Whether from personal experience or film and television portrayals, most European Americans know that Sunday services in black Christian churches can be quite lively. Adorned with elegant and colorful garments, worshipers dance, clap, wave, shout, sigh, and sing. Choirs, accompanied by drums, brass, and keyboards, repeatedly build to emotional climax, carrying the people along with them. Pastors call out to the people, exhorting them to enthusiastic response. African American Christians celebrate, lament, pray, and praise the Lord with their bodies.

In contrast, in many white Christian churches, worshipers comport their conservatively attired bodies solemnly. Musicians, rarely swept away by feeling, virtually solo as the people sing in muted tones, if at all. People murmur responses sotto voce; pastors appear unconcerned with the quality of congregational participation. European American Christians carefully control their bodies in order to appear properly decorous before the Lord and one another.

On the surface, African American worship customs appear to indicate a level of comfort with the body that far exceeds that of most white Christian practices. Yet many of these churches—white and black alike—exhibit a tendency to fear and condemn sexual diversity. Homophobia and heterosexism are common among Christians, and black and white churches are at the forefront of the movement to block same-sex marriage. Among U.S. citizens, African Americans are particularly likely to oppose same-sex marriage, often citing Christian teachings as their reason. Such attitudes reveal a deep-seated aversion to certain kinds of bodies. But given the history of U.S. racism,
of white aversion to black bodies, should black Christians oppose homosexuality?

So far, African Americans have reached no consensus. Some see same-sex marriage as a civil rights issue for which black people should advocate; others, citing the Bible as hostile to same-sex relationships, take offense at the suggestion that because enslaved black people were forbidden to marry, and subsequently were forbidden to marry whites, they should now support same-sex marriage. Black religious scholars also disagree among themselves. In the late 1980s, toward the beginning of the development of womanist theology, Cheryl Sanders argued that Christian thinkers could not be womanists because same-sex relationships, which Alice Walker’s foundational definition of the term affirms, are contrary to the spirit of Christianity; she has been contradicted by Katie Cannon and Monica Coleman, among others. The dispute over homosexuality among black Christians constitutes a microcosm of the wider debate.

Some African American religious scholars argue that black opposition to homosexuality is an unfortunate byproduct of assimilation, trying to fit in with white culture. Black worship services may be lively, occurring as they do in a space somewhat protected from the white gaze. But in order for black denominations and churchgoers to be accepted as authentically Christian, the content of preaching largely conforms to the white mainstream. Arguing that black churches have uncritically adopted homophobia from white churches, womanist thinker Kelly Brown Douglas asserts that this is a matter not only of biblical interpretation but also of the theological development of Christianity. In her view, the primary culprit is the influence of Plato and the Greeks that led to “platonization,” the inscribing of dualism at the heart of Christianity. Douglas believes that extracting platonization from the black faith tradition and replacing it with a concept of “harmonious relationality” could eradicate black Christian homophobia.

How would this work? And should white Christians pursue a similar corrective for our faith tradition? To consider these questions, this chapter first outlines Douglas’s investigation of how Christianity became platonized, with special attention to the effect this has had on black bodies; second, it examines Douglas’s proposal to rectify this problem through an emphasis on harmonious relationality and a sexual discourse of resistance; third, it asks how white Christians should respond to this account. If, as Douglas argues, platonization has had a special affinity with the white faith tradition, can white Christianity be redeemed? What color is Christianity?