

Black Trans Flourishing as a Sign (Semeia) of the Future: Revelation 12

Journal for the Study of
the New Testament
2025, Vol. 48(2) 372–381

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DOI: 10.1177/0142064X251390585

journals.sagepub.com/home/jnt



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Abstract

This paper scripturalizes Revelation 12 through an Africana queer lens to advance the survival and flourishing of Black and brown people of transgender experience. The woman is read as a transcestor of trans women and gender non-conforming people from William Dorsey, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Pepper LaBeija, and RuPaul to signify a community screaming for survival, freedom, and flourishing. This approach brings Black Transgender Studies into conversation with the topic of Gender and the study of Revelation.

Keywords

Gender, queer hermeneutics, Revelation, sexuality, transgender studies

In accordance with the spirit of Sankofa, where one of its meanings is ‘it is not taboo to fetch that which is at risk of being left behind’,¹ I’d like to invoke the memory and brilliance of Dr. Lynne St. Clair Darden into this discussion. Her friendship and mentorship made it possible for me to pursue biblical studies beyond seminary, and I miss her very much. Our discussion of the future of gender studies in the book of Revelation at the 2024 annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature happened between Transgender Day of Remembrance (November 20) and World AIDS Day (December 1). Therefore, I wanted to invoke the memory of queer ancestors and transcestors, especially those of

1. <https://www.berea.edu/centers/carter-g-woodson-center-for-interracial-education/the-power-of-sankofa#:~:text=Sankofa%20is%20an%20African%20word,risk%20of%20being%20left%20behind.%E2%80%9D>.

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African descent, who are part of my great cloud of witnesses.² It is on their behalf that I propose a Black Trans reading of Rev. 12 as a sign (or *semeia*) of Black and brown transgender futures where we not only survive, but we also thrive. Lynne Darden would challenge us to find ways to thrive that do not reinscribe the imperial evils that got us here in the first place. Let us find interventions that are not almost the same but not quite like the hegemony, homophobia, and hypocrisy that make gender-queer-trans necropolitics into ‘regimes of the normal’ (Warner 1993: xxvi).

When I consider what I hope the future of gender studies in the book of Revelation might be, my desire is to bear witness to the existential realities of Black and brown queer folk specifically where ‘brown’ is in solidarity with Afrolatinidad, as we read the first-century text and experience its manifestations in the twenty-first century. That is to construct praxes of liberation to insist that Black Trans Lives matter. To this end, I introduced an Africana Queer interpretive approach to Revelation, considering the possibility of futures outside of heteronormative interpretations of the New Jerusalem specifically, and the book of Revelation in general (Thomas 2017). I invite us to continue to read *darkly and queerly*, which is almost always to say *apocalyptically*, for a freedom and flourishing that, like queerness, is not yet here (Muñoz 2009: 21). Vincent Wimbush (2000: 21) told us that

anyone can read darkness. Darkness is here to be equated neither with a simple negative nor with any one people or class. It is a particular orientation, a sensibility, a way of being in and seeing the world. It is viewing and experiencing the world in emergency mode, as through the individual and collective experience of trauma.

For some of us, there is no mode in which to live that is not already emergency mode. Reading Revelation through our multiple lived experiences demonstrates the complexity of our ongoing task, especially considering what has been and is being revealed to us as we live through the deaths of George Floyd and other Black lives lost, the COVID-19 pandemic, the earthquakes, hurricanes, wildfires, and floods that have decimated our land, mass shootings, and the criminalization of the undocumented, unhoused, and the mentally vulnerable, among the many socio-political challenges of the current time.

A report released by Forbes on November 16, 2024, indicated that globally, more than 350 people of transgender experience had been murdered in 2024 (Wareham 2024). It said that

2. Reay (2006: 149) defines *transcestor* as ‘an elision of trans and ancestor to signify those transgender characters and people who provide a history and prove that we have always been here’.

One in four of those murdered were aged between 19 and 25. There were also 15 recorded murders of trans youth under the age of 18, representing 6% of those killed.... The majority of the murders were committed in Latin America and the Caribbean. For the 17th consecutive year, Brazil has seen the highest number of murders, accounting for 3 in ten (30%) cases. Nine cases were recorded in Africa for this monitoring period, more than double the previous highest annual total since the project began. Notably, there were also rises in the U.S., while there was a decrease in Europe. As in previous years, the report found that most victims were Black and migrant trans women of color, and trans sex workers. Nine in ten (93%) of the reported murders were of Black or brown trans people, a 14% increase from last year.³

The Human Rights Campaign Foundation (2024) listed 32 transgender or gender non-conforming people who were murdered in the U.S. in 2024. In this number, 78% of the victims were people of color; 56% of them were Black transgender women; 63% were killed with a gun; 42% of victims with a known killer were killed by romantic/sexual partner, friend, or family member; and 38% were misgendered or dead-named by authorities and/or the press. Appropriating Rev. 14.13, we pray that they will rest from the labor of being the collateral damage of the LGBT liberation movement, and that our academic and activist works will follow them.

As I cultivate an intervention that is becoming queer of color biblical criticism, I invite the Black queer transgender and gender non-conforming flesh and blood reader to be willing to tell what activist/poet Essex Hemphill called the ‘ass-splitting truth(s)’ concerning what biblical texts reveal about our relationships with the divine, our communities of origin, and our communities of choice.⁴ The racial ethnic queer subject must hold these challenges in tension and live into their resolution in ways that move the community towards self-determined embodiments of agency, dignity, intrinsic value, and to engage in unapologetic pursuits of desire, and flourishing.

In her 2015 book *Scripturalizing Revelation: An African American Postcolonial Reading of Empire*, Lynne Darden summarizes *scripturalization* as a process through which marginalized communities, especially African Americans,

3. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jamiewareham/2024/11/16/350-transgender-people-murdered-in-2024-will-the-violence-ever-end/>.

4. Hemphill 1992: 64: ‘The Black homosexual is hard pressed to gain audience among his heterosexual brothers; even if he is more talented, he is inhibited by his silence or his admissions. This is what the race has depended on in being able to erase homosexuality from our recorded history. The “chosen” history. But the sacred constructions of silence are futile exercises in denial. We will not go away with our issues of sexuality. We are coming home. It is not enough to tell us that one was a brilliant poet, scientist, educator, or rebel. Whom did he love? It makes a difference. I can’t become a whole man simply on what is fed to me: watered-down versions of Black life in America. I need the ass-splitting truth to be told, so I will have something pure to emulate, a reason to remain loyal’.

reinterpret biblical texts in ways that connect sacred narratives to their unique historical and social struggles. Scripturalization serves as a transformative interpretative method, allowing communities to reclaim scriptural stories and symbols, shaping them to reflect their lived realities, communal memory, and resistance against systemic oppression.⁵ We see examples of African American and Caribbean scripturalization in the Negro spirituals (e.g., ‘Ride on King Jesus’) and Bob Marley’s song ‘Babylon’.

I argue that we can engage an Africana Queer scripturalization of Revelation through queer of color critique by viewing the woman in chapter 12 as a sign (or *semeia*) of Black Trans futures and flourishing. I offer this as a contrapuntal signification to other racial-ethnic interpretations, including the Our Lady of Guadalupe traditions, not to criticize or displace, but to add another example of imagining otherwise. Reading darkly and queerly, ‘a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars’ (Rev. 12.1) is a drag queen!⁶ And she is not just any drag queen, but when read through this lens she is the ancient construction of the ‘grand prize’ category in the Black and brown house/ballroom scene.⁷ We can read this celestial grand prize as recalling the elaborate garments worn by the famous House Mothers Avis Pendavis, Dorian Corey, Angie Xtravaganza, or Pepper LaBeija. RuPaul might say, ‘The category is, Femme Queen Apocalyptic Extravaganza’ in an episode of *Drag Race*.⁸ This world-making transgender performance of politics is captured by Jennie Livingston’s 1990 documentary film *Paris Is Burning*, in the FX television series *Pose* (2018–2021), and in the HBO Max reality competition series *Legendary* (2020–2022).

The original self-named Queen of Drag, William Dorsey Swann, was a formerly enslaved man born in Maryland in 1858. Swann hosted gatherings of cross-dressing queens in his home in the nineteenth-century to the shock of Washington, DC, authorities and the press (Shane 2023). Playwright, director, and producer Marjorie Morgan (n.d.) writes, ‘Swann was one of the early adopters of the old slave tradition of the Cake Walk dance, that was to become a regular performance routine when introduced in Paris, France in 1902, and still forms a part of the aesthetic and social structure of the drag scene today: often

5. See “African American Scripturalization: Signifyin(g) and Cultural Memory” in Darden 2015: 13–43. I had the privilege of being Lynne’s teaching assistant at the Interdenominational Theological Center as she was preparing her monograph for publication.
6. On other women in Revelation and drag, see Moore 2014; Emanuel 2020.
7. For the history of this scene, see, e.g., Brown 2001; Lawrence 2011; Bailey 2013; Criales-Unzueta 2023; Roberson 2025.
8. Grand prize in the house ballroom scene was usually the final category whose theme required an extravagant production, wardrobe, and props. The category was often a showcase for House Mothers, and its winner(s) received a trophy, cash, and the bragging rights of being an ultimate performer.

exhibited as voguing'. Swann's soirees are the predecessors to Harlem drag balls, and the House Mothers of the twentieth-century house/ballroom scene. He is among the transcestors screaming with loud voices from the earth over the past 200 years (cf. Rev. 21.3–4), to stop killing queer, non-binary, and transgender people!

As Jackie Hidalgo (2025) reminds us in her article in this issue, Rev. 12's woman is the *semeia* who screams, recalling the initiators of the Stonewall Riots, Marsha P. Johnson, Sylvia Rivera, and the many unnamed gender non-conforming siblings who said, 'Oh hell no!' to police brutality against the queer community. Pride was not a parade, it was a protest. In an interview with Latino Gay Men of New York in 2001, Sylvia Rivera (2007: 118–19) said,

Part of history forgets that as the cops are inside the bar, the confrontation started outside by throwing change at the police. We started with the pennies, the nickels, the quarters, and the dimes. 'Here's your payoff, you pigs! You [...]ing pigs! Get out of our faces.' This was started by the street queens of that era, which I was part of, Marsha P. Johnson, and many others that are not here.

Sylvia Rivera and her descendants have been 'screaming women' for a long time. Another example is the 'Y'all Better Quiet Down' speech at a New York Pride rally in 1973 in which Sylvia responded to the racism of the gay and lesbian community and its erasure of Black and brown transgender, gender non-conforming, and queer folk. Despite confrontation and heckling from the crowd that she shouldn't speak, she stood up and proclaimed,

I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the f[...]s wrong with you all? Think about that (Rivera 1973)!

The screaming woman of trans experience has been with us up to and including members of the Movement for Black Lives' present shouts to 'stop [...]ing killing trans women!'⁹ Through an Africana Queer lens, I argue that the dragon and the woman of Rev. 12 represent an eternal battle of hegemonic masculinity that is always in combat with women of cisgender and transgender experience.¹⁰ The collateral damage is experienced throughout the African diaspora in imperial laws and interpretations of the Bible that render sexual minorities including cis-women, non-binary, and transgender kin as abject bodies.¹¹ In the text, the

9. For the full policy platform, see <https://m4bl.org/policy-platforms/end-the-war-trans/> [Accessed 16 September 2025].

10. This is a Black queer interpretation of Yarbrow Collins 1976.

11. See Kristeva 1982; on abjection in Transgender Studies, see Phillips 2014.

child the woman gives birth to represents the one who will enact the salvation of the world by a rod of iron (Rev. 12.5). Reading darkly and queerly, taking care not to reinscribe the imperialism that occasions the book of Revelation, we might imagine the queerness, liberation, safety, and flourishing that are not yet here. Instead of a ‘messiah’ who will reinscribe the Roman Empire in its likeness, we might think of the woman giving birth to a liberation movement that is symbolized by the safety and flourishing of Black and brown trans women. It is both here and withheld from us (Rev. 12.6). The woman is given a temporary hiding place, prepared by God, where in the spirit of Dolores Williams, she joins with other sisters and siblings in the wilderness to conspire how Black, radical women of color, and trans feminisms might construct methodologies of the oppressed to help us save the world.¹²

We are living in the aftermath of a victory that was won in the cosmos, which causes the defeated ones to pursue us on the earth. The evil ancient deceiver of the inhabited world (*ho planōn tēn oikouménēn holēn*, Rev. 12.9) and its minions continue to terrorize the sexually marginalized offspring of Rev. 12’s woman screaming for justice (12.17). Its minions include those who strive to enact laws against people of trans experience, the healthcare industrial complex that denies gender-affirming and other kinds of care to trans people, as well as intimate partners and communities who attack and murder trans people. Not to be omitted or overlooked, Rev. 12.10–12 through a queer/trans-critical lens suggests that its minions also include earthly congregations that sing hymns of praise to a hegemonic, homophobic, misogynistic, trans-antagonistic deity, while turning their backs to and rejecting their children who are queer, non-binary, and trans.¹³ Carl Siciliano, founder and former executive director of the Ali Fourney Center, the nation’s largest housing program for homeless LGBT youth, shares that more than 10,000 young people have sought refuge from the Center since its opening in 2002. ‘Most [of the children seeking refuge] have suffered family rejection due to their sexual orientations or gender identities. When we ask them why their families couldn’t accept them, a staggering amount, about 90 percent, tell us they were rejected due to their parents’ religious beliefs’ (Siciliano 2024). Furthermore, he shares alarming stories including one about a transgender woman who arrived at a drop-in center battered and bruised, covered in welts on her back from being pummeled by a crucifix. She had three broken fingers from being smashed with a Bible. Another gay youth was told by his parents that “God is so disgusted with homosexuals that he vomits them out”. He’d lay awake at night terrified his religious parents would find out he was gay, wrestling nightly with suicidal thoughts’ (Siciliano 2024.). These are two of many thousand similar stories from the U.S.

12. Cf. Williams 1993 and Sandoval 2000.

13. For a broader history and its political and systemic implications, see Spade 2015; Stryker 2017.

and throughout the African diaspora. Covenant House, another New York-based homeless advocacy organization reports that, ‘Once homeless, LGBTQ+ youth face further challenges [including] discriminatory practices and policies when trying to access homeless youth services ... LGBTQ+ young people are more likely to be physically assaulted, to be forced to have sex, to engage in sex for basic needs, to harm themselves, and to face discrimination or stigma’ (Covenant House 2025).

Considering these horrific real-life situations, to imagine that women of trans experience would be given the wings of an eagle with which to escape the quotidian violence enacted upon them and that the earth would come to their rescue as the death-dealing forces of evil are defeated is to disidentify with heteronormative readings of Revelation. Freedom and safety are part of an otherwise imagination that is spectacular—as in, a portent in the sky, and livable lives on earth—at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race, class, and nationhood. In an Africana queer reading of Rev. 12.13–16, it can be possible for trans women to live in way in which they are protected from harm. The very earth and its human comrades can build the activism and mutual aid to build futures where trans freedoms and flourishing are possible. The woman of Rev. 12 is the *semeia* of that future. Through an Africana queer lens, scholarly considerations of crowds or communities like the members of the seven churches (Rev. 1–2), the souls under the altar (Rev. 6.9–11), the ones who have come through the great tribulation (Rev. 7.14) or other populations in which femme and transgender experience are hidden in the masculine plural, might be illuminated by the *semeia* of trans and femme flourishing furnished by a scripturalization of the screaming woman in Rev. 12. As Darden reminds us, ‘The task of the African American biblical scribe in the twenty-first century and beyond is to open the eyes of the community to the challenges and pitfalls involved in accommodating to a social, political, and economic system that is founded on social inequality, exploitation, and an unfair distribution of wealth’ (Darden 2015: 5). These brief remarks bear witness not only to the precarity of Black and brown queer, non-binary, and trans folk in the African diaspora under this Western/U.S. Empire. They also sharpen an apocalyptic vision wherein the ancient evil of hegemonic masculinity and its minions are vanquished. In that vision, we will wipe away every tear from our eyes; there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away (Rev. 21.4). We learn from our past in order to disrupt the present, to build alternative futures—even if our futures are outside of heteronormative Christian nationalist or neo-liberal notions of a New Jerusalem.

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