from the perspective that the Black Church is working to address AIDS, and details how this work is being done. Harris couches her findings within social movement theory, the sociology of health and illness, social marketing, and the social construction of knowledge. This text provides a unique lens through which to examine AIDS discourse within the Black community. *AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church* is essential reading for AIDS scholars, researchers, and community activists alike.



Angelique Harris is Assistant Professor of Sociology at California State University, Fullerton.

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR **AIDS, Sexuality,
and the Black Church**

“This fine book, a thoughtful study of the response of the Black Church to the AIDS epidemic, is of value for students of the sociology of religion, of race, and of health. But perhaps it is most valuable as an exploration in the construction of a social problem, and as an offer of hope for the enlightened, caring development of solutions.”

*Barbara Katz Rothman, Professor of Sociology, City University of New York;
Past President, Society for the Study of Social Problems*

“This is an important book about AIDS in Black communities that details the significant role that Black churches and community-based organizations have played in responding to this crisis, especially in Black communities. Harris’s discussion of *The Balm in Gilead* is especially instructive for all those interested in how one community-based organization helped to generate a movement in response to HIV and AIDS in Black communities. In the pages of this text we learn how some members of ‘the Black Church’ were mobilized to use their power to confront the epidemic of HIV and AIDS. This book is a necessary and important read for all those concerned with the fight against AIDS, especially as it continues to take hold in Black communities.”

*Cathy J. Cohen, David and Mary Winton Green Professor of Political Science,
University of Chicago; Author of Boundaries of Blackness:
AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics*

AIDS, Sexuality, and the Black Church

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Studies in Religion, Culture, and Social Development

Mozella G. Mitchell
General Editor

Vol. 11



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Angelique Harris

**AIDS, Sexuality,
and the Black Church**

Making the Wounded Whole



PETER LANG

New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
Frankfurt • Berlin • Brussels • Vienna • Oxford

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Harris, Angelique C.

AIDS, sexuality, and the black church:
making the wounded whole / Angelique Harris.

p. cm. — (Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial studies
in religion, culture, and social development; v. 11)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

1. African American churches. 2. AIDS (Disease)—Religious aspects—
Christianity. 3. Church work with the sick—United States. 4. Sex—Religious
aspects—Christianity. 5. Balm in Gilead (Organization). I. Title.

BR563.N4H363 259'.41969792008996073—dc22 2010017700

ISBN 978-1-4539-0024-6

ISSN 1052-181X

Bibliographic information published by **Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**.

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the “Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie”; detailed bibliographic data is available
on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de/>.

Cover illustration by Marva P. Martin

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability
of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity
of the Council of Library Resources.



© 2010 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
29 Broadway, 18th floor, New York, NY 10006
www.peterlang.com

All rights reserved.

Reprint or reproduction, even partially, in all forms such as microfilm,
xerography, microfiche, microcard, and offset strictly prohibited.

Printed in Germany

This book is dedicated to the loving memory of Louise Marie Gumbs – a brilliant artist, friend, and partner – whose love and support will always be my inspiration!

Table of Contents

Acknowledgments	xi
------------------------------	-----------

Chapter One

Engaging the Power of Prayer.....	1
Situating this Project.....	3
The Black Church	4
Health and the Black Community	7
The Balm in Gilead	8
Research Methodology	9
Ethnography and Participant Observation	10
In-Depth Interviews.....	11
Content Analysis.....	12
Data Collection.....	12
Aims of this Text.....	14

Chapter Two

Within the Rafters: The Black Church AIDS Movement.....	17
Social Movements	18
Leadership.....	22
The Movement Begins	27
The Balm in Gilead	31
Conclusion.....	34

Chapter Three

Sex, Drugs, and the Holy Ghost: The AIDS Identity in the Context of the Black Church.....	37
AIDS and Its Stigmatized “Sick-Role”	38
Constructions of AIDS as an Illness and a Disease	39
AIDS and Stigma	42
AIDS—Them Versus Us	44
AIDS and the Black Church.....	48

Drug Use.....	50
Sexuality.....	58
Black Churches Confront AIDS	61
AIDS Identity.....	63
Conclusion	65

Chapter Four

Framing for the Church: AIDS Facts.....	67
The Social Construction of Science and Medicine	68
Science	69
AIDS Facts	72
“Frames” and AIDS	76
The Balm in Gilead’s “Facts”.....	78
Reframing the Facts	79
Conclusion	89

Chapter Five

Selling Disease: Social Marketing and Its Application to AIDS Awareness within the Black Church.....	91
Marketing Social Behaviors	93
Marketing AIDS.....	95
The Balm in Gilead “Sells” AIDS.....	99
Reaching the Audience	109
Social Marketing Drawbacks	116
Conclusion	120

Chapter Six

Tending the Flock: The Black Church AIDS Movement Continues and This Book Concludes	123
Contributions	124
Social Movement Theory	125
Sociology of Health and Illness	126
Social Marketing	128
The Social Construction of a Social Problem.....	130
Policy Concerns.....	132
Funding	132
Faith-Based Initiatives.....	134
Public Health Concerns	138
The Black Church Continues the Movement	139
Conclusion	142

Appendix A	145
Appendix B	147
Notes	151
Bibliography	161
Index	181

Acknowledgments

I have so many people to thank in aiding me in the completion of this project. I'd first like to thank all of my respondents. Their comments, insights, suggestions and the open and frank conversations they had with me not only deepened my knowledge of AIDS discourse within the Black Church, but it also provided me with my awareness of this unique social movement. I am particularly indebted to Pernessa Seele and her openness and kindness in allowing me to study *The Balm* in such depth.

This book is based on my dissertation research, and as such, I am indebted to my committee members and professors at The Graduate Center, City University of New York, whose incredible feedback and guidance made not only my dissertation possible, but this book possible. In particular I would like to thank Barbara Katz Rothman, Leith Mullings, Juan Battle, and Lisa Jean Moore. There are not enough words to express my gratitude.

I also thank my former colleagues, classmates, and dissertation writing group mates from The Graduate Center, in particular Antonio "Jay" Pastrana, Jr., Colin Jerolmack, Kevin McGruder, Lauren McDonald, Alan Takeall, Alex Welcome, Martine Hackett, Tracy Chu, Alena Singleton, Michael Dumas, Mehmet Kucukozer, and Randol Contreras for helping me to formulate my ideas and commenting on early drafts of the dissertation. I also thank all those people who I met at conferences and AIDS educational events, many of whom gave me feedback and suggestions on this project. I'd especially like to thank Alia Tyner-Mullings and Niki-sha Williams for being not only incredible friends, but providing me with an incredible level of support – not only in all of my research endeavours, but in life.

I'd like to thank my students Omar Mushtaq and Alexis Mesko, at California State University, Fullerton who helped for-

mat and structure the book manuscript. I am indebted to the Dean's Office in the Humanities and Social Sciences at California State University, Fullerton, and in particular Dean Angela Della Volpe, for their generous support in providing the funding for the book. I thank Gail Smith and the MAGNET Fellowship at the Graduate Center, CUNY. This funding allowed me to complete the research for this project.

I also thank the *Western Journal of Black Studies* and the *Journal of African American Studies* for permission to reprint two chapters.

I am so fortunate to have such wonderful family and friends. I'd especially like to thank my aunts: Ruby Harris, Eulene Harris, and Marva Martin for their excellent comments and suggestions on this book and for pushing (and inspiring me) not only in school, but in life. I'd also like to thank Kimberly Felix, Robert MacEachern, and Eric Farkas for their support and reminding me that there is a world outside of academia.

I am truly indebted to my parents, Cassandra and Glen Harris for supporting me in every endeavor I attempt, and this book was no different. I especially thank my mother, Cassandra Harris who consistently cheered me along the way and kept me sane.

Although Louise Gumbs did not live to see the book in print, she, more than anyone, helped in the completion of the dissertation which formed the basis of this book and as such, I not only thank and acknowledge her, I also dedicate this book to her.

I would also like to give a special acknowledgment to Estelle Disch, my professor from the University of Massachusetts, Boston, who recently retired. If it were not for the "Insiders and Outsiders" course I took with her during my sophomore year in college and her persuading me to drop my initial goals of being an FBI agent in exchange for a career in academia, I most certainly would not be a sociologist.

Introduction: Engaging the Power of Prayer

Almost 30 years ago, a Los Angeles doctor first reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (see Appendix A for a list of all abbreviations used in this book) a strange “sickness” among five gay men. Since then, what has come to be known as the autoimmune deficiency syndrome, or AIDS, has completely changed the world in which we live. AIDS has challenged notions of sickness and health, as often those infected with AIDS can be physically healthy but technically sick. AIDS has also given rise to a number of conspiracy theories regarding its origins and efforts to treat and prevent it and has cost economies around the world many billions of dollars. Faced with the possibility of death from AIDS, members of marginalized groups and communities across the United States, ranging from the gay men of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) (Cohen 1998; Stoller 1998; Gamson 1991) to the sex workers of the California Prostitutes Education Project (later renamed California Prevention Education Project) (Stoller 1998), mobilized to bring awareness of AIDS, its medical treatments, and services.

As a social and medical phenomenon AIDS has shed light on the effect that societal views and cultural beliefs have on how we understand illness and disease. This book explores how AIDS is socially and culturally constructed and the process by which AIDS knowledge, i.e., the information concerning its transmission and progression, is produced and disseminated. Social constructionism argues that knowledge is a product of a particular culture or society (Lupton 2000). The social construction of health and illness is

central to medical sociology and helps one gain a better understanding of how social forces shape ideas of health, diagnosis, disease, illness, and death (Lupton 2000; Brown 1995). Analyzing the ways in which AIDS has been constructed does not aim to diminish the devastation that AIDS has had on the lives of millions of people around the world. As Paula A. Treichler notes, “[o]f course, AIDS is a real disease syndrome, damaging and killing real human beings... Yet, with its genuine potential for global devastation, the AIDS epidemic is simultaneously an epidemic of a transmissible lethal disease and an epidemic of meaning or signification” (1999: 11).

Although AIDS is an illness with very real symptoms and often results in death, AIDS, like other diseases, also has a number of associated meanings (Freund and McGuire 1999; Lorber 1997; Weitz 1991; Goldstein 1990). It is a syndrome of a weakened immune system, caused by a virus that is spread through bodily fluids, but AIDS is more than simply an illness. What we know about AIDS is derived from the meanings we associated with the taboo nature of HIV transmission, associations linked to homosexuals, sex workers, and drug addicts. As a result, AIDS, as a disease, as well as our knowledge and the meanings we associate with it, are socially constructed (Null and Feast 2002; Freund and McGuire 1999; Barbour and Huby 1998; Epstein 1996; Weitz 1991; Goldstein 1990); or as Cindy Patton (1990) contends, “invented.” By claiming that AIDS is “invented,” Patton argues not that someone created the actual disease, but that social understandings of AIDS are invented.

AIDS information and meanings – such as those associated with susceptibility, protection measures, treatment, and stigmas – have been, and continue to be, received by various communities and groups differently. I extend this notion to argue that AIDS, like all concepts that carry social significance – gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and health – is constructed differently depending on the community producing and receiving the knowledge. Consequently, knowledge and perceptions of AIDS may vary. For example, the social construction of AIDS is different for the gay community than for the Black¹ community. Since the beginning of the epidemic, Blacks have had the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in

the U.S. (Cohen 1999). Yet it was gay men who immediately mobilized and formed the world's first AIDS service organization, Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC). Despite the evidence of disproportionate rates of infection, most Blacks initially saw AIDS as something that did not affect them – it was commonly perceived as a White gay disease (Levenson 2004; Cohen 1999; Cohen 1996). Therefore, it took members of the Black community several years to develop large-scale mobilizations², mobilizations that never matched those of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community (Quimby and Friedman 2003; Cohen 1999).

Blacks, like all racial and ethnic groups, are diverse, and the Black community is made up of a number of smaller communities. This book examines AIDS and the impact it has had on the community of Black churches, their congregants, and leaders, what I will simply refer to as the Black Church³. It explores how one community-based organization (CBO), The Balm in Gilead, framed AIDS as a social problem for the Black Church and created a social movement based on a reconstructed version of AIDS knowledge, encouraging Black religious institutions to address AIDS in ways that coincide with their constructions or perceptions of AIDS.

Situating this Project

Currently, Blacks have the highest HIV/AIDS rates, accounting for over half of all HIV/AIDS diagnoses in the U.S. This statistic is disproportionately high considering that Blacks were 12.3% of the total U.S. population in 2000 (U.S. Census 2006). As detailed in Chapter Three, one of the reasons cited for the high rates of HIV in the Black community was its slow⁴ response to addressing the virus (Cohen 1999). The taboo topics of sexuality and drug use associated with AIDS played a role in this (Levenson 2004; Cohen 1999; Dalton 1989). These sensitive issues were difficult for many Blacks – particularly religious leaders – to discuss openly. Scholars (Brown 2003; Fullilove and Fullilove 1999; Weatherford and Weatherford 1999; Shelp and Sunderland 1992) have argued that religious influence may have played a role in this denial. The old saying, “as goes the Church, so goes the community,” speaks volumes to the influence of the Church on the Black community, and

since the Black Church did not address AIDS, neither did other members of the Black community.

The Black Church

The Black Church has historically been the most influential institution in the Black Community (Carruthers, Haynes, and Wright 2005; Wilmore 2004; Brown 2003; Williams and Dixie 2003; Raboteau 2001; Billingsley 1999; Sernett 1999; Gaines 1996; Howard 1965/1989; Frazier 1964/1969; DuBois 1903/1994). Traditionally, it has been made up of seven Black American Protestant denominations that had their origins in slavery and emancipation: the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church; the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (AMEZ) Church; the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Incorporated (NBC); the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated (NBCA); the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC); and the Church of God in Christ (COGIC) (Lincoln and Mamiya 2003/1990). New Christian denominations with Black leadership continue to develop; these new houses of worship model themselves on the traditions of the Black Church. This book is less concerned with defining what the Black Church is, than what the Black Church does and what it means to millions in the Black community. In discussing the importance of religion in the lives of Blacks, Mary Pattillo-McCoy (1998) points out that, based on empirical measurements, Blacks are among the world's most religious people, as noted by high frequencies of church membership, attendance, and prayer.

Researcher Edward Wimberely (1979) believes that the Black Church served as a safe haven and second family for many Blacks during the hardships of slavery and later Reconstruction and the Great Migration. This tradition of family and community continues today. Since Blacks were denied access to public space and civic institutions for much of American history, the Church served as "a school, a bank, a benevolent society, a political organization, a party hall, and a spiritual base" (Pattillo-McCoy 1998: 769) for many Blacks. Because of this, the Black Church has played a key role in political and social justice activities⁵, (Lincoln and Mamiya 2003/1990) and it is also known for encouraging racial pride and