

**“Come the Final Throwdown, What is s/he First, Black or Gay?”:
Revolutionary Arguments in Randall Kenan’s *A Visitation of Spirits* and
Me’shell Ndegeocello’s *Cookie: the Anthropological Mixtape***

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Abstract

Cheryl Clarke writes in “The Failure to Transform: Homophobia in the Black Community,” that “we cannot rationalize the disease of homophobia among black people as the white man’s fault, for to do so is to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to transform ourselves” (197). The very transformation of which she speaks is that of accepting, acknowledging, and in a revolutionary way, celebrating the sexual desires of all those within the Black community. Clarke sees the current lack of acceptance of non-heterosexuals by black society as monumentally destructive within a group whose members are inextricably, immediately, and perpetually, despite the other ways by which they are identified, foremost signified as “Black.” Due to the fact that “white” is the default racial signifier of American identity, white individuals have the privilege—indeed, seemingly the right—to identify themselves as hetero/homo/bisexual without being forced in any real way, to take into consideration the issue of race. However, in their discourse, black individuals must deal with their blackness prior to any productive discussion or understanding of racially charged, black sexuality. Thus, when dealing with the matter of sexual difference, Kenyatta Dorey Graves duly notes in “Are Love and Literature Political: Black Homopoetics in the 1990s,” that “whiteness must be engaged because so many African Americans equate it with gayness” (184). Indeed to many outsiders, non-heterosexual identification is the “white man’s disease.”

In *A Visitation of Spirits*, through the central character of Horace Cross, Randall Kenan presents the possibility that in opposition to the all too commonly held belief that homosexuality is in some way at odds with blackness, African American same gender sexual unions may in actuality be a salvific force and the ultimate profession of Black self-love. Similarly, Me'shell Ndegeocello, through both the lyrics of her album *Cookie: the Anthropological Mixtape* as well as in her self-proclaimed bisexuality, makes the case that regimented heterosexuality is, like materialism and Christianity, merely a product of the black community's internalization of white society's ideas of normality. The artist views both racism and heterosexism as equally detrimental to the black, American psyche and “[draws] parallels between her own personal narrative and the early-american slave trade claiming, “anywhere you feel trapped is a plantation” (Psaroudis). Notably, neither Kenan nor Ndegeocello places the blame for the black community's problematic relationship with its non-heterosexual members on the shoulders of white America, but rather locates this conflict within the community's continual need to model itself on that of the dominant and dominating culture which equates heterosexual manhood with agency. Phillip Brian Harper argues in *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* that “Subscription to black identity itself bespeaks a masculine status because the courage thus to claim social autonomy is precisely what constitutes conventional manhood, no matter what the racial context” (68). In an attempt to provide an alternate route to black identity, as if performing a literary call and response, *Visitation* and *Cookie* act in concert to discredit this notion of heterosexual male centered blackness: *Cookie* calls out the warning; *Visitation* provides the unavoidable response if that warning goes unheeded.