

Translating (Black) Queerness

Unpacking the Conceptual Linkages Between Racialized Masculinities, Consensual Sex, and the Practice of Torture

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This essay argues that the 2005 documentary Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story uses narrative strategies that link it with the 2004 Abu Ghraib abuse scandal. The film tells the story of a Caribbean-born boxer who killed his Cuban-born opponent in the ring for allegedly calling him a homosexual. However, corroborating evidence of Griffith's homosexuality is as scanty in the documentary as it is in the boxer's life. Like the absent sexualities of actual gay men in the Iraqi scandal, Griffith's absent sexuality in the film relies problematically on a conceptual confusion between gender and sexuality.

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What kinds of violences are necessary to consolidate the constituency designated by the pronoun "we"?¹

—Hiram Perez

Global appropriations of U.S.-derived understandings of how gender and sexuality operate as categories of human experience have

acquired a special resonance these days. The revelation in May 2004 that U.S. military personnel brutally tortured Iraqi male prisoners of war by employing antihomosexual taunts has placed our country's gender and sexual norms at the center of contemporary discourse. Moreover, these revelations appear to implicate contemporary gay men's own marginalization as persecuted sexual minorities in ways that, to one scholar in particular, "reads as an orientalist projection that conveys much more about the constraints and imaginaries of identity in the 'West' than anything else."² Indeed, as we will see shortly, not only have some gay male commentators argued that the armed forces' use of simulated forms of male-male sexuality as a method of torture strategically plays upon U.S. gay men's (especially *white* gay men's) own identifications and desires in the service of a broad policy of national defense, but such views have sometimes also been held by those who are not gay men, and who are in fact hostile to homosexuality altogether.

Such identificatory gestures position homosexuality as an over-determined category, and they raise important questions about the nature of embodiment, affect, and the production of politicized epistemologies more generally. For instance, what modes of selective identification make possible these visceral responses to an objectified "gay" sexuality that is enacted upon and by bodies that are *neither* white nor self-identifying as "gay," but instead are visibly racialized as Other? More specifically, how does white gay male outrage at the release of the disturbing photographs of Iraqi male prisoners posed in ways that *resemble* intimate acts of same-gender sexual activity, but that are in reality something quite different, function in part to unmask white gay men's own complex social positioning within U.S. identity-based race, gender, and sexual hierarchies? In the end, whose politics and affective interests are best served by these calculated speech acts that are, at bottom, also a *misrecognition*, and whose interests are foreclosed by this very same speech?

Utilizing the insights of contemporary theorists like Marlon Ross, Roderick Ferguson, and Jasbir Puar, among others, I attempt to offer provisional answers to these questions. I do so by closely examining the 2005 documentary *Ring of Fire: The Emile Griffith Story* for what I want to suggest are the conceptual linkages the film, along with the tactics engaged in by those promoting the film, shares with the Abu Ghraib prison scandal and its aftermath.

Ring of Fire: Audience-as-Market and the Problem of Difference

The life and career of the former welterweight boxing champion Emile Griffith would seem to provide any filmmaker with the raw

material for a powerful documentary. Arriving from the U.S. Virgin Islands in the late 1950s, Griffith was “discovered” while working as a gofer in Manhattan’s bustling garment district. When he was fifteen, his employer noted Griffith’s impressive physique and brought the youth to the attention of a well-known trainer. The trainer worked with Griffith for a mere two months before entering the youth into the prestigious Golden Gloves competition, where, incredibly, Griffith made it all the way to the final round. A few years later, in 1961, Griffith’s growing reputation as a fighter earned him a title bout with welterweight champion Benny “Kid” Paret, whom he defeated in a decision. Because the fight was aired on the popular television series *Friday Night Fights*, Griffith became an instant media celebrity and later appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. However, when Paret’s handlers requested a second fight, Griffith went down to defeat in a decision. Upon losing this fight, Griffith retreated into himself.

A year later, in 1962, the younger fighter was reluctantly granted a rematch with his Cuban-born opponent. Fighting with a resolve that was missing in the second encounter, Griffith was strong in the early rounds. The prefight hoopla of this rematch was marred by controversy, however, as Paret apparently began to make use of a rumor about his opponent’s sexuality. At the weigh-in, Paret taunted Griffith by calling him a “*maricón*,” perhaps the worst insult one presumptive heterosexual male can make to another, since the word, in Spanish, calls into question a man’s masculinity by suggesting that he is a homosexual. Griffith’s trainer had his hands full keeping his young fighter from throwing a punch at Paret before the bout even began. “Save it for tonight,” Gil Clancy was reported to have told his charge.³ Finally, at 2:09 in the twelfth round, Griffith landed a vicious flurry of punches to his opponent’s head, twenty-nine consecutive punches in all, causing Paret to slump worrisomely to the canvas, whereupon the referee, the famed Ruby Goldstein (celebrated for stopping fights mercifully, sometimes too soon for some bloodthirsty aficionados), finally intervened and declared Griffith the victor. But Paret never regained consciousness and was eventually carried from the ring in a stretcher. Ten days later, the Cuban fighter died in New York’s Roosevelt Hospital, his young, grief-stricken wife by his side.

According to the film’s narrative logic, Emile Griffith was never the same after this final fight with Paret. Although Griffith eventually returned to the ring and even won several more high-profile fights, he never recaptured the form or the wide popularity that his earlier success had garnered. As many fighters do, Griffith unfortunately stayed in the profession for far too long, finally losing a series of bouts to lesser opponents and being forced by his trainer to retire in 1977,

balding and nearly forty. His earnings depleted, Griffith found a second career for a while as a trainer of promising fighters before working as a corrections officer in New York. One night outside a Manhattan gay bar, Griffith was attacked as he stumbled onto the sidewalk drunk and was badly beaten in what the police characterized at the time as a possible hate crime. For weeks Griffith lay near death, and when he was eventually released from the hospital he had lost some of his motor skills as well as much of his short-term memory. To many observers and fans, the irony was that Griffith's condition resembled that of a punch-drunk fighter—a longtime boxer's expected fate. But the more sensational truth apparently was that the former champion's beating quite possibly occurred at the hands of gay bashers, and not of an opponent in the ring.

This narrative undermines a dominant cultural assumption in Western culture, and it is that male athletic prowess and homosexuality are mutually exclusive categories. *Ring of Fire* takes up this narrative thread and attempts to unravel it with varying degrees of success. The film is the work of Dan Klores and Ron Berger, two white, Jewish, heterosexual men whose previous documentary, *The Boys of 2nd Street Park*, chronicles the ups and downs in the lives of several middle-aged men who as youngsters belonged to a Jewish basketball-playing gang. By anchoring their narrative about Griffith to the well-known trope of secrecy and revelation that has become the dominant mode of conceptualizing lesbian and gay male possibility in the twentieth century—a trope emblemized by what Marlon Ross has dubbed the “closet paradigm”—Klores and Berger ensure that their documentary will be legible within the very terms by which much of mainstream lesbian and gay discourse is now understood.⁴ However, because same-sex identities and desires are diverse in their lived realities, representational approaches that rely on this metaphor “as the essential vehicle for narrating homosexuality as a necessary progress from dark secrecy to open consciousness” often inadvertently construct universalizing narratives about lesbian and gay identities that are exclusionary.⁵ One risk of any uncritical use of the closet paradigm to explore same-gender sexuality is that one “effectively diminishes and disables the full engagement with potential insights from race theory and class analysis.”⁶ Such an oversight may become especially problematic when the central subject of one's project is a person of color, more specifically an Afro-Caribbean, as is the case in *Ring of Fire*.⁷

The following close analysis primarily derives from two sources: (1) a screening I attended of the film in July 2005 at the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival in Los Angeles; and (2) promotional materials that I received in the mail from festival organizers before the film's

premiere as well as from the thicker, glossier program I received upon my arrival. Although I later learned that the documentary had aired on the USA television network in April of that year, the present analysis does not attempt to consider the implications of that prior broadcast but rather limits itself to trying to decipher how my own understanding of the film was shaped almost entirely by this initial experience of the film within a specifically lesbian and gay milieu.

Moreover, given the concerns I raise here, my analysis engages in the interpretive critical practice known as queer of color critique. Building on the insights of scholars such as Chandan Reddy and José Esteban Muñoz, Roderick Ferguson argues that queer of color analysis “interrogates [such] social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.”⁸ Because those ideals and practices have traditionally tended to “suppress the diverse components of state and capitalist formations,” queer of color critique strives to “debunk the idea that race, class, gender, and sexuality are discrete formations, apparently insulated from one another.”⁹ In order to perform such critical work, queer of color analysis must *disidentify* with other modes of material analysis that have traditionally centered class as a privileged social formation over the simultaneous imbrication of several categories at once. For Muñoz, “Disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy.” In short, “queer of color critique decodes cultural fields not from a position outside those fields, but from within them, as those fields account for the queer of color subject’s historicity.”¹⁰

Precisely because my own critical posture is skeptical of any epistemological stance that would preemptively see homosexuality, black maleness, and athletic prowess as necessarily mutually exclusive or as discrete identity formations, I often find myself drawn to self-consciously queer narratives that likewise aim to subvert such assumptions. From past experience, I had reason to hope that the festival’s screening of *Ring of Fire* would prove to be just such a narrative. However, from the start there seemed to be a disjunction between the film I actually watched seated in the Director’s Guild Theater on Sunset Boulevard and the film I had *expectations* of seeing from what I had gleaned from the promotional materials I had read. For me, the problem centers on the question of translating the experiences of what Scott Bravmann calls “queer historical subjects” to the screen in a way that manages to remain faithful to “the specificities of the social formation” of those subjects.¹¹ As Julio Ortega reminds us,

“Translating is the possibility of constructing a scene of mediation that frames interpretation as a dialogic exercise. Thus, it is the first cultural act that places languages and subjects in crisis, unleashing a redefinition of speakers, a debate over protocols, and a struggle over interpretation.”¹²

In short, the practice of translation in whatever medium is never innocent, involving, as it often does, contests over the authority to name and give shape to forms of human experience that may both intersect and depart from both mainstream and folk wisdom at crucial points, but which never, when all is said and done, collapse neatly into one another. The specific problems involved with *Ring of Fire* emerged most clearly when I carefully began to scrutinize the narrative logic the filmmakers employ along with how the festival organizers made use of that logic to promote, that is, *translate*, the film to their specialized niche audience—men and women who are interested in seeing films with what they hope will be identifiable lesbian and gay content.

However, given the economic considerations of filmmaking and the need often to identify a niche audience for one’s efforts, not everyone will constitute the target of a given film’s marketing strategies. Some individuals and groups will not be targeted at all. In an essay analyzing the organizational role that film festivals play in helping to shape lesbian and gay identities, Joshua Gamson argues that such festivals become “homes or warehouses for collective identity; they involve ongoing and self-conscious decision making about the content and contours of the ‘we’ being made literally visible.” Engaged in the business of “*identity framing*,” lesbian and gay film festivals are central in “making visible particular versions of group ‘consciousness and characters.’”¹³

Until recently, the “particular versions” of queer subjectivity that lesbian and gay film festivals have tended to privilege were the identities and identity-concerns of primarily white lesbians and gay men at the exclusion of lesbians and gay men of color. However, such practices have proven untenable in recent years, as “it has become extremely difficult to retain legitimacy as a lesbian and gay community organization without demonstrating a commitment to gender, racial, and ethnic diversity.”¹⁴ While later festivals have conscientiously responded to this criticism by diversifying their film offerings to ensure the inclusion of work by and about a wide range of *different* lesbians and gay men, much of this work has nonetheless promoted what Gamson calls the “mainstreaming and commercialization” of lesbian and gay identities. The result is that lesbian and gay cinematic identities become framed increasingly in narrow terms. Paradoxically, just as lesbian and gay male image-making has begun to

reach a wider audience, the view of what a lesbian or a gay man is or looks like has become *less* rather than *more* diverse. As Gamson explains it, relying on commentary from such festival insiders as Daryl Chin:

Consolidating a market niche, typically by providing “more mainstream things that will fill up 500 seats and everything,” involves affirming that same-sex desire is a coherent, shared basis for a social grouping. The accommodation of racial diversity takes place in this organizational context, primarily through a multi-culturalism that posits a plurality of lesbian and gay experiences, but does not challenge their basic commonality. The boundaries of the collective category are expanded, the “family” enlarged; racial and ethnic differences are framed as variations on a theme rather than as demonstrations of the instability of the collective. This framing prevails not so much because organizers all share this perspective—they do not—but because the characteristics of the organizational sector favor the consolidation of an audience-as-market for survival purposes.¹⁵

What becomes difficult to apprehend in such a context is the degree to which most lesbian and gay male communities are themselves deeply fractured by racial and ethnic division. As Scott Bravmann reminds us, “The queer fiction of the present that ‘we’ are ‘now’ a ‘community’ with a shared history . . . is very deeply troubled by queer fictions of the past that powerfully refract the historically embedded, highly consequential differences among us, rightly making any attempt to theorize or write the histories of queer heterosociality a problematic, uncomfortable, and disturbing endeavor.”¹⁶

The “Closet” Metaphor as a Limiting Paradigm

Although actual queer communities are generally *not* founded on a “coherent, shared basis” for understanding social identity, it was precisely this assumption of “basic commonality” existing between all lesbians and gay men, regardless of racial or ethnic identity, that I am suggesting was operating when I attended the screening of *Ring of Fire* in Los Angeles. This bias could be detected in any number of ways, but the most obvious way the festival context served to “mainstream” Klores and Berger’s documentary about Griffith was in its use of the closet paradigm in its promotional materials. For example, consider the following passage, which was printed in the festival program I received once I arrived for the screening:

The year is 1962, when [as popular opinion would have it] “even Liberace was thought to be straight.” What if—in the brutal, macho sport of boxing—the six-time welterweight champion of the world was really a closeted homosexual? RING OF FIRE, Dan Klores and Ron Berger’s enthralling documentary, deftly depicts this very true story. During the weigh-in for a highly anticipated bout at Madison Square Garden, archrival Benny “Kid” Paret called Emile Griffith a *maricón*, a

Spanish word for “faggot.” Later, on live television, Griffith pummeled Paret, leaving him in a coma from which he died 10 days later. That match sparked outrage and calls for boxing reform. Griffith, who currently lives with his longtime roommate and “adopted son” Luis Rodrigo, is still haunted by Paret’s death. Skillfully blending current interviews with rare black-and-white footage, *RING OF FIRE* skewers the hypocrisy of political outrage, exposes the underside of social and cultural mores, thoughtfully provides a framework for forgiveness and bravely poses the question, who (or what) is really to blame for Paret’s death?

This quotation is a lengthier version of the blurb that was printed in the glossy brochure I received in the mail before I attended the screening, and which originally enticed me to want to see the film. Here, Griffith is narrativized for the sake of its niche audience as a potential “homosexual,” one who is “closeted” but who nonetheless manages to have a “longtime roommate,” a man we are told is also Griffith’s “adopted son.” The fact that Griffith is Caribbean-born or black, is not worthy of mention. Only Paret, who utters the Spanish-language equivalent to the English word “homosexual,” is marginally identified by culture. Stripped of the specificity of his ethnicity and color, then, Griffith functions in this summary as an “abstract homosexual body,” not as himself.¹⁷ He is the ideal stand-in for the feared and hated homosexual, a figure Jeffrey Weeks has called the “scapegoated minority.”¹⁸ As such, Griffith becomes, in a word, a kind of “gay everyman,” and therefore someone with whom *all* gay men (and perhaps all lesbians), regardless of race or ethnicity, can identify—that is, see as themselves, but not really.

This is because Griffith’s narrative of closeted queer identity is an *anti*-identity for the film’s targeted audience. For in identifying with Griffith, but in *dis*identifying with his refusal to “come out” as gay (that is, not condoning that refusal), the film’s privileged lesbian and gay viewers could then root for Griffith to conquer his fear as they, the viewers, have ideally conquered their own fear. After all, given the internal logic of the closet paradigm on which both the film and the festival organizers rely, “It [in my analysis, Griffith’s ‘coming out’] was an *essential* step in the evolution of a modern homosexual consciousness.”¹⁹ Not to “come out” is to give in to that fear and therefore to remain in darkness. But in being “seen” by others in such a way, “as themselves,” not “dark” but “out and proud,” Griffith is not “seen” as *himself*, and whatever meaning this may hold for him, as a man of color in the racially tumultuous era of postwar America. Because any “dark” body in such a cultural context becomes saturated with cultural meanings of “darkness” that preexist, even extend beyond, his identity, that body’s darkness becomes useful-for-others in a way that it is not seen as useful-for-itself.²⁰

Ralph Ellison dramatized this social condition of African Americans eloquently in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, when he wrote: “I am

invisible . . . simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.”²¹ In such a world, “perverse forms of anonymity” can be said to structure the social relations between blacks and whites, so that, as the Fanonian scholar Lewis Gordon has described it, “Things become what they are based on what they are not, and they become what they are not based on what they are.”²² For blacks, what such situations often translate into is farce, relations in which the following scenarios are likely to predominate: “The black is invisible because of how the black is ‘seen.’ The black is not heard because of how the black is ‘heard.’ The black is not felt because of how the black ‘feels.’”²³ Such scenarios emerge for the simple reason that in white-dominated cultures whites insist on translating black experience in ways that prove palatable and undisruptive to *white* modes of seeing, hearing, and feeling. Hence, “For the black, there is the perversity of ‘*seen* invisibility’ a form of ‘*absent* presence” in which the specificity of black existence is wished away in favor of narrating an existence that serves the one who is doing the seeing—in this case, the white.²⁴

But what is it that white lesbians and gays presumably want to *see*, *hear*, and *feel* in Griffith’s story that would require the festival promoters, and the filmmakers—who, after all, rely on the concept of the closet in narrating Griffith’s story—to leave out crucial information about Griffith’s racial and cultural identity? In other words, just how does Griffith’s paradoxical racial condition of “*seen* invisibility” facilitate this very wanting on the part of contemporary white lesbians and gay men? Before I attempt to answer this question, I would note that in order for such a narrative to have the explanatory power the blurb’s author expects, he or she must have an inordinate amount of faith in the targeted reader’s ability to draw a clear-eyed connection between the key signifiers in the passage—namely, “closeted homosexual,” “*maricón*,” and “faggot.” Most importantly, such a reader ultimately has to believe these signifiers to be interchangeable at the level of signification for them to experience the intended effect: identification. Moreover, that “effect” should ideally carry over from the reading of the blurb to seeing the film for which the synopsis is merely a preview.

Interestingly, whereas the specifics of the two filmmakers’ identities (racial and sexual) are suppressed in the film’s translation from “real” to “reel”—that is, Klores and Berger never appear on screen, nor are their voices heard in the film—the sexual identities of the festival’s organizers, although masked in their racial and gendered

specificity, are nonetheless accessible in other ways. That is, these individuals' mere involvement with a lesbian and gay film festival has the effect of evoking a specific *identitarian* affiliation, one that highlights these men's and women's real or merely affective identification as/with gay men and lesbians, just as it does their target audience. In so far as *Ring of Fire* purports to tell the "true story" of a Caribbean-born black male champion boxer who was rumored to have been homosexual—but who had not then, nor since, publicly "come out" as such—its inclusion in a contemporary lesbian and gay film festival might be said, following Gamson, to privilege a sexual identification over a racial or cultural one. The reason for this is that both Klores and Berger, as well as the festival organizers, in relying on the universalizing metaphor of the closet to tell and *sell* Griffith's story, flatten out that story and its subject so as to appeal to the broadest possible audience—that is, to lesbians and gay male filmgoers for whom a racial or a cultural identification beyond the sexual, the queer, is superfluous. The result is the privileging of *white* lesbians and gay men over lesbians and gay men of color, whose multi-identity concerns are disregarded.

Because such an approach "occludes the intersecting saliency of race, gender, sexuality, and class in forming social practices," something I am arguing a queer of color critique works assiduously to "debunk," the film's promotional materials cannot challenge the dominant belief that these categories are "apparently insulated from one another" and thus "disconnected."²⁵ In his essay "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," Marlon Ross suggests an answer to the earlier question I posed as to what white lesbians and gay men want to see, hear, and feel in Griffith's story, when he writes, "The 'sphere of the body' defined by race becomes over time (moments, days, weeks, decades, centuries?) the model for other 'new identities of bodies' defined by something other than race: gender, sexuality, class, criminality, etc. The abstraction of 'the body' into a further abstraction of its 'sphere' currently a customary and necessary way of talking about these problems in academe—has the effect of covering over how a *single person's body* could, from the outset . . . be seen as carrying both visible and invisible markers of more than one identity discourse already interfused and *embodied* in that single person."²⁶ If one were to replace "story" with "body," then it might become clearer as to how Griffith's narrative, by analogy to the shared narrative of lesbian and gay oppression that Joshua Gamson outlines, could appeal to mainstream white lesbians and gay male filmgoers via the film's central reliance on the closet metaphor. Quite simply, "race, sex, sexuality, and criminality become visible differently because different discourses are at play, even when a single

body is the anatomical object.”²⁷ And nowhere is this dynamic more on display than when black bodies are present.

Unearthing the “Truth” About Griffith’s (Black Male) Sexuality

Of course, one thing undermining the festival organizers’ effort to narrate Griffith’s identity as a closeted gay man, and nothing more—not black, not Caribbean—is that Griffith himself never says with any conclusiveness that he *is* a gay man, nor do the filmmakers include any male interview subjects who were sexually or romantically involved with the athlete, neither during his heyday as a champion boxer nor as an elderly man, to corroborate this narrative. The only person who appears in the film with whom Griffith was reputed to have been sexually involved is Sadie Griffith, a Caribbean woman the boxer hastily married in the early 1970s and reportedly separated from not long after. She never utters a word about her husband’s rumored homosexuality, nor is she asked. As such, she never so much as hints at what the reason might have been for why the marriage came to such an abrupt end. Was the marriage ever properly dissolved, or did the two just go their separate ways? Oddly, Sadie Griffith still carries the boxer’s surname, suggesting that she and Griffith are still legally wed. But are they? Maddeningly, the documentary is sketchy in fleshing out these intimate details, just as it is equally sketchy on providing satisfying clarity around its subject’s sexuality more generally.

Klores and Berger leave a number of questions unaddressed in *Ring of Fire* that eventually aroused my suspicions. While answering these questions may have contributed to a more complex portrait of their subject, doing so might also have complicated the neat binary structure on which the filmic narrative depends for coherence. For instance, what did Griffith’s brother, who is interviewed several times in the film, think about his older brother’s rumored sexuality, or for that matter what did his large extended family think of these rumors? Griffith’s ever-present mother had already died years before the film’s production in 1997, and so surely Griffith could not have been worried about causing her embarrassment over the scandal his possible “outing” as a homosexual would cause. The impediment the filmmakers might have come up against was simply that Griffith may not have organized his sexuality according to the model of secrecy and revelation that the concept of the closet suggests, and that *Ring of Fire* steadfastly clings to. After all, much of African American social history “indicates that intragender love has been constructed along axes not simply reducible to or easily characterized or explained by the closet paradigm and its attendant narrative of sexual evolution.”²⁸

As such, for black men and women who engage in same-gender intimacy, whether exclusively or only on occasion, “the emphasis is not on a binary of secrecy versus revelation but instead on a continuum of knowing that persists at various levels according to the kin and friendship relations within the community.”²⁹ As if providing a ready answer to just how Griffith might have managed to negotiate the “truth” of his sexuality with his close friends and family members, a question the filmmakers do not begin to explore (because, perhaps, it is a question that does not ultimately interest them), Ross writes:

It is impossible *not* to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough. In such a context, to announce one’s attraction by “coming out” would not necessarily indicate a progress in sexual identity, and it would not necessarily change one’s identity from closeted to liberated as conceptualized in the dominant closet narrative. When the question of telling loved ones what they already know does become an issue, it can be judged superfluous or perhaps even a distracting act, one subsidiary to the more important identifications of family, community, and race within which one’s sexual attractions are already interwoven and understood.³⁰

Ross’s point is certainly timely, and it intervenes quite persuasively in critical approaches that too earnestly promote a single, overarching narrative for interpreting the way diverse subjects live out their same-gender attractions. If not to shield his close family members from the “truth” of his (homo)sexuality, what then was Griffith worried about, supposing he *was* worried at all? Could the conflict have been more internal? That is, might it have been possible that Griffith, who was Caribbean-born, could not reconcile himself to the fact that he was attracted to men, supposing he was? Why is it that Griffith is so reluctant all these years later to claim his sexuality, whatever it is? What are the cultural forces that conspire to encourage him, within the framing of the documentary itself, that he should “keep his secret,” so to speak? Are they, by chance, similar to the forces that may have compelled the Caribbean-born writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Claude McKay, long rumored to have been homosexual, never to publicly claim that identity for himself or to portray it openly in his work?³¹

In an article investigating homophobia in black popular culture and Caribbean literature, Timothy Chin writes of McKay, “despite the vitality and passion with which [his] protagonists are typically imbued, the forms of masculinity that the narratives inscribe do not ultimately depart from traditional notions of maleness and masculine behavior. Indeed, McKay’s folk heroes reflect and even reinforce dominant sexual ideologies by asserting a masculinity that is predicated on both sexism and homophobia.”³² Moreover, I would say, these ideologies are anchored in the historical narrative of colonialism through which the West Indian gendered subject is produced. In other words, given Griffith’s reticence to cooperate fully either with

Klores and Berger or with festival organizers' skillful efforts at re-narrativization, the documentary's spectators must "simultaneously confront[t] the patriarchal, heterosexist, and Eurocentric ideologies that constitute the particular legacy of the Caribbean colonial experience," one that perhaps, on some level, I would hazard to guess, also reflects the former champion's "*unstable* status as both a colonial subject and a homosexual."³³ In other words, might McKay's experiences as a transplanted colonial subject serve as a useful framework for trying to understand the experiences that may have drove Griffith to remain largely silent about his own sexuality, even within the context of a documentary film project seemingly designed, or at least marketed as such, to unearth "speech" about that very sexuality?

While past and present Caribbean culture has notoriously been resistant to the affirmation of same-gender identities and desires, insights into how Caribbean male and female subjects navigate that resistance are not difficult to locate. In their review essay on Caribbean sexualities, Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto identify a variety of scholarly work that addresses this topic in some detail. For example, the authors cite Suzanne LaFont's 2001 essay "Very Straight Sex: The Development of Sexual Mores in Jamaica" as a useful look into colonial history to understand how sexual attitudes of the era were shaped "out of both African and British codes of sexual conduct." Because of the hybrid nature of this influence, early Jamaican notions of sexuality were likewise divided: "The creole sexual ideology approved of sexual activity as a natural part of human pleasure," however, any expression of "sexuality had to be expressed within the confines of respectability." According to the reviewers, this perspective helps to explain Jamaican culture's "tacit acceptance of a woman prostituting herself to support her children so long as she maintains a public face of respectability, while two men seen holding hands in the street can be stoned to death."³⁴ Sharpe and Pinto also list other works that provide useful information. Two edited volumes the reviewers cite focus specific, and much needed, attention on same-sex desire. These include Rhoda Reddock's *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities* (University of West Indies Press, 2004) and Linden Lewis's *The Culture of Gender and Sexuality in the Caribbean* (University Press of Florida, 2003). Moreover, black gay male cultural producers such as the British auteurs Isaac Julien and Rikki-Beadle-Blair have both produced film and stage work that looks closely at the virulent homophobia that has characterized much of West Indian culture in recent decades.³⁵

Unfortunately, the makers of *Ring of Fire* do not mention any of this scholarship, nor do they include any of these public intellectuals as commentators on Griffith's story, although they do include other

commentators—such as critics Neal Gabler and Pete Hamill, gay historian Charles Kaiser, and sportswriter Jimmy Breslin, as well as assorted other journalists (the novelist Norman Mailer even contributes a voiceover commentary adding to the sensationalism of the final tragic bout with Paret). But the filmmakers neglect to include a single commentator who might have addressed the role that Griffith's Caribbean birthplace and upbringing may have had on the development of his racial, gender, and sexual identities. Could Klores and Berger not have located any qualified intellectuals who might have helped to situate Griffith's compelling life within the overarching but also, given Griffith's Caribbean-born status, nuanced context of antiblack racism in postwar American society? In other words, could the filmmakers have done better than simply placing the athlete's story within the hermetically sealed boxing world, on one hand, and, given the tightly circumscribed subject matter of the film festival itself, in the largely "white" gay world, on the other?

Contemporary social-science researchers of African-American sexualities have continually stressed that any strategy for elucidating the complex sexualities of *black* people, as distinct from the sexualities of whites, must resist proceeding as if racial or cultural background is irrelevant or else the same across different racial and ethnic groups.³⁶ Rather, as social scientist Linwood Lewis and his collaborator Robert Kertzner write in their article "Toward Improved Interpretation and Theory Building of African American Male Sexualities," such strategies must actively seek to dispel "the belief in an essential African American (hetero)sexuality." Beliefs of this sort often posit "a shared, African psychosocial essence for all persons of African descent." However, "not all African Americans have the same experiences or respond to these experiences in the same way."³⁷

More significantly, these revised interpretive frameworks "must account in some way for the effect on African American sexuality of living in a racialized society, a society that emphasizes race as a major organizer of life experiences and places increased significance on practices and discourses that refer to race."³⁸ The authors go on to state that this is especially the case for male subjects of African descent, whose sense of their own fragile gender and sexual identities must often be negotiated and reconstructed within a climate saturated with both the legacy of past as well as ongoing cultural narratives about black male sexuality as abnormal and bestial as compared to their white counterparts. With this in mind, Lewis and Kertzner conclude: "If we accept that African American men's meanings, beliefs, and emotions are in part affected by their racial and cultural background and experiences related to their background, then it is vital to allow their voices to guide interpretation of their actions."³⁹

Is Simulated “Gay Sex” “Gay”? Is It Even “Sex”? The Risk of Translation

At the start of this essay I suggested that Griffith’s story, especially its imaginative retelling in *Ring of Fire*, shared certain conceptual linkages with the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal. I would now like to make that connection more apparent. Ultimately, what Dan Klores and Ron Berger’s documentary asks its viewers to consider is this: When one man calls another man a “faggot,” whether in Spanish, English, or some other language that has an equivalent expression, or when one man uses another man’s body against his consent in a way that invokes the widely held notion of “faggotry”—that is, homosexuality—is he commenting primarily on what this man does in bed and with whom he does it, is it commenting on this man’s status as a man, or is it both? In other words, just as with the elaborately staged photographs of the abuse American soldiers inflicted upon Iraqi male prisoners of war, is this a question of gender or is it a question of sexuality? Or is it neither, and how do we tell?

After all, the two terms, gender and sexuality, name related but not identical phenomena. The way the two are related has to do with the role each term plays in conceptualizing human identity and behavior where “sex” is concerned. The term “sex” is itself part of the confusion, since it has a double meaning—one of which denotes male/female difference, known as dimorphism, and the other, which denotes erotic desire/practice. As researchers Don Kulick and Deborah Cameron tell us, “Those who coined and then popularized the terms gender and sexuality were deliberately trying to get away from narrowly biological/reproductive definitions, and also to make a clear distinction between the two senses of sex. But this strategy has still not met with uniform acceptance, and the two ‘new’ terms, gender and sexuality, have complex histories in recent English usage.”⁴⁰ While I do not have the space here to go into these complex histories, I will say that they involve historically and culturally determined notions of what the “proper” behavior is for anatomical males and females at any one time and place, as well as the “proper” forms of sexual expression these men and women can engage in both in terms of normative and nonnormative practices.

Uncritical acceptance of these understandings has come at the expense of our being able to identify and name sexuality as an important factor in a broad range of social relations, whether forced or consensual, in which gender may not always be the most privileged, or even the most salient, category in play. For instance, Marlon Ross has elsewhere reminded us that in antipornography feminist arguments in which sex is conceptualized as men’s “desire for domination and power” over women, and nothing else, “it tends

to spotlight the perversity of gender oppression while casting the role of race into the shadows.”⁴¹ Rather than vilify antipornography feminists, who are hardly alone in holding such views, the point that Ross is trying to make is that this conceptualization obscures the ways in which societies with racial hierarchies in addition to gender hierarchies routinely position “men” and “women” from different racial and ethnic groups unequally in relation to these structuring gender and sexual norms, so that only some men are thought to be “real men” and only some women are thought to be “real women,” while other “men” and “women” are viewed as inferior, along with their sexual practices.

It becomes especially difficult, then, to recognize that in such societies the oppression of “women of color,” as a specific class of “women,” not only involves a matter of a racially unmarked class of men exerting their dominance and control over a racially unmarked class of women, but has also entailed, especially for black women, forms of “racial and class domination through sexualized violence from the period of slavery forward.”⁴² Historically, this has included white men’s practice of raping black women as a calculated strategy of consolidating their gender and racial authority over both black women and black men. And as feminist analysis has illustrated time and again, rape has a complicated relationship to sex. Strictly speaking, the two are neither equivalent nor interchangeable.

Building on this theory, other scholars have persuasively argued that “we cannot ignore the question of how men in subordinate social positions in U.S. culture, particularly African American men, become self-implicated in acts of domination through sexual violence,” whether as perpetrators of that violence or as its victims.⁴³ After all, the subordination of black men and black women by white men within patriarchal, white supremacist regimes “collides with the cultural logic of rape.”⁴⁴ This collision is one of a conceptual nature, and it emerges as soon as we realize that “graphic racial violence against black men,” which is often imaged as castration or emasculation—or male-on-male rape, is sometimes equated “with an abstraction of men’s sexual violence against women.” Ross describes the conflation in this way:

Paradoxically, this process of analogy and abstraction tends to keep the two acts of violence—sexual and racial—bifurcated even as they are united symbolically in the figure of race rape. It tends to construct violence against women as deriving ultimately and/or solely from sexual oppression and violence against black men as deriving necessarily from racial oppression. Sexual violence against black men—and the sexual violence they perpetrate against others—is thus reduced to a matter of racial jousting between men of European and African descent. Racial violence against African American women then becomes exceptional, rather than symptomatic and explanatory of racial violence itself.⁴⁵

In other words, violence that white men commit against black men is not usually conceptualized as sexual violence but only as racial violence, while the violence white men may commit against black women is always conceptualized as both sexual violence and racial violence. But for Ross, “the awful social and psychic aggression of the assault consists in the interrelatedness of exploiting sexual violation to reinforce racial subordination and simultaneously exploiting racial violence to reinforce sexual subordination.” In other words, “the racial exploitation of men or women always presupposes the license—and thus the right—to exploit them sexually.”⁴⁶ So the two cannot ever be disentangled; doing so, Kulick and Cameron would argue, unproductively preserves an understanding of sexuality that keeps it linked to its more narrow sexual orientation meaning so that other meanings—those beyond the biological/reproductive definitions—become difficult to theorize and to grasp.

This returns us more directly to the Abu Ghraib scandal and to the following snide comment, one authored by a black female Christian fundamentalist, whose homophobia allows her to think nothing of lumping homosexuality in with prostitution, incest, adultery, and pedophilia: “It struck me strangely that many people who were so disturbed about the abuse that happened in a prison in Iraq do some of the same perverted things in their own homes and think it’s perfectly all right.”⁴⁷

To that writer, there is apparently no difference between consensual male–male sex and the brutal U.S. torture of male prisoners by, among other heinous practices, forcing these men to simulate oral and anal sex while being bound, gagged, and having loaded weapons pointed at their heads. This is in part because the author finds both scenarios to be repulsive to her on moral and religious grounds, and therefore any distinction between the two is unnecessary to note. While this example may be somewhat crude, given that the antihomosexual sentiment behind it prevents this writer from acknowledging any critical differences separating the two, it is nonetheless important to remember that even among progay commentators such conflation have been commonplace. One example is the following remark by gay journalist Patrick Moore. After viewing photographs of the Arab prisoners tortured at Abu Ghraib, Moore writes:

The world was stunned by these images not only because of their brutality but also because of their sexual nature. Homophobia in the American military is nothing new, but the abuse of homosexual sex as a military tactic achieves a new level of perverse ingenuity. Confronted with the use of their sexuality as the ultimate tool of degradation, gay men now have another reason to fight against the reelection of George Bush. We should be at the forefront of outraged protests against these war crimes as we will ultimately pay the price for our sexuality being further stigmatized.⁴⁸

In this passage, Moore conflates same-sex consensual sex acts with the simulation of those acts within the context of brutal torture, and he does so in a way that makes it clear that he identifies personally with those simulated acts, as if those acts were identical to the acts he himself may engage in within the privacy of his own home with a male partner. As Moore puts it, “we,” by which I imagine he means gay men, “will ultimately pay the price for our sexuality being further stigmatized.”

But what is the difference, I wonder, between Moore’s willful collapsing of the distinction between gay men and Iraqi prisoners and that of Ruth White, the Christian fundamentalist I quoted earlier? For starters, in White’s case she collapses the two in order to condemn them both, while in Moore’s he does so in order to defend one by condemning the other—that is, he defends gay male identities and desires by condemning the U.S. military’s homophobic use of those identities and desires for the sake of torture and dubious national interest. For Moore, collapsing the two proves enabling, as it mobilizes his critique against U.S. imperialism: “We,” he says, again meaning gay men, “should be at the forefront of outraged protests against these war crimes.” By taking this stance, however, Moore still does not manage to escape drawing a conceptual link between consensual gay male sex practices and the practice of torture. His logic elides the specifically violent and ideological nature of those simulations, thereby suggesting that the two identities and acts—gay men and Iraqi prisoners, same-sex sex acts and simulations of same-sex sex acts—are the same, and therefore interchangeable.

But how are they the same? To insist upon this sameness uncritically, even if that insistence enables critical speech and provokes outrage is not only to misinterpret the historical practice of torture itself, and the reasons marshaled for it, but it is also to place at the center of one’s analysis a single defining feature of that brutal practice in a way that reveals itself to be primarily self-interested, and only secondarily interested in broader matters of human rights and social justice. More importantly, doing so by raging at what one takes to be a recognizable, and hence familiar, form of homophobia fundamentally masks all the other features that may be just as relevant for the sake of privileging merely one.

But, as Jasbir Puar writes in a 2004 article exploring the Abu Ghraib controversy, “The reaction of rage misses the point: this violence is neither an exception to nor a simple extension of the violence of an imperialist occupation. Rather, the focus on purported homosexual acts obscures other forms of gendered violence and serves a broader racist and sexist, as well as homophobic, agenda.”⁴⁹ Puar makes the salient point that Moore, as well as other white gay male

commentators like him who have latched onto the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal because of the “‘deep sense of shame as a gay man’” the images invoke within him (the quote is Moore’s), “in particular sets up the (white) gay male subject as the paradigmatic victim of assaulting images.”⁵⁰ Puar goes on to ask:

Is it really prudent to foreclose the chance that there might be a gay man or lesbian among the perpetrators of the torture at Abu Ghraib? To foreground homophobia over other vectors of shame is to miss that these photos are not merely representative of the homophobia of the military; they are also racist, misogynist, and imperialist. To favor the gay male spectator—here presumably white—is to negate the intersectional audience implicated as viewers of these images and, oddly, to privilege as victim the coherently formed white gay male sexuality in the West over “closeted” and acts-qualified bodies, not to mention the bodies of tortured Iraqi prisoners themselves.⁵¹

As with Ross’s earlier point about the inadequacy of the closet paradigm, Puar’s point is well taken. Notwithstanding the fact that lesbians and gay male American soldiers might have also been among the perpetrators of the sexual abuse of Iraqi prisoners, what if some Iraqi prisoners of war at Abu Ghraib were themselves homosexual? If so, it should be quite apparent to anyone paying even the slightest bit of attention that U.S. military forces would not have targeted these men because of this fact; rather, they would have targeted these foreign nationals first and foremost because they were Iraqi citizens, and therefore viewed, whether they were or not, as potential threats to our country’s security. And while it may be useful at times to acknowledge that being a homosexual and being a foreign national from the Middle East are sometimes deployed by our fellow citizens in ways that seem to flaunt all human logic, as the preceding examples illustrate, we must nonetheless struggle to always keep in mind that such deployments are rarely, if ever, in fact grounded in truth. Far from it. This is because, as Puar puts it, “Calling the simulated and actual sex scenes [at Abu Ghraib] replicative of ‘gay sex’ is an easy way for all-mass media, Orientalist anthropologists, the military establishment, LGBT groups and organizations—to sidestep an acknowledgment of both ‘perverse’ proclivities in heterosexual sex and of the gender normativity immanent in some kinds of gay sex” as well.⁵² In other words, “straight” sex sometimes too gets implicated in contemporary media scandals—as in the various military rape controversies that marked the 1980s and 1990s more generally—but we seldom see heterosexuals becoming enraged because “their sexuality” is being defiled by these acts. Why, then, should contemporary white gay men feel so attacked?

This returns me to *Ring of Fire*, and to the filmmakers’ decision to have Emile Griffith repeat the following statement at least twice in

the documentary: “He [Paret] called me a *maricón*, and I wasn’t nobody’s faggot.” I find myself wondering now, is it possible that something more was at stake between the two foreign-born black men (one Latin American, the other West Indian) than simply Paret’s trying to say, rather simplistically, that Griffith was a homosexual—in other words, that he was a man who willingly had sex with other men, or was he trying to say something much different? Was the fact that Paret called Griffith a “*maricón*” supposed to be taken by Griffith as a comment about the former’s gender, or was it to be taken as a comment about his sexuality? Both or neither? After all, is it a matter of public record that the U.S. military was attempting to say that male Iraqi prisoners of war were homosexuals by the specific forms of sexual torture they devised to humiliate and “break” these men, or were they simply trying to let these men, these “enemies of the state,” know who wielded the power?

Always alert to the challenges of translation, Marlon Ross reminds us that “we are dealing here with the phantom of language, with the way that language seems to make the felt swelter of realities seem both shadowy and fixed.” What this means in terms of the Abu Ghraib scandal is that “in addition to the violating deficiencies of linguistic representation, we are also dealing . . . with the embeddedness of ideological formations in which race [or differences between men and nations] can be made manifest only through sexualized characteristics and behaviors.”⁵³ In his essay “Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities,” Roberto Strongman touches on this point when he argues that there is no necessary correspondence between U.S. conceptualizations of same-sex identities and desires and those in Latin American contexts. As Strongman puts it, “The Latin American homosexual categories that find a niche” in such cultures through the use of terms like “*maricónes*, *makomè*, *bichas*, and *ekedes* . . . do not fit into the U.S.-fabricated gay and lesbian categories. These forms of homosexuality are different from each other and from those forms of homosexuality found in the United States because they have developed within specific regional contexts.”⁵⁴

Indeed, one of the greatest distinctions between the two, for Strongman, is that whereas U.S.-derived understandings of same-sex identity and desire rely on a binary notion of secrecy/revelation, in which the image of the closet can be said to predominate, for many Latin Americans “the performance of desire is a much more defining moment than the declaration; the act is more important than the speech act.”⁵⁵ Since it is not known whether Paret actually saw Griffith engaged in same-sex sexuality with another man—saw him performing such desire, that is—it is difficult to know if what he meant by calling Griffith a “*maricón*” was what other people have

taken him to mean, or if he meant something else entirely. Might Paret just have been “trashing talking,” that is, telling Griffith that he was going to kick Griffith’s ass because he, Paret, was the better fighter—in other words, that he was more masculine?

As this essay has been gesturing toward all along, it becomes imperative that we not conflate questions analytically related to negotiations of gender with those having to do with sexual identity and practice, since doing so unnecessarily entangles human categories in ways that promote continual misreading rather than clarity. No where is such vigilance more crucial than in sincere efforts at understanding what Fanon called the “lived experience” of people of color in a white-dominated society.⁵⁶

This last point might be said to be corroborated in an essay black American writer James Baldwin wrote near the end of his life, in 1985, in which he weighed in on the complex matter of culture, gender, sexuality, language, and historicity with the following insight: “The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls.”⁵⁷ It seems to me that Baldwin’s words might serve as a kind of warning to contemporary white lesbians and gay men who tend to overidentify with the various labels, whether pejorative or otherwise, the dominant culture has devised in order to keep the various hierarchies undisturbed and firmly in place, and their own dominance unchallenged and secure. After all, if it is true that Emile Griffith is a man who prefers male sex partners to those who are female—and I for one do not know if he is or not—the fact that he angrily exclaims, “I ain’t no faggot!” in the film is a clear indication that he does not identify with terms meant to degrade his character. And this is the case whether, for Paret the term *maricón* meant that Griffith was a poor boxer or that he had disgusting sex with men. Either term, once translated into its pejorative meaning on the part of the person who utters it—in this case, Benny “Kid” Paret—“may seem to define you for others,” as Baldwin well knew, and said as much, “but it does not have the power to define you to yourself.”⁵⁸ This is a lesson we should all be so lucky to learn. It is certainly a lesson that Emile Griffith took to heart, but unfortunately no one seemed to be listening to him, even though he was the one speaking.⁵⁹

Notes

1. Hiram Perez, “You Can Have My Brown Body and Eat It, Too!” *Social Text* 84–85 (Fall–Winter 2005): 178.

2. Jasbir K. Puar, "Queer Times, Queer Assemblages," *Social Text* 84–85 (Fall-Winter 2005): 125.
3. "Gary Smith, 'The Shadow Boxer,'" *Sports Illustrated*, April 18, 2005.
4. According to Marlon Ross, "In what academics call 'queer theory,' the closet has become ground zero in the project of articulating an 'epistemology' of sexuality. Beyond political strategy and polemical tactics, the closet has become a philosophical concept grounding both lesbian-gay history and queer theory by joining them at the hips as a legitimate academic discipline. Significantly, historians and theorists of queerness stake their claims to academic centrality largely through the concept of the closet, as they argue with great rigor and sophistication that the binary between closeted and uncloseted sexual desire is a primary determinant of modernity and modernism." See Ross's essay "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm," in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 161.
5. *Ibid.*, 162.
6. *Ibid.*
7. I use the term *Afro-Caribbean* in the way that Linwood Lewis and Robert Kertzner do in their essay "Toward Improved Interpretation and Theory Building of African American Male Sexualities," *Journal of Sex Research* (November 2003): 383–395. Lewis and Kertzner believe that it is important to distinguish between diverse ethnic groups of African descent to avoid "incorrect assumptions of homogeneity in behavior" by scholars who analyze the experiences of ethnic minority populations. The authors use the term *African Americans* to denote those blacks who were "involuntary immigrants" to the United States through enforced servitude and the term *Afro-Caribbean* to denote those blacks who were "involuntary immigrants to their own country but who have immigrated to the U.S. voluntarily" (384).
8. Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 149 n. 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 3–4.
10. *Ibid.*, 4. See also Kara Keeling on the inside/outside status of black lesbian and gay subjects. In an essay on black lesbian cinema, Keeling writes that lesbian and gay cultural production and scholarship "demonstrate that the category 'black lesbian and gay' is wholly inside the construction of both 'blackness' and 'lesbian and gay.' But, it also is part of what needs to be expunged vigilantly and repeatedly from 'black' and from 'gay' and 'lesbian' in order to render each category artificially coherent and discrete. Yet, any separation of 'black lesbian and gay' into two categories ('black' and 'lesbian and/or gay') presumed to be autonomous can be effected only violently." Keeling, "'Joining the Lesbians': Cinematic Regimes of Black Lesbian Visibility," in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 216–217.
11. Scott Bravmann, *Queer Fictions of the Past: History, Culture, and Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 98.
12. Julio Ortega, "Transatlantic Translations," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 118, no. 1 (January 2003): 26.
13. Joshua Gamson, "The Organizational Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York," *Sociological Forum* 11, no. 2 (1996): 238; original emphasis.
14. *Ibid.*, 246.
15. *Ibid.*, 255–256.
16. Bravmann, *Queer Fictions*, 99–100. The compound neologism "queer heterosociality" represents Bravmann's playful effort to capture the wide diversity that makes up many lesbian and gay male communities, including differences in class, race, ethnicity, and even sexual practices, among others. The prefix "hetero," in this instance, which means "different" or "other," is not reducible to the sexual. For a closer look at how white gay communities have participated in "othering" black gay men in particular, see Charles Nero's "Why Are the Gay Ghettos White?" in Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*, 228–245.
17. This phrase belongs to Marlon Ross, who analyzes how people of color often function as stable, analogous bodies in some (white) queer theoretical writings designed to make visible homosexual oppression. Ross does not theorize whiteness as itself a racial formation. See "Beyond the Closet," 165.
18. Jeffrey Weeks, preface to Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, trans. Danielle Dangoor (London: Allison & Busby, 1993), 22.
19. Ross, "Beyond the Closet," 162.
20. See Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), especially chapter 5, "The Fact of Blackness." Here Fanon writes: "I was responsible at the same time for my body, for my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all else, above all: 'Sho' good eatin'" (112).
21. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 3.

22. Lewis R. Gordon, *Her Majesty's Other Children: Sketches of Racism from a Neocolonial Age* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 37.

23. *Ibid.*

24. *Ibid.*; emphasis added.

25. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 4. The volume is ultimately focused on advancing what its author calls a “postnationalist” critique within American studies, one that would take seriously the political insights of women of color and queers of color without encouraging “the idealization” of either of these subjects or their contributing knowledge. Turning to Louis Althusser’s engagement with Marxist thought, Ferguson, like Althusser, rejects categories of the abstract in favor of postulating concrete, lived experiences in theoretical formulations. “Althusser argues that as Marx turned to ‘real man,’ Marx turned to society. The category of ‘real man’ then became the impetus for historical materialism’s investigation of social formations. Althusser goes on to argue that substituting abstract man with real man results in the eventual dismissal of the category ‘man’ entirely.” Such a critical move would usefully pave the way for valuing the insights of such now-marginalized knowledge producers as women of color and queer people of color without necessarily privileging “identity” per se. Writes Ferguson, “Making queer of color and the woman of color [*sic*] subjects the basis of critical inquiry means that we must imbue them with gestural rather than emulative functions. As subjects of knowledge, they point away from themselves and to the racialized, gendered, classed, and eroticized heterogeneity of the social, summoning critical practices appropriate for that heterogeneity” (143).

26. Ross, “Beyond the Closet,” 166; original emphasis.

27. *Ibid.*, 167.

28. *Ibid.*, 180.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. As Ross’s commentary points out, it is entirely possible that Griffith himself did not experience any type of “existential” angst over his sexuality in the way we in the sexually repressed West have come to expect. For Griffith, perhaps those individuals who “needed to know” about his sexuality—his mother, his brother, and so on—presumably already knew, and so no one else simply mattered to him. What this insight suggests, of course, is that it is the filmmakers, its distributors, as well as its various audiences, who exhibit this anxiety about pinning down sexual “truths” about other people. As such, perhaps we are the ones driven to construct elaborate narratives around someone like Griffith, all of which are designed to expose a subjective anxiety that, in Griffith’s case, is in fact never really there at all; rather, it has been imposed from without, to satisfy a need that has nothing to do with Griffith himself. Taking up this critical stance allows me to argue that Griffith’s behavior in the documentary itself, as constructed and framed by the filmmakers, interpellates the viewer in such a way as to compel our suspicion that Griffith is not being truthful about his sexuality—and this is the case whether Griffith is *actually* being truthful or not. I want to thank the editors for suggesting this reading to me.

32. Timothy S. Chin, “‘Bullers’ and ‘Battymen’: Contesting Homophobia in Black Popular Culture and Contemporary Caribbean Literature,” *Callaloo* 20, no. 1 (1997): 129–130.

33. *Ibid.*, 138; emphasis added.

34. Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto, “The Sweetest Taboo: Studies of Caribbean Sexualities—A Review Essay,” *Signs: Journal of Woman in Culture and Society* 32, no. 1 (2006): 247.

35. See Isaac Julian’s documentary *The Darker Side of Black* (1994) and Rikki Beadle Blair’s stage play *Bashment* (2005). Both works explore dancehall reggae music and its reputation for homophobic lyrics, which are believed by many to fuel anti-antigay violence in Britain and the Caribbean.

36. See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Ann du Cille’s “‘Othered’ Matters: Reconceptualizing Dominance and Difference in the History of Sexuality in America,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 1, no. 1 (1990): 102–103; and Jackie Goldsby, “What It Means to Be Colored Me,” *Out/Look* (Summer 1990): 8–17.

37. Linwood Lewis and Robert Kertzner, “Toward Improved Interpretation and Theory Building of African American Male Sexualities,” *Journal of Sex Research* (November 2003): 385.

38. *Ibid.*, 388.

39. *Ibid.*, 389.

40. Deborah Cameron and Don Kulick, *Language and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2.

41. Marlon Ross, “Race, Rape, Castration: Feminist Theories of Sexual Violence and Masculine Strategies of Black Protest,” in *Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 306.

42. *Ibid.*

43. See Michael Awkward, *Negotiating Difference: Race, Gender, and the Politics of Positionality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), and Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).

44. Ross, "Race, Rape, Castration," 306.

45. *Ibid.*, 306–307.

46. *Ibid.*, 317–318.

47. Steve A. White and Ruth B. White, *Life Through the Eyes of an Interracial Couple: And Their Dreams of a Colorblind America* (Bloomington: Authorhouse Publishers, 2004), 586. While the couple often alternates narration, this particular homophobic passage is narrated by Ruth White alone.

48. Patrick Moore, "Weapons of Mass Homophobia," *The Advocate*, June 8, 2004; emphasis added.

49. Jasbir K. Puar, "Abu Ghraib: Arguing Against Exceptionalism," *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 523; emphasis added.

50. In addition to Moore, Puar also cites two other gay male commentators who adopt a similar stance with respect to the scandal, including the Arab-American gay journalist Mubarak Dahir and Aaron Belkin.

51. Puar, "Abu Ghraib," 529.

52. *Ibid.*, 530.

53. Ross, "Race, Rape, Castration," 308.

54. Roberto Strongman, "Syncretic Religion and Dissident Sexualities," in *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism*, ed. Arnaldo Cruz-Malave and Martin F. Manalansan IV (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 187.

55. *Ibid.*, 181.

56. See note 20.

57. James Baldwin, *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 819; emphasis added.

58. *Ibid.*

59. While completing this essay I learned that a biopic of Griffith's life has been planned by a major film studio that will purportedly grapple more thoroughly with the boxer's sexual identity. I also learned that Griffith is allegedly a longstanding charter member of the Stonewall Veterans' Association, a social and political outreach organization for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender (GLBT) individuals and their supporters. The group was founded in New York City in 1969, following the historic Stonewall rebellion. For more information on this group and on Griffith's involvement, including photographs, visit its Web site (www.Stonewallvets.org/EmileGriffith.htm). As of this writing it is not clear why the filmmakers of *Ring of Fire* did not include reference to Griffith's participation in this group in their documentary.