

## **pÿ The Blaquer [Blacker] Church: Queerness as a Synch pÿ Jones, Jr. s The Prophets**

**Auteur :** Klein, Sandra

**Promoteur(s) :** Tunca, Daria

**Faculté :** Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres

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Université de Liège  
**Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres**  
Département de Langues Modernes : Linguistique, Littérature et Traduction

**The “Blaqueer [Blacker]” Church:  
Queerness as a Syncretic Religion in Robert  
Jones, Jr.’s *The Prophets***

Mémoire présenté par Sandra KLEIN en vue de l’obtention du grade de  
Master en Langues et Lettres Modernes, orientation germaniques, à finalité approfondie

Promotrice : Dr. Daria TUNCA

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“Why is it that, everywhere else in the world, gay  
people are a blessing, and in the modern world they are  
a curse?”

- Malidoma Somé

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# 1. Introduction

Most people, when hearing about the 1963 March on Washington, think of Martin Luther King, Jr. Indeed, during the rally, King gave his famous speech “I Have a Dream” and shared with the crowd the dream he had for his four children (King qtd. in “March on Washington”). His vision for a future in which African Americans could grow up peacefully and be treated as whites’ equals has since become part of History (“March on Washington”). Schools across the world teach their students about King and his speech. In the United States, King is honored on Martin Luther King Day. With a day off in King’s name every year, each new generation of young Americans will, undoubtedly, remember him well. However, there is no holiday for Black activist Bayard Rustin, King’s advisor, and the main organizer of the March on Washington (Slack). While Rustin played a very important role for the civil rights movement, he had to remain in the background because of his sexual orientation (Collins, 114). Had Rustin, like King, been a heterosexual father, he too might have been a central figure in history books.

Similarly, because he was gay, well-known writer James Baldwin struggled to be recognized as a representative for the Black community during the civil rights era. Indeed, Douglas Field explains that Baldwin was the target of insults and “attacks on his authority as a (homosexual) racial spokesperson” (Field 460). Field posits that, because he had been verbally assaulted by fellow African Americans, Baldwin adopted an ambiguous attitude toward queerness: he insisted that sexuality was “a private matter” and rejected labels such as “homosexual,” “bisexual,” or “gay” (Field 458-460). Moreover, Baldwin argued that issues related to race were more important than those related to queerness (Field 459). This reflects the contrast between his support of the civil rights movement and the criticism he addressed to the gay liberation movement (Field 458, 460). In addition, Baldwin initially shied away from writing characters that were both Black *and* queer (Field 457-58). Indeed, his novel *Giovanni’s Room* (1956), while it “has emerged as a key work of twentieth century gay fiction,” depicts the relationship of two white men (Field 458). Finally, the manner in which homosexuality is represented in the novel is debated, as some critics see it as utterly negative (Field 458). It is only at the end of the 1960s that Baldwin became more vocal on (Black) queer matters and that he wrote Black queer characters in *Tell Me How Long the Train’s Been Gone* (1968) (Field 473). In other words, to fit in as a Black public figure, Baldwin had had, for some time, to reject his queer identity and focus almost exclusively on his racial one. It might be argued that, for the same reason, he did not let both identities co-



exist in his characters' lives at that time. Therefore, the pressures that Baldwin faced because of his homosexuality led to an erasure of Black queer visibility in both fictional and non-fictional worlds.

Such an erasure is highly problematic because it perpetuates and feeds on a colonial myth that represents Black people as driven by primitive reproductive instinct, and hence, as heterosexual. Patricia Hill Collins explains that the myth was first designed and propagated by whites to justify colonization and slavery: the Africans and their enslaved descendants were presented as mere animals driven by their sexual impulses (Collins 98-105).<sup>1</sup> Seeing that those impulses were guided by nature, they were perceived as inherently heterosexual: a species' instinct is to survive, and to this end, to reproduce (Collins 105). Later, Black people themselves interiorized the image of the heterosexual Black (Collins 106). Thus, to be Black meant that one had to have black skin *and* be heterosexual (Collins 106). In the United States, this position was – and still is – largely supported by the Black Church, which offers its congregations heteronormative interpretations of the Christian Bible condemning queer behaviors (Collins, 107). Due to its central role in the fight against white oppression, the Black Church lies at the heart of the Black community (Gates xviii-xix; Ward 494). As a result, such problematic religious teachings are spread on a large scale among African Americans (Ward 494). Additionally, as heterosexuality became a prominent symbol of Blackness, queerness, in Black communities, came to be seen as “un-African” (Collins 106-108). Thus, queerness has been defined as “a white disease,” in the sense that it can only “affect” white people (Collins 108). From the civil rights era onward, in the midst of fighting against blatant racism, African Americans have been holding on tight to their group identity, its symbols, and the assumption that their sexual orientation is in line with the heteronormative standards of the United States. Therefore, Black queers have had to remain invisible (Collins 114). According to Patricia Hill Collins, the lack of Black queer visibility has worsened the problem since it reinforces the assumption that one cannot be both Black and queer (Collins 94).

However, Black queer invisibility has been challenged over the past decades. Among other initiatives, efforts have been made to acknowledge the too often forgotten role played

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<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, the use of the term *enslaved* will be preferred over that of *slave* to refer to a person who was held in bondage. Indeed, it has been argued that the word *slave* suggests that the enslaved person “was, at [their] core, a slave” (“Why We Use ‘Enslaved’”). The word *enslaved*, on the other hand, emphasizes the humanity of the enslaved, showing that “bondage was not [their] core existence” (“Why We Use ‘Enslaved’”).

by Black queer figures in History. For instance, in 2013, Bayard Rustin posthumously received the Medal of Freedom for his activism (Slack). In the musical realm, queer rapper Lil Nas X has risen to fame with unapologetically queer lyrics and video clips for which he accumulates billions of downloads on *Spotify* and hundreds of millions of views on *YouTube*. While *Time* underlines that there are very few Black queer artists in American pop-culture, they believe that Lil Nas X's success reflects a promising change in mentalities ("It Feels Like I'm Chosen to Do This"). In literature, Black queer authors and stories have been more abundant: among others, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, and of course, James Baldwin, built an important catalogue of Black queer novels and essays that constitutes a solid foundation for the next generation of queer writers such as Tarell Alvin McCraney or Robert Jones, Jr.

While all those examples reconnect being Black with being queer by their mere public existence, Robert Jones, Jr.'s debut novel, *The Prophets* (2021), makes the reconciliation of both identities central to its plot. Indeed, the novel depicts the love that unites two enslaved men, Samuel and Isaiah, on a Mississippi plantation and the reverberations that such a relationship has on its communities – both Black and white – as the enslaved are being converted to Christianity. Considering that racism and hypersexuality have been intertwined by the colonialist discourse to better oppress Africans and their descendants, understanding how such a myth is deconstructed is crucial. Therefore, this dissertation will focus on how *The Prophets* proposes to see queerness as a syncretic religion informed by a reinterpretation of the Christian Bible inspired by Black theology.

To do so, I will first provide a historical background in which I will give a brief overview of the importance of African and Christian religions in the lives of African Americans from the time of slavery up until the present day. I will then summarize the novel. My analysis will start with my first chapter, "Circles and Lines," which will be divided into four parts. The first three parts, "Gender," "Gender Hierarchy," and "Queerness" will focus on the perceptions of gender, gender hierarchy and queerness in the West and in Africa in the novel as well as examine how these perceptions are informed by religions. The fourth part, "Circles come before lines," will show that while the novel portrays African and Christian religions as being very different, these religions are reconciled in the narrative. My second chapter, "The Blacker Church" will show that *The Prophets* proposes to see queerness as a syncretic religion, combining African and Christian beliefs and detail the ways in which the Blacker Theology is different from the Black Theology of the Black

Church and promotes liberation from all systems of oppression rather than from racial oppression only.

Finally, the title of this dissertation, “Blaqueer [Blacker] Church: Queerness as a Syncretic Religion in Robert Jones, Jr.’s *The Prophets*” is inspired by one of Jones’s newsletters, referenced in the bibliography of this work, and titled “Blaqueer [Blacker] stories” (Jones). As this dissertation will show that Jones’s novel reconciles Blackness and queerness and portrays queerness as a means of liberation for Black people, the wordplay seems fitting.

## 2. Historical background

“One of the great paradoxes of race in America is that the religion of the oppressor, Christianity, became the religion of the oppressed and the means of their liberation.”

- The Reverend Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book*, qtd. in Gates (148)

Religion lies at the center of this dissertation. To begin with, it is one of the main themes in *The Prophets*, as the title and synopsis of the novel indicate. Moreover, it is the focus of my analysis. Indeed, as mentioned in the introduction, this work will show that *The Prophets* represents queerness as a religion that serves as a means of survival. Thus, it is necessary to understand the significant role that spiritual movements have played in the lives of African Americans and their enslaved ancestors. I will therefore give a brief overview of the History of Christianity and West African religions – that is, religions from the slaving regions – in the Black communities of the United States.<sup>2</sup> In the process, I will position myself outside of the political debates that wish to assess whether Christianity has had a positive or negative overall impact on the enslaved and their descendants (Gates xv). Indeed, I will show that the influence of Christianity is complex and should not be reduced to such a simple dichotomy.

To do so, I will first explain how Christianity was used by white colonizers to justify and facilitate the oppression of Africans and their descendants. Then, I will show that the religion was reinterpreted and reappropriated by Black people – enslaved and free – who turned it into a tool of resistance against white supremacy. Next, this historical overview will tackle the controversies surrounding Black Christianity. That is, I will address the sexism and homophobia that are often said to pervade Black churches. Subsequently, I will discuss the survival and incorporation of African dances, music, call-and-response patterns and spiritual possession in Christianity. Finally, I will focus on the conflicts that Black churches face as they negotiate their African and their American identities.

Christianity transformed the lives of millions of Africans and their descendants as it was used to justify the European colonial enterprise and slavery (Harvey 20). Indeed, the exploitation and enslavement of Africans, and their transportation to the Americas, were

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<sup>2</sup> Although Islam was transported from Africa to the United States along with the enslaved, “by far the greatest number of those Africans who fell victim to the Atlantic trade came from peoples who held the indigenous and traditional [African] beliefs of their fathers” (Raboteau 7). Considering this and the limited scope of my research, I will not discuss Islam in this dissertation. This historical section will focus only on Christianity and West African religions as spiritual influences for the Black community in the United States.

legitimized by the missionaries who claimed that those actions would christianize and, hence, save the heathens (Gates 30; Harvey 20). However, slaveholders in the British colonies were reticent to convert the enslaved as they felt that fellow Christians could not be held in bondage (Gates 22, 30; Raboteau 98). As a result, while Christianization was used to justify slavery, the enslaved were not converted in British territories (Gates 30). This was particularly problematic for the missionaries who engineered a new explanation for the servitude of the enslaved Africans and their descendants (Gates 30). They asserted that Christianization would not change the status of the enslaved because their skin color, not their heathenish state, determined their fate (Gates 30-31; Harvey 16-17, 19). To support this argument, the missionaries used passages from the Bible which they believed sanctioned racial hierarchy and slavery (Hopkins 31; Raboteau 152). Moreover, they convinced the slaveholders that introducing the enslaved to Christianity would make them more obedient: not only would the carefully selected passages from the Bible persuade Black people that their condition of bondage was divinely ordained as children of Ham, but they would also be taught devotion and obedience as paths to heaven (Gates 31; Hopkins 30-31). Thus, Christianity played an important part in the oppression of Black people not only by justifying slavery, but also by creating racial categories and hierarchies (Harvey 4).

However, while some enslaved people adopted the biblical justification of slavery that was forced upon them, others interpreted the Bible very differently (Gates 21; Raboteau 126). More specifically, they identified with the Israelites who lived in servitude in Egypt (Harvey 22; Raboteau 250-51). Thus, they believed that, just like the Israelites were rescued by Moses in Exodus, so they too would be freed (Harvey 33; Raboteau 250-51). This belief was supported by the biblical representation of God and Jesus as siding with the oppressed, which, to the enslaved, implied that both were opposed to bondage (Bradley 74; Gates 35; Walton qtd. in Gates 35). Consequently, Christianity provided hope as well as a means for the enslaved to assert their humanity and their worthiness as God's children (Harvey 47). Even more so, Christianity sparked violent rebellions such as Nat Turner's Rebellion in the United States, in which the enslaved revolted against the slaveholders and fought for their freedom (Harvey 46; Raboteau 163-64).

As a result, Christianity among the enslaved came to be seen as a threat to white supremacy and religious meetings were kept under close surveillance (Harvey 25; Raboteau 171). While there were some exceptions to this rule, most slaveholders required the attendance of a white person at each meeting and prohibited the enslaved from preaching in

the secrecy of their quarters (Murphy qtd. in Gates 37). In addition, when authorized preaching was undertaken by an enslaved person, they had to comply with the slaveholder's wishes (Raboteau 214, 236). In other words, they asserted the superiority of white people and exhorted their fellow enslaved to be obedient (Raboteau 214, 236).

Still, despite threats of violent punishment, enslaved people held religious meetings in secret, and thus, created the underground Church, also known as the invisible institution (Gates 38; Raboteau 212-13). At night, they met in their cabins, in the woods or at some prearranged location on the plantation and worshipped together (Gates 38-42; Harvey 56; Raboteau 212). Thus, they kept on preaching their own interpretations of the Bible and, in doing so, found refuge from the horrors and dehumanization brought about by slavery (Harvey 56, 61; Raboteau 318). Indeed, not only did their egalitarian version of Christianity enabled the enslaved to be hopeful and empowered as mentioned above, but the religious meetings also provided them with communal support as they prayed for their freedom (Pierce qtd. in Gates 16; Gates 38; Raboteau 218). Christianity thus became a tool for the survival of the enslaved and its practice an instance of rebellion against slaveholders.

It is important to note that the Black Church and its part in the fight for Black liberation are not limited to slave quarters nor to the antebellum era. Indeed, free Black people in the North had their own Christian churches which, like their underground counterparts in the South, became pillars of Black life and the freedom struggle (Harvey 63-67). Among other things, they served as stages for abolitionist discourses with church ministers such as formerly enslaved man Frederick Douglass becoming prominent figures of Emancipation (Harvey 65-66). Moreover, as the end of slavery did not mark the end of racial discrimination and assaults, Black churches remained relevant as the site of Black empowerment after the Emancipation Proclamation (Gates 94-95; Harvey 75). Thus, they provided their congregations with education, community support, and defend their interests through political activism (Gates 95). For example, during Reconstruction, they established schools to teach their congregations how to read and write and hosted political meetings calling for equal citizenship rights (Gates 84-85; Harvey 72-75). Later, they played a crucial role in the Civil Rights Movement, which relied on Christianity among other spiritual movements to reaffirm racial equality and demand Black rights (Gates 131). Black church minister Martin Luther King Jr. became one of the emblematic figures of the movement (Gates 132). Today, the religious institution remains important in the lives of African Americans as it presents them with a "safe place" to survive and rise against racism (Harvey

137). Nonetheless, the conservatism of some Black churches has been the source of tensions and has led the younger generation to walk away from the pews (Gates 170).

Indeed, while Black churches have come to be perceived as an important means to fight off oppression, some of them are accused of participating in the persecution of minorities such as women and queer people. This, ironically, originates from the wish of the religious institution to uplift and protect African Americans (Ward 501; Collins 107-8). To understand how prejudice might be considered to empower the Black community, one must know that ideologies about gender and sexuality have been instrumental in the creation of racial binaries and discrimination (Collins 44). Indeed, while “Western sex role ideology is premised on ideas of strong men and weak women, [...] active virile masculinity and passive, dependent femininity,” African Americans display opposite sex roles (Collins 44). This very difference has been exploited by white supremacists to establish their “racial normality,” and depict African Americans as “deviant” (Collins 44).

Therefore, to ensure what Ward calls “race survival” and improve the conditions of their congregations, Black churches have adopted the politics of respectability (Ward 501; Collins 107-8). That is, they have appropriated the values held by white America in a bid to render Black individuals acceptable to mainstream society and “redefine themselves outside the prevailing racist discourses” (Ward 501; Gross qtd. McBride 71). Thus, Black churches have promoted hypermasculinity and the patriarchal nuclear family modelled by white society (Gates 99; Ward 501; Collins 183). Simultaneously, queer African Americans and strong African American women have been chastised by Black churches and depicted as a threat to the Black community (Collins 183): since they do not conform to the Western gender roles, they are believed to endanger the efforts of Black people in their fight against racism (Collins 183).

Moreover, Ward argues that the important part played by Scripture in Black liberation provides a further explanation for the presence of homophobia in Black churches: considering that the enslaved “sought refuge and found freedom in the literalness of Scripture,” the authority given to the Bible is particularly high in Black Christian circles (Ward 495). Arguably, the Bible does not literally condemn queerness (Ward 494-95). Rather, such condemnation rests on interpretations of Scripture which, in time, have come to be perceived as the accepted meaning of the religious texts (Ward 494-95). Indeed, these interpretations have been increasingly contested in the past decades (Ward 494-95). For

example, scholars of theology and biblical studies such as Renato Lings, Richard Elliott Friedman and Shawna Dolansky have deconstructed readings of the Bible which promote heterosexuality and “given contextual clarity to passages long-adhered to as justifications for homophobia” (Ward 495). They have argued, for instance, that the story of the destruction of Sodom, which has long been interpreted as a reference to homosexuality – to the point that “the very word for anal sexual intercourse in English, ‘sodomy,’ derives from this [...] understanding of the story of Sodom –, does not specifically “deal with homoerotic relationships” (Friedman and Dolansky 8; Lings 281). In the Bible, God sends two angels to Sodom in order to assess whether its inhabitants are as sinful as They have heard, in which case They will destroy the city (Lings 244; Gen 18:22). In Sodom, the two angels disguised as common travelers meet Lot who invites them to spend the night in his home (Lings 244, Gen 19:2). Soon, a crowd surrounds Lot’s house and demands to “know” the visitors (Lings 244-45; Gen 19:5). Many exegeses have understood this passage as describing a crowd of men ordering Lot to let them have sexual intercourse with the two strangers he welcomed into his home (Friedman and Dolansky 4-5). However, Friedman and Dolansky explain that, while the crowd consists of “men” in translations of the Bible, Hebrew, the language in which the text was originally written, uses the same word for *men* and *people* (Friedman and Dolansky 5). Thus, they assert that the crowd surrounding Lot’s house is not gendered in the original version of the Bible (Friedman and Dolansky 5). Moreover, Lings argues that the group who demands to “know” the two travelers does not request to become acquainted with them sexually, but rather, to undertake “an official enquiry” into the foreign visitors (Lings 354-56). Nevertheless, the Black community is distrustful of works such as those undertaken by Lings, Friedman and Dolansky as these works have, for the vast majority, been conducted by white people (Ward 495). Thus, the position of the Black Church on queerness remains unchanged (Ward 495, 501).

Finally, while there is no doubt that Christianity played a significant role – for better or for worse – in the lives of African Americans, African beliefs and practices also constitute an important part of the Black Church. However, these African retentions have been given little recognition. Scholar of African and African American religions Albert Raboteau explains that Christianity is often thought to have replaced African spiritual beliefs in the United States after the Christianization of the enslaved (Raboteau 49, 53, 86). This common assumption emanates from the observation that there is very little evidence of African retentions in the country in comparison with other societies in the Americas (Raboteau 48-



49, 86). Nonetheless, the idea that Christianity supplanted African religions entirely is incorrect (Raboteau 51).

Admittedly, there are fewer Africanisms in the United States than elsewhere in the New World (Raboteau 92). Indeed, white supremacy has severely impeded the Black community in the preservation of their African heritage. To begin with, the enslaved were forced to abandon their languages, cultures, and religions (Harvey 17; Raboteau 4, 53). Although this process was not specific to North America, it was more effective there than in other parts of the New World (Raboteau 49). An explanation for this is that the British colonies were inhabited by far more white settlers than other territories across the Americas (Raboteau 89). Thus, the ratio of white to Black people was significantly greater in North America than in Latin America (Raboteau 89). Moreover, very few enslaved people had been deported from Africa to the United States: the vast majority was American-born and had therefore never seen the African continent (Raboteau 89-91). These demographics made the British colonies a favorable terrain for the apparent erasure of the enslaved people's African heritage (Harvey 18; Raboteau 92).

However, African religious practices did not completely disappear in the United States. While some of them vanished, others were incorporated into the transformed brand of Christianity practiced by the enslaved (Harvey 26, 49; Hopkins 109-10; Raboteau, 59). Many West African religions shared important similarities among themselves and with Christianity (Harvey 15; Hopkins 110-11; Raboteau 7). For instance, they "held in high esteem [...] the Supreme Being" who, like the Christian God, is eternal, omniscient and the creator of all things (Hopkins 110). In other words, African and Western beliefs were compatible rather than mutually exclusive (Hopkins 109). Moreover, this compatibility could be acted upon because African cultures were prone to syncretism: they have been known to incorporate into their religion the spiritual beliefs of their neighbors and of their enemies (Harvey 16; Raboteau 22). Thus, the forced process of acculturation that occurred during slavery did not result in the total eradication of a people's heritage. Instead, it consisted in the transformation of both African and Western spiritualities as each informed a new understanding of the other (Hopkins 110; Raboteau 58-59). Above all, Africanisms have pervaded Black worship styles: the most important retentions to be found in Black churches are Spirit possession, speaking in tongues, sung sermons known as spirituals, the call-and-response pattern, and forms of dance (Gates 213-14). Hence, as Gates asserts, "the

Black Church is the space where [African Americans'] direct cultural ties to Africa come to life in new and mutated but still recognizable form" (219).

Nonetheless, the importance given to Africanisms in Black spirituality has been the source of tensions and animated debates (Harvey 3). As some Black churches adopt the politics of respectability, they reject their African heritage (Harvey 3; Gates 88-89). Even more so, these churches believe African practices to be primitive (Crummell qtd. in Gates 210). Thus, they fear that such practices will lead to a "reversion to heathenism," which they see as the "ultimate danger" (Gates 210; Crummell qtd. in Gates 211). In other words, while Black churches have been center stage in the fight against white supremacy, some have tended to interiorize prevalent racist discourses.

Other Black churches, by contrast, are unwilling to sacrifice their African origins for the sake of white society's approval. They embrace their African heritage, which manifests primarily in music, dances, and the ecstatic behavior of Spirit possession (Gates 213-17). Moreover, some churches accuse some Black ministers of preaching a white gospel that does not account for, and tend to, the struggles of African Americans (Gates 156; Cone xxv). Thus, these Black churches provide an alternative to what pastor Jeremiah Wright has called the "white church in blackface" (Bradley 38-39, 121; Wright qtd. in Gates 156). To do so, the Black churches embracing their heritage present their congregations with James Cone's Black liberation theology (Gates 153). This theology asserts that God is Black because "God has made the oppressed condition his own condition" in the figure of Jesus Christ (Bradley 56, 58; Cone xxv, 133; Gates 153). Hence, this interpretation offers a reading of the Bible which, similarly to that of the enslaved, promotes liberation (Cone xxv, 36, 135-36; Bradley 19). Finally, while Cone's theology is "primarily Christian," it largely relies on the Black experience and accommodates African Americans' needs as second-class citizens in the United States (Bradley 40-42; Cone qtd. in Bradley 42). As a result, Black liberation theology has proven popular among the Black churches that combine Christianity with their Black identity (Gates 154-57).

To conclude, the lives of Black people in the United States have been tremendously impacted by Christianity and, to a lesser but non-negligible extent, their African heritage. The ability of the enslaved to reappropriate the religion of their oppressors and adapt it to their own needs and ways of worship has made the influence of Christianity particularly complex. While Christianity has been used to justify the enslavement of Africans and their

descendants, it has also been a crucial means of resistance against white supremacy. Still, it is important to acknowledge that Black churches have not remained immune to the prejudices of white society. Their politics of respectability and their interpretations of the Bible have led them to be particularly conservative regarding gender and sexuality. Therefore, as Gates observes, they often oppress their female and queer members (Gates 159). Similarly, as they work to uplift their congregations by gaining white approval, Black churches find themselves in a conflict that mirrors rather than alleviates the broader American racial division. Indeed, they fight an “ongoing tug-of-war between a drive toward ‘respectability’ [...] and valorizing practices derived from African religious influences” (Harvey 3). In other words, one needs to be vigilant when it comes to assessing the impact of Christianity on Black communities in the United States.

### 3. Synopsis

Robert Jones, Jr.'s historical fiction, *The Prophets*, is mainly set on the Halifax plantation, also known as Empty, in antebellum Mississippi. It depicts the love that unites two enslaved men, Samuel and Isaiah, as well as the enslaved and white communities' reactions to that relationship.

Indeed, even though Samuel and Isaiah, whom some enslaved refer to as "The Two of Them," live away from everyone in a barn on the outskirts of the Halifaxes' land, their love is not a well-kept secret. First, the intimacy provided by the barn is limited because the fences surrounding it are easily climbed and the holes in its walls allow for the couple to be spied on. Second, while Samuel and Isaiah hide their relationship outside the barn, their love can still be felt as it comforts the other enslaved who, just like them, are confronted with the horrors of slavery.

One such horror is sexual exploitation. Indeed, Paul Halifax, the plantation's owner, wants to breed the enslaved to increase his labor force. Before the time of narration, he had carefully selected Samuel and Isaiah to fulfill his goal, hoping that they would pass on their strong musculature to their descendance. However, neither one of them have conceived children with the enslaved women presented to them in the Fucking Place. It turns out that Isaiah and Essie faked their sexual intercourse on every occasion and became friends instead. Amos, an older enslaved man, was consequently assigned to impregnate Essie. While the two fell in love, they failed to become pregnant. Finally, Essie was raped by Paul himself. Thus, she gave birth to Solomon, a pale and blue-eyed baby whom she resents.

To protect his partner from being raped again, Amos intends to gain Paul's favors by teaching the gospel to his fellow enslaved, which would make them more obedient. Amos has a talent for preaching and thus manages to gather a small congregation near the cotton field on Sunday mornings. While his words are at first soothing, this changes after he finds out that Samuel and Isaiah are in love. Indeed, Amos believes that their relationship will cause great harm to the enslaved community: they will be further oppressed in a bid to prevent similar behaviors from developing among them; they might also be sold – and hence separated – should Paul fail to get children out of Samuel and Isaiah to keep his plantation afloat. Amos finds himself in a difficult situation: not only does he find beauty and comfort in Samuel and Isaiah's relationship, but he also loves Isaiah like a son. In fact, Isaiah's mother had entrusted Amos with her son's real name, thus making it Amos's mission to

reveal it to him in due time. Eventually, Amos refuses to tell Isaiah his name unless he complies with Paul's orders. Moreover, he tells his congregation that Samuel and Isaiah are sinners.

At first, the other enslaved are unwilling to condemn them. Both boys are very much loved, and their relationship is seen positively: it merely provides the couple with some happiness in the face of hardships. However, Amos's Christian ideals quickly spread among the enslaved as they realize that they can be superior to Samuel and Isaiah, and thus leave the very bottom of the social hierarchy. As a result, they hold Samuel and Isaiah in contempt. When the two are falsely accused of having gazed at Paul's wife, Ruth – who in fact attempted to rape Samuel –, many help the overseers carry out the punishment by climbing in the carriage which Samuel and Isaiah have to drag around the plantation.

Nonetheless, not all enslaved have turned against The Two of Them. Indeed, Sarah, who was born in an undefined location in Africa, knows about the very different perception of gender and sexuality held in their ancestral land. There, all children are born girls and can then choose whether they want to be women, men, free or all. Thus, Sarah feels sympathy for Isaiah whom she believes has chosen to be a woman. She tells him that his “thing” – queerness – is an “old thing” from the African continent. Through her memories, readers learn that she herself was in a relationship with a woman on another plantation but was sold after they were found out. Sarah encourages Isaiah to keep on living his relationship with Samuel, even though she knows that it can only end badly. After the punishment involving the carriage, she is called by Maggie, an enslaved house servant who also has a lot of sympathy for The Two of Them. While Maggie was not born in Africa, her blood memory allows her to remember and participate in the ways of her ancestors. Along with the three other women gifted with the same memory, Essie, Be Auntie and Puah, they perform an African ritual to heal the wounds sustained by Samuel and Isaiah.

Finally, the Halifaxes' reactions to Samuel and Isaiah's relationship lead The Two of Them to plot their escape from the plantation. Timothy, Paul's son, has had to keep his own homosexuality a secret and, therefore, channels his sexual impulses into painting. Soon, he comes to direct his artistic interests at Isaiah. While Timothy is determined to treat the enslaved humanely, he fails to understand their wants and needs. Thus, when he discovers that Samuel and Isaiah are in love, he believes that he is doing them both a favor as he invites them to be intimate with him and promises literacy and better treatment as a demonstration

of his affection. As a result, The Two of Them find themselves subjected to a sexual partner they do not want.

Moreover, Amos, seeing that his efforts to convince Samuel and Isaiah to reproduce have failed, tells Paul about their relationship. Paul believes that he can change Samuel and Isaiah's nature to make it fit his needs. Thus, he goes to the barn with the Bible and a whip to assert his authority and order them again to "multiply." However, when he steps into the barn, Paul feels a gentle caress that makes him merciful, thus preventing him from using his whip on the recalcitrant enslaved. Additionally, the rising sun shines its light on Samuel and Isaiah and blinds Paul, who wonders whether the light is blessing or accusing them. Still, the plantation owner sees resistance in the couple. Hence, he resolves to sell them both.

To avoid being sold and to escape Timothy, The Two of Them decide to run away from the plantation. Isaiah runs first while Samuel goes to the Big House and kills Timothy, who had summoned him. Before he can go back and reunite with Isaiah, Samuel is caught. He is hanged on a tree and set aflame. Samuel's ghost joins Isaiah on the other side of the river that delimits the Halifaxes' land, but neither one of them realizes that Samuel is dead. Eventually, Samuel yells Isaiah's real name, "Kayode" – or "he brings joy" in the African language Isaiah's mother spoke – before turning into bits of light. Isaiah follows the light, which guides him into complete darkness. The darkness cradles Isaiah who dies of heartbreak. On the plantation, Maggie, who turns out to be Samuel's mother, kills Paul and begins a rebellion when she sees her son being murdered. As the enslaved and overseers fight, Essie kills Solomon.

In between the chapters of the main story, readers are transported back in time to Kosongo, an African village, as it is being colonized. That village is led by a woman, King Akusa. She rejoices with her wives in anticipation of a wedding when missionaries arrive. King Akusa invites the missionaries to partake in the wedding's celebrations. However, they disapprove of the union because Elewa and Kosii, the people getting married, are two men. To King Akusa, those accusations do not make much sense as her people categorize not the bodies, but the spirits. Moreover, the village is excited at the prospect of finally having guardians to protect the gods' gates. Later, the village is attacked, and its inhabitants are boarded on a slave ship. On the ship, Kosii sees Elewa's lifeless body. In a fit of rage, he jumps on a white boy, throttles him with his chains, and drags him overboard, thus precipitating himself and those chained to him in the water.

## 4. Circles and Lines

“Circles came before lines; that was what had to be honored.”

Robert Jones, Jr. *The Prophets* (115)

As mentioned previously, this dissertation will demonstrate that queerness in *The Prophets* can be interpreted as a syncretic religion made up of both Christian and African beliefs. This chapter will be divided into four parts. The first three parts, “Gender,” “Gender Hierarchy,” and “Queerness” will focus on the perceptions of gender, gender hierarchy, and queerness in the West and in Africa in the novel as well as examine how these perceptions are shown to be informed by religions. The fourth part, “Circles come before lines,” will show that while the novel portrays African and Christian beliefs as being very different, these religions are reconciled in the narrative. To show how such reconciliation is made possible, this subchapter will be divided into two subsections, “Africa comes before the West” and “Inclusion comes before exclusion.” Both subsections will analyze a different interpretations of the sentence “circles come before lines,” thus illustrating the multiplicity of meaning that texts may have, which, as I will explain, allows for religious syncretism.

### 4. 1 Gender

In *The Prophets*, the West and precolonial Africa appear to have completely different understandings of gender. Their contrasting worldviews seem most evident in the chapters set in precolonial Africa, that is, when the culture of the Kosongo community clashes with the Western values held by the European missionaries. Indeed, when discussing Elewa and Kosii’s wedding, Brother Gabriel asserts that both characters are male (Jones 183). King Akusa, the leader of the village, disagrees and wonders about the white man’s system of gender categorization: “[these] colorless people had the strangest system of grouping things together [...]. He could see bodies, but it was clear that he could not see spirits” (Jones 183). Thus, while gender is shown to be conventionally determined by one’s biological sex in the West, it is defined by spirit in the Kosongo community.

Nonetheless, much about gender in the Kosongo community remains unclear. Indeed, seeing that their gender is determined by spirit rather than body, it is not necessarily restricted to female and male as it is often the case in the West. As gender theorist and philosopher Judith Butler explains, the distinction between sex and gender allows for a given body to take on other genders as the one which it would otherwise be preassigned (Butler “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*”<sup>3</sup> 35). Thus, Butler contends with feminist activist and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir who, they say, envisions the body “as a field of cultural possibilities” (Butler “Sex and Gender” 49). For instance, one is born a “girl” but can become “woman, man, free, or all” in the precolonial African society that Sarah, an enslaved person on Empty, was born into (Jones 115). In other words, gender in King Akusa’s village could potentially take on different forms.

Still, while readers could be tempted to believe that the Kosongo community and Sarah’s native society have similar available genders, the lives of King Akusa’s people appear to be regulated by gender binaries. Indeed, one could assume that the Kosongo share the four genders of the African society depicted by Sarah seeing that, as mentioned above, both societies have similar approaches to gender as they believe it to be determined by the spirit rather than by the body. Nevertheless, the Kosongo do not appear to have any alternatives to male and female identifications. Rather, they are subjected to binary classification. Indeed, the only personal pronouns used to refer to individual Kosongo characters are *he*, *she*, *her*, *him* and *his*. Considering that English, the language in which the novel was written, has available alternatives to refer to non-binary – “free” – or gender-fluid – “all” – people with *they*, *them* and *their*, the absence of these pronouns appears to indicate that only female and male genders are acknowledged in the Kosongo community. The binary structure is further demonstrated when the village holds a council meeting after the arrival of the white missionaries: “They came as they were: the *women* with heads that weren’t completely shaven, the *men* with penises dangling behind skirts instead of tubed and tied firm against their navels” (Jones 176; emphasis added). While this passage merely shows that only men and women are part of the council, it seems highly unlikely that non-binary or gender-fluid characters would be excluded from the decision-making process were the four genders of Sarah’s society recognized by the Kosongo.

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<sup>3</sup> Further references to Butler’s “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *Second Sex*” will be given with the abbreviation “Sex and Gender.”



Even more so, the existence of gender binaries in the Kosongo community appears to be crucial for the representation of differences between Africa and the West. Indeed, as will be explained in more detail later, Butler posits that the binary opposition between feminine and masculine genders implies that each pole is assigned specific functions and attributes (Butler “Sex and Gender” 35). Thus, the novel establishes a stark contrast between precolonial Africa and the West as it shows the Western standards of gender roles and features to be reversed among the Kosongo. For instance, while the Western norm – especially in the nineteenth century, when the novel is set – is for fathers to provide for their families and for mothers to be caregivers, the opposite is true of the Kosongo village, “the place where fathers held you and mothers hunted for your pleasure” (Jones 81). The quotation in the above paragraph provides another example of such gender reversal: while the Western norm is for men to have short or shaved hair and for women to wear skirts, women shave their head and men wear skirts in the precolonial African society (Jones 176).

However, it should be noted that the above passage in which Kosongo men and women gather for a council meeting points to a significant contradiction in the representation of gender in the Kosongo community. Indeed, while gender is shown to be determined by one’s spirit among the Kosongo, the description of the men indicates that all have a penis. This suggests that gender is assigned based on one’s biological sex. Therefore, one could argue that in portraying precolonial Africa as different from the West, the novel fails to escape its own Western interpretative framework. That is, to demonstrate that gender-specific features are reversed, *The Prophets* finds itself mirroring the Western binary whose gender classification is based on one’s biological sex. Thus, the passage highlights what the West would perceive as the manliness of the characters wearing skirts. Similarly, the pronouns given to the characters refer to their biological sex and not to their gender. Indeed, while King Akusa asserts that Elewa and Kosii are not both male, each is referred to as “he.” Likewise, both are the “nephews” of other characters: just like Kosii is Ketwa’s “favorite nephew”, Elewa’s aunts “would want [...] anyone who even dreamed of holding their nephew” to be tender (Jones 83, 178). Again, to show that the precolonial African society has a perception and attribution of gender that differs from the West, the novel categorizes the characters using a Western framework which labels them as men. Thus, *The Prophets* allows for the Western framework to clash with the workings of the African society depicted in the text.

Furthermore, one could even go so far as to argue that the mere existence of gender binaries and their attached gender roles is inconsistent with the perception of gender held by the Kosongo. Indeed, Butler explains that gender binaries and the gender roles that they allow rely on the perception that gender is determined by sex (Butler “Sex and Gender” 35). This understanding of gender is based on the premise of universal biological differences between the female and the male body (Butler “Sex and Gender” 35). These differences dictate the alleged qualities and limitations of each sex, which, in turn, inform the societal meaning, or gender, given to female and male bodies (Butler “Sex and Gender” 35). Scholar of biblical hermeneutics Jeremy Punt states that, as a result, gender has been “understood as a given, as natural, as some essential quality” and even, at times, as “divinely ordained” (Punt 326). Moreover, Punt asserts that gender differentiation is derived from, or reflected in the “polarity in unity” observed in the “design” for human sexuality (Punt 326). Thus, he states, the characteristics assigned to the two genders have long been presented and accepted by Western society as being complementary (Punt 326). As men are traditionally understood to have an active role in sexual intercourse, “the masculine is believed to be situated in initiation, as elaborated in leadership, authority, and protection of the dependent” (Punt 326-27). Women, on the other hand, are often perceived as having a passive role. Thus, the “feminine resides in response, [...] [in] the complementary principles of receptivity, nurturing, and sacrificial love” (Punt 327). Such oppositions and complementariness can be observed in the representation of the Kosongo, as shown in the roles attributed to fathers and mothers which were addressed earlier. Indeed, this passage depicts a reversal of Western norm in which men have the active role of protecting and providing for their families while women nurture their children. Thus, while the gender binaries and gender roles of the Kosongo serve to represent the community as being drastically different from the West, they inscribe both societies in a common frame of reference regarding gender. Therefore, the perception of gender of the Kosongo community is similar to that of the West.

Now that it has been established that the gender binaries and gender roles of the Kosongo both contrast and relate precolonial Africa with the West, this analysis can go on to compare the representation of gender roles in both societies depicted in *The Prophets*. Indeed, this analysis of gender has so far focused on its African representation in relation to the non-fictional Western society. While this approach was indispensable to introduce important theory on gender, it is necessary to compare the perception of gender held by the

Kosongo and by the *fictional* West. In this manner, one can reach a more comprehensive understanding of the mobilization of gender in the novel.

To begin with, gender plays a role in determining whether one fights in war in both the West and the Kosongo village. In the West, this activity is legally restricted to men: “women were not permitted to fight in the official declarations of such” (Jones 128). Although this is not explicitly mentioned, one could argue that the restriction imposed on women results from the perceived biological differences which, according to Butler, inform gender in the West. Indeed, among the Portuguese colonizers and on the Halifax plantation, violence and strength are believed to be inherently masculine traits. For instance, when attending Elewa and Kosii’s wedding in the Kosongo village, Brother Gabriel asks: “[a]re these two being initiated into manhood? Is this a warrior’s ritual?” (Jones 182). Thus, the white missionary not only establishes a direct link between masculinity and being a warrior, but he also presents being a warrior as a possible requirement to be a man. In addition, one of the overseers on the Halifax plantation, James, associates his nephew’s lack of strength with his not being a man: “[h]ad they let his strength develop unhindered by their fear and sadness, perhaps [Timothy] would have had the chance to be a man” (Jones 331). Moreover, the Western gender perceptions can be observed among the enslaved who have been influenced by their American environment or aspire to better fit into it. Thus, Amos tells an enslaved man, Big Hosea, that “no one blame[s] him for doing what came natural for men to do” after he attacked Samuel (Jones 78-79). Finally, after Samuel exposes the pain and anger that being rejected by the other enslaved causes him, he regrets not having hidden his emotions better as he thinks any man should have done: “[h]e regretted letting himself open this way. A man, he thought, should have better control over his doors and locks” (Jones 107). Hence, Samuel believes that men ought to display psychological strength and mask any distress they may feel. While men are natural warriors, women are thought to be weak and delicate. Indeed, Samuel reproaches Isaiah for being “too much like a woman” while he, Samuel, “can[not] have no weaklings by [his] side” (Jones 106-07). Furthermore, Amos believes that “[w]omen [are] weak [...] by God’s design” (Jones 74). Thus, being female is equated with being naturally weak, just like being male is equated with strength and violence. This view is further illustrated when Ruth Halifax, the plantation owner’s wife, reflects on the benefits of privacy, which grants women “the power to be cruel but regarded as kind, to be strong and be thought delicate” (Jones 134). This shows that women, as a

group, are believed to be “kind” and “delicate” by default. Ruth supposes that only by showing a different visage in public would these stereotypes fall apart.

Importantly, the novel criticizes the notion that female bodies do not have the same abilities as male bodies do. Indeed, while women are prohibited from fighting in wars, this prohibition is not always respected: during what Ruth describes as what appears to be the American Indian Wars, some women “disguised themselves as men, took on the *exact* visage and manner of men, from the short hair to the aggressive gait, to do what they believed was the patriotic thing” (Jones 128; emphasis added). In this passage, the restriction imposed on women is undermined not only because it is shown to be inefficient, but also because it illustrates the artificiality of gender roles and binaries. Indeed, the word *exact* signals that women are successful in appropriating the listed characteristics of masculine appearance. As a result, female and male bodies become visibly indistinguishable when disguised. Moreover, the characters who “disguise” themselves and pass as male do not merely look the part with their “short hair” and “aggressive gait:” one of them is said to have “fought even better than the men” (Jones 128). This indicates that the permeability of gender categories extends beyond the adoption of masculine looks and demeanor to include physical abilities. Indeed, the female body is shown to be just as strong and capable to fight as its male counterpart. Thus, the novel challenges the Western notion that women are inherently weak and men naturally strong. Even more so, *The Prophets* can be understood as levelling the two genders as it effectively subverts presupposed differences between female and male bodies in both their appearance and their abilities. In turn, the naturalness of gender itself as well as its inherent categorization are called in question. This is most evident in the description of the above-mentioned character “who fought even better than the men” which indicates that they are transgender: “the deception [...] was in more than her disguise; it was in the way she lived even in times of peace, rejecting “she” for “he,” an affront to Christ” (Jones 128). Indeed, this representation of gender subversion echoes Butler’s claim that “what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* XV). In other words, gender is not “a stable identity” but the product of discourses which “divide nature and culture as ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 191; De Wald 175). While these discourses are “based on perceived and *imposed* differences between men and women [...] [which] are far from ‘natural,’” they present “gender as the effect of an essential sex” (Salih 89, emphasis in original; De Wald 175). Thus, the novel suggests that female bodies can not only pass as male on the battlefield, but they can also transcend

artificial gender boundaries and effectively be male – although the characters do not recognize them as such.

The portrayal of the Kosongo community further contributes to the critique of the Western perception of women as weak. However, while the representation of settler women violating gendered boundaries destabilizes the naturalness of gender and its inherent categorization, the depiction of the Kosongo appears to support such differentiation. Indeed, the idea that females are inherently weak and, therefore, unable to fight is contradicted by the portrayal of precolonial African society since the only two warriors in the community mentioned in the text are King Akusa and her mother: just like the king is, as discussed previously, “the greatest warrior among them,” the king’s mother “led the charge against [the mountain people], her spear held high” (Jones 85). Considering that no other characters are depicted as warriors, it is unclear whether the function is available to all genders or assigned to women specifically – which would constitute a further reversal of Western standards. Still, Kosii could be read as being a woman, and, as such, destined to be a warrior. To begin with, Elewa and Kosii are said not to both be male. Seeing that the Kosongo are likely to only have female and male genders, at least one of them should be a woman. Moreover, before marrying Elewa and becoming guardian of the gates as will be explained in more detail when discussing the Western and the African perceptions of queerness, Kosii was a hunter – although not the best one: “his hunting skills [were not] as sharp as some other members of the tribe” (Jones 178). Considering that hunting is the task of Kosongo mothers, and hence, of women, Kosii assumed a female role in the community. Finally, admitting that Kosii is indeed a woman, his<sup>4</sup> experiences show that Kosongo society expects women to have a warrior mindset. Indeed, the king appears to have expected such a trait from Kosii who remembers that, when he was younger, she “chastised him for not letting the lion in him roam freely” (Jones 244). Semjula, the village seer, consoled him and explained that King Akusa’s “spirit was set for war” but that “the ancestors had other plans for him” (Jones 244). As gender is determined by spirit among the Kosongo, this passage makes it possible to envision a definition of womanhood based on a fighting spirit. While the description of King Akusa’s spirit is admittedly not enough to justify such a claim, her expectations regarding Kosii’s behavior support this reading. Thus, Kosii only avoids his predestined role as a woman because he is queer and, hence, given special status as guardian of the gods’ gates (Jones 179). Therefore, the depiction of the Kosongo community disputes

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<sup>4</sup> The pronouns of the Kosongo people used in this dissertation are those used in the novel.

the Western idea that women are weaker but seems to do so by displaying the opposite. Indeed, the Kosongo women could be read as being naturally predisposed to be warriors. The only difference is that their predisposition comes not from their bodies, but from their spirits. Consequently, although the novel establishes an important contrast between the perception of women in the West and in Africa, both societies could be seen as relying on an understanding of gender as a natural rather than socially constructed feature. However, this perception of gender is challenged in the representation of the American settler women while it serves as a tool for the feminist portrayal of the Kosongo community.

## **4. 2 Gender Hierarchy**

The novel does not merely challenge the idea that women are inherently weak while men are naturally strong. It also criticizes Western patriarchy. In *The Prophets*, the patriarchy of the United States is contrasted with the apparent matriarchy of Sarah's native village and the gender equality of the Kosongo.

### **4.2.1 Among the white population of the United States**

Indeed, in the United States, the gender dynamic in the novel proves to be particularly detrimental to women. To begin with, Ruth reflects on the fact that she belongs "in the secondary space where she, due to the curves of her sex, could only ever be partial and two steps behind. Head down. Not a whole body; merely a rib" (Jones 124). This quotation echoes an important claim expressed by scholar of liberation theologies Lisa Isherwood. Leaning on Grosz, Isherwood observes that women's sexual organs are often assessed in comparison with that of the dominant and normative male, which leads to the tendency to see women as not having genitals (Grosz qtd. in Isherwood 251). According to Isherwood, this representation is particularly problematic because women are seen as "lacking and, therefore, unworthy" (Isherwood 251). Indeed, Ruth mentions that she does not have "a whole body" and can therefore only occupy a "secondary space" (Jones 124). This negative comparison, Isherwood explains, results from the fact that Western societies are patriarchal and, hence, focused on the phallus (Grosz qtd. in Isherwood 251). More precisely, Grosz explains that the masculine "takes itself as the unquestioned norm, the ideal representative" (Grosz 188). The alleged masculine ideal can be explained by the purported biblical originality of men. Indeed, in the Bible, God is said to have created Eve from one of Adam's "ribs" (Lings 5). While translation of the Hebrew word *tsela`* to *rib* has often been contested – with scholars arguing that Adam was both male and female and that God merely separated

the female *side* from the rest –, “theologians have argued for centuries that woman is a complementary being whose life only finds fulfilment if she is under the care of a man” (Lings 30, 35-36). This is reflected in the above quotation as Ruth laments that she is “merely a rib” (Jones 124). Moreover, the masculine norm can be further explained by the sexual roles assumed by the female and the male bodies: while men, as mentioned above, are perceived as having an active role, women are often thought of as being the passive receptacle of men’s lust (Punt 326-27). For these reasons, as feminist writer Andrea Dworkin argues, “[w]omen become a space inhabited and a territory occupied which lays the foundations of a language in which women are unequal and owned” (Dworkin qtd. in Isherwood 251). In other words, women become the subordinated object and “depersonalized into the function” (Dworkin 167) of “being the body for men” (Grosz 22). Finally, as *woman* becomes the subordinated term, *man* becomes the primary one. Thus, as Grosz asserts that “[t]he subordinated term is merely the negation or denial, the absence or privation of the primary term” (Grosz 3); women become “reasonless” and “penisless” individuals, “lacking” in reason and, as Isherwood argues, in body (Isherwood 251).

The objectification of white women by white men is most evident when Ruth recalls being sold by her father who used her virginity as a selling argument: “a man was offering up his only daughter [...] unspoiled” (Jones 129). This indeed signals that Ruth was reduced to an untouched body to be taken and appreciated by white men, regardless of her feelings and desires. Moreover, as Ruth wonders whether she could truly be considered “unspoiled” after the abuse she endured from her father, whose hands she “fought against as regularly as evening prayer,” the novel further hints at the relationship between the oppression of women and Christianity – which it represents as hypocritical as will be shown in the third section of this chapter (Jones 129-30). Indeed, Ruth establishes a link between her abuse and Christianity as she equates the frequency of the assaults with her evening prayers. The role played by religion is highlighted again when she condemns her mother’s lack of reaction to the offense: “[i]f the hands bruised one thigh, surely hush bruised the other” (Jones 130). With its mention of an attack on a body part coming in pair and its reference to the other of the pair, Ruth’s sentence reminds one of Jesus’s instructions in the Sermon of the Mount: “whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (*Holy Bible: King James Version*, Matthew 5:39). This verse, Bishop Robert Barron explains, has often been interpreted as a call to passively endure violence (Barron). According to him, however, the meaning of the verse is, on the contrary, to “stand [one’s] ground” (Barron). While the

signification of the Sermon of the Mount is still debated among theologians, one could read the above quotation from the novel as a reference to the alleged Christian expectation to quietly submit to – in this case, sexual – assault. Thus, while Ruth mentions that she did not surrender to her father as she “fought” his hands, she condemns the censorship surrounding sexual violence which her mother abides by. Furthermore, the resemblance between Ruth’s sentence and the biblical verse could be interpreted as bestowing prophetic strength upon her accusation against compliance with sexual assault, thus reflecting that silence has commonly been believed to be the prescribed Christian behavior in the face of violence. In addition, as Ruth asserts that silence “bruises” the other thigh, she also conveys that the lack of reaction to the ordeal pains her just as much as the abuse. In doing so, she shows that passivity in the face of violence is violence in itself. Therefore, Christianity is shown not only to be linked with the molestation of women with Ruth’s father assaulting her “as regularly as evening prayer,” but also to participate in a culture of silence regarding the abuse, which, in turn, inflicts further trauma on the victim. Admittedly, sexual assault does not affect women only. Thus, one could argue that Christianity does not play a role in the oppression of women specifically, but rather in that of all victims of such violence. While this is an important and valid argument, the novel strongly aligns with the above theory, which suggests that the objectification of women as mere “bodi[es] for men” is most prevalent in Western society, as will be discussed in more detail in the following subsection of this chapter (Grosz 22).

Since Ruth is partial and does not have “a whole body,” she inhabits a space that is not only “secondary,” but also delimited and controlled by white men who are granted the authority to define women and female roles (Jones 124). Indeed, Ruth is “told [the secondary space] [is] where she belong[s]” (Jones 124). In this passage, the passive signals Ruth’s lack of agency, which indicates that others, presumably men, labelled her as subordinate. Moreover, as Ruth reflects on the struggles that women face, she thinks of “the chastity and modesty designed by *men* to be foisted upon the backs and fronts of *women*, but only for the leisure, pleasure, and whims of *men*” (Jones 139; emphases added). In this passage, women are literally enclosed by the repetition of *men*. Thus, this quotation highlights the constraint that women endure as their identity is restricted by men. This constraint is further articulated by the fact that white women cannot live up to the societal expectations of womanhood. For instance, Maggie contrasts the public attitude of white women who “[go] on and on about what it mean[s] to be a lady” with their secret visits to enslaved men after their husbands



have drunk themselves to sleep (Jones 37). Similarly, Ruth seems to be under the impression that others see her as asexual while she would prefer “other people [...] [to] know that she was actually alive and not some haint half existing” (Jones 125). Indeed, she wishes for them to see the cord emanating from her womb and “connect[ing] her, forever, to the thick and thin separating man from beast” (Jones 125). Thus, the novel shows that the definition of womanhood designed by men does not accommodate the needs nor reflect the realities of women.

#### **4.2.2 Among the enslaved population of the United States**

Moreover, the objectification of women that prevails in Western society does not affect white women only, but enslaved women as well. Indeed, *The Prophets* shows that sexual abuse, which results from the perception of women as mere commodities, is integral to the experience of enslaved women on Empty, who suffer at the hands of white and Black men alike. This is particularly evident when Maggie anticipates the coming hardships of “a beautiful little girl she wished wasn’t so beautiful. Hair too aglow. Eyes too bright. Skin too shimmery. Laugh too dainty. Teeth too pearly. It was only a matter of time” (Jones 154). Although Maggie does not explicitly mention it, it is clear that she believes that the girl will be raped. Thus, as Maggie asserts that “it is only a matter of time,” she indicates that sexual violence against enslaved women has come to be expected on the plantation. The exploitation of enslaved women is all the more pervasive that it represents a considerable source of income for slaveholders. Indeed, slavery historically relied on forced reproduction to sustain the labor force necessary for the survival of the institution (Collins 55-56, 58). This practice substantially increased in frequency in the nineteenth century, when the novel is set, after the closing of the Atlantic slave trade prevented new arrivals from Africa (Doddington 149). In *The Prophets*, the economic importance of slave “breeding” is reflected when Adam, an enslaved man on Empty, refers to the law of Partus Sequitur Ventrem, which states that “the status of the child [whether they are free or bound] follows that of the mother” (Millward 92): “he wonder[s] if his grandmother or grandfather were [...] raped. More likely his grandmother since if it was his grandfather, his mother would have been a free woman” (Jones 291). Therefore, when reflecting on the benefits that a slave owner would reap from owning a girl, Samuel claims that “a girl [is] an investment for toubab men because they [can] be raped into multiplying” (Jones 160).

However, while the suffering of enslaved women as a result of forced reproduction is evident, the role of sexism in such oppression is debated in academic circles. To begin

with, historian David Doddington speaks of *racial* oppression when discussing the historical exploitation of enslaved women by slave owners (Doddington 146, 152-53). Such a categorization seems to be motivated by the observation that white people objectified *both* enslaved women *and* men, whom they regarded as mere animals (Doddington 146; Foster 125). This is illustrated in the novel when “[Isaiah] realize[s] that he, the cow, the horse, and the hogs – even the chickens – [serve] the same purpose” (Jones 362). As a result, enslaved men on Empty are, like their female counterparts, considered to be sexual commodities. Thus, they too are subjected to forced breeding. This process is demonstrated in the continuation of Samuel’s thoughts on the value of female and male enslaved to slaveholders: “[a] boy [...] with big arms, wide shoulders, a black and heaving chest, and iron legs, who could drag a hoe through land, digging the lines of demarcation needed to plant whatever seed the land would take” (Jones 160). In this passage, Samuel displays his understanding that the value ascribed to enslaved men is attached to their strength. Thus, he highlights the objectification of enslaved men who are reduced to their capacity for labor. Moreover, the body of enslaved men is eroticized. Indeed, historian John Saillant posits that particular focus on “musculature and skin color” reflects an idealization of the black male body, which underscores the sexualization of Black men in Western society (Saillant qtd. in Foster 128). Even more so, while the passage first appears to merely describe the work of enslaved men in the fields, the sexual allusions hidden behind the semantic field of agriculture simultaneously detail their reproductive functions. The “seed” that Samuel mentions might be interpreted to be that of a plant as well as that of a man. Thus, Samuel shows that the expectations to fulfill sexual duties do not befall enslaved women only, but enslaved men also. In other words, the extreme form of racism encountered during slavery makes it difficult to determine the (extent of the) role played by sexism in the oppression of enslaved women at the hands of white men.

Although enslaved men and women appear to suffer from similar racial oppression, the gender dynamics that operate *among enslaved people* are particularly complex. The novel reflects the ambivalent representation that historians give of the status of enslaved black men in forced reproduction. That is, while some scholars such as historian Thomas Foster want enslaved men to be “rehumanize[d] [...] as another type of victim in a multilayered sexual assault perpetrated by white men,” others such as Doddington argue that some enslaved men willingly participated in the sexual domination of enslaved women (Foster 132; Doddington 147-54).

Indeed, on the one hand, *The Prophets* depicts the “psychological toll” that forced reproduction exerts on enslaved men (Foster 131). Thus, the novel relates the experiences of Adam, who finds himself unable to “get past not having the choice [to have sexual intercourse]” and who is also affected by the “[u]nwillingness [that] [wears] a woman in a way that [makes] him want to weep” (Jones 284). Hence, Adam suffers from both his own dehumanization, and that of the women he is forced upon. Even more so, as Foster argues that some enslaved men are further afflicted by “the rejection and resentment of their forced wives,” one might go so far as to wonder whether Adam’s weeping is caused by empathy or rejection, or both. The difficulty encountered by enslaved men as they are forced to reproduce is further demonstrated when Paul lines up nine enslaved men in front of Essie in the Fucking Place and some of them look away (Jones 45). Indeed, one might understand the enslaved looking away as a demonstration of their shame as they face the prospect of being used for breeding. Finally, Amos’s behavior in the Fucking Place challenges the above-mentioned representation of enslaved men as dominating males who enjoy taking advantage of enslaved women. Indeed, Amos shows himself to be respectful and gentle towards Essie: he looks her in the face and “[takes] [her] hand and rub[s] it against his cheek” (Jones 45).

Furthermore, forced breeding deeply impacts Amos, who feels emasculated after Essie is raped by Paul. When Essie returns to their shack after the assault, Amos feels that “she had become a looking glass for his incompetence and he had no courage to place the blame where it actually belonged” (Jones 56). Amos’s incompetence, which can be understood to mean both his failure at getting Essie pregnant – thus leading Paul to impregnate her – and his inefficiency to protect her from harm, causes Amos to feel less virile and to blame Essie who becomes a mere “looking glass” for his feelings. Amos remarks that “older men were sometimes not as virile as they were when they were younger” and that, as a result, he needs more time to produce children (Jones 73). In addition, Foster asserts that “slavery violated the masculinity of men” because it “denied [them] the ability to protect vulnerable female dependents” (Foster 124). More strikingly, the chapter which relates Amos’s reactions to Essie’s rape begins with Amos’s childhood memory of discovering a cut off penis under the corpse of a hanged enslaved man (Jones 54). That is, the recollection of Essie’s rape and its aftermath conjures up in Amos’s mind the image of literal emasculation, which, again, presents a man as the victim of the rape. However, it should be noted that as Amos struggles with his wounded masculinity, he inflicts further

harm upon Essie. For instance, while “he want[s] to handle [Essie] like he would a newborn,” “he whisper[s] to her viciously [instead]” (Jones 56). Moreover, Be Auntie reproaches Amos for “trying to climb on top of [Essie] after what she [has] been through” (Jones 88). Even though Amos argues that he does so to show Essie that there “[is not] [an] ounce missing of her beauty,” Be Auntie believes that his actions are guided by his need to prove himself (Jones 88).

On the other hand, the novel sheds light on significant gendered inequalities within the slave quarters. To begin with, while Adam is tormented by the “unwillingness” that wears the faces of the women he is coupled with, “none of that alter[s] *his* actions – threat of whip or not” (Jones 285; emphasis added). As Adam indicates that he behaves in the same way with or without the “threat of whip,” he suggests that he sexually assaults women independently of Paul Halifax’s orders. Therefore, Adam is responsible for some of the abuse he inflicts on women and seems to retain some agency even when forced to procreate. This is illustrated by the possessive determiner that describes the “actions” as being *his*. This point is supported by Doddington, who states that “enslaved men were [...] trapped in an institution that legitimized sexual abuse, as well as within a society that expected men to dominate sexual encounters” (Doddington 147). Consequently, “some [...] enslaved men [...] viewed sexual domination as an acceptable [and even, at times, required] expression of manhood” (Doddington 148, 154). This, Doddington explains, was translated into “a lack of concern for consent” (Doddington 154). Indeed, Essie asserts that “most men [follow] their impulses without considering where they might lead, perhaps in spite of considering where they might lead” (Jones 44). In addition, some enslaved men “occasionally used [forced breeding] to craft homosocial hierarchies based on sexual prowess,” which sometimes led slaveholders to grant them access to enslaved women as a reward (Doddington 151). While the novel does not mention forced breeding ever being used as a means to reward enslaved men, it highlights the enthusiasm that some of them show in performing their task. Indeed, some of the nine enslaved men whom Paul lines up to impregnate Essie “dissect her by wondering the shape of her breasts or what contours might be hidden behind her clothing,” thus avidly anticipating the assault (Jones 45). As such, their reaction starkly differs from that of Essie, whose only focus is on the pain that she is about to endure: “[w]ould she be left so numb that afterward, her walk back to her shack would have to be done with legs far apart and clutching the agony at the pit of her stomach?” (Jones 45). Thus, seeing that enslaved men often dominated sexual intercourse and “occasionally used” these encounters

to fashion what they deemed to be a more masculine identity, they retained more agency during forced breeding than enslaved women did enduring the assaults (Doddington 149-52). This substantial disparity is best represented in Samuel's description of the role of enslaved men on the plantation which was examined earlier: "[a] boy [...] with big arms, wide shoulders, a black and heaving chest, and iron legs, who could drag a hoe through land, digging the lines of demarcation needed to plant whatever seed the land would take" (Jones 160). This passage establishes a significant contrast between the enslaved women who are represented as the "land" and the enslaved men who must plant it. Hence, the objectification of enslaved men discussed in the earlier analysis of this quotation pales in comparison to that of enslaved women who are not given a body but are instead portrayed as mere gardening tool and surface to be altered by men. That is, while enslaved women are depicted as being fully dehumanized by the process of forced breeding, enslaved men are shown to retain some agency.

Moreover, the abusive behavior of the enslaved men on Empty, which extends beyond the orders of slaveholders and the Fucking Place, prompts enslaved women to liken the actions of enslaved men to that of their white oppressors. Indeed, the following quotation does not merely depict Be Auntie's suffering, but it also highlights the similar workings of racial and gendered forms of oppression: "after [...] being *beaten* in the fields by Massa," Be Auntie "return[s], scarred, to the shack to be *beaten* by her lover's hand" (Jones 99; emphases added). The relationship between the two systems of domination is made most evident with the repetition of the verb *beaten* which shows that the acts perpetrated by the slaveholder and the enslaved lover are analogous, if not identical. Furthermore, the different locations and the succession of the events reflect the absence of reprieve from abuse as one oppressor is relayed by another. Hence, to the enslaved women, the actions of white people and enslaved men mingle together into one painful experience.

In addition, Puah draws a parallel between enslaved men and slaveholders themselves as she observes that both groups resort to Christianity to justify the abuse they perpetrate. Indeed, Puah asserts that "men and toubab [share] far more than either would ever admit" because they do not take responsibility for their actions, which they attribute to external entities instead: "both claimed they had good reason for this absurd behavior: whatever forces in the sky had declared that this act had to take place [...] it was as much beyond their control as sunshine" (Jones 99). Although Puah remains vague as to what the justifications of white people and enslaved men are, one might read the "forces in the sky"

as a reference to Christianity. This interpretation is supported throughout the novel as the characters stress the role played by Christian beliefs in the oppression of women and enslaved people. For instance, Be Auntie comments on the “men [who] [expect] her, and all women, to forget that women [are] always the first casualties of their lust, [and] [claim] that Eve had made this the order of things” (Jones 345-46). Indeed, in the Garden of Eden, Eve eats of the fruit of knowledge which God had forbidden mankind to taste and shares it with Adam (Gen. 3:6). Although the subsequent reaction of God to the offense is debated among theologians, many believe that They condemn Eve to obey her husband since They address her as follows: “thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee” (Gen. 3:16; Lings 8-12; Radford Ruether 86). Therefore, the western Christian tradition has long considered women to be prone to disobedience, thus making it necessary for men to subjugate them (Radford Ruether 86). As the enslaved men on Empty<sup>5</sup> use the Bible to justify their sexist endeavors, they adopt the same attitude as white men – and white women who, like Ruth, have interiorized the prevalent discourse – who label white women as second-rate beings because they were created after Adam and from one of his ribs. Even more so, as they resort to Christianity to explain gendered oppression, the enslaved men follow the same process as that used by the white population to support slavery. Indeed, Paul feels “comforted” in his role as slaveholder after “he return[s] to the Word [...] For God had said, plain and clear, render unto Caesar, first, and, also, slaves shall be obedient in order to one day find reparation in the exquisite cotton plantation in the sky” (Jones 258). As historian Paul Finkelman explains, the biblical passage “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God” was part of the pro-slavery religious argument stating “that Christians should obey the laws of the state” (Finkelman 195; Mark 12:17). Moreover, verses that emphasize the importance of obedience, particularly in master-enslaved relationships, were heavily exploited to defend the institution and its compatibility with Christianity (Finkelman 195).

Finally, the sexist endeavors of enslaved men are described as symptoms of the loss of their cultural heritage and of their westernization. Indeed, gendered oppression is portrayed as being un-African when the ancestors describe “the very first rapes” as “practices

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<sup>5</sup> Like the white population of the Antebellum South who refer to themselves as people and to African Americans as animals, the enslaved on Empty describe their own as “people,” and the white population as “toubab.” The characters often contrast the two terms, which implies that the enslaved do not consider their white oppressors to be human. This is most evident when Isaiah describes Adam as “the lightest-skinned person Isaiah ever did see who could still be considered a person” (Jones 211). Therefore, the “men” Be Auntie refers to must be understood as being Black men.

that drew him [the African man] away from his people and into the lair of his demise” (Jones 236). Similarly, when discussing the sexism that pervades the slave quarters, Puah asserts that “it hadn’t always been this way” (Jones 98). Importantly, she explains that she knows this because, as a woman, she is gifted with blood memory: “[b]lood memory confirmed this and women [are] the bearers of the blood” (Jones 98). Therefore, Puah presents enslaved women as naturally more capable to remember their African past than their male counterparts. This is further emphasized when Maggie only calls on women to perform the healing ritual on Samuel and Isaiah and remarks that “[a] long line of womens before us did this work. Used to be men too, until they forgot who they was. Something about men make them turn they back” (Jones 156). Indeed, not only does Maggie claim that men “forgot who they was,” but she also attributes their memory loss to some inherently masculine characteristic: “[s]omething about men make them turn they back.” While Maggie remains vague as to what the masculine trait responsible for sexism is, Puah mentions it explicitly: “the desire for power erase[s] memory and replace[s] it with violence. And Be Auntie had the bruises to prove it. Nearly every woman did” (Jones 99). Therefore, enslaved women suffer from violent acts which enslaved men would not have perpetrated had their memory of Africa been preserved – or, presumably, had they not been immersed in an environment that, as explained in earlier paragraphs, promotes hegemonic masculinity as a compensation for the emasculation that enslaved men feel during slavery (Foster 124).

#### **4.2.3 In precolonial Africa**

As enslaved women are able to remember their African past, they contrast their lived experience in Mississippi with the gender equality they would have enjoyed in Africa. Thus, in Be Auntie’s dreams, “the men [are] what men [are] supposed to be: secondary like they were in the beginning before imbalance. [...] [T]hey knew to leave the women alone to think. Therefore, finally, worthy of her worship” (Jones 346). Although Be Auntie’s assessment that men ought to be “secondary” appears to be a reversal of Ruth’s lament to belong in the “secondary place,” Be Auntie goes on to explain that this was the state of things “before imbalance” and that it made men “worthy of [...] worship.” Therefore, she does not exhibit misandrist sentiments, but rather suggests that women should be able to prioritize themselves. Indeed, she asserts that, in earlier times, men “knew to leave the women alone to think.” In this respect, Be Auntie’s memory of her African past, “the beginning,” starkly differs from Sarah’s description of the enslaved men on the plantation who “take up too

much space in us as it is. Leave no room for ourselves to stretch a bit or lay down without being bothered” (Jones 103).

Moreover, Puah daydreams of what appears to be an African parallel world where she relishes the absence of racist and masculine threats. Puah’s alternative universe is home to black-sand beaches, Black inhabitants who speak a language she does not understand – but knows is spoken to her kindly – and “sweet-smelling fruit” (Jones 99-100). This universe is also “crisper in color [and] more textured in sound” (Jones 100). Thus, Puah’s imaginary world reflects reality since it can be apprehended particularly well by the senses. The relationship between the imaginary and the real world is further emphasized by the narrator as they state that “the imaginary – where the Other Puah lived, [...] [is not] too far, [...] [sits] right up against where This Puah lived” (Jones 99). This quotation points to a strong resemblance between Puah’s mental picture of Africa and the actual state of the world, which sit “right up against” each other. Importantly, Puah sees this alternative space as a refuge where she can escape “the whims of false brothers [...] and toubab” (Jones 99). She conveys that she does not suffer from gendered and racial forms of oppression in her African imaginary. When cotton causes This Puah’s fingers to experience a “picking” sensation and be “raw and heavy,” the Other Puah does not know slave labor: “the tingling at the tips of her fingers [come] from how willingly they [are] kissed” (Jones 94, 100). Likewise, while most men on the plantation “feign [to be] interest[ed] [in what This Puah thinks] as an oh-so transparent ruse to get in under her dress,” “[the Other Puah] frolic[s] because there [is] no one lying in wait, anxious to take advantage of her kindness, misuse it, and leave it squirted on top of her like a shooting-star-shaped stain” (Jones 102, 100). One might understand it to be a metaphor for semen which “stains” women after they have been manipulated or coerced into sexual intercourse by men. Therefore, Puah establishes a contrast between the West and Africa in terms of gender violence as she praises the absence of sexual threats in her African imaginary. Furthermore, Puah associates sexism and western slavery since she imagines that in a world where her fingers would not be picking cotton, they would be kissed instead.

Not only is Africa portrayed as a place spared from gender discrimination against women in Be Auntie and Puah’s dreams, but Sarah’s memories of her native village also show that some African communities are matriarchal. Indeed, Sarah seems to underline the significance of women and girls when she explains why all children in her village are considered to be female until they are old enough to choose their own gender: “girl [is] the



alpha. Even in the womb, the healers had said, the start was there before anything might change. Circles [come] before lines” (Jones 114-15). Although this quotation appears to merely claim that human sexual organs are initially female before they can become male, it can also be interpreted as describing a hierarchy which places the female body at its top. This plurality of meaning is first reflected in Sarah’s characterization of the girl as “the alpha.” Indeed, alpha is the first letter of the Greek alphabet, so its mention thus seemingly refers to the anteriority of female sexual organs to male ones. However, the term extends beyond the notion of temporality and designates “the principal or key element of something” (Oxford English Dictionary). Consequently, the alpha can also be “a person tending to assume a dominant role in social or professional situations, or thought to possess the qualities and confidence for leadership” (Oxford English Dictionary). Similarly, the sentence “circles [come] before lines” can be understood as a repetition that human sexual organs are first female – or “circles” – before they can become male – or “lines.” Likewise, one may read this passage as claiming that women and girls ought to be prioritized over men and boys.

Interestingly, the intrinsic link between temporality and primacy that is established in Sarah’s description of what one might call the genesis of the sexes mirrors that of the biblical justification for sexism used by white and Black men in the United States – namely the idea that women are inferior to men because Eve was created *after* Adam and *from* one of his ribs. From this observation, one might understand the explanation for the matriarchy of Sarah’s community to be constructed in opposition to that of western patriarchy in an attempt to better highlight the differences between the West and Africa. Therefore, the reversal is all the more relevant that it could explain why biological sex is given such consideration in a society that believes gender to be determined by spirit (and it might also explain how gender hierarchy is possible in a society that does not have binary gender and association between body and gender). Indeed, while children are assigned “girl” independently of their own physical characteristics, the attribution and worth of their gender is based upon a general assessment of the human body. That is, Sarah’s people seem to believe that children must be considered “girls” because female sexual organs develop first and, possibly, because the associated feminine gender is therefore of higher value. Conversely, as the “lines” or male sexual organs are believed to form at a *later* stage of gestation and *from* the female ones, the masculine gender is given less importance: not only are children attributed female by default, but men are also absent from the overall depiction of Sarah’s village – along with the other two genders which the community can choose from,

“free” and “all.” Indeed, the visibility of women and invisibility of other genders is symbolically perpetuated in Sarah’s memories as they only mention girls and women: “a girl with so many mothers, aunts, and sisters” (Jones 115).

Finally, while Sarah admittedly claims that men are violent – she asserts that Isaiah is not a man because “violence [isn’t his primary motion]” – her assessment seems to be informed by her western experiences, rather than by her African ones (Jones 116). This is illustrated when she contrasts the racial and gendered oppression that she has had to endure in the United States with her childhood in Africa. Indeed, she juxtaposes the horrors of slavery and rapes with her upbringing in an idyllic environment where there were “no unkind eyes or untoward glances” (Jones 114-15). Most importantly, she claims that her memories of Africa prevented her from being mentally crushed by slaveholders: “they tried to break her in half [...] [but] trapped within her mind were remembrances” (Jones 114). Thus, Sarah not only shows that she did not suffer from sexism and other forms of mistreatment during her childhood, but she also signals that her environment empowered her consequently enough to allow her to feel self-confident and not be shattered by inhumane treatments.

The opposition between the United States and Africa regarding gender relations is nuanced in the chapters that focus on the conflict between the Kosongo and their past and current invaders, namely the mountain people and the Portuguese. Indeed, the portrayal of precolonial Africa is diversified by its juxtaposition of the Kosongo and the mountain people. On the one hand, the African continent displays gender equality as the Kosongo village is led by a female king and allows both men and women to take part in its council, and, therefore, in decision-making (Jones 176). On the other hand, other African societies such as the mountain people and villages neighboring the Kosongo support masculine hegemony: the mountain people have killed their own king and “[want] to make the women [...] tools” (Jones 242). Accordingly, “it vex[es] some of the [...] kings [of other villages] that a woman [King Akusa] should call herself [king]” (Jones 241). Therefore, unlike in earlier portrayals, Africa is not an idyllic haven devoid of sexism. Rather, it is home to various communities which appreciate gender relations in different manners.

Still, it should be noted that although only a minority of African peoples in *The Prophets* practice gender equality, their behavior is portrayed as African, while sexism is described as a western importation which supports slavery. While King Akusa’s subjects are “one of the few to maintain the original order,” “[the men of other villages] [have] been

stripped of their memories as surely as if someone [...] drained [them] of all that had been passed to them for millennia, through blood” (Jones 241). Hence, when gender equality reflects the traditional customs of the continent, sexism breaks away from them. In this respect, sexism seems to be represented as un-African.

This definition of sexism as un-African is supported by the novel’s identification of the mountain people with the white colonizers. In addition to being sexist, the mountain people are belligerent. King Akusa remembers that they “had once come down from their perches in the clouds and attacked her village unprovoked” (Jones 85). In addition, Kosii recalls his father telling him the same story when he was a child and adding that the mountain people “had skulls around their necks [...]. Human. No bigger than [Kosii’s]” (Jones 242). The violence of the mountain people leads some of the Kosongo to draw a parallel between the attack perpetrated by the mountain people in “the Great War” and the intrusion and subsequent invasion of Kosongo by the colonizers (Jones 242). To begin with, King Akusa accuses one of the council members of being resentful after he suggested killing the Christian missionaries who had arrived uninvited: “[s]urely your saltiness from so long ago does not still cloud your reason” (Jones 176). However, it is clear from King Akusa’s reaction that she has never seen white people before encountering Brother Gabriel and his men. Indeed, the king manifests curiosity for their Caucasian features, which she is evidently unfamiliar with: “[s]he [could not] stop staring at them. They had hair the color of sand” (Jones 85). In addition, she thinks that her “*initial assessment* was correct: all three demons were missing skin” (Jones 86; emphasis added). Therefore, the grudge that the council member is said to hold against the missionaries shows that the white men are equated with Kosongo’s previous – and only mentioned – invaders. This reading is supported by the fact that when the mountain people attacked the village, “white paint [...] garishly adorned their faces” (Jones 85). Thus, their appearance itself bears traces of their being symbolically assimilated with the colonizers. Furthermore, while aboard the slave ship, Kosii explicitly likens his white oppressors with the mountain people: after initially thinking that he never heard of people like the colonizers, he corrects himself and describes the story his father told him about the “people [who] came down from the distant mountains” (Jones 242). Thus, not only does Kosii establish a direct link between the mountain people and the colonizers as he reflects on their similarity, but the description he gives of the former also echoes the depiction of the latter presented by the ancestors: “[t]hey tumbled down from the great mountains” (Jones 235). Even more so, Kosii suspects the African enemy of having aided their Western

counterparts attack and capture the Kosongo: “[h]e wondered now if the people who built vessels big enough to swallow entire villages conspired with the mountains to destroy everything in between” (Jones 243). The “mountains” are later confirmed to be a metonymic reference to the mountain people when Kosii wonders whether one of his fellow prisoners could be “a mountain man double-crossed” (Jones 243).

Considering the significant resemblance between the mountain people and the Europeans, one could read sexism as a further European characteristic exhibited by the mountain people and other communities. Finally, gender discrimination plays a role in the slave trade as it encourages villages neighboring the Kosongo to be complicit in the enslavement of their fellow Africans. After Kosii has been captured by the enslavers, he asserts that “it was spitefulness [...] that allowed [the Kosongo] to be left wide open for anything to swoop in and grab them up” (Jones 241). This spitefulness, he explains, is motivated by sexism since it causes the other kings to be vexed by King Akusa’s title and, therefore, to disapprove of the Kosongo community (Jones 241). In other words, gender hierarchy hinders African solidarity which, in turns, benefits the colonizers. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Kosii suspects the mountain people of having actively helped the Europeans capture them (Jones 243). Therefore, the novel portrays sexism as not only un-African, but also as *anti*-African.

### 4. 3 Queerness

So far, the focus of this chapter has been on the analysis of the representations and understandings of gender and gender hierarchy in *The Prophets*. I have shown that the novel portrays the western world and Africa as drastically different in terms of their perception of gender and the traditional structure of their gender relations – although, admittedly, the author’s wish to oppose the West and Africa on these issues sometimes paradoxically inscribes the two poles into a same framework for apprehending gender and gender hierarchy, thus leading to some discrepancies. Moreover, I have illustrated the significant role played by Christianity in the West, as it used to justify both the conflation of sex and gender and the patriarchy that results from such gender perception.

Far from drifting away from the main topic of this dissertation, the particular attention given to the different appreciations of gender and gender hierarchy – as well as to the religious influences that inform their configuration – allows for a better understanding of the clashing perceptions of the West and Africa on queerness. Indeed, taking these factors

into account in the analysis of queerness helps demonstrate that although queer men are believed to be inherently un-masculine in both the West and Africa, this perception reflects the heterosexism that prevails in the West and the celebration of queerness on the African continent. Furthermore, such an analysis enables one to further explore the parallels drawn in the novel between various forms of oppression, namely sexism, racism, and homophobia. Most importantly, the contrast between the West and Africa on such issues will show that *The Prophets* portrays queerness as a means of liberation from all three forms of oppression.

#### **4.3.1 The western perception**

In the West, where naturalized gender prevails, the description of queer men as feminine is part of homophobic discourses that rely on the assumption that queer behavior entails the *loss* of one's gender. Indeed, Sarah explains that, on the plantation, Samuel and Isaiah are "defined by the mistaken belief that it [is] *broken* manhood coating their skin" (Jones 117; emphasis added). Strikingly, the adjective *broken* describes a state of being which has been negatively altered from its *original* form. In other words, the existence of broken manhood implies that of a "whole" or "true" masculinity which, according to the western description of Samuel and Isaiah, queer men have lost. It follows that, in the western world, "true" masculinity requires heterosexuality. This perception echoes Butler's claim that when gender is conflated with sex, "gender [is regulated] as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31). That is, gender is not only defined by sex, but it is also "reflecte[d] or expresse[d]" in its relationship with the other sex (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31; *Bodies That Matter* 183). Thus, to "be" a man entails to desire a woman, and vice versa (Butler, *Bodies* 183). This means that the western understanding of gender normalizes and, hence, naturalizes heterosexuality, which, in turn, reinforces the normative gender binary (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 31; *Bodies* 182-83). Conversely, queer desire implies gender non-conformity and is therefore deemed unnatural (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 26; *Bodies* 183). As a result, queer individuals are often subjected to homophobic discourses which "[operate] through the attribution of a damaged, failed, or otherwise abject gender to homosexuals, that is, calling gay men 'feminine' or calling lesbians 'masculine'" (Butler, *Bodies* 182). Indeed, not only are Samuel and Isaiah defined by their "broken manhood," but Amos also remarks that they "[carry] on as though at least one of them was female" (Jones 74). Similarly, James asserts that Timothy's

homosexuality is a result of his parents' behavior as they "softened him" and denied him "the chance to be a man" (Jones 331).

The homophobic discourses that pervade the West do not rely on gender shaming only: they also resort to readings of the Christian Bible which portray queerness as sinful. For example, Brother Gabriel condemns Elewa and Kosii's relationship, which he describes as a "blasphemy" and "the seeds of Sodom" (Jones 183). In the Bible, the inhabitants of Sodom are "wicked" and "great sinners," which leads God to destroy their city (Lings 243). As mentioned in the historical background, the biblical story of the destruction of Sodom has often been used to "justify systematic persecution of people in homoerotic relationships" with many believing the sin of Sodom to be that of homosexuality (Lings 241). Similarly, Paul is anxious that Samuel and Isaiah's love will cause "divine wrath" to fall upon the couple and afflict others living on the plantation (Jones 263). As the plot of the novel largely revolves around Samuel and Isaiah's repeated refusal to supply the Halifax plantation with enslaved children, the most significant argument extracted from the Bible against queerness is, in *The Prophets*, the divine order to conceive children. Among other instances, this argument is used by Paul when he enters the barn holding a whip in one hand and the Bible in the other and orders Samuel and Isaiah to be "fruitful" and "multiply," thus echoing God's command to Noah and his sons to "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth" (Jones 264-65; Gen 9:1). Finally, the significance of religion in the production of homophobia is perhaps best illustrated in the changing attitude of the enslaved population towards Samuel and Isaiah after they have been christianized. Amos declares that "before [he] found Jesus, [he] understood [Samuel and Isaiah]. [He] felt the praise of [their] together time and rejoiced. But now, [his] eyes have been opened and [he] see[s]" (Jones 72). Likewise, "[n]o one [among the enslaved] cared much for Isaiah and Samuel either, until [Amos] thought he could also be a toubab and the two simply couldn't coexist" (Jones 300).

In addition to the homophobic discourses rendered in the novel, the importance of homophobia in the West can be observed in the experience of queer individuals who hide their queer identity from fear of being rejected and/or abused. This is best illustrated in Samuel's attempts to hide his relationship with Isaiah and in his suggestion to comply with the heterosexual expectations of the West. Indeed, Samuel repeatedly objects to Isaiah's public display of affection to the point that Sarah observes that "[he] [cannot] stand to be anywhere, joined, where there [is] no barn cover" (Jones 119). Moreover, Samuel reproaches Isaiah for not adopting the norms of the white population, which leads the other enslaved

people to reject them (Jones 107). Thus, he tells Isaiah that he is “too much like a woman,” and suggests that they agree to sexual intercourse with enslaved women: “if you [Isaiah] feel to stay [on Empty], [it would] be easier if [we complied]” (Jones 106-11). In the same vein, one could wonder whether Samuel attempts to affirm his own masculinity as he asserts that “[he] could do it [...] Make it with all those womens [presented to them by Paul]. But he just [does not] [want to]” (Jones 111). Since, as explained earlier, masculinity is assumed to require heterosexuality, Samuel’s boasting about his capacity to have sexual intercourse with women might reflect his need to affirm his manhood in the face of western stereotypes. In any case, Samuel’s suffering as he is confronted with heteronormative standards is expressed by Sarah, who states that “Samuel [...] [is] fighting against himself because his desire [does not] look like anything he [has] ever seen before” (Jones 116). Similarly, Big Hosea, an enslaved man on Empty, seems to try to deflect attention away from his sexual orientation by assaulting Samuel for having looked at him “in a way that made him feel defenseless, naked” (Jones 78). The novel hints at Hosea’s being queer as it mentions that the character used to “always sought Samuel out to play-wrestle” and has an erection after fighting Samuel for the looks he allegedly gave him (Jones 78-79). Thus, Hosea appears to have feared that Samuel’s gaze – or at least a lack of violent reaction to it on Hosea’s part – would expose his own queer identity. Finally, the novel shows that Black people are not the only ones who conceal their sexual orientation. As Timothy notices looks that tell him that his schoolmates have surmised that he is queer, he thinks that he “ha[s] perhaps not been careful *enough*” (Jones 191; emphasis added). He then proceeds to list the behaviors that may have given him away, such as “[staring] too long at a passing gentleman” or “[saying] a male name during his slumber,” and he concludes: “[y]ou [can] never know for sure what inspire[s] their malice, so every part of your inside self [has] to remain inside” (Jones 191). In other words, Timothy remains – or, at least, tries to remain – closeted in order to protect himself from the “malice” of homophobic others.

#### **4.3.2 The precolonial African perception**

In Jones’s novel, the oppression of queer individuals in the United States is contrasted with the celebration of queer relationships in precolonial Africa. Indeed, while Samuel, Hosea, and Timothy attempt to hide their sexuality for fear of being abused, the *entire* Kosongo village attends and celebrates Elewa and Kosii’s wedding: “*everyone* in the village [is] there” and “*the entire village* erupt[s] in ululation” at the end of the ceremony (Jones 178, 181; emphases added). Subsequently, “they *all* [the Kosongo] [dance] and [dance] and [dance]

until they [are] wet with celebration” (Jones 181; emphasis added). Afterwards, “*each member of the tribe* [takes] a moment to walk over to Elewa and Kosii and leave a gift with them” (Jones 182; emphasis added). Thus, while homophobia pervades the West, it appears to be inexistent among the Kosongo as they *all* partake in festivities honoring Elewa and Kosii’s relationship.

#### **4.4.2.1 The social irrelevance of queerness**

Jones argues in multiple interviews that the precolonial African world was historically free from not only homophobia, but also from the very concepts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and queer (Fatin). In precolonial African societies, “there was no need to give [queerness] a special name like homosexual or lesbian [...]. [Queerness] was just part of nature, part of the community [...] and not thought of as despicable, wicked [or] sinful until the Christian missionaries [arrived]” (Fatin). To borrow Somé’s words, queer individuals were “looked on, essentially, as people” rather than defined by their sexual orientation (Somé). In *The Prophets*, King Akusa struggles to understand Brother Gabriel’s shock at seeing Elewa and Kosii being wedded, which is illustrated when she asks him whether “[his] own land lack[s] even the most basic of traditions” (Jones 183). Similarly, she cannot make sense of the colonizer’s condemnation of the couple for being queer as she states that “they are Elewa and Kosii as they have always been” (Jones 183).

Nonetheless, while some – and not all, as will be explained in more detail later – precolonial African societies did not label queer relationships, this was often the case because these relationships did not have the same social meaning as they do in the western world. Murray et al. explain that “in Africa [...] heterosexual marriage and procreation – but not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation, or monogamy – [were] universal expectations” (Murray et al. 270). In other words, “homosexuality [was not seen] as incompatible with heterosexuality [...], marriage, and parenthood,” which “kinship obligations [guaranteed]” (Murray et al. 93). Thus, in traditional precolonial African societies where people were required to marry and have children, “heterosexuality [was] not fetishized [...] as ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ or even a necessary [...] or *recognized* [...] state of being” (Murray et al. 93; emphasis added). It is only in the contemporary West, where the freedom to choose one’s partner is greater and where monogamy entails that heterosexual and queer relationships are mutually exclusive, that individuals are “define[d] [...] on the basis of [their] sexual [orientation]” (Murray et al. XXXI, 270).



It should also be noted that when people who engage in same-sex practices in the Western world often consider themselves to be queer, it was not necessarily so in precolonial Africa. For instance, like in ancient Greece, one's sexual role was often more important than the "gender of one's partner" (Zabus 26). In other words, "a 'masculine man' playing the dominant role in a relationship with another man [...] [was] called 'a straight man' and [was] not perceived as 'gay' because he act[ed] as penetrator" (Zabus 26). Being penetrated during homosexual intercourse likewise did not entail that one was queer: adolescents working in mines were often "boy-wives" to older miners, the "boss-boys," and agreed to play that role not out of sexual attraction, but "in order to be able to pay for the bride-price, and thereby [secure] a wife" (Zabus 42). Even in the rare cases in which people of the same sex married each other, the two partners were not necessarily queer (Zabus 44-45). For instance, "female husbands" were "generally widows without a male offspring, who [took] on 'wives' to produce heirs for their husbands' lineages. The 'wives' then [took] in male lovers and [had] children who [were] in turn handed over to the 'female husbands'" (Zabus 45). Thus, people who engaged in same-sex relationships in non-fictional precolonial Africa often did not subvert the primacy of heterosexuality. Rather, the purpose-oriented nature of their relationships generally supported heterosexual marriages and their lineages.

Therefore, to understand the portrayal of the perception of queerness and queer individuals among the Kosongo, it is important to note that the novel adapts the historical social irrelevance of sexual orientation in precolonial Africa to a westernized acceptance of queer relationships. Although Elewa and Kosii are expected to have children – "Kosii [is] expected to pass [his medicine stick] to his firstborn child" – the couple marry each other and will form their own household: "[King Akusa's wives] [will] help [Elewa and Kosii] take the gifts to their new dwelling in the morning" (Jones 178, 182). Thus, Elewa and Kosii do not "maintain the conventional image of married life" that African people were required to preserve in precolonial times (Jones 178; Murray et al. 270). What is "part of nature" among the Kosongo is not merely queer sexuality, but also a queer relationship that supplants the primacy of compulsory heterosexuality.

#### **4.4.2.2 Religion**

Importantly, the contrast between the West and the Kosongo regarding their treatment of queer individuals is informed not only by the social irrelevance of sexual orientation in Africa, but also by their respective religions. While Brother Gabriel identifies homosexuality with the sin of Sodom, King Akusa "[does] not know this word, *Sodom*" (Jones 183;

emphasis in original). Thus, she assesses Elewa and Kosii's relationship using her own African belief system, and claims that "their courtship has been witnessed and approved by generations of ancestors" (Jones 183). Not only are Elewa and Kosii not at odds with Kosongo beliefs, but they are also fully integrated within them. As queer individuals, they have been given the spiritual role of guarding the gods' gates: "they were born guardians [...] The whole village knew it from the moment [Elewa] and Kosii met as barely-walkers. The way they took to each other and remained as inseparable as a tortoise and its shell" (Jones 179). One may understand the existence of a spiritual role that is specifically taken on by queer individuals to further assert Elewa and Kosii's legitimacy. That is, as there is a sacred function for queer people to assume, the Kosongo belief system is shown not to merely approve of queerness, but also to need and expect it to exist. Thus, the description of Elewa and Kosii as guardians is supplemented by the observation that "only with great violence could they be split, which all of nature would frown upon" (Jones 179).

While the novel portrays queer sexuality – or the attraction that Elewa and Kosii have felt for each other from a tender age – as determining the couple's role as guardians of the gates, it is necessary to underline that, once again, Jones translates African realities into a western framework for understanding queerness. In the Dagara villages whose "gatekeepers" appear to have inspired Jones's "guardians of the gates," the role of the gatekeepers is not seen as reflecting their sexuality: like in other traditional African societies, queer people are expected to "form heterosexual family relations through marriage," which renders sexual orientation irrelevant to the community (Williams 71). Even more so, it appears that, in such context, the sexual preferences of gatekeepers are unknown to their people (Somé, Williams 70-72). Somé explains that "[he] only got to know that [gatekeepers] [are] gay" because, after having spent time in the United States and "seeing the serious issues surrounding gay people, [he] began to wonder [whether] it [existed] in [his] own country" and "asked one of [the gatekeepers] [...] whether he [felt] sexual attraction towards another man" (Somé). Thus, in the Dagara community, the spiritual importance of queer people – or, to borrow Somé's words, "what makes a gay person gay" – comes from their particular "state of vibrational consciousness, which is far higher, and far different from that [of other people]" (Somé). According to Somé, the Dagara tribe considers "the Earth [...] as a very [...] delicate machine or consciousness, with high vibrational points" (Somé). The gatekeepers must guard these points "in order for the tribe to keep its continuity with the gods and with the spirits that dwell there" (Somé).

Although Somé argues that it is precisely the focus on queer individuals' spiritual role rather than on their sexuality that causes them to be particularly well integrated into the Dagara community, *The Prophets*' depiction of the guardians as an openly queer couple allows for the celebration of not only queer individuals, but also of queer identity and relationships as they are experienced in the West. While the responsibility of guardians is not detailed in the novel, they too appear to play an important role in maintaining the relationship between their community and ancestors. For instance, when, upon the arrival of the Portuguese, King Akusa worries that the ancestors might have cursed the village, she reminds herself that the ancestors have no reason to be angry with the Kosongo, who are on the brink of finally having guardians of the gates again (Jones 83-84). Thus, while queerness is depicted by Christians as a sin that prevents any future from occurring – since homosexuality is believed to be responsible for the destruction of Sodom and prevents children from being born –, queer behavior is portrayed as a crucial component of the Kosongo community as it maintains communication with the spirits of the ancestors and, in doing so, ensures the safety of the village. In other words, when the West perceives queerness as a threat, the Kosongo see it as safeguarding both past and future. Seeing that the role of guardians is, as mentioned above, determined by their queer relationship, Elewa and Kosii's bond is construed as providence by the Kosongo: "[i]t was providence, their connection, for the last guardians had transitioned a few seasons before [...] and there was no one in the village to guard the gates [...] between here and the invisible place [of the ancestors]" (Jones 179). Thus, the portrayal of guardians in Jones's work not only legitimizes the existence of queer individuals, but it also praises their romantic union and open relationship, which are believed to be crucial to the well-being of their community.

#### **4.4.2.3 Feminism**

In addition to religion and the social irrelevance of queer sexuality among the Kosongo, the African view that queer men are un-masculine contributes to the celebration of queerness, which it represents as part of African traditions. When, as explained earlier, the attribution of another or "failed" gender to queer individuals is part of homophobic discourses in the West, it is not part of homophobic discourses in Africa. To begin with, although King Akusa suggests that at least one person in a gay couple must not be male when she answers Brother Gabriel's claim that "[Kosii and Elewa] are two men" by saying that it is "impossible. They are bonded" (Jones 183-84), the Kosongo are shown to be accepting of and even encouraging queer individuals and relationships, as illustrated above. Furthermore, on Empty, Sarah

remarks that Isaiah has chosen “woman or free,” and that Samuel is only choosing man because “he [does not] understand how that [makes] the other possibilities remote” (Jones 116, 119). Nonetheless, Sarah does not share the belief that being queer entails the loss of one’s gender. She describes as “mistaken” the western understanding that it “[is] broken manhood coating [Samuel and Isaiah’s] skin” (Jones 117). Finally, being queer herself, Sarah identifies with the struggles encountered by The Two of Them and feels sympathy towards them: “their safety [is] [...] less [than hers was with her partner, Mary] and she [feels] for them” (Jones 117). She encourages Isaiah to pursue his relationship with Samuel and tells him that she should have held on to hers as well, thus alluding to her own difficulties as a lesbian (Jones 120). Therefore, Sarah does not appear to display any forms of internalized homophobia when she suggests that Samuel and Isaiah are not “*men-men*” (Jones 166; emphasis in original). Rather, as mentioned earlier, when assessing Isaiah’s gender, Sarah affirms that he is not a man because “violence [is not] his primary motion” (Jones 116).

Admittedly, some might be tempted to argue that heterosexual men such as Adam and Amos are mindful of others and, like (Samuel and) Isaiah, do not have violence as their primary motion. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, as demonstrated earlier, both Adam and Amos hurt their female partners. While Adam is afflicted by the suffering of the women he has intercourse with, he does not let it “alter his actions” (Jones 285). As for Amos, although he is shown to be very considerate of Essie, he “whispers to her viciously” when he begins to see her as “a looking glass for his incompetence” after he failed to protect her (Jones 56). Moreover, when comparing her experiences with Amos and Isaiah in the Fucking Place, Essie states that, like “most men,” Amos “[does not] have Isaiah’s decency” (Jones 44). It appears that, in *The Prophets*, “men” need to be queer, or un-masculine, to not be violent.

As mentioned in the previous subsection of this chapter dealing with gender hierarchy, “[s]omething about men” makes them lose their memory of Africa and allows them to be corrupted by Western society (Jones 156). Therefore, the characterization of queer men as un-masculine suggests that, unlike their heterosexual counterparts, Samuel and Isaiah have retained their blood memory (and, as will be demonstrated in the second chapter of this dissertation, this characterization emphasizes the oppression that they endure as queer individuals in the novel). This is illustrated, for example, when Isaiah has a conversation with Sarah on the bank of the river that borders the plantation and “[sticks] his foot in the

water and swirl[s] it,” thus surprising Sarah who did not know “it was even in him to do [that]” (Jones 120). In this passage, Sarah identifies Isaiah’s swirling with an African practice and encourages him to “keep on” until a face – which she recognizes as Mary’s – appears in the water (Jones 120). As for Samuel, Maggie tells him that his ability to see shadows, which she believes to be the ancestors, means that “the favor” has been passed down to him (Jones 303).

Most importantly, Samuel and Isaiah’s queer behavior testifies to their African remembrances. In the following passage as in other passages which describe Samuel and Isaiah’s sexual intercourse, the actions of the couple are depicted as being those of shadows: “sixteen seasons ago, one hand [...] placed on top of the other while at the riverbank [...] was all it took for their evening shadows to later dance” (Jones 211). Since dance is a common metaphor for sexual intercourse, Samuel and Isaiah embody their ancestors, and, hence, their African past when they engage in queer sexual acts. The link that is established between queerness and precolonial Africa is reinforced by the metaphorical “dancing” of the shadows. Not only is dancing an important aspect of African spiritual practices, as mentioned in the historical background, but it is also explicitly defined as a custom inherited from the Kosongo by the ancestors who tell their audience: “[y]ou come from the place where fathers held you and mothers hunted for your pleasure. Holding great spears and dancing [...]. You still do the dance. It is part of who you are” (Jones 81). More explicitly, Maggie and Sarah both explain that queerness is “an old thing” (Jones 39, 120).

Far from being an argument to support homophobia, the description of queer men as un-masculine, helps define Black queer men as inherently feminist. The novel shows that while heterosexual men in the United States are prone to sexism and sexual violence, Samuel and Isaiah are not. For instance, when most enslaved men are enthusiastic to perform their sexual duties in the Fucking Place, The Two of Them repeatedly refuse to impregnate enslaved women. Although the couple’s refusal might be seen as merely reflecting their own sexual orientation and interests, these acts of disobedience nonetheless testify to their unwillingness to hurt women.

Indeed, it should be noted that Samuel and Isaiah bear the consequences of their defiance to Paul: not only are they whipped when they do not procreate, but they are also alienated from their community, who sees them as sexually deviant (Jones 45, 107-09). The consequences of Samuel and Isaiah’s resistance are so far-reaching that, as mentioned

earlier, Samuel tells Isaiah that they should consider complying with Paul's orders – that is, engage in heterosexual intercourse – so as to not be rejected by the other enslaved people (Jones 111). Despite these challenging circumstances, Isaiah reprimands Samuel for his proposition as he asks: “[s]o you wanna hurt two people, not just one?” (Jones 111). Hence, Isaiah conveys that while Samuel suffers from the repercussions of their refusal, surrendering to Paul would only inflict harm upon someone else – namely the enslaved woman Samuel would have sexual intercourse with – and himself. Therefore, as they keep on refusing to procreate, Samuel and Isaiah do not only attempt to protect their own bodily integrity, but also that of enslaved women.

Furthermore, as Samuel apologizes to a cow before milking it, he distinguishes himself from abusive heterosexual men who treat enslaved women as mere animals “without so much as [...] a ‘beg your pardon’” (Jones 88). The novel establishes a parallel between enslaved women and cows as it shows that, as enslaved women are objectified, both are treated in a similar fashion. This is best illustrated when Maggie is ordered to breastfeed a baby Halifax and understands her function to be that of a cow: “[o]nly with a great deal of restraint could she act as a cow for this child” (Jones 30-31). Similarly, Puah describes the purpose of the animal to define her own as an enslaved woman: “[t]he cow was always useful for something. Milk, if not labor. Labor, if not meat. Meat, if not milk. Rape” (Jones 172). As women and cows are repeatedly associated, the description of Samuel milking the cow as “grabb[ing] her teats” summons in the readers’ mind the objectification of enslaved women as they are sexually abused by men (Jones 112). Nonetheless, while the description of Samuel’s action conjures up images of the rapes of enslaved women, the similarities of both situations allow for a comparison that sheds light on their differences. Whereas abusive men treat enslaved women as mere animals, Samuel treats a cow as an animal. Therefore, Samuel’s actions are not depicted as reprehensible, unlike those of his abusive heterosexual counterparts. Moreover, Samuel’s apology to the cow further establishes his difference from other men. Be Auntie explains that part of the pain that she endures when being physically abused is caused by the indifference of enslaved men, who do not even pretend to be forced upon her and “walk out of [her] shack without so much as [...] a ‘beg your pardon’” after the assault (Jones 88). The contrast between Samuel and the other enslaved men is all the more apparent that Samuel’s apology consists of the exact words that Be Auntie wishes were addressed to her – “I beg your pardon” (Jones 112). In other words, when heterosexual men willingly assault enslaved women without showing any remorse, Samuel’s feeling the need

to ask for the cow's pardon indicates that he would not treat an animal in the way that some men treat enslaved women.

While the novel defines queer men as un-masculine as it highlights their potential to subvert patriarchy by refusing to engage in the oppression of women through heterosexual intercourse, it does not need to assign a different gender to queer women who are, by default, "gifted" with blood memory (Jones 98). Although Sarah is a lesbian and questions Samuel and Isaiah's, gender, she does not reflect on her own gendered identity. Instead, she appears to identify as a woman as she is referred to as such throughout the narrative and never contests this categorization. This is perhaps best illustrated when she answers Maggie's call to perform a healing ritual on The Two of Them. The passage emphasizes that the group summoned by Maggie is made up of women as it repeatedly refers to them with this label and highlights the significance of their blood memory (Jones 154-73). Moreover, Sarah does not indicate that she considers Mary, her partner from whom she was forcibly separated, to not be female (Jones 118, 154-73). When asked by Be Auntie why she hates men, Sarah replies that she simply does not have any interest in them: "I don't hate men [...]. And I don't love men, either. More like neitherway with them. They just there, like a tree or a sky" (Jones 166). Admittedly, Sarah's worldviews allow for alternatives to male and female with "free" and "all." Nevertheless, the fact that her partner's gender is never scrutinized leads the readers to assume that Mary is indeed a woman.

In *The Prophets* as in the non-fictional world, queer women participate in the struggle against sexism. To begin with, Sarah seems to have, like Samuel and Isaiah, refused to submit to forced reproduction. She remembers that, back on the plantation where she lived prior to arriving on Empty, she attempted to attack her white oppressors because "they wouldn't heed [her refusals]" (Jones 118). Although the nature of Sarah's refusals remains vague, she draws important parallels between her experience and that of Samuel and Isaiah as she states that "seeing them [...] soften[s] her because she [remembers] [...] how it [will] end" (Jones 117). Given the similarities that Sarah finds between the circumstances of the two couples, her refusals can be interpreted as refusals to procreate. Such refusals, lesbian and feminist writer Cheryl Clarke argues, are "an act of resistance" against patriarchy (Clarke 128). Indeed, Clarke asserts that "the system of patriarchal domination is buttressed by the subjugation of women through heterosexuality" (Clarke 130). In other words, compulsory heterosexuality coerces women into "a life of servitude" as "the male-dependent female" (Clarke 129). Lesbianism, on the other hand, entails "a recognition" and "an

awakening” of the love that women feel for each other and themselves (Clarke 128). In turn, “women who love women [...] [refuse] to comply with the behavior demanded of women [and] [refuse] to define themselves in relation to men” (Clarke 128). While such position seems extreme as it suggests that heterosexual women do not love themselves, Clarke makes the compelling argument that queer women who embrace their sexuality in their romantic and sexual lives have chosen to indulge themselves over the societal expectations of heterosexuality (Clarke 128). In doing so, queer women threaten patriarchy: not only do they not conform to the heterosexual model on which patriarchy depends, but they also reject the masculine authority which is often credited with having devised the societal norms that maintain women in a subordinate position (Clarke 128; Isherwood 251; Punt 330).

Therefore, in the novel, Sarah and Mary’s feminist resistance is perhaps best illustrated in the description of their lovemaking. At first glance, the passage might seem to objectify women as it compares their bodies to an African landscape: “the dual bushes that each [hold] their own shining stars [...] joined” (Jones 116). This description reminds the readers of Sarah’s native village, which she depicts, only two pages before, as follows: “[i]t was deep in the bush, which [...] protected them [...] and made their eyes suitable for night” (Jones 114). Moreover, as it represents the female body as a land, the description of lesbian intercourse is reminiscent of Samuel’s portrayal of the sexual duties of enslaved men, which was analyzed earlier: “[a] boy [...] who could drag a hoe through land, digging the lines of demarcation needed to plant whatever seed the land would take” (Jones 160). Nonetheless, while, in forced heterosexual intercourse, women must receive the seed planted by men, it is not so in lesbian intercourse. Rather than being penetrated and altered by their partner, “the dual bushes [...] joined.” In contrast to heterosexual intercourse, which implies an imbalanced relationship between men and women – where men are active penetrators and women are the invaded land –, queer intercourse is described as a connection between equals. The equality that prevails in lesbian relationships is further emphasized with the description of the female vulvas which “each [hold] their own shining stars” (Jones 116). Although the “shining stars” are a metaphor to depict the female anatomy, the verb *hold* and the positive value commonly ascribed to “shining stars” suggest that each partner has, in themselves, their own worth. Neither one depends on the other to give them meaning, or importance. Thus, the female sexual organ or the “shining stars” – is reimagined and redefined as a treasure as it is not devalued by being depicted as inferior to the male body.



Finally, while the novel particularly emphasizes the importance of African customs in male homosexuality, it shows that blood memory influences lesbian relationships as well. The parallel between lesbian intercourse and the African bush literally inscribes queerness as part of the African landscape. Moreover, Sarah asserts that the African bush “made [the] eyes [of her people] suitable for night” (Jones 114). As Sarah and Mary’s lovemaking is painted as a starry night with two “shining stars,” the African land appears to have enabled Sarah not only to see in the dark, but also to appreciate her queer identity.

#### **4. 4 Circles Come Before Lines**

As demonstrated above, the novel represents Africa and the West as having very different understandings of gender and queerness, which are informed by their respective religions. In precolonial Africa, women are treated with respect and queer people are celebrated as guardians of the gods’ gates. In the United States, on the other hand, atrocities allegedly sanctioned by the Bible are committed against women, queer individuals, and Black people. Thus, it might be difficult to consider that the novel portrays queerness as a syncretic religion that reconciles African beliefs and Christianity, particularly so when, as will be explained in what follows, the novel idealizes Africa and simultaneously criticizes the West. Analyzing the aforementioned quotation, “circles come before lines,” this subsection will show how such reconciliation is made possible in *The Prophets*. Viewed in its context, the sentence “circles come before lines” describes, as explained earlier, the belief held in Sarah’s native village that female sexual organs develop before male ones, and the higher value that Sarah’s people attribute to women as a result (Jones 115). As the quotation resonates with other important aspects of the novel, namely the idealization of Africa and the combination of African and Christian influences in the structure of the narrative, it allows for new and diverse interpretations. It is precisely the multiplicity of meanings presented in *The Prophets* that makes religious syncretism possible. As stated in the historical background, the Bible can be read in very different ways, some of which are compatible with African beliefs. While this subsection focuses on showing that texts have multiple meanings, the second chapter of this dissertation will explore alternative readings of the Christian Bible that are presented in the novel and draw important parallels between the “Blacker” Church of *The Prophets* and the Black Church.

#### 4.4.1 Africa Comes Before the West

The first alternative meaning that can be attributed to “circles come before lines” is the claim that the enslaved should prioritize their African heritage over Western customs. In the novel, circles are important symbols of African rituals and beliefs, whereas lines – or angles – are associated with Christianity as illustrated by René Guenon in his book *The Symbolism of the Cross*. For instance, when calling on the ancestors to heal Samuel and Isaiah, the five women “[form] a [...] circle around [The Two of Them]” (Jones 168-69). After they have recited their incantation, Maggie, who appears to be in a trance, “[stands] up [with her] eyes rolled back in her head [...] [and moves] in a circular motion” (Jones 169). Moreover, as Isaiah crosses the river to flee the plantation, he sees his ancestors at the bottom of the stream, “smiling or maybe screaming, hands joined in a circle, feet tapping to the rhythm of the river’s ebb” (Jones 365). Finally, Maggie attempts to prevent Amos from telling Paul about Samuel and Isaiah’s relationship by “[drawing] a circle with an X inside of it” on Amos’s path to the Halifaxes’ house, in the hope that it will dissuade him from advancing further (Jones 230).

When circles are an important aspect of rituals for the enslaved who have retained their blood memory, Isaiah remarks that white people “despise [circles]” (Jones 147). Instead, they “relentlessly [worship] right angles as though they [provide] order in and of themselves” (Jones 147). With its mention of the worshipping of right angles, this passage might be understood as a reference to the Christian cross, and, hence, to Christianity. Furthermore, the notion that right angles are believed to “[provide] order” echoes Paul’s assertion that ancient Greek religion was replaced by Christianity because “chaos must always give way to order” (Jones 262). As the description of right angles invites for geometrical considerations, the readers are led to visualize the two perpendicular lines that form the Christian cross. Thus, “circles come before lines” can be read as “African beliefs come before Christianity.” In light of this chapter, which has shown the influence of religions on the cultures portrayed in the novel and taking into consideration Somé’s affirmation that “[religion] is where the life-pulse of the culture is,” one might go so far as to suggest that the novel exhorts the enslaved to prioritize not only African beliefs, but their African heritage as a whole (Somé).

The argument that *The Prophets* calls for a prioritization of African heritage at large is supported by the idealization of the African continent and simultaneous criticism of the West in the novel. Although *The Prophets* shows that Africa is made of a vast array of languages, cultures, and religions – “[the enslaved] brought with them hundreds of

languages, divine practices, and ancestors [to the Americas]” (Jones 113) –, its main representations of precolonial Africa, namely the Kosongo and Sarah’s native village, are both depicted as gender-fluid, women-friendly and queer-friendly. When scholars such as Murray et al. show that some societies had indeed what could be defined in the West as progressive attitudes towards gender and sexuality, their work also underscores the significant diversity that existed in precolonial Africa in terms of how gender, women, and queer individuals were perceived. For instance, while the Kosongo and Sarah’s people believe gender to be determined by spirit, other precolonial societies conflated sex and gender and strongly discouraged “public gender non-conformity” (Murray et al. 7). Similarly, when the Kosongo are led by a female king and allow both men and women to participate in the village council, “women [tended] to be much [more] restricted in [other, patrilineal societies]” (Murray et al. 5). In *The Prophets*, however, communities such as the mountain people who do not conform to the ideals presented by the Kosongo and Sarah’s village are, as mentioned above, depicted as un-African – and even anti-African: their behavior is defined as a breaking away from traditional African values and symbolically linked with that of the colonizers (Jones 241).

Most strikingly, as explained earlier, the novel portrays precolonial Africa as celebrating queer identities that are based on a Western understanding of queer sexuality and relationships. Unlike in the Kosongo village where Elewa and Kosii marry each other, heterosexual marriage was required in precolonial Africa, making queer relationships secondary (Murray et al. 93, 270). Moreover, while people who engage in same-sex practices in the Western world often consider themselves to be queer, it was not necessarily so in precolonial Africa. Although queer relationships were accepted in some precolonial African societies, their social meaning was very different from that given to Elewa and Kosii’s bond in *The Prophets*. In contrast to Elewa and Kosii, people who engaged in same-sex relationships in non-fictional precolonial Africa often did not subvert the primacy of heterosexuality. Rather, the purpose-oriented nature of their relationships generally supported heterosexual marriages and their lineages.

Moreover, when the Kosongo and Sarah’s community do not seem to consider sexual orientation to be relevant to the definition of one’s identity, in other precolonial African societies, “named social roles [were given to people who engaged in same-sex intercourse] and were the basis for social identities incorporating sexual and gender difference” (Murray et al. 269). Labels for people who engaged in same-sex sexual practices existed in some fifty

African precolonial societies (Murray et al. 265). A list taken from *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, edited by Murray and Roscoe, can be found in the appendix to this dissertation (Murray et al. 265, 277-80). Although most labels are neutral and do not “single out same-sex relations as sinful or [link] them to concepts of disease or mental health,” some of these appellations are stigmatizing (Murray et al. 267, 277-80). For example, the African expression “umuswezi” translates to “sodomite” (Murray et al. 279). Most importantly, while there are positive labels, these are a minority (Murray et al. 267, 277-80). Thus, when *The Prophets* shows queerness to be celebrated in precolonial Africa, the novel presents a minority as the norm, and, in so doing, idealizes precolonial Africa. This idealization is illustrated in the title of the novel itself as “prophet” is the name given to queer individuals among the Ila, a Bantu-speaking tribe of precolonial Africa, and is one of the only four positive appellations to designate queer people listed in *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands* (Murray et al. 278).

While *The Prophets* idealizes precolonial Africa, it criticizes the Western world and Christianity. Above all, the novel points to the religious hypocrisy of the white population. For instance, Adam notices that white Christians who attend Church on Sunday mornings are the same individuals who drink in bars on Saturday nights (Jones 285). He explains what he deems to be poor scheduling by claiming that white people are asleep in church on Sunday mornings anyway (Jones 285). Thus, Adam conveys that white people only care about the *appearance* of doing what is expected of respectable Christians, but do not actually abide by Christian principles to which they only lend an unconscious ear on Sunday mornings. The religious hypocrisy of white people is perhaps best illustrated when, as the Kosongo village is about to be attacked by colonizers, the omniscient narrator explains that, to the Portuguese, “[King Akusa’s people] [are] [...] fuels for engines of the most ungodly kind but, bafflingly, in the name of a god that they claim [is] peaceful. A lamb, they [say]. [...] [I]t was merely a costume” (Jones 185). With its mention of the deceptiveness of the lamb’s costume, this passage alludes to the biblical warning issued against false prophets: “[b]eware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves” (Matt 7:15). The allusion to the biblical verse is later reinforced when, on the same page, the narrator foresees that “[the Portuguese] [will] *devour* not just [King Akusa’s people] but [will] *wolf down* many other tribes as well” (Jones 185; emphases added). These passages establish that the colonizers, who, as mentioned in the historical background, justify their enterprise by claiming that it is a Christian act, do not behave according to the principles of

Christianity. Rather, they are depicted as aggressive and cunning wolves who disguise themselves as Christians only to serve their own interests. These passages echo an important argument of the abolitionist movement, namely that slavery is incompatible with Christianity (Gates 48). The argument is expressed, among others, in slave narratives such as the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. In his narrative, Douglass, who as mentioned earlier, was a formerly enslaved man and a church minister, distinguishes between “the religion of the South,” which, he writes, is “a mere covering for the most horrid crimes” (Douglass 56) and “the religion of Christ,” which he defines as “pure, peaceable, and impartial” (Douglass 79). To Douglass, “[t]o be the friend of the one is of necessity to be the enemy of the other” (Douglass 79).

As white people use the guise of Christianity to serve their own interests, they are shown to adapt their tool, the Bible, to suit their needs. Samuel notes that white people “[bleed] the color from God’s face, [give] it a dangle between its legs, and [call] it holy” (Jones 301). Theologian Christena Cleveland argues that the representation of God as white and male is a powerful reinvention that is designed to “protect the power of white people and cisgender men” at the expense of non-white and non-male others (Cleveland 42). She explains that there is no indication of God being white in the Bible (Cleveland 37-38). On the contrary, she claims that “the most prominent idea of God is in the person of Jesus Christ, a Palestinian man of African descent” (Cleveland 37). Thus, “the historical Jesus looked like a modern-day Arab” (Cleveland 38). The “white christ” as Cleveland calls it, only emerged in 1526 as a means to justify slavery and assert white privileges (Cleveland 38).<sup>6</sup> According to Cleveland, the white christ “[makes] a statement about [not only] who God is [but also] what [or rather who] God cares about” (Cleveland 39). In other words, “God [is] not merely associated with whiteness, but specifically with white supremacy. In the white christ, God specifically [chooses] white people over Black people” (Cleveland 39). In addition to choosing white people over Black people, the definition of God as male suggests that God favors men over “women, non-binary and gender-expansive people” (Cleveland 34). Although the idea that God is male is deeply embedded within Western society to the point that English versions of the Bible refer to God with the pronoun “He,” Lings argues that the Book of Genesis represents God as being both male and female (Lings 15, 25). Indeed, Adam, the human being created in the image of God, is male and female before the above-

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<sup>6</sup> Cleveland refrains from using capital letters when referring to the “white christ.” Although not explicitly stated, this may be understood as an attempt to challenge the authority of this reinterpretation.

mentioned separation from his female side (Lings 15; Gen 1:27 qtd. in Lings 15). Finally, the power that Cleveland argues is taken by white cisgender men as they redefine God is reflected in the apparent reversal of the story of Genesis. Like God fashions mankind in Their own image, white men fashion God in theirs, thus claiming the prerogatives of the divine.

Thus, as has been demonstrated in previous subsections and as will be explained in more detail in the second chapter of this dissertation, *The Prophets* shows that white people's adaptations and interpretations of the Bible served – and still serve – to legitimize oppression and place themselves on top of social hierarchy. More relevant to the interpretation of “circles come before lines” is the novel's claim that Black people adopt the white theology of their oppressors. Samuel laments that, when white people “[bleed] the color from God's face” and “[call] the color of the universe itself a sin,” “the whole world believe[s] them, even some of Samuel's people. Especially some of Samuel's people” (Jones 301). More explicitly, the ancestors tell the enslaved that Christian songs are not their songs and that they are not “who [they] [are] supposed to be:” they “disrespect artisans,” “throw stones at guardians of the gates,” “imagine their own rituals savage,” and “forget the circle” (Jones 373). The seven voices of the ancestors conclude that “living so far from the existence [Black people] were snatched from,” the enslaved are “becoming ever more like [their] captors” (Jones 373). To remedy this, the ancestors ask their descendants to “let [them] gather [them] all” and proceed to tell them about African beliefs and customs such as the “wiping [of] lines across faces” and “the elders [wearing] blue garments” (Jones 374-76). Moreover, in this chapter and throughout the book, the discourses of the seven voices are given a particular rhythm and musical quality (Hyams). For instance, the following passage appears to echo the rhythm of the dancing that it describes: “Hips will sway/ Heads will spin/ Arms will swing” (Jones 375). The presence of rhythm, musicality, and dancing in the discourse of the ancestors is significant since Raboteau explains that “[d]rumming, singing, and dancing are essential features of African and Afro-American liturgical expression and are crucial to the ceremonial possession of cult members by their gods” (Raboteau 35). Thus, when the ancestors tell their descendants that Christian songs are not their songs, they seem to divert the enslaved away from Christianity to their own musical and spiritual heritage.

Finally, *The Prophets'* juxtaposition of an idealized African past with an unglamorized representation of the West further contributes to the criticism of the Western world to which it provides an alternative model. According to scholar of queer theory José

Esteban Muñoz, “utopian memory” offers a powerful “critique of the present, of what is, by casting a picture of what *can and perhaps will be*” (Muñoz 35; emphasis in original). This understanding of utopia is explained by social theorist Theodor Adorno who states that, by definition, utopias represent states of affairs that do not exist (yet/anymore) and are, therefore, “determined negation[s]” of what is (Adorno qtd. in Muñoz 37). As utopias are most desirable states of affairs that do not reflect present realities, they “always [point] [...] to what should be” (Adorno qtd. in Muñoz 37). In *The Prophets*, the idealized portrayal of precolonial Africa as women-friendly, queer-friendly, and gender-fluid is juxtaposed to descriptions of the colonial West, where Christianity is used to fuel racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. This juxtaposition creates an important contrast which highlights the horrors of the West by illustrating what the West could/should be like. For example, as explained in the subsection dealing with gender hierarchy, enslaved women compare the sexism of the West with the experiences that they would have had in Africa, where they would not have been oppressed by men. Similarly, the persecution of queer individuals in the West is opposed to the celebrations of Elewa and Kosii’s wedding in the Kosongo village.

#### **4.4.2 Inclusion Comes Before Exclusion**

The second alternative meaning that can be given to “circles come before lines” is the claim that boundaries should be subverted. In addition to reflecting the opposition between African and Western religions, “circles” and “lines” can be understood as references to the different perceptions of time, namely circular and linear, that prevail on the African continent and in the United States in *The Prophets*. The precolonial African perception of time as circular is illustrated when Kosii describes the “Kosongo symbol of eternity” as a “snake kissing its tail [with a woman] at the center” (Jones 238). This symbol can be read as an allusion to the “ouroboros serpent,” a snake “continually devouring itself and being reborn from itself” (“Ouroboros”). Since the ouroboros forms a circle which has, by definition, no beginnings nor ends, it is thought to represent “the mystery of cyclical time, which flows back into itself” (Bekhrad). Moreover, as the oldest ouroboros was discovered on “a golden shrine in the tomb of Tutankhamen [...] in the [thirteenth] century B.C.,” the symbol is believed to have African origins (Bekhrad). In *The Prophets*, the meaning of the Kosongo symbol of eternity does not only lie in the visual representation of the circle, but also in its recurrence throughout the narrative. When Kosii injures his wrists by pulling on his chains on the slave ship, he comments on “the arc [formed by] the spilling blood:” “the perfect circles

themselves forming a larger circle. Almost a head, almost a tail. Almost infinity closing in on itself” (Jones 246). The Kosongo symbol of eternity recurs when, during the slave rebellion on the Halifax plantation, Maggie exhorts other enslaved people to join her in forming a circle “like a snake biting its own tail” (Jones 358). In both these passages, the representation of time as circular highlights the significant connection between the ancestors and the enslaved as it shows them to be united by blood and through space. Indeed, temporal continuity, the persistence of “the past” into “the present,” is directly linked with blood when Kosii describes the droplets as “the perfect circles [...] forming a larger circle.” Thus, like the spilling blood, the ancestors and their enslaved descendants are part of a trail linking the “almost a head” to the “almost a tail.” The trail that unites the ancestors and the enslaved is given a more concrete, spatial dimension as the Kosongo symbol of eternity, through its recurrence in both the Middle Passage and the United States, follows the journey taken by the enslaved away from their ancestral land to North America.

While circles represent the precolonial African perception of time as circular, lines might be understood as symbolizing the Western understanding of time as linear. This understanding is pointed to by the ancestors who note that the enslaved “perceive time as three separate occasions” instead of “only one” (Jones 315). More importantly, the seven voices explicitly associate temporal linearity with lines as they attempt to change their descendants’ views: “[t]here are no lines. For everything is a circle, turning back on itself endlessly” (Jones 81). Since, in this passage, the ancestors tell the enslaved that they should “[r]eturn to memory,” the “lines” might be read as the separations that are inherent to the perception of time as linear – or “as three separate occasions” – the existence of which are challenged by the ancestors (Jones 81). When circular time highlights the significant connection between the enslaved and their forebears, linear time creates mental boundaries between the enslaved and their African “past.”

Considering that the perceptions of time as circular and linear are African and Western respectively and given the ancestors’ attempt to make the enslaved adopt the view that time is circular, some might argue that these new interpretations of circles and lines support the first alternative reading of “circles come before lines,” namely that “Africa comes before the West.” While this analysis is convincing, it is important to specify which African custom the novel suggests should be prioritized over which Western practice, as the understandings of time as circular and linear reveal very different ways of approaching reality. As mentioned above, circular time is shown to allow for connections through time



and space, whereas linear time is portrayed as setting boundaries. These boundaries distinguish not only between past, present and future, but also between “the single narrative of truth” and other narratives believed to be inherently inaccurate (Ashcroft qtd. in Herbillon 75). Indeed, temporal linearity “give[s] [one] the impression that events unfold according to a logic of their own” (Carter qtd. in Herbillon 74). In turn, this “deterministic perspective [...] leaves no room for any alternative historical paradigm, or counterfactual history” (Herbillon 74-75). The above quotation “circles come before lines” might therefore be analyzed as “inclusion comes before exclusion.” In other words, the novel calls for boundaries to be subverted and for dominant (hi)stories to be challenged.

In *The Prophets*, temporal, spatial and religious boundaries are undermined as “past,” “present,” and “future,” Africa and the United States, as well as African and Christian beliefs are blended together in one narrative. The blurring of temporal boundaries is mainly enacted by the ancestors who, like ghostly figures, “propose an alternative mode of non-linear temporality” (Freccero 195) by “remind[ing] [the readers] that the past and the present are neither discrete nor sequential” (Freccero 196). To put it differently, the ancestors call temporal categories in question by transcending them. The ancestors do not merely “haunt” the present, but they also summon the past as they tell their audience the story of the Kosongo village. With the chapters centered on the Mississippi plantation being interwoven with those relating the colonization of the Kosongo village, the structure of the narrative itself rejects lines – or temporal linearity – in favor of the circle. Simultaneously, this interweaving of stories highlights the intrinsic link that exists between the Kosongo and the enslaved who are, literally, part of the same narrative. When the ancestors promise their descendants to tell them their story at the beginning of the novel – “your story is coming” (Jones 2) – the narrative that follows is that of the Kosongo *and* of the enslaved in the antebellum South. The connection between the Kosongo and the enslaved is further demonstrated when, after the ancestors have accomplished their task of narrating the story, they begin the last chapter with: “[y]ou know who *we* are now/ So now you know who *you* are” (Jones 372; emphases in original). In this last chapter, the ancestors also establish an important connection between past, present, and future by claiming that the past has been repeating itself – “The noose has already been hung/ The bond has already been broken/ The seen has already been foresaw/ The then is arriving now” – and suggest that the only solution to prevent atrocities from recurring lies in their addressees, who live in, and hence, embody, the present (of the time of narration): “And nothing in creation able to stop the coming./*Nothing*/ except You” (Jones

378; emphasis in original). Finally, as each representation of a moment in time is assigned a specific space – the Kosongo live in Africa and the enslaved in the United States –, the blurring of temporal boundaries is paired with a blurring of spatial boundaries: Like past, present, and future, Africa and the United States are intertwined and follow the back-and-forth movement of time. The intrinsic link between time and space can be observed in the remembrances of the enslaved, which take the form of African practices and rituals. In other words, when the past is summoned into the present, so is Africa conjured up in the United States.

It should be noted that the circular structure of the narrative can be observed within the individual sections of the novel and not just in their intersections. As the chapters centered on the plantation relate the changing attitudes of the enslaved and white slaveholders towards Samuel and Isaiah from different perspectives, parts of the story are repeated with each new point of view. Furthermore, at the beginning of the novel, Maggie appears to briefly foresee Samuel's death, which only occurs at the end of the narrative: she "[sees] something blink into existence, shimmer, and then fade out as soon as it [arrived]" and believes that "it might have been someone on fire" (Jones 37). In this passage, the future event fleetingly exists in the present, thus challenging temporal linearity. Finally, while the story of the Kosongo follows a linear trajectory from the arrival of the Portuguese to Kosii's suicide as he jumps off the slave ship, characters repeatedly remember and associate the attack of the mountain people – or, in Kosii's case, tales of the attack – with the invasion of the village by the Portuguese. Thus, although the story is linear, it consists in the repetition of another story, which shows that time is again portrayed as being circular.

Thus, by portraying time as circular, the narrative blurs boundaries and allows for past and present, but also African and American experiences to intertwine in a same story. Moreover, as the novel challenges linear temporality, it simultaneously challenges historical determinism, which, as mentioned above, arises out of the impression that linearity provides logic and order (Herbillon 74-75). Taking all of this into consideration, it appears that Jones's book promotes the merging of cultures and influences and refutes the "single narrative truth" – the idea that there is only one valid way to tell and interpret (Hi)stories (Herbillon 75). This last point is best illustrated in the multiple meanings that the sentence "circles come before lines" can take in the novel and in the new interpretation of the Christian Bible that will be explored in what follows. Importantly, this possibility for textual

reinterpretation and the propensity of the novel to subvert boundaries allow for the reconciliation of African and Christian beliefs in the narrative.

Although African and Christian religions are shown to be very different, they are combined in the novel to form what Jones calls “a new sort of covenant” (Hyams). The novel is imbued with references to Christianity as almost every chapter – with the exceptions of “Maggie” and “Essie” – are titled after books of the Bible, biblical characters, and biblical stories. However, the Christian references made in the novel do not follow the chronological order of the Bible. Rather, they are reassembled and, as in the Black theology mentioned in the historical background, reinterpreted to portray the Kosongo and the enslaved as the persecuted Israelites. For instance, similarly to the Book of Exodus that describes “the liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt,” the chapter “Exodus” relates the slave rebellion on the Halifax plantation (“Exodus”). During the rebellion, Isaiah and Puah, who both cannot swim, miraculously cross the water and flee Empty, aided by their ancestors – whom Isaiah sees in the bottom (Jones 365) and whom Sarah believes assist Puah who “glid[es] across the river as though the forever mamas [laid] hands to buoy her” (Jones 351) – like the Israelites were guided by Moses who parted the waters of the Red Sea to allow them to pass through. In addition to assisting Isaiah and Puah in their respective escapes, the ancestors are granted divine authority in the novel and proclaim themselves prophets when, after they have told the story of the Kosongo and the enslaved, they assert: “that is a story only a prophet can tell” (Jones 377). As these passages show, the Bible is not merely reinterpreted, but assimilated with African beliefs to form a new, syncretic religion in a way that is reminiscent of the Black theology of the Black Church.

## 5. The Blacker Church

The previous chapter has established that although the novel portrays African and Christian beliefs as informing very different views on gender, gender hierarchy, and queerness, the religions are reconciled in the narrative. This reconciliation is made possible, among others, by the reinterpretation of the Christian Bible which, like Cone's Black theology, identifies Black people with the Israelites who were held in bondage by the Egyptians. This chapter will show that the reinterpretation is part of a larger rereading of the Christian Bible which represents Black queer men as particularly oppressed and, simultaneously, allowing for the liberation of racial and sexual minorities. In other words, I will argue that queerness is a syncretic religion combining Christian and African influences and serving as a means of liberation for the oppressed.

To do so, I will divide this chapter into three parts, namely "The Prophets," "The Oppressed" and "The Tower of Labels." In "The Oppressed," I will show that The Two of Them are depicted as being particularly abused and that their experience is likened to the suffering of enslaved women. I will contrast the Blacker theology with the Black theology which, as mentioned in the historical background, has been accused of prioritizing race and, in so doing, ignoring, and even antagonizing other minorities. In "The Tower of Labels," I will explain that the various systems of oppression described in the novel are intrinsically linked as the one has historically been used to permit the other.

### 5. 1 The Prophets

To understand how queerness is represented as a syncretic religion in *The Prophets*, it is important to demonstrate that the novel portrays the religion as being centered around the two main characters on the Halifax plantation, Samuel and Isaiah. The two of them play important spiritual roles inspired by both African and Christian religions, namely those of prophets – or guardians – and Christ figures. Indeed, like Amos and Big Hosea, Samuel and Isaiah have the names of biblical prophets. The couple are also, like Elewa and Kosii, guardians of the gates. This is illustrated when Maggie refers to them as such during the healing ritual and asks them to "pierce the barrier" between them and the ancestors (Jones 169). Seeing that, as mentioned earlier, guardians ensure the communication between the gods and their villages, Samuel and Isaiah have a spiritual function that strongly resembles that of prophets. Moreover, the title of the novel, "The Prophets," is expected to refer to The Two of Them since their relationship lies at the heart of the narrative. This title might also

have been inspired by the above-mentioned book, *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands*, which Jones claims he used for his research on the perception of gender and sexuality in precolonial Africa (Fatin), and which, as explained earlier, lists “prophet” as one of the names given to queer individuals among the Ila tribe (Murray et al. 278).

Finally, the representation of Samuel and Isaiah mixes Christian and Islamic influences as the couple are not only prophets, but also biblical Christ figures – while in Christian religions, Jesus is believed to be the son of God, and hence, divine, he is only a prophet in Islam (Hasan). Thus, like Jesus’s story is told by prophets in the Bible, the story of Samuel and Isaiah is narrated by the ancestors who are self-proclaimed prophets. More strikingly, The Two of Them are depicted as holy throughout the narrative. Their divine quality is shown, for instance, when Amos reflects on his reaction to seeing Samuel and Isaiah’s bond: “he nearly glorifie[s] their names. He cover[s] his eyes because Isaiah and Samuel [are] bright and coated in a shining the likes of which he [has] never seen” (Jones 76). Similarly, when Paul comes to the barn to order Samuel and Isaiah to procreate, “the sun [...] [begins] to shine down on the standing Samuel and Isaiah, touche[s] their crown as though they [are] actually so consecrated, bright in a way that [does not] hinder sight but [does] make the face pinch just a little” (Jones 265). The light emanating from and touching Samuel and Isaiah is explicitly associated with the divine when Paul fears that the sun shining on the heads to the couple is the “divine [...] singling out the wretched before him [Paul] for blessing” (Jones 265). As the religious importance of queer people in African religions has been addressed in the subsection on queerness and briefly repeated in the beginning of this subsection, this chapter will mostly focus on the Christian component of the syncretic religion presented in *The Prophets*. The following subchapters will investigate how reinterpretations of the Christian Bible allow for a syncretic religion that incorporates Christian beliefs and is centered around queerness.

## **5. 2 The Oppressed**

The syncretic religion centered around queerness that is represented in *The Prophets* relies, as mentioned above, on Cone’s Black theology. As I have explained in the historical background, Black theology aspires to free Black people from racial oppression by proposing an alternative interpretation of the Christian Bible. This rereading of the gospel identifies Black people with the oppressed Israelites whom God saved from bondage and understands God to be Black since They “[have] made the oppressed condition [Their] own

condition” in the figure of Jesus Christ, “the Oppressed One” (Bradley 56) – Jesus “was a poor black man who suffered under the oppression of rich, white people (Wright qtd. in Bradley 13). As shown in “circles come before lines,” *The Prophets* adopts this reinterpretation of the Bible as it draws important parallels between the enslaved and the Israelites.

While the novel incorporates Black theology within its narrative, it also points to its limitations. Considering that Black theology is only preoccupied with the issue of race – its “sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression” (Cone 36; emphasis added) and it considers that “[a]ll ideas that are opposed to the struggle for black self-determination or are irrelevant to it must be rejected as the work of the Antichrist” (Cone 137) –, it risks perpetuating the above-mentioned alienation of women and queer individuals in Black churches. Indeed, political theorist Anna Carastathis explains that to “[focus on] a particular system of oppression [...] [and isolate it] from its interrelations with other systems” is detrimental to people who are part of multiple oppressed groups such as, for instance, Black queer women (Carastathis 167-68). The reason for this is that “social [and, in this case, religious] movements [often] [claim] to represent a whole group (‘Black people,’ ‘women’) while in fact representing a narrow, relatively privileged subset of that group (‘Black men,’ ‘white women’) whose experiences and interests [are] falsely universalized, while group members constructed as non-prototypical (‘Black women’) [are] nominally included but materially excluded” (Carastathis 166). Even more so, “group members whose experiences are constructed as non-prototypical” are sometimes excluded from “dominant conceptions of who ‘belongs’ in the group – of who ‘counts’ as a member” (Carastathis 164). Thus, movements who attempt to liberate a community from a specific system of oppression often do not account for the experiences nor the needs of groups members who endure multiple oppressions and sometimes even lead to the exclusion of these members (Carastathis 164). While Black theology claims that its purpose is the liberation of Black people, its exclusive focus on racial issue may restrict its involvement to the liberation of Black heterosexual men only and create further difficulties for other, nonnormative Black people.

The “Blaqueer” theology that is portrayed in *The Prophets*, on the other hand, “conceptualize[s] [...] systems of oppression as [...] interconnected, and therefore simultaneously operative” (Carastathis 167). That is, while the novel focuses on racial discrimination as it identifies enslaved people with the Israelites, it highlights the intersection

of multiple systems of oppression in its depiction of Samuel and Isaiah, whose experiences are shaped by racist and homophobic abuse. This subchapter will explore the representation of Samuel and Isaiah's oppression and demonstrate that the experiences of the couple are likened to those of Jesus in the Bible. Afterwards, I will analyze the parallel that is made between enslaved women and Samuel and Isaiah who are victims of sexual abuse. As this Black and queer theology promotes the liberation of all enslaved people rather than a selected few, I propose to call use Jones's playword and to call it the Blacker – from "Blaqueer" theology.

The interconnection between multiple systems of oppression in the novel is perhaps best illustrated when Samuel and Isaiah are forced to pull a heavy "wagon around the entire perimeter of Empty" (Jones 144). The punishment testifies to both the blatant racism that prevails in the antebellum South and the homophobic attitude of the enslaved community. Indeed, the sanction is brought about by Ruth, who, as a white woman, only "ha[s] to say but one word [to falsely accuse Samuel and Isaiah of having stared at her], and James, who ha[s] to act even if he [doesn't] believe, round[s] up [the overseers] to shake Isaiah and Samuel out of slumber" (Jones 144). It should also be noted that Ruth's willingness to inflict harm upon the couple emanates, as will be explained in more detail later, from her objectification of the enslaved and the resulting offense that she feels when Samuel does not have an erection as she rapes him (Jones 137-140). While Samuel and Isaiah's sanction is brought about by racism, homophobia contributes to the difficulty of the task as it adds literal and figurative weight for the couple to carry. As homophobia has spread throughout the plantation, many of the enslaved approve of the suffering that is inflicted upon Samuel and Isaiah: some of them jump onboard the old wagon (Jones 144) and others have "smiles on the[ir] faces" (Jones 151). The positive reaction of the enslaved community to the punishment "[is] the weight that finally [makes] Isaiah collapse" (Jones 151). In this passage, the novel shows that systems of oppressions cannot be reduced to what Harris has coined "additional problems" where "'racism'+ 'homophobia' [...] = black [queer] experience" (Harris qtd. in Carastathis 169). Racist and homophobic abuse are shown to be "co-constitutive" (Carastathis 162) and to "work together" (Collins and Bilge). In other words, homophobic and racist abuse cannot be separated as they shape the same experience of

pulling the carriage.<sup>7</sup> Their interaction, however, is noticeable as it makes the experience more painful for Samuel and Isaiah.

Importantly, Samuel and Isaiah's punishment echoes Jesus's crucifixion in the Bible. When Samuel and Isaiah are made to pull a heavy "wagon around the entire perimeter of Empty" (Jones 144), Jesus was forced to drag his cross to the place of his crucifixion (Luke 23:26; John 19:17). Similarly, when the overseers "[fasten] [...] shackles [with spikes] to [Samuel and Isaiah's] wrists and ankles" (Jones 143), the soldiers "platted a crown of thorns [or spikes] and put it on [Jesus's] head" for him to wear as he bore the cross (Matt 27:29; John 19:2). It should also be noted that, like Samuel and Isaiah, Jesus is represented as innocent (Luke 23:4-22). By portraying the scene of Samuel and Isaiah's punishment as similar to that of Jesus's crucifixion, the novel establishes an important link between the oppression of Jesus and that of Samuel and Isaiah. This does not mean that the novel proposes a reinterpretation of the Bible which believes Jesus to be queer – there is no allusion to Jesus's sexual orientation in the verses detailing its condemnation and crucifixion. However, following Cone's reasoning that Black people are God's people by virtue of being oppressed like God was oppressed in Christ, the parallel between the couple's experience of abuse and that of Jesus suggests that Black queer men are God's people (Cone 133). This parallel also contributes to the novel's definition of Samuel and Isaiah as Christ figures.

The Christ figures of the novel are portrayed not only as Black and queer, but also as un-masculine and suffering from sexual abuse. Like the enslaved women who, as mentioned in the section dealing with gender hierarchy, are perceived as mere (sexual) commodities by white and Black men, Samuel and Isaiah are objectified by Ruth and Timothy, respectively. This objectification is shown, among others, in the perspective adopted by the novel as it narrates the rapes of Samuel and Isaiah – as well as that of most of the enslaved women – from the point of view of the aggressors rather than that of the victims who are symbolically silenced. Moreover, as the rapists are given a voice, they further dehumanize their victims. This is best illustrated when Ruth finds "it easy [...] to picture herself wearing Samuel closely, like a shawl or beaded necklace, something simple to drape for a cold occasion or a festive one" (Jones 135). While Ruth sees Samuel as a garment that she can wear whenever

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<sup>7</sup> As my analysis explores the intersection of race and homophobia, it finds itself guilty of separating the two systems of oppression it claims cannot be untangled. However, Crenshaw justifies this contradiction: "'in mapping the intersections of race and gender [in this case, homophobia], the concept does engage in dominant assumption that race and gender are essentially separate categories' but its aim is to 'disrupt the tendencies to see race and gender as exclusive or separable'" (Crenshaw qtd. in Carastathis 169; Carastathis 169).



she pleases, Timothy literally turns Isaiah into an inanimate object as he paints him. Not only does the painting process forces Isaiah to sit still for hours, but it also symbolically allows Timothy to “capture almost all that he want[s] of Isaiah’s nature” (Jones 190). In this passage, the verb *capture* refers to both Timothy’s ability to represent Isaiah in his art and to the violence of the act as it is perpetrated against Isaiah’s will. The description suggests that Isaiah is not so much represented as he is imprisoned in the painting. Timothy’s objectification of Isaiah also takes the form of a sexualization and fetishization of Isaiah’s body: Timothy “examines [Isaiah’s] crotch” and “marvel[s] at [Isaiah’s] skin [finding himself] seduced by [Isaiah’s] dark edges, by the sweet curves of his-blacker-than-black” (Jones 206). This focus on Isaiah’s body does not merely sexualize Isaiah, but it also strips him of his humanity as it takes away his human shape and divides him into body parts. Isaiah thus becomes a “splendid physical specimen” to be painted and studied through rigorous examinations (Jones 206).

While the portrayal of Samuel and Isaiah’s experiences of being sexually abused establishes an important parallel between *The Two of Them* and enslaved women, it further distinguishes the couple from the men living on Empty. Admittedly, men are also victims of sexual assault in the novel. James was raped by priests during his childhood in an English orphanage – “[the priests] had already unleashed themselves on him” (Jones 329) – and, as mentioned earlier, Adam cannot “get past not having the choice [to have sexual intercourse]” (Jones 284). However, while the rapes of Samuel and Isaiah as well as those of enslaved women are narrated, the instances of sexual abuse suffered by James and Adam are only briefly mentioned. As the readers’ access to James and Adam’s suffering is limited, they are prevented from feeling as much empathy towards the two men as they do towards Samuel, Isaiah, and enslaved women. The readers’ empathy towards James and Adam is all the more limited that the characters are portrayed not only as victims, but also as perpetrators of sexual assaults: James “touche[s] women as he ha[s] been touched” (Jones 344) and, as explained above, Adam forces himself upon women independently of Paul’s orders (Jones 285). Thus, it appears that the novel depicts the experiences of sexual abuse very differently depending on the gender of the victims. When the victims are not male, the novel highlights the objectification that they endure. When the victims are men, however, the novel juxtaposes their suffering with instances in which they themselves abuse others and have, therefore, agency. In other words, while the novel acknowledges that men are abused, it shies away from representing them as victims and attempts to counterbalance their suffering with

instances in which they inflicted harm upon others. In *The Prophets*, the status of victim of sexual assault is only fully granted to women and other non-male individuals. In other words, Samuel and Isaiah suffer from multiple systems of oppression afflicting Black, queer, and non-male individuals. One might go so far as to argue that the portrayal of Samuel and Isaiah as un-masculine might have been designed to add to the multiple layers of oppression that *The Two of Them* endure and better highlight that the theology presented in the novel and centered around the religious importance of Samuel and Isaiah, focuses on all Black people rather than on Black (queer) men.

### **5. 3 The Tower of Labels**

The importance of a Black theology that represents systems of oppression as “multiple, co-constitutive and simultaneous” goes beyond the issue of liberating the entire Black population instead of a privileged subset and of accurately representing people who are part of various oppressed groups (Carastathis 162). Indeed, feminist and activist Andrea Smith asserts that systems of oppression do not merely interact as they shape one’s experience, but they also support and maintain each other (Smith 60-61). In the novel, important parallels are drawn between sexism and slavery and between homophobia and racism. As explained in the section dealing with gender hierarchy, the abuse perpetrated by enslaved men against enslaved women sustain slavery by providing slaveowners with enslaved children. Thus, symbolically, enslaved men who exhibit sexist behavior are likened to their white counterparts and the actions of sexist enslaved men are described in identical terms to that of the white slaveholders – Be Auntie “return[s], scarred, to the shack to be *beaten* by her lover’s hand” (Jones 99; emphases added). The intrinsic link between sexism and slavery is further illustrated in the depiction of the mountain people and other communities neighboring the Kosongo village who, because they disapprove of the idea of a female King, let the Kosongo be kidnapped by the Portuguese. Like the sexist enslaved men on Empty, the mountain people are assimilated with the white population and depicted as un-African. Finally, the plot of the novel revolves around the relationship between homophobia and racism: Amos must implement homophobia on the plantation to force Samuel and Isaiah to agree to sexual intercourse with enslaved women and, hence, sustain the Halifax plantation. Taking all of this into consideration, it appears that the liberation of Black people, whether they belong to a privileged subgroup or not, can only be achieved if multiple forms of oppressions are challenged simultaneously.

The novel articulates this idea in its chapter titled “Babel” (Jones 140-152). The title of the chapter refers to the story of Babel, which relates the division of mankind brought about by God (Gen 11:1-9). At the beginning of the story, all human beings speak the same language and are, therefore, united (Gen 11:1-5). As they work together, the people start building a city, Babel, and within it, a gigantic tower (Gen 11:4-5). Seeing that human beings can accomplish anything “they have imagined to do” (Gen 11:6), God decides to “confound their language” and prevent them from understanding each other (Gen 11:7). As a result, human beings scatter and leave their city and tower unfinished (Gen 11:8-9). In the novel, the chapter “Babel” relates Samuel and Isaiah’s punishment. Like the biblical story, “Babel” describes the division of a people, in this case, the enslaved, who, as mentioned above, rally against Samuel and Isaiah: they approve of the torture inflicted upon The Two of Them and some take part in the persecution by jumping on board the wagon that the couple must drag across the plantation. In doing so, the enslaved support racial oppression. Most importantly, the chapter reveals the enslaved people’s motives for rejecting Samuel and Isaiah: “[w]hat matter[s] is the elevation [...], they can now look down [...] and that [...] [is] irresistible” (Jones 144). In other words, like the people of Babel were divided into linguistic communities, the enslaved people are divided by the creation of distinct categories – in this case, heterosexual and queer – which allow them to “look down” on others and feel elevated. While, in the novel, this division allows the vast majority of the enslaved to leave the very bottom of social hierarchy, the chapter’s reference to the biblical story of the Tower of Babel suggests that these categorizations impede the enslaved community. Since the Bible identifies linguistic divisions as preventing the people of Babel to achieve whatever goal they set, the novel seems to identify the creation of labels – or categories – as the only obstacle separating Black people from their objectives, which, in the novel, is their freedom (Jones 48, 68, 115, 307). In other words, the novel appears to indicate that to achieve their goal, liberation movements must not create categories and liberate one oppressed group at the expense of another. Rather, liberation movements must unite and attempt to tackle all forms of oppression. This is precisely what the Blacker theology presented in the novel attempts to do.

## 6. Conclusion

This dissertation has shown that while in both fictional and non-fictional worlds, Black people tend to see Black queer individuals as a threat to their group and use religious arguments to support their homophobic bias, both African and Christian religions lend themselves to the celebration of queer individuals. The analysis of Robert Jones Jr.'s *The Prophets* has also shown that reinterpretations of the Bible that celebrate people who belong to multiple oppressed groups are not merely possible, but also necessary for the effective liberation of Black people since systems of oppression can only be undermined if they are simultaneously tackled. Most importantly, the novel calls for the subversion of all boundaries and labels which it portrays as dividing people and hindering the transformative potential of the collectivity. Further research on Jones' novel could explore other ways in which boundaries are subverted in *The Prophets*. For instance, the barn may be seen as a church reuniting African and Christian influences. While this dissertation has shown the reconciliation of the above mentioned religions, other works may examine the incorporation of Islam and Native American beliefs in the narrative as well as their possible interactions with African and Christian religions.

## 7. Appendix

The following table was taken from *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*, edited by Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe, pp. 277-280.

African Groups with Same-Sex Patterns

Ethnonym <sup>1</sup>	Region	Language group	Terms
Akan (Ashante)	II	Niger-Congo	
Ambo/Ovambo (Wanyama)	III	Bantu	<i>kimbanda</i> , diviners; <i>esenge</i> (pl. <i>omasenge</i> ), m an possessed by female spirit; <i>eshengi</i> (pl. <i>ovashengi</i> ), "he who is approached from behind"
Amhara (Amharic)	I	Afro-Asiatic	<i>wāndarwārād</i> , "male-female"; <i>wāndawānde</i> , "mannish women"
Anyi/Anyin	II	Niger-Congo	
Bafia (Fia)	III		<i>jigele ketön</i> , reciprocal anal intercourse
Bagishu/Bageshu, Gisu	I	Bantu	<i>mzili</i> (pl. <i>inzili</i> ); <i>buyazi</i>
Bala/Basongye/Basonge/Songe	III	Bantu	<i>kitesha</i> (pl. <i>bitesha</i> ), male and female
Bambala/Mbala	III	Bantu	<i>mokobo</i> , <i>tongo</i> , sterile men
Bambara	II	Niger-Congo	
Bangala/Mbangala	III	Bantu	
Dagaari/Dagara	II	Niger-Congo	
Dahomey (Fon)	II	Niger-Congo	<i>akho'si</i> , <i>lagredis</i> , court eunuch; <i>gaglgo</i> , homosexuality
Duala	III	Bantu (trade language)	
Etrian (various)	I	Afro-Asiatic	
Fanti/Fante (Akan)	II	Niger-Congo	
Gangella/Ovigangella	III	Bantu	<i>m'uzonj'ame katumua</i> , male lover; <i>m'ndumbi</i> , "podicator"
Gikuyu/Kikuyu	I	Bantu	<i>onek</i> , active male
Gisu (Masaba)	I	Bantu	
Hausa	II	Afro-Asiatic	<i>'dan daudu</i> (pl. <i>'yan daudu</i> ); <i>k'wazo/baja</i> , older/younger men; <i>kifi</i> , lesbianism

Ethnonym <sup>1</sup>	Region	Language group	Terms
Herero (Damara)	IV	Bantu	<i>okutunduka vanena</i> , anal intercourse; <i>epanga</i> , lover; <i>oupanga</i> , erotic friendship (male or female)
Ila	III	Bantu	<i>mwaami</i> , "prophet"
Ireso/Teso	I	Nilo-Saharan	
Kongo	III	Bantu	
Konso	I	Afro-Asiatic	<i>sagoda</i>
Krongo/Korongo/ Kurungo	I	Kordofanian	<i>londo</i> , nonmasculine males
Kru	II	Niger-Congo	
Lango	I	Nilo-Saharan	<i>mudoko dako</i>
Maale/Male/Maalia	I	Afro-Asiatic	<i>ashtime</i>
Maragoli/Logooli	I	Bantu	<i>kiziri</i>
Meru	I	Bantu	<i>mugawe</i>
Mesakin (Ngile)	I	Kordofanian	<i>tubele</i> , nonmasculine males
Mombasa (Swahili)	I	Bantu	<i>mke-si-mume</i> , "woman, nor man," male and female homosexuals; <i>mashoga</i> (sing. <i>shoga</i> ), male; <i>basha</i> (pl. <i>mabasha</i> ), partner of <i>mashoga</i> ; <i>msagaji</i> , <i>msago</i> (pl. <i>wasagaji</i> , <i>misago</i> ), "grinders," lesbians
Mossi (More)	II	Niger-Congo	<i>soronés</i> , pages
Mpondo/Pondo (Pana)	IV	Niger-Congo	<i>Tinkonkana</i> , boy wives
Naman/"Hottentot"	IV	Khoisan	<i>koetsire</i> , sexually receptive males; <i>soregus</i> , friendship bond; <i>ôa-/huru</i> , <i>/huru</i> , mutual masturbation; <i>/goe-ugu</i> , "trabadie"
Nandi	I	Bantu	
Ndembu (Lunda)	III	Bantu	
Nkundu/Lonkundo (Mongo-Nkundu)	III	Bantu	
Nuer	IV	Nilo-Saharan	
Nyakyusa-Ngonde	IV	Bantu	
Nyoro	I	Bantu	
Nzema	II	Niger-Congo	<i>agyale</i> , "friendship marriages" (sex denied)
Ondonga (Ndonga)	IV	Bantu	<i>eshenga</i> , gender-mixing male shamans

Ethnonym <sup>1</sup>	Region	Language group	Terms
Ororo	I	Kordofanian	
Pangwe/Pahouian (Fang)	III	Bantu	<i>a bele nnem e bango</i> , "he has the heart [aspirations] of boys"
Rwanda/Ruanda (spoken by Hutus and Tutsis)	I	Bantu	<i>umuswezi</i> , <i>umukonotsi</i> , "sodomite"; <i>kuswerana nk'imbwa</i> , <i>kunonoka</i> , <i>kwitomba</i> , <i>kuranana inyuma</i> , <i>ku'nyo</i> , male homosexuality; <i>ikihindu</i> and <i>ikimaze</i> (Mirundi), "hermaphrodite" priests
Tsonga (Thonga)	IV	Bantu	<i>nkhonsthana</i> , <i>tinkonkana</i> , <i>nkonkana</i> , boy-wife; <i>nima</i> , husband
Umbundu/Mbunda/Ovimbundu	III	Bantu	<i>chibadi</i> , <i>chibanda</i> , <i>chibados</i> , <i>jimbandaa</i> , <i>kibamba</i> , <i>quimanda</i>
Wawihé /Viye	III	Bantu	<i>omututa</i> , (male) homosexuals; <i>eponji</i> , "lovers"
Wolof/Woloff	II	Niger-Congo	<i>gor-digen</i> , men-women; <i>yauss</i> , insertors; <i>oubi</i> , "open" insertees
!Xun	IV	Khoisan	
Yaka/Ba-Yaka	III	Bantu	
Yoruba	II	Niger-Congo	
Zande/Azande/Sandeh	I	Niger-Congo	<i>ndongo-techi-la</i> , boy-wives
Zulu	IV	Bantu	<i>inkosi ygbatfazi</i> , "chief of the women" (diviners); <i>amankotshane</i> , <i>izinkotshane</i> , <i>inkotshane</i> , boy- wife; <i>skesana</i> , cross-gender males; <i>iqgenge</i> , masculine partners

1. Most ethnonyms in the historical and ethnographic literature are names of languages (that is, glossonyms). In the case of names that are not glossonyms (for example, Dahomey), the language spoken appears in parentheses. Common variants of group names are separated by slashes. Roman numerals under Region correspond to the geographical organization of the book: I. Horn of Africa, Sudan, and East Africa; II. West Africa; III. Central Africa; IV. Southern Africa. Entries under Language Family identify the general group to which the language has been assigned. Bantu is a subdivision of Niger-Congo, which, together with Kordofanian languages, constitutes the Niger-Kordofanian macrofamily. Literal translations of terms appear in quotes.

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