

## Black History Month Celebrating the Perspectives of People of African Descent Reading and Discussion

### ***One More River to Cross: Black & Gay in America*** by Keith Boykin (1996)

*Boykin, a twentieth/twenty-first century Black gay man, writes poignantly about the experiences of being both Black and gay in the United States and about the intersections between the two. Here he reminds us that prejudice comes from the same root source, regardless of how it manifests itself over the centuries. Because of this, it is critical that we, as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered people and our allies of all colors, explore Black history and honor ourselves and others who are on this path to freedom.*

Traveling in a direct path from Cairo, Egypt, at the northern end of Africa, a thousand miles south to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, it is possible to cross the Nile River four times. The river then snakes along various paths into Ethiopia and Uganda, stretching out for another three thousand miles from Khartoum. To some, these may seem to be many different rivers. Instead, they are all part of the same waterway, the world's longest river– the Nile.

Traveling through human history from the earliest tribal and ethnic warfare to the present, it is possible to cross a river many times. From the ethnocentrism of nationalism to the Anti-Semitism of the Inquisition to the racism of American slavery, the river breaks off into the tributaries of sexism, xenophobia, and homophobia. Some imagine these currents to be separate bodies of water, but they are all the same. They are all a part of the river called prejudice. Like the Nile, it is deceptive, taking on many different shapes, and it naturally appears different at various places along its vast expanse. At some points it is deep and wide and forbidding, while at other points it is not as intimidating. But all of us, black and white, straight and gay, must cross this river to survive.

#### **Questions for Discussion:**

- ❖ Where do you see similarities between racism and homophobia? How do we know that they are related to one another?
- ❖ Name some groups or people who act in both racist and homophobic ways.
- ❖ What forms do you see prejudice taking in your life?
- ❖ How do you think GLBT people can best combat racism?
- ❖ What actions are you taking, or could you take, to counter prejudice in our world?

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### Excerpt from "An Address to the Slaves of the United States America" by Henry Highland Garnet

*Garnet was a nineteenth century Presbyterian minister in New York and a black abolitionist. He advocated a commitment to freedom as the duty of Christians and called on slaves to resist by all means possible in order to bring about liberation. This address to slaves was delivered before an abolitionist audience and was a daring and compelling part of the abolition movement.*

"Two hundred and twenty-seven years ago the first of our injured race were brought to the shores of America. They came not with glad spirits to select their homes in the New World. They come not with their own consent, to find an unmolested enjoyment of the blessings of this fruitful soil. The first dealings they had with [people] calling themselves Christians exhibited to them the worse features of corrupt and sordid hearts: and convinced them that no cruelty is too great, no villainy and no robbery too abhorrent for even [the] enlightened ... to perform, when influenced by avarice and lust. Neither did they come flying upon the wings of Liberty to a land of freedom. But they came with broken hearts, from their beloved native land, and were doomed to unrequited toil and deep degradation. Nor did the evil of their bondage end at their emancipation by death. Succeeding generations inherited their chains, and millions have come from eternity into time, and have returned again to the world of spirits, cursed and ruined by American slavery . . .

To such degradation it is sinful in the extreme for you to make voluntary submission . . . . The diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, NEITHER GOD NOR ANGELS, OR JUST [PERSONS], COMMAND YOU TO SUFFER FOR A SINGLE MOMENT. THEREFORE IT IS YOUR SOLEMN AND IMPERATIVE DUTY TO USE EVERY MEANS, BOTH MORAL, INTELLECTUAL, AND PHYSICAL, THAT PROMISES SUCCESS."

### Questions for Discussion:

- 🌀 Is it a sin to submit to injustice?
- 🌀 Do you agree with Garnett that it is a moral and religious imperative to resist oppression? Why do you feel the way you do?
- 🌀 Are there limits to the acceptable tactics that a Christian can use to combat oppression? What, if any, are those limits? How do you know what the limits, if any, are?
- 🌀 If you had lived in the 19th century, what points would you have made in a sermon about slavery?

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from **Voice of Missions** (quoted in *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*,  
Gayraud Wilmore)

by **Bishop Henry M. Turner**

Turner, a nineteenth century leader in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, preached that the religion of African-Americans was, at its heart, a protest against a white church that failed to uphold the principles of the Christian faith. He sought opportunities for people to return to Africa and spoke publicly about the color of God and the theological implications of that:

Every race of people since time began who have attempted to describe their God by words, or by paintings, or by carvings, or by any other form or figure have conveyed the idea that the God who made them and shaped their destinies was symbolized in themselves, and why should not the Negro believe that [s/]he resembles God as much so as other people? . . . Yet we are no stickler as to God's color anyway, but if [God] has any we would prefer to believe that it is nearer symbolized in the blue sky above us and the blue water of the seas and oceans . . .

### Questions for Discussion:

- ⦿ How were you taught to image God as a child? What color was God? Do you view God differently now?
- ⦿ How does your image of God, particularly of God's color, impact how you see God?
- ⦿ What is the connection between our image of God and how we understand ourselves and other people?
- ⦿ How do you see yourself reflected in your image of God? How is this related to your identity?

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**Harriet Tubman**, from **Black Women in Nineteenth Century American Life: Their Words, Their Thoughts, Their Feelings**, by Bert Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin, eds.

*Tubman is well known for her work as a part of the underground railroad, guiding blacks to freedom in the North. She herself escaped to freedom, leaving behind her husband and family. This is her reflection on the experience:*

I looked at my hands, to see if I was the same person now I was free. There was such a glory over everything, the sun came like gold through the trees, and over the fields, and I felt like I was in heaven.

I had crossed the line of which I had so long been dreaming. I was free; but there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land, and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter, with the old folks, and my brothers and sisters. But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also; I would bring them all there. Oh, how I prayed then, lying all alone on the cold, damp grounds; "Oh, dear Lord," I said, "I ain't got no friend but you. Come to my help, Lord, for I'm in trouble."

### Questions for Discussion:

- ⦿ What does your dream of freedom look like? What will the land of freedom be like for you?
- ⦿ Harriet Tubman describes her home as with those still enslaved ... freedom is not yet home for her. Can you think of any parallels in your own life or in the lives of others?
- ⦿ What help do you think the Lord gave to her? How might she have experienced that help?
- ⦿ Do we, as Christians, have a responsibility to seek freedom for ourselves?
- ⦿ Do we, as Christians, have a responsibility to bring others to freedom?

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