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The Politics of Homosexuality In the Twentieth Century Black Freedom Struggle

Glenda Elizabeth Sherouse
University of South Carolina

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The Politics of Homosexuality in the
Twentieth Century Black Freedom Struggle

by

Glenda Elizabeth Sherouse

Bachelor of Arts
Mercer University, 2006

Master of Arts
University of South Carolina, 2008

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Accepted by:

Patricia Sullivan, Major Professor

Kent Germany, Committee Member

Sarah Gardner, Committee Member

Lawrence Glickman, Committee Member

Lacy Ford, Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all of the queer men and women whose stories have yet to be heard, and to Joseph Beam and the countless other queer black men who lost their lives, friends, and loved ones to AIDS.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, thank you to my parents, for fostering my intellectual curiosity and academic ambition, and supporting me for the last thirty years. To my mentors, Sarah Gardner and Patricia Sullivan, I owe endless gratitude and many vodka tonics. To my best friend, Maris McEdward, thank you for last-minute proofreading and constant validation. To Rob Haulton, my partner, thank you for enduring all of my freak-outs, for being a curry god, for bringing basset hounds into my life, and for loving me. To my dogs, thank you for putting up with my aggressive cuddles and for always being so silly that I could never feel stressed out for too long.

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While I owe thanks to numerous archivists, Stephen Fullwood at the Schomburg Center deserves special mention for his extensive work in gathering and processing archives on the lives of queer African Americans, without which this project would not have been possible.

Abstract

This project examines the changing status and role of queer African Americans during the twentieth century in the context of increasing black politicization. Moreover, it traces the relationship between queer African Americans and their communities until the emergence of queer black identity politics in the 1970s. Specifically, this dissertation seeks to more fully illuminate both the experiences of queer African Americans and how their communities and leaders discussed and dealt with homosexuality in the broader context of black political mobilization from the Jim Crow era and the Harlem Renaissance, through the Black Power and early Gay Liberation movements, roughly the 1920s through the late 1970s. In their ongoing struggle for citizenship rights and social equality, African Americans faced political pressures that affected the ways in which they sought to present themselves to dominant white society, and these pressures influenced the ways that they dealt with the presence of homosexuality in black communities and political organizations. Ultimately, the need for racial solidarity both kept queer African Americans engaged in black communities and prevented any meaningful development of independent queer black identity politics until the 1970s.

This project also seeks to challenge contemporary popular notions about hyperhomophobia among African Americans. So many present-day discussions of “black homophobia” simplify a very complex issue to an alarming degree. Dialogue within the

white gay community that condemns African Americans for not unquestioningly supporting gay rights because of their own struggles for racial equality is problematic at best and racist at worst. Moreover, condemnations of the monolithic “black church” for its conservatism on gay rights issues seem to ignore the incidence of similar, if not more pervasive, attitudes within white churches, not to mention ignoring the variety of black religious institutions and belief systems. Finally, this project hopes to place queer African Americans at the center of their own stories rather than at the periphery of narratives of white gays and lesbians or heterosexual African Americans.

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Introduction

“The struggles of Black people are too perilous and too pervasive for us to dismiss one another, in such cursory fashion, because of perceived differences. [...] Aren’t all hearts and fists and minds needed in this struggle or will this faggot be tossed into the fire?”¹

– Joseph Beam

Joseph Beam, a gay black activist and writer, penned these words about black homophobia as he was dying of AIDS in the mid-1980s. His words reveal his longing for a racial solidarity among African Americans that overcame differences of sexuality, a solidarity that, this dissertation argues, existed in varying forms and to different degrees over the course of the twentieth century, but at least for Beam, seemed to have vanished by the end of the civil rights era and the onset of the AIDS epidemic.

This project examines the changing status and role of queer African Americans during the twentieth century in the context of increasing black politicization, southern to northern and rural to urban migration, generational shifts in black politics, and the dismantling of Jim Crow segregation. And moreover, it traces the relationship between queer African Americans and their communities through the emergence of queer black

¹ Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words From the Heart,” *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 285.

identity politics in the 1970s. Specifically, this dissertation seeks to more fully illuminate both the experiences of queer² African Americans and how their communities and leaders discussed and dealt with homosexuality in the broader context of black political mobilization from the Jim Crow era and the Harlem Renaissance, through the Black Power and early Gay Liberation movements, roughly the 1920s through the late 1970s. In their ongoing struggle for citizenship rights and social equality, African Americans faced political pressures that affected the ways in which they sought to present themselves to dominant white society—pressures to conform not only politically, but also in their personal lives, to white middle-class ideas about behavior, family, gender, and sexuality—and these pressures influenced the ways that they dealt with the presence of homosexuality in black communities and political organizations. Ultimately, the need for racial solidarity both kept queer African Americans engaged in black communities and prevented any meaningful development of independent queer black identity politics until the 1970s.

Queer African Americans were essential to their communities and to the black

² In a historical discussion of sexuality, terminology is often vague and politically charged. Terms such as “gay,” “lesbian,” “homosexual,” and “queer” have ambiguous meanings that have changed throughout the twentieth century and remain fluid. For the purposes of this dissertation, the words “homosexual,” “gay,” and “lesbian” will refer to men and women who self-identified as such or those who expressed an unambiguous orientation toward members of the same sex. “Bisexual,” likewise, will refer only to those who identified as such or who pursued sexual or romantic relationships with both sexes. “Transgender” refers to men and women who self-identify as the gender not typically associated with their birth sex, and does not include, for example, men who identify as gay and perform drag or occasionally dress as women. “Transsexual” refers to people who pursued hormonal therapies or surgical procedures to change themselves physically from the sex of their birth. “Queer” will be used as an inclusive term to refer to any person or group of people who engage in non-heterosexual romantic or sexual relationships, as well as those who do not identify with the gender associated with their biological sex, and those who actively identify with and participate in queer communities (in the cases where the nature of an individual’s same-gender relationships are ambiguous).

freedom struggle, and their lives and contributions cannot be fully understood without considering the ways in which their sexuality informed their daily experiences and their status within black communities and in the context of black racial politics. Just like queer white Americans,³ queer African Americans created spaces for themselves both outside of and within the heterosexual world. Because segregation, economic inequality, and the resulting need for racial solidarity in the black freedom struggle persisted throughout the twentieth century, queer African Americans often maintained closer ties to their families and communities than their white counterparts out of necessity. Same-sex desire and the existence of gay men, lesbians, transgender, and otherwise sexually nonconforming people were just as if not more visible within African American communities as they were within white communities. To varying degrees and in a variety of contexts, heterosexual black people of all backgrounds knew about, interacted with, read about, were concerned about, discussed, wrote, and spoke publicly about, maintained friendships with, and loved, trusted, and respected queer men and women. While some queer blacks sustained lifelong same-sex partnerships, others conformed to heterosexual marriage rather than risk losing social status; still others were able to keep their same-sex desires private.

This project also seeks to challenge contemporary popular notions about hyperhomophobia among African Americans by exploring how average African Americans talked about homosexuality. Many present-day discussions of “black

³ On the relationships between queer whites and their families and communities, see, for example, Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 73; and Race, Class, Gender, and the Changing Social Landscape of Washington’s Gay Communities, 1940-1955,” in *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, Brett Beemyn ed. New York: Routledge (1997).

homophobia” simplify a very complex issue to an alarming degree. Dialogue within the white gay community that condemns African Americans for not unquestioningly supporting gay rights because of their own struggles for racial equality is problematic at best and racist at worst. Moreover, condemnations of the monolithic “black church” for its conservatism on gay rights issues seem to ignore the incidence of similar, if not more pervasive, attitudes within white churches, not to mention ignoring the variety of black religious institutions and belief systems.

Finally, this project hopes to place queer African Americans at the center of their own stories rather than at the periphery of narratives of white gays and lesbians or heterosexual African Americans. As Beam argued in the mid-1980s, “There are many reasons for such Black gay invisibility. Hard words come to mind: power, racism, conspiracy, oppression, and privilege—each deserving a full-fledged discussion in gay history books yet unwritten.”⁴ Historians have only begun to answer Beam’s call and bring queer African Americans from the margins to the center of historical narratives, and thus this project engages the historiographical intersections between African American and GLBTQ (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer) history.

As the field of GLBTQ studies has grown in recent decades, scholars have begun to illuminate the histories of queer individuals and communities despite the dearth of sources that deal openly with subjects that remained taboo throughout much of the twentieth century. Early queer histories ranged from close studies of urban lesbian communities to political histories of the emergence of gay identity politics, but the vast

⁴ Beam, *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Washington: RedBone Press, 1986), xx.

majority of early queer history focused primarily on queer whites, predominately white gay men in urban areas.⁵ A handful of earlier studies by Martin Duberman, Allan Bérubé, and Jonathan Ned Katz included African Americans in broader histories of homosexuality in the United States, but none placed queer African Americans at the center of their stories.⁶

More recently, however, a few scholars have given more attention to queer African American history. The availability of primary sources for the Harlem Renaissance has made it a focus of several studies on queer black life. While Christa Schwarz focused exclusively on gay writers of the Harlem Renaissance, other scholars like Martin Summers have established the significant role of queer African Americans in shaping the era's literary and artistic movement.⁷ Although George Chauncey focused predominately on white gay men, his study provided unprecedented insight into Harlem's working-class queer culture.⁸

Before World War II, however, few queer African Americans aside from these Harlem Renaissance writers left accounts of their experiences as sexual minorities.

⁵ See, for example, Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of A Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁶ Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Plume Books, 1994); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010 [1990]).

⁷ Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003) and Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁸ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

While same-sex desire certainly existed in the Jim Crow South, the racial violence and oppression that characterized that period has left the historical record with very few examples of black homosexuality. From Leon Litwack's seminal study, *Trouble in Mind*, to oral history projects such as Duke University's "Behind the Veil," histories of the Jim Crow era are notably silent on the topic of sexuality. Given the lack of overlap in the historiographies of African Americans and LGBTQ Americans, it is likely that such concerns simply remained beyond the scope of concern by historians of the Jim Crow Era.

As queer African Americans became more visible during and after World War II, public and private discussions of homosexuality increased, and sources are thus more numerous. For the postwar and civil rights period, Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin have received significant attention from biographers,⁹ but they remain the only prominent black queer activists who have received such scholarly interest. Moreover, very few histories of the Civil Rights Movement address homosexuality, even in their discussions of Rustin, whose sexuality became a significant cause of concern for Martin Luther King, Jr. and other movement leaders.

While there are fewer studies on homosexuality in the South than on northern urban areas, they tend to be more racially inclusive. John Howard's study of gay male relationships in Mississippi from World War II to the 1980s includes numerous queer black subjects and discussions of interracial queer interactions, as do the essays in his

⁹ John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York: Free Press, 2003) and David Leeming, *James Baldwin: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

collection about the gay and lesbian South.¹⁰ James Sears also follows a few black narrators from the postwar and Stonewall-era South.¹¹

In one of the only secondary treatments of homosexuality in the context of the black freedom struggle, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” historian Thaddeus Russell explored the public discussion of black sexuality throughout the twentieth century, arguing that during the pre-Civil Rights period, and especially in northern cities during the Harlem Renaissance, working-class black culture was accepting and even celebratory of black homosexuality. During the Civil Rights Movement, however, black leaders identified such “sexual perversion” as an obstacle to achieving equal rights, and thus forced a discourse of heteronormativity onto ideals of black sexuality.¹² While Russell’s work offers rich insights into the public dialogue about black sexuality both among black leaders and within African American popular culture, he gives only passing attention to the political context of the Cold War, and his discussion of the movement itself offers little more than a superficial understanding of the working relationship between Bayard Rustin and Martin Luther King.

This dissertation thus represents a significant contribution to the understandings of both GLBTQ and African American history, and the ways in which they have informed

¹⁰ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Howard discusses the same-gender attractions of Mississippi NAACP president Aaron Henry. Also, John Howard, *Carryin’ On In the Gay and Lesbian South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

¹¹ James Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (New York: Basic Books, 1997) and James Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit, And Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001).

¹² Thaddeus Russell, “The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and Black Sexuality,” *American Quarterly* 2008 60(1): 101-128.

each other. By placing queer African Americans at the center of the narrative, my work traces the reasons for and nature of shifting ideas about homosexuality and the changing status of queer African Americans in their communities to an unprecedented extent. My work also represents a significant contribution to the nascent historiography of queer African Americans, a field that demands much more attention from scholars. While my project seeks to demonstrate the significance of queer African Americans to both the histories of gay liberation and the black freedom struggle, it first and foremost establishes the ongoing presence of both queer black people and a public discussion of homosexuality in black communities throughout the twentieth century.

In addition to mining secondary literature on both African American and GLBTQ history, this project makes extensive use of several large archival collections and black newspapers. The voluminous personal correspondence between black gay New York social worker Glenn Carrington and a variety of other queer black men from the 1920s through the 1960s, housed at the Schomburg Center in Harlem, provided a rare view of middle-class gay black life during the twentieth century. Activist Melvin Dixon's papers, also at the Schomburg Center, which included his personal journals from the late 1960s and 1970s offered significant insight into the intersections of black power and gay liberation. The African Ancestral Lesbians collection at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn was especially helpful in revealing the thoughts and lives of black lesbian activists, particularly during the black power and gay liberation eras, whose layered oppressions have often served to obscure their voices in the historical record. Although a handful of scholars have used these collections before, none has attempted, as this

dissertation does, to use them in constructing a broader narrative about twentieth century queer black life.

This dissertation also relies heavily on black newspapers, which constituted a space for black public dialogue about a variety of subjects, including sexuality, throughout the twentieth century. The more prominent of these papers, like the *Pittsburg Courier*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *New York Amsterdam News*, Baltimore's *Afro-American*, the *Atlanta Daily World*, and the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, reached black subscribers from the rural South to the urban North and West, and thus connected rural and urban African American communities across the country.

These papers not only provided African Americans with information about the latest scientific, medical, and criminal theories about homosexuality, but also featured commentary by prominent black political and religious leaders, and allowed readers—both queer and heterosexual—to shape national dialogues about sexuality by writing letters to the editor and advice columnists. These responses, one scholar has argued, “suggest that many African Americans used black papers as a public sphere to debate issues surrounding sexuality.”¹³ While some scholars have suggested that illiterate African Americans, whose numbers were greater in the South, were cut off from these newspapers and the dialogues they facilitated, recent scholarship has suggested otherwise. Neighbors and friends discussed stories, and literate family members read articles aloud to those who could not read, suggesting that the black press reached far

¹³ Kim T. Gallon, “Between Respectability and Modernity: Black Newspapers and Sexuality, 1925-1940,” Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2009, iv.

more African Americans than just those who were literate and held subscriptions.¹⁴ The black press, then, offers an important source on how African Americans, rural and urban, gay and straight, working-class and elite, and northern and southern, talked publicly about homosexuality.

My project begins with the Harlem Renaissance and Jim Crow period for several reasons. The Harlem Renaissance was a period not only of unprecedented black cultural and literary production, but also saw significant migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North, which brought about the beginnings of more organized black politics, ranging from the integrationist NAACP to the more nationalist Garveyism, aimed at uplifting the black race and challenging white racism. Moreover, the early twentieth century was a time during which ideas about homosexuality began to proliferate in medical literature and homosexuality began changing from individual acts to personal identity based on same-sex desire.¹⁵ In other words, this generation of queer African Americans was taking part both in racial politicization and nascent sexual identity formation during the 1920s and 30s.

¹⁴ In his history of the black press, Charles A. Simmons suggested that because of lower literacy rates and “harsh” living conditions in the South, southern blacks “were preoccupied with sustaining life and thus had little concern for other domestic or international affairs.” A more recent collection of essays on the black press suggests that African Americans read and discussed black newspapers in their families and communities, which meant that the papers’ contents reached more than simply literate subscribers. See Charles A. Simmons, *The African American Press: A History of News Coverage During National Crises, With Special Reference to Four Black Newspapers, 1827-1965* (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1998), 26, and Todd Vogel, *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 2.

¹⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*. Chauncey argued that a shift from homosexual acts to homosexual identities occurred over the course of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. In other words, during this period, gay men came to define themselves as homosexual or heterosexual based on their sexual desires as opposed to “normal” men who were masculine but may have had sex with men, and feminine “fairies.” (See pgs 13-14)

My first chapter examines homosexuality in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and other northern urban centers, and to a lesser extent because of the scarcity of source material, the Jim Crow South. In addition to exploring the early formation of urban queer black culture, this chapter pays particular attention to the early twentieth century project of racial uplift and the ways in which middle-class respectability complicated the lives and identities of queer African Americans and informed black sexual politics during a time that black sexuality was pathologized by whites.¹⁶

The second chapter focuses on the World War II period, which saw a significant increase in opportunities for same-sex interactions and queer visibility, and a flowering of segregated gay urban culture. At the same time, the military began developing official procedures for screening out homosexuals. Those policies along with a growing general interest among African Americans in medical explanations for homosexuality during this period revealed a sustained emphasis among “respectable” African Americans on conformity to heterosexuality.

Chapter three examines the postwar period through the 1950s, a period in which conformity to traditional gender roles and strict heterosexuality became heightened by Cold War culture. In this context, many African Americans accepted prevailing medical theories about homosexuality as a disease in need of curing. As African Americans began mobilizing the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s, they were forced to contend with a growing tendency among opponents to link fears of homosexuality and

¹⁶ On the politics of respectability, see Kevin Gaines *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

communism with fears of racial change. Moreover, the prominent role of black ministers and churches in the movement also served to complicate the work of queer black activists. Nonetheless, the need for racial solidarity and the sustained burdens of segregation and economic inequality kept queer African Americans engaged in black communities and the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.

The fourth chapter traces the role of queer African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and argues that as the movement reached its peak, the need for racial solidarity overcame homophobia, most dramatically demonstrated when civil rights leaders rallied to the defense of openly gay March on Washington organizer Bayard Rustin. As the movement became more successful, and white resistance increased, many of those African Americans who might publicly deride homosexuality continued to privately accept the presence of homosexuals in their communities and came to respect them as political leaders, thus paving the way for increased acceptance of homosexuality and queer politics in the subsequent decade.

The fifth and final chapter focuses on the simultaneous development of the black power and gay liberation movements in the late 1960s and 1970s. During this period, many African Americans became more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights. Moreover, the racial and sexual militancy of the era inspired the formation of queer black identity politics wherein queer African Americans took a more active role in creating public dialogue about homosexuality and articulating the ways in which racism and homophobia worked together to oppress them.

I end this project before the onset of the AIDS epidemic because against the backdrop of the conservative Reagan era, AIDS fundamentally changed the gay rights movement and had a disproportional impact on African Americans, shifts that deserve far more analysis than a dissertation chapter can provide. Moreover, gay identity politics in general and black gay identity politics in particular, the emergence of which this dissertation traces, were sidelined during the 1980s in the face of unbelievable sickness and death; survival took precedence over liberation. It is my hope that this project will begin to answer Joseph Beam's call for historians to make queer African Americans visible, to take them seriously as historical actors, and to reveal their value to American history.

Chapter 1

“No Pansies in Africa”: Race, Class, and the Politics of Black Sexuality in the Harlem Renaissance and Jim Crow Era

In March 1934, Baltimore’s leading black newspaper, the *Afro-American*, ran an article entitled “Sissies are Declared Normal Among Monkeys and Savages by Columbia U. Psychologist.” This piece focused on a recent study that the writer interpreted as meaning, “the sissies, the pansies, the ‘soft men,’ the fagots [*sic.*], the neuter genderites and other inverters who come in for contempt, ridicule and abuse, are only acting in normal sex methods peculiar to monkeys and primitive peoples.” The writer went on to highlight a part of the study that claimed there were “no pansies in Africa,” that although “pansies are found in all countries,” African tribes were “outstanding as being ‘not addicted to the act.’” The article concluded with a reference to Freudian ideas that “All men go through a homosexual stage [...] and only a minority fail to transcend this level to attain the stage of natural sex behavior.”¹⁷

This article reflects the interrelated nature of gender, sexuality, race, and class that influenced the ways in which African Americans began to discuss homosexuality during the Harlem Renaissance and Jim Crow Era, when non-normative sexuality and gender performance became at once more visible within black communities and a

¹⁷ “Sissies are Declared Normal Among Monkeys and Savages by Columbia U. Psychologist,” *Afro-American*, 10 March 1934, 19.

source of concern for some African Americans who sought to “uplift the race.” The article indicated both fascination with and concern about homosexuality, as well as an engagement with contemporary psychological and scientific theories. The presence of such an article in a prominent black newspaper that reached thousands of African Americans up and down the eastern seaboard suggests the desire of educated black Americans to distance themselves and other members of their race from sexually deviant behavior, particularly that associated with primitiveness or social inferiority. If psychologists could show that homosexuality was not prevalent in Africa, then perhaps “respectable,” educated, middle-class and elite African Americans could cite its origins in influences outside their communities, and thereby undermine white arguments linking black sexuality to black inferiority as a means of denying African Americans full citizenship.

Scholars have shown that Harlem during the 1920s and 30s had one of the most vibrant queer communities of color in the twentieth century. While the flamboyant fairies who walked the streets and the extravagant drag balls that attracted both queer and straight white audiences were the most visible features of this gay world, scholars have also explored the less visible worlds of queer middle-class Harlem Renaissance writers and artists, and working-class speakeasies and sex parties.¹⁸ For those African

¹⁸ On gay life in Harlem see George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World* (New York: Basic Books, 1994) particularly chapter 9. Chauncey’s treatment of the gay male world in NYC is by far the most extensive treatment of the subject, but other scholars have explored the lives of queer Harlemites, particularly those involved in the literary and artistic Renaissance. See, for example, Martin Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity, 1900-1930* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Christa Schwarz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2003).

Americans that belonged to or aspired to the middle class in Harlem, homosexual contact carried with it much bigger potential consequences than it did for working-class blacks, especially as conservative laws regarding sexual conduct appeared in the 1930s as part of a larger cultural backlash against the perceived excesses of the “roaring twenties.” Moreover, despite the challenges that some middle-class African Americans offered to Victorian notions of gender and sexuality during the 1920s, those notions remained influential throughout the decade, and the 30s saw the emergence of both laws and attitudes that sought to define proper middle-class black masculinity and femininity in strictly heterosexual terms.¹⁹

While the queer world of Harlem in the 1920s and 30s cannot be taken as representative of queer black life in the rest of the country, both the differences in working-class and middle-class black attitudes toward homosexuality and the increasing scrutiny of homosexual contact during the 1930s hold true in other contexts, including the violent and oppressive Jim Crow South, wherein homosexuality was treated as another form of black sexual deviance. As African Americans sought to survive, resist, and challenge varying forms of white racism, queer sexuality was at once undeniably present within their communities and a cause for concern as it represented another possible source of arguments for black inferiority and exclusion from citizenship. For black Americans across the country, then, the Jim Crow era saw both the beginnings of modern queer black culture and communities, and the beginnings of anti-homosexual

¹⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 8 and 14.

attitudes within black communities that intensified in subsequent decades as African Americans increasingly came to embrace white middle-class ideas about gender and sexuality as a means of strengthening their arguments for access to full citizenship rights.

Between 1910 and 1920, half a million African Americans moved from the South to northern cities, pushed by the violence of lynching and the poverty of sharecropping, and pulled by the promise of higher paying jobs in wartime industries as European immigration declined during the war, and hopes that the urban North would greet them with less discrimination and violence. The black populations of cities like New York and Chicago increased exponentially by the end of the decade as southern African Americans migrated north. As lynching became more prevalent in the South in the period following the first World War, black southerners who fled the region often encountered violent race riots in northern cities;²⁰ and when the postwar riots subsided, African Americans in the urban north still faced an active process of racial segregation that relegated blacks of all social and economic positions to neighborhoods like New York's Harlem and Chicago's South Side.

In the decades that followed this first wave of migration, African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans continued pouring into the urban north, and in Harlem, these migrants created a literary, artistic, and musical movement that became known as the Harlem Renaissance. While some of Harlem's younger writers and artists celebrated black

²⁰ For more detailed population statistics and a discussion of the origins of the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, see David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 18-20.

working-class culture, many more established black leaders who had been disappointed by the lack of racial progress during World War I²¹ saw the movement as a chance to prove to white Americans that black Americans were their cultural and intellectual equals. Despite generational divisions, most of those who participated in the Harlem Renaissance thought, in the words of historian David Levering Lewis, that, “a critical mass of exemplary talent could make things better.”²²

Historians have described Harlem in the 1920s and early 30s not only as a center for this remarkable flowering of African American art and culture, but also as a “homosexual mecca”²³ or “queer paradise.”²⁴ With its speakeasies, jazz and blues shows, and drag balls, Harlem became a place that—particularly to fascinated white outsiders—represented unbridled sexual freedom. Moreover, while Greenwich Village was also infamous for its gay community during this era, Harlem, as historian George Chauncey explained, “was the *only* place where black gay men could congregate in commercial establishments,” making it the center of black gay life in the urban North.²⁵

Whites, many of them heterosexual, flocked by the hundreds to Harlem’s white-owned clubs and drag balls, which showcased caricatured representations of African Americans as well as sensationalized images of black sexuality. The effeminate “fairy”

²¹ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 12.

²² Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, xvi.

²³ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 244.

²⁴ Mason Stokes, “Strange Fruits: Rethinking the Gay Twenties,” *Transition* 92 (2002), 58.

²⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227.

and the flamboyant female impersonator became the most publicly visible images of gay Harlem, images of transgressive sexuality that made the Village and other centers of white gay life in the city seem relatively tame in comparison, and which attracted white gay men, bisexuals, and lesbians to the neighborhood as well.²⁶ Photographer and writer Carl Van Vechten was one of these queer white interlopers. His novel, *Nigger Heaven*, which was published in 1926 and presented Harlem's African Americans as stereotypically lascivious, drew scores of whites to Harlem to "go slumming," many of whom were gay.²⁷ Aside from the more general ways in which Harlem's drag balls and speakeasies reinforced white stereotypes about African Americans, part of its appeal to white gays and lesbians was its appearance of sexual permissiveness. "Harlem was very much like the village," artist Richard Bruce Nugent said. "People did what they wanted to do with whom they wanted to do it. You didn't get on the rooftops and shout, 'I fucked my wife last night.' So why would you get on the roof and say, 'I love prick.' You didn't. You just did what you wanted to do."²⁸

The largest of New York's drag balls—known in Harlem as the "Faggotts Ball," or to outsiders, the Hamilton Lodge Ball—took place in Harlem each spring. The ball featured dancers and both male and female impersonators and attracted many white outsiders, as well as "normal" African Americans of all social classes, including many of the Harlem Renaissance elite, but the majority of the performers and audience were

²⁶ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 244-246.

²⁷ Eric Garber, "Tain't Nobody's Business: Homosexuality in Harlem in the 1920s," *The Advocate* (13 May 1982), 39-40.

²⁸ Quoted in Mason Stokes, "Strange Fruits," 58.

black gay men. While some middle-class or elite men came to the ball in drag, most of the drag performers were poor or working-class Harlemites. The ball grew in popularity over the course of the twenties, and by the early 1930s, as many as seven thousand “ordinary” Harlemites attended.²⁹

The popularity of such performances did not indicate social acceptance of the performers among Harlem’s middle-class or white outsiders, however. Attendance at drag balls and other events where black gays and lesbians were highly visible more likely fits within the broader fascination with black culture and fetishization of black sexuality. As George Chauncey has argued, the popularity of these drag balls suggests that “drag queens and other gay men could earn the grudging respect—and even the awe—of many Harlemites. But they could not achieve respectability.”³⁰

African Americans for whom respectability was less of a concern, however, carved out their own spaces within black communities like Harlem, wherein queer sexuality was more or less tolerated. The heart of queer Harlem was not the more visible drag balls and fairy shows, but the speakeasies, blues clubs, and private parties, which attracted fewer whites, and where working-class black queers danced, drank, and mingled with “normal” black men and women.

Many of the best-known female blues singers openly had same-sex relationships and often performed wearing men’s clothing. Although blues singer Bessie Smith did have relationships with men, scholar Sukie de la Croix has described her as sleeping

²⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 257-261.

³⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 264.

“with as many female members of her performing troupe as she could get her hands on.” According to de la Croix, Ma Rainey preferred to sing in the “earthier style of the male blues minstrels who then roamed the streets and back roads of” the South.³¹ Rainey’s “indiscreet” same-sex desire even got her arrested in 1925 for hosting what historian Lillian Faderman described as a “lesbian sex orgy.”³² Many of these queer blues musicians, including New Orleans pianist Tony Jackson, and singers Alberta Hunter and Ethel Waters, offered their gender-transgressing performances not only in Harlem, but for predominately black audiences in the jazz and blues clubs in larger cities like Chicago.³³

Many other female blues singers married men, but continued having sexual relationships with women, presumably because they were attracted to both sexes or wanted the economic and social benefits of heterosexual marriage. In her history of twentieth century lesbianism, Faderman has observed that “among Harlem women of wealth or fame, bisexuality was not uncommon, though few would have admitted to exclusive homosexuality. Perhaps,” Faderman speculated, “[...] the former seemed like adventure while the latter seemed like disease.”³⁴ She went on to suggest that A’Leia Walker, daughter of black millionaire Madame CJ Walker, who threw extravagant parties and surrounded herself with scores of gay men and lesbians, might have had an

³¹ Sukie de la Croix, “Sissy Man Blues,” *Perversions* (Summer 1994), 77-78.

³² Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*, 74.

³³ Sukie De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers: A History of LGBT Chicago Before Stonewall* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 104-107.

³⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 74.

influential role in shaping the generally tolerant attitude of some elite Harlemites toward black female bisexuality.³⁵ Regardless of Walker's influence, this tolerance suggests that the outward appearance of respectability through heterosexual marriage was often enough for Harlem's elites to look the other way when it came to more concealed or clandestine queer relationships.

In contrast to the more subtly bisexual women of Harlem's elite, working-class lesbians were generally more likely to assume hypermasculine and hyperfeminine butch and femme roles in their relationships.³⁶ The most famous and certainly more overtly lesbian blues singer of the era, for example, was Gladys Bentley, who regularly dressed in masculine attire, and whose friends remembered her being "happy" about her homosexuality. Wearing a tuxedo, Bentley even publicly married her white female partner in what one historian has described as a "civil ceremony" in Atlantic City in the early 1930s.³⁷ According to Faderman, Harlem was tolerant enough of lesbianism that it was not uncommon for black butch/femme couples to hold large marriage ceremonies, and use masculinized names or a "gay male surrogate" to obtain a marriage license from the city. For Faderman, this represented an unusual level of tolerance, which "permitted black lesbians to socialize openly in their own communities instead of seeking out alien turf as white lesbians generally felt compelled to do."³⁸

³⁵ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 76.

³⁶ Madeline Davis and Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of A Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 5.

³⁷ Eric Garber, "Tain't Nobody's Business," 41.

³⁸ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 73.

Catering to their mostly working-class audiences, blues singers also referred to homosexuality in their songs. Ma Rainey's song "Prove It On Me" described her interactions with women, because she "don't like no men": "Wear my clothes just like a fan, Talk to the gals just like any old man." In another song, Rainey laments losing her man to a "sissy" man:

I dreamed last night I was far from harm,
Woke up and found my man in a sissy's arms.
Some are young, some are old,
My man says sissies got good jelly roll.
My man's got a sissy, his name is "Miss Kate,"
He shook that thing like a jelly on a plate.
Now all the people ask me why I'm all alone,
A sissy shook that thing and took my man from home.³⁹

The visibility of same-sex desire and gender transgression among blues singers and in the lyrics they performed certainly showed that among working-class African Americans that same-sex desire was a viable alternative to heterosexuality.

On the seedier side of working-class queer Harlem life were parties at private residences, called "buffet flats," which often featured orgies or live sex shows that attracted a variety of attendees, including white gay men seeking the transgressive and often fetishized pleasures of interracial sex. Buffet flats could be found not only in Harlem, but in black neighborhoods in cities across the country, including Detroit, Philadelphia, and Washington.⁴⁰ One of Al Capone's gay relatives, for example, ran a

³⁹ De la Croix, "Sissy Man Blues," 81 and 87.

⁴⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 74.

buffet flat in Chicago that hosted interracial sex parties for gay men.⁴¹ While these parties were not unusual, they were still technically illegal, whereas drag balls were officially sanctioned with permits and attendance was considerably more socially acceptable.⁴² Harlem's Mount Morris Baths, the only public bathhouse in the city that allowed black men, was also known as a place that white men could find "rough trade" for interracial sexual encounters.⁴³

While queer communities were for the most part racially segregated during the early twentieth century, working-class black districts that catered to queer sexual entertainment often served as sites of interracial interaction. Historian Kevin Mumford has argued that such districts in New York and Chicago represented "interzones," wherein blacks and whites "shared a sexual subculture" that tended to blur racial lines in a way that few other spaces did.⁴⁴ Queer African Americans and queer whites, he explained, were more prevalent in black clubs and bars than queer whites were in similar white establishments. Even black brothels were more likely to feature both male and female sex workers in the same institution, whereas white brothels typically catered only to customers looking for women, and white male prostitutes were relegated to street corners.⁴⁵ Taken together, Mumford concludes that these trends may suggest the

⁴¹ De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 120.

⁴² Eric Garber, "Tain't Nobody's Business," 41.

⁴³ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 218. "Rough trade" refers to masculine gay men or masculine men who sought sex with feminine men but did not necessarily identify as gay.

⁴⁴ Kevin J. Mumford, *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago and New York in the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 74.

⁴⁵ Mumford, *Interzones*, 80 and 86-87.

“relative powerlessness of black Harlemites to rid their neighborhoods” of such vice, or a greater “tolerance for the marginalized among people with a long history of exclusion.”⁴⁶ Either way, Mumford’s observations about these queer “interzones” do suggest both the ways in which working-class queer black culture often transgressed color lines, and the greater extent to which queer African Americans remained integrated into black communities and predominantly heterosexual institutions.

Clearly Harlem’s queer culture was not monolithic during the early twentieth century, and ideas about gender and sexuality and related attitudes toward homosexuality within black communities were informed by broader trends during the period. Northward migration opened up new possibilities for black political organization. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, for example, saw its black support grow exponentially by 1920, and was not only able to expand its legal defense program and begin mobilizing black voters over the following decade, but also to support the black cultural and artistic renaissance.⁴⁷

The class dynamics that characterized the project of racial uplift in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and Jim Crow Era are essential to understanding the politics of race, gender, and sexuality among African Americans in the early twentieth century. As Lewis has argued, the Harlem Renaissance “reveals itself to be an elitist response on the part of a tiny group of mostly second-generation, college-educated, and generally

⁴⁶ Mumford, *Interzones*, 84.

⁴⁷ Patricia Sullivan, *“Lift Every Voice”: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 102-104.

affluent Afro-Americans—a response, first, to the increasingly raw racism of the times, second, to the frightening Black Zionism of the Garveyites, and finally, to the remote, but no less frightening, appeal of Marxism.”⁴⁸ For many members of the era’s black middle class and elite, then, achieving respectability was central to uplifting the race, and the creation of great art and literature offered a promising alternative to other contemporary narratives of racial progress that were less palatable to white America.

These class-related concerns extended beyond Harlem and had significant implications for the ideas of gender and sexuality predominant among more affluent African Americans in other parts of the country. As historian Kevin Gaines has argued, black leaders pointed to class distinctions within the race as evidence that African Americans were capable of uplifting themselves socially and economically and were thus worthy of citizenship.⁴⁹ Central to that uplift, Gaines contended, were ideas of “self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and the accumulation of wealth,” through which black elites distinguished themselves, “as bourgeois agents of civilization, from the presumably undeveloped black majority.”⁵⁰ Those whose desires and behavior clashed with those ideas of morality and patriarchy, then, faced possible rejection from respectable black society.

Social and political divisions between elite or middle-class blacks and working-class or poor blacks created a Harlem in which homosexuality was at once visible and

⁴⁸ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, xvi.

⁴⁹ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xiv.

⁵⁰ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

hidden, mainstream and transgressive. George Chauncey has argued that “exclusive heterosexuality became a precondition for a man’s identification as ‘normal’ in middle-class culture at least two generations before it did so in much of Euro-American and African-American working-class culture,”⁵¹ suggesting that ideas concerning sexual behavior and gay identity remained more permissive and fluid for non-middle-class African Americans throughout this period than they did for those who belonged or aspired to the black middle class.

By the early 20th century, doctors and psychologists had essentially concluded that homosexuality was a disease, with hereditary causes, that reflected evolutionary inferiority.⁵² Moreover, in the context of early twentieth century eugenics and Social Darwinism, these “experts” linked homosexuality with racial and economic degeneracy, which as Margot Canaday has argued, “explained ‘the immorality of the poor.’”⁵³ In her extensive study of the American scientific fascination with homosexuality, Jennifer Terry has shown that this association that medical and psychological authorities made between homosexuality and social inferiority was profoundly racialized. “They stressed,” she argued, “that [homosexuality] was separate from normal middle-class life and thus were able to underscore a larger segregationist perspective that regarded the

⁵¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 14.

⁵² D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 15.

⁵³ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 22.

blurring of classes, races, and sex roles as inimical to the nation.”⁵⁴ Homosexuality, then, carried implications of racial inferiority and confirmed, for some, pathologized images of black sexuality.

What constitutes proper gendered behavior is defined relationally in any given historical context. In other words, as Martin Summers explained, black men—and arguably black women as well⁵⁵—defined their masculinity and femininity in contradistinction to other groups. “These qualities are not only determined by sex (male against female),” he contended, “but also by class and skill level (middle-class manliness against working-class, ‘rough’ masculinity), age (men against boys), sexuality (heterosexual against homosexual), and race and ethnicity (white, ‘civilized’ manliness against nonwhite and non-Western ‘savage’ masculinity).”⁵⁶ In the context of 1920s and 30s Harlem, then, many middle-class black men and women not only attempted to replicate middle-class white ideas of masculinity and femininity, which remained and even became increasingly predicated on exclusive heterosexuality, but also defined themselves in direct opposition to the gender performance and sexuality of working-class queer African Americans. As Chauncey explained, “Sexuality became one of the

⁵⁴ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession: Science, Medicine, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 116.

⁵⁵ Both primary sources and secondary studies of lesbianism in general, and black lesbians in particular, remain extremely scarce for this time period and mostly focus on middle-class or elite white women. While Chauncey’s and Summers’ arguments about black men cannot simply be extended to black women, their argument about black middle-class gender and sexuality being defined in contradistinction to those working-class blacks seems to hold true in the context of the historiography of black women during this period. It is not too much of an extrapolation, then, to assume that the class dynamics that informed black masculinity and homosexuality also informed black femininity and lesbianism.

⁵⁶ Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 10.

critical measures by which the black middle class differentiated itself from the working class and constituted itself as a class.”⁵⁷ While many of the artists and writers that became the face of the Harlem Renaissance attended drag balls or occasionally visited a buffet flat, the working class world of fairies and speakeasies provided a level of personal and sexual freedom only temporarily available to those who wished for professional success and respectable status. As Gaines explained, “anxieties over bourgeois sexual mores doubtless weighed more heavily on already stigmatized black Americans, and overall, the internal tensions of class, gender, sexuality, and color seldom mentioned by privileged African Americans.”⁵⁸ The queer leaders of the Harlem Renaissance, then, were often forced to either reject respectability at the risk of endangering their class status, or keep their private same-sex desires out of the public eye.

An anomaly among the more affluent circles of the Harlem Renaissance was novelist Richard Bruce Nugent, the youngest of Harlem’s literati, who, although he came from an elite background, rejected middle-class respectability, dressing flamboyantly, acting eccentrically, and openly identifying as gay.⁵⁹ Perhaps because of his youth and privilege, Nugent seemed unconcerned with the burden assumed by many Renaissance writers of representing their race to the outside world, but as Christa Schwarz has suggested, “his stance toward the black leadership’s aspirations seems indifferent

⁵⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 253.

⁵⁸ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 8.

⁵⁹ Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 170.

rather than rebellious.” Nugent seemed comfortable being the “clown,” dressing inappropriately and refusing to make any serious effort to promote his career.⁶⁰ Nugent’s openness about his sexuality was reflected not only in his homoerotic writings, but also in his correspondence with other members of the Renaissance, wherein he eschewed the practice of coded references to “friendship” that was typical in the letters of the era’s more closeted writers, opting for more explicit discussions of same-sex desire. In the decades following the Harlem Renaissance, Nugent self-identified as gay, claiming to have only had one sexual encounter with a woman.⁶¹

While Nugent’s general apathy toward middle-class respectability afforded him considerably more sexual freedom than many of his contemporaries, it did not allow him to escape the social implications of his class status entirely. Nugent’s family seems to have mostly tolerated his homosexuality, asking only that he not “disgrace the family name,” a request to which he consented by publishing most of his work under the name “Richard Bruce.” Ironically, it was Nugent’s birth into significant economic privilege that allowed him the freedom to reject the social and sexual norms that came with his elite status.

Like Nugent, Jamaican-born Claude McKay flaunted his same-sex desire in both his work and daily life.⁶² His novels, *Home to Harlem* (1928) and *Banjo* (1929) sparked controversy for their sexually explicit content, and much of his work portrayed African

⁶⁰ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 121.

⁶¹ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 122.

⁶² Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 196.

Americans as primitive and driven by their sexual urges. Moreover, his foreign background, radical politics, and focus on the black working-class made some of Harlem's literati question whether McKay should be part of the Renaissance. McKay also seemed to show little concern for respectability in his private life, making little effort to conceal his sexual relationships with both men and women of all social classes.⁶³ In contrast to Nugent's flamboyance, however, McKay believed that working-class masculinity was superior to that of middle-class and elite men, criticizing Renaissance leader Alain Locke for his "effete European academic quality," and avoiding any hint of effeminacy in his own mannerisms.⁶⁴ Although McKay's work was well-received by his literary and artistic peers, his sexuality and the extent to which he expressed it in his writings and relationships set him at odds with middle-class respectability and created tension in his relationships with other Renaissance writers.

Others of Harlem's middle-class and elite challenged Victorian norms of gender and sexuality, but less overtly, through their career choices and leisure activities, which sometimes included interactions with queer culture rather than overt displays of sexuality.⁶⁵ While one historian has argued that Harlem's cabaret culture constituted a challenge to "the racial and sexual normativity of uplift ideology," such challenges should not be taken as a wholesale rejection of those norms, however, but rather a

⁶³ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 88-89.

⁶⁴ McKay quoted in Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 92.

⁶⁵ Martin Summers's work includes an engagement with queer working-class Harlem, along with a broader rejection of the producerist definitions of masculinity associated with the Victorian era, as evidence of a shift in middle-class black manhood during the 20s.

temporary, yet meaningful challenge to the status quo in the context of similar challenges characteristic of urban culture in the 1920s.⁶⁶ Ultimately, most of Harlem's elites who participated in queer culture were constrained by the boundaries of respectability. As Jennifer Terry has argued, "while sex roles for men and women changed, clear-cut distinctions between the sexes continued to be a gauge of normalcy" during the early twentieth century.⁶⁷

Other queer black Harlemites felt constrained either by their dependence on white patronage or their desire for middle-class status to conform to heterosexual marriage or at least keep their same-sex desires somewhat concealed. Moreover, lingering Victorian-era ideas about sexuality, gender, and respectability combined with Progressive-era anxieties about self-control and the visibility of homosexuality in Harlem often made sexuality a subject of profound confusion and anxiety, and particularly by the late twenties and early thirties, a popular topic of scrutiny and criticism by Harlem's elite. Ultimately, most of the Harlem Renaissance writers and those who shared their social status sought to hide their homosexuality or at least avoid public displays that challenged normative gender and sex roles.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Shane Vogel, *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret: Race, Sexuality, Performance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 3. While Martin Summers offers a similar argument about the challenges middle-class black men posed to Victorian-era respectability during the 1920s, those young men whose challenges took the form of acceptance of or participation in Harlem's gay male culture should be considered in the broader context of 1920s urban culture and does not indicate that these young men embraced homosexuality as a part of an alternative model of masculinity. Moreover, his study ends before the rise of anti-homosexual laws and attitudes that George Chauncey has identified as happening during the 1930s. (See Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 156-57).

⁶⁷ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 117.

⁶⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 227.

Some of the leading figures of Harlem's middle class and elite were overt in their condemnation of Harlem's queer residents, publically proclaiming homosexuality a threat to the community and the black family. In 1929 Adam Clayton Powell, pastor of Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church railed against the "perversion" and "vice" promoted by Harlem's queer culture wherein respectable young black men and women could be corrupted by their interactions with homosexuals. He showed particular concern for the problem of lesbianism, which he believed to be a widespread cause of young black women's refusal to marry. Numerous other ministers, community leaders, and black newspapers joined his crusade against homosexuality that year.⁶⁹ Perhaps because of drag balls' appeal among the black working class, however, attendance at the Hamilton Lodge Ball increased in the early 1930s following Powell's campaign.⁷⁰ Queer Harlemites who desired respectability and social acceptance would have heard, loudly and clearly, that in some circles of Harlem's middle-class and elite, their same-sex desires would exclude them from respectable status.

In addition to community leaders like Powell, some of the intellectual and political leaders of the Renaissance sought to downplay the same-sex desires of many of the leading writers of the era. It was widely known that W.E.B. Du Bois had fired the managing editor of *The Crisis* after the man was arrested for soliciting sex with another man in a public bathroom. Although writer and Howard Professor Alain Locke was gay himself, he considered the queer characters in the writings of Claude McKay and

⁶⁹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 254-55.

⁷⁰ Russell, "The Color of Discipline," 105.

Wallace Thurman, and the blatantly homoerotic nature of Nugent’s poetry totally unacceptable.⁷¹ As literary scholar Michael Cobb has argued, Locke represented an older generation of black cultural leaders during the renaissance and a “figure of literary repression and obsession with quasi up-lift projects that stifle[d]” younger queer artists like Nugent. Overtly or “impolite” queerness in black literature, Cobb explained, did not fit into Locke’s image of the race-focused “New Negro.”⁷²

Poet Countée Cullen is perhaps the most revealing example of the tensions between same-sex desire and middle-class respectability in the context of the Renaissance. Cullen, who recognized and acted upon his same-sex desire at a young age,⁷³ was profoundly concerned about the impact of that desire on his status as one of the most acclaimed young poets of the era. Adopted at age eleven by a prominent Harlem minister, Frederick Cullen, Countée went on to earn an undergraduate degree from New York University and a master’s degree from Harvard.⁷⁴ While he was still a teenager, Cullen’s poetry made him somewhat famous among Harlem’s middle class and his work was printed in both black and white publications. As Christa Schwarz has explained, his poetry emulated Keats and Tennyson, “and his preference for romantic form and imagery endeared him, as [novelist Wallace] Thurman cynically commented, to ‘both bourgeois black America and sentimental white America.’ Cullen was

⁷¹ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 264-65.

⁷² Michael L. Cobb, “Insolent Racing, Rough Narrative: The Harlem Renaissance’s Impolite Queers,” *Callaloo* 23, no. 1 (Winter 2000), 330.

⁷³ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 265 and Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 4.

⁷⁴ Stokes, “Strange Fruits,” 61 and Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 49.

consequently seen as the embodiment of the virtues of the Talented Tenth—it seemed, as a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier* wrote, that ‘his virtues are many; his vices unheard of.’⁷⁵

Locke acted as a mentor to Cullen, encouraging him to read works that depicted male same-sex desire as positive and healthy, which helped Cullen to avoid fully internalizing the prevailing idea that his desires were deviant or abnormal. Cullen recognized, however, the potential consequences of his desires on his career and class status, and thus avoided the kinds of obvious depictions of same-sex desire found in the works of Thurman, Nugent, and McKay. Like Locke, Cullen’s writings suggest a discomfort with any overt depictions of sexuality, but as Schwarz has argued, much of his poetry contained coded references to homosexuality and he often left the gender of figures in his poetry ambiguous so as to allow for gay interpretations without being explicit, which was a strategy “popular among gay writers” of the era.⁷⁶

As he did in his work, Cullen attempted to conceal his same-sex desire in his personal life, while still participating in Harlem’s queer social circles. After Cullen attended the 1931 Hamilton Lodge Ball, at least one leading black newspaper reported on an incident where a “Pansy” rather suggestively addressed Cullen as “Fannie.” Although Cullen reportedly “responded with a smile,” the incident and the fact that it was deemed worthy of publication in the Baltimore *Afro-American* suggests that there

⁷⁵ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 48.

⁷⁶ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 51-52.

was measure of public rumor and speculation about his sexuality.⁷⁷ He married twice in attempts to conceal his same-sex desire and maintain the respectability afforded to him by his upbringing and education. His first marriage, to W.E.B. Du Bois' daughter Yolande in 1928, fell apart within a few months. In the couple's wedding, which was an extravagant affair attended by more than three thousand Harlemites, Harold Jackman, whom some scholars have acknowledged as Cullen's lover, served as his best man.⁷⁸ Yolande agreed to publicly attribute their break up to his infatuation with another woman, but admitted to her father that Cullen's homosexuality was to blame. "When he confessed that he's always known that he was abnormal sexually—as far as other men were concerned then many things became clear," she wrote on May 23rd, 1929.

She continued:

At first I felt terribly angry—I felt he'd no right to marry any woman knowing that. Now I feel only sorry for him—all I want is not to have to be anywhere near him. I've heard of such things of course but the idea of it being true of anyone close to me gives me a feeling of horror and disgust. [...] Of course, if any of this had reached me before—I'd never had married him. If he was born that way I can't help it. I'm sorry—but I cannot understand it.⁷⁹

At least to his wife, then, Cullen did not identify as a homosexual, but rather as "abnormal" because of his sexual attractions to men. Despite his continued long-term relationships with men, including a lengthy clandestine relationship with the much

⁷⁷ "Fannie' Cullen," *Afro-American* (14 March 1931), 1.

⁷⁸ Stokes, "Strange Fruits," 63.

⁷⁹ Yolande D. Bois to W.E.B. Du Bois, 23 May 1929, quoted in Stokes, "Strange Fruits," 69.

younger Edward Atkinson, Cullen married another woman twelve years later, to whom he stayed married until his death.⁸⁰

Despite Cullen's acknowledgement of his same-sex attractions and his intimate friendships with other members of Harlem's queer literati, he still sought to preserve his respectability and middle-class status by outwardly performing heterosexuality both in his marriages to women and his avoidance of overtly homoerotic themes in his writing. This dichotomy between his public and private selves also reflects a middle-class masculinity that did not allow the kinds of sexual fluidity found among working-class Harlemites.

In contrast to Cullen's romantic styles and themes, Langston Hughes' writing tended to celebrate the lives and culture of working-class blacks; and much like those working-class queer Harlemites, Hughes' sexuality seems to have resisted simple categorization. While scholars have uncovered at least one same-sex encounter in Hughes's life, he guarded his personal and sexual relationships closely and avoided revealing his desires even among members of Harlem's gay social circles. Despite Cullen's and Locke's repeated attempts to integrate Hughes into their circle of queer friends, Hughes kept them at arms length. As one historian observed, "He responded positively to Cullen and Locke's coded references [to homosexuality in their letters...]"

⁸⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 265 and Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 50.

thereby hinting at his familiarity with this type of gay discourse.” Yet unlike Cullen, Hughes rarely if ever openly acknowledged his same-sex desire, even to his friends.⁸¹

Although Hughes’ writing rarely dealt with homosexual themes or characters, he attended drag balls and parties frequented by Harlem’s queer elite.⁸² Renaissance novelist Wallace Thurman described Hughes as “such a mysterious person, so discreet in [his] reports of intimate matters.” The openly and flamboyantly gay Richard Bruce Nugent who was a friend of Hughes, called him “intrinsically homosexual, but overtly not,” or even, perhaps, “asexual.” Carl Van Vechten also speculated that Hughes may have been asexual, and others have speculated that he was simply discreet in his sexual encounters.⁸³ Many years later, in 1973, George Bass, who was a close companion of Hughes in the years before his death, related his impression of Hughes’s sexuality more clearly to young gay African American activist Melvin Dixon. “I asked him directly if Hughes was gay,” Dixon recalled. “He said yes but that they had no sexual relations. It was a father-son relationship though many rumors spread that they were lovers.”⁸⁴

While Hughes might have been “gay” by modern definitions of the term, it is likely that his sexual identity was more fluid, which might well have been informed by his engagement with more sexually permissive working-class black culture. It also might

⁸¹ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 70. Marlon Ross has suggested that Hughes’ correspondence with Cullen and Locke, reflected a sort of flirtation, “an erotic pleasure taken in toying with another’s attraction and in deferring intercourse.” See Marlon Ross, *Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 288.

⁸² Vogel, *Harlem Cabaret*, 104.

⁸³ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 69.

⁸⁴ Melvin Dixon, Journal entry dated 19 March 1973, Box 1, Folder 9, Melvin Dixon Papers

have simply reflected, as Christa Schwarz has suggested, that Hughes “might not have found a model of same-sex love he felt comfortable with,” between the extreme examples of the conflicted Cullen and the flamboyant Nugent.⁸⁵

To some of Harlem’s queer literati, Hughes’s sexuality defied the kinds of middle-class definitions of gender and sexuality that served to complicate the lives (and constrain the same-sex desires) of Countée Cullen and exclude working-class queer Harlemites from respectable status. But the care with which he guarded his private life allowed him to both celebrate working-class culture without facing the possible social consequences of his queer desires.

Novelist Wallace Thurman’s same-sex attractions also complicated his relationship with black bourgeois standards of gender and sexuality. Hoping to avoid the pitfalls of traditional marriage, he married the educated, modern, and independent activist and professor Louise Thompson, but their marriage fell apart within a matter of months. During the divorce, Thompson revealed that Thurman had been arrested in 1925, several years before their marriage, for having sex with another man, a “Fifth Avenue hair dresser,” in a Harlem subway station. Although Thurman claimed that he and his wife were sexually compatible and had intercourse, and rejected the idea that the encounter meant he was homosexual, it appears that the accusation itself tarnished his reputation among his middle-class Harlem peers. “And you can also imagine with

⁸⁵ Schwarz, *Gay Voices*, 71.

what relish a certain group of Negroes in Harlem received and relayed the news that I was a homo," he lamented to a close friend.⁸⁶

Although it may seem that Thurman was simply in denial of his homosexuality, Thurman's case suggests both the rejection by his peers of more fluid definitions of sexuality associated with Harlem's black working-class, and an adherence to more traditional Victorian sexuality that seems to have never fully faded from black bourgeois gender norms during the 1920s. While Thurman's description of his sexual relationship with his wife may have been honest, the social implications of his same-sex encounter and the extent to which these writers and artists guarded their same-sex relationships reflect a middle-class black masculinity that by the late 1920s, had come to depend on exclusive heterosexuality. Despite their migration in queer social circles and their appearances at events like the Hamilton Lodge Ball, the class status of Harlem's intellectual elite and the popularity of working-class queer culture among "normal" Harlemites, afforded them the ability to pass as straight to outsiders, a place of privilege that some of them went to great lengths to protect.

For some of the younger generation of middle-class queer African Americans, Victorian ideas about sexuality and Progressive Era ideas about the body and sexual self-control thoroughly complicated the process of coming to terms with their same-sex desires. One of Alain Locke's young protégés, David Schwartz, came to him for advice on romance in 1926, and Locke frankly advised him that while Schwartz may also have romantic feelings for women, he most likely had a "homosexual complex," and

⁸⁶ Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents*, 183-185. Thurman quoted on 185.

suggested that to avoid the complications of attractions to both men and women, the young man should “go back to masturbation” as a means of controlling his sexual urges.⁸⁷ This exchange once again shows Locke’s discomfort with the possibilities of more overt sexual expression on the part of the younger generation of Harlemites.

Schwartz and his good friend Glenn Carrington, also a student and friend of Alain Locke, corresponded frequently over the course of two years about sexual self-control. While Schwartz seems to have primarily been concerned with controlling his urges toward women, Carrington was struggling with same-sex attractions and would later in life identify as gay; both young men, however, were deeply committed to controlling their sexual appetites. “I have had no definitely sexual conflicts for some time,” Carrington wrote in March of 1926, “on account of a rather rigorous guarding of my sentimental tendencies, which I can usually submerge when I will.”⁸⁸ In the subsequent months the two friends embarked on a joint plan of sexual self-control that involved refraining from unsuitable foods, alcohol, and eating between meals, and regularly hiking, studying, and pursuing other intellectual activities.⁸⁹ Their letters also discussed the pursuit of “manhood” and various contemporary theories about sex and masturbation.

⁸⁷ David Schwartz to Glenn Carrington, 2 November 1926, Box 8, Folder 8, GC Papers. Although Harlem Renaissance writer Jean Toomer was heterosexual, it is worth mentioning that he too struggled with similar issues. Summers explained that Toomer’s masturbation during his teenage years “created enormous feelings of guilt and depression,” and he sought to control his urges through colds baths and exercise. It was not until his early twenties that he rejected these Victorian-era ideas of manhood, forging an alternative masculinity based on being a writer and a nurturing husband. See Summers, *Manliness and Its Discontents*, 162-165.

⁸⁸ Glenn Carrington to David Schwartz, 15 March 1926, Box 8, Folder 7, GC Papers.

⁸⁹ Glenn Carrington to David Schwartz, 3 May 1926, Box 8, Folder 7, GC Papers.

While clearly interested in emerging Freudian ideas about sexuality,⁹⁰ these two young men's conversations and Locke's advice strongly suggest that middle-class queer African Americans were to some extent engaged with the more general kinds of concerns about sexual self-control that white Progressive Era reformers were still promoting during this period. Despite their urges toward premarital, homosexual, and otherwise "deviant" sexual behaviors, these men saw restraining their appetites as essential to their definitions of manhood, definitions that by their very nature distinguished them from the working-class black men and women who drank and danced provocatively at speakeasies and patronized buffet flats. Carrington's correspondence also reflects a continued compulsion well into his early adulthood during the 1930s to consider marriage, despite almost exclusively expressing sexual and romantic desire for other men.⁹¹

While the twenties saw at least some young black men of all classes offering challenges to notions of respectability, those ideas remained so significant to the project of racial uplift that many of Harlem's artists and writers could not fully escape from middle-class masculinities and femininities that required exclusive heterosexuality. Moreover, the following decade saw the resurgence of these Victorian ideals as part of a broader cultural backlash against the perceived excesses of the prohibition era, and as George Chauncey has argued "a new anxiety about homosexuals and a hostility toward

⁹⁰ Jennifer Terry has shown that Freud's ideas about psychosexual development became influential in encouraging public dialogue about homosexuality during the early 20th century. See Terry, *An American Obsession*, 119.

⁹¹ Carrington's papers during the 1920s and 30s indicate discussions of his possible engagement to a woman, as well as several marriages of his former male sexual partners.

them began to develop.”⁹² Even as these broader shifts in attitudes toward homosexuality occurred, those attitudes were complicated by class and race.

With all of its queer black culture, Harlem cannot offer a complete portrait of the lives and experiences of queer African Americans outside of the neighborhood; and while it may not completely reflect the class, gender, and racial dynamics that informed attitudes toward homosexuality in different African American communities, it seems to share similarities to queer black life in other parts of the country during the Jim Crow era. To be sure, even if their presence in the historical record is not prominent, queer African Americans existed with varying degrees of openness throughout the country, as did the mixture of fascination and concern with their existence and the fears of their impact on black communities.

If the Harlem Renaissance created spaces for queer African Americans, such spaces were certainly replicated in other contexts where similar cultural and political movements developed. As David Levering Lewis has observed, “the assertive dignity of the New Negro Movement was evident throughout America [...]. In just about every good-sized city, earnest little bands of part-time Afro-American culture-nurturers (usually, though not always, heavily represented by prim, light-complexioned wives of striving doctors, lawyers, preachers, and teachers) drew up bylaws, politely heard one another’s book reports, and, if truly ambitious, tithed themselves to underwrite a literary publication.”⁹³ Moreover, the lines between “southern” and “northern” identity

⁹² Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 8.

⁹³ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 156.

were often blurred for African Americans during this period. The vast majority of northern black populations, particularly in the early years of the Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance, were migrants from the Jim Crow South;⁹⁴ and as Lewis claimed, some elements of the Harlem Renaissance—particularly the white fascination with primitive blackness that brought whites flocking to Harlem’s cabarets and speakeasies—extended into the Deep South.⁹⁵ This emphasis on racial uplift and the class tensions that defined the social positions of queer African Americans in Harlem, then, also characterized black communities in other parts of the country.

Although scholarship on queer African Americans in other northern urban cities is scarce, there is clear evidence of queer people and communities of color as well as a broader fascination or concern with their activities on the part of other African Americans. In addition to the drag balls held in New York, black men in Washington, DC held drag balls beginning in the 1890s, and like those in Harlem, the balls were attended by “normal” working-class and middle-class African Americans.⁹⁶ Similar drag or “pansy” balls took place among African Americans in Chicago, Baltimore, Los Angeles, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and even on the campuses of black colleges and universities.⁹⁷ In St. Louis in 1907, a white psychologist offered a concerned report on the arrests of a group of

⁹⁴ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 27.

⁹⁵ Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, 162.

⁹⁶ Katz, *Gay American History*, 42-43.

⁹⁷ For records of such events see Baltimore’s *Afro-American* for the 1930s. See also Restricted Letter to Glenn Carrington, 17 May 1927, Box 9, Folder 7, GC Papers; Grantmyer, 987; and D’Emilio, 12.

“black perverts” who were known to hold “miscegenation dances,” where the black men dressed as women and had sexual encounters with “white degenerates.”⁹⁸ German sexologist and homosexual rights advocate Magnus Hirschfield’s study of homosexuality in American cities reveals the presence and visibility of queer African Americans in as early as 1914 in Chicago and in “a small city” in Ohio.⁹⁹ While queer African Americans throughout the country may have been a source of curiosity or ridicule as they were in Harlem, they were hardly invisible during the early decades of the twentieth century.

By the 1930s, queer African Americans appeared as subjects of interest in black newspapers throughout the country—including the Jim Crow South—indicating both the increasing visibility of black queer communities and increasing concern over that very visibility. Baltimore’s *Afro-American*, the *Atlanta Daily World*, Virginia’s *Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Chicago Defender* all carried stories about “pansy balls” in Harlem and other cities, suggesting that the spectacles were of interest to black journalists, editors, and readers across the nation.¹⁰⁰ Black female impersonators also toured the South, performing in such cities as Macon and New Orleans.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Katz, *Gay American History*, 48-49.

⁹⁹ Katz, *Gay American History*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ For examples from the *Afro-American*, see next paragraph and note. See also, “6000 at Harlem Pansy Dance,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 11 March 1932, 2 (the same article was reprinted in the *Norfolk New Journal and Guide* the following day on page 10); Floyd G. Snelson, “Strange ‘Third’ Sex Flooding Nation, Writer Reveals,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 March 1932, 6; Harry Levette, “Thru Hollywood,” *Chicago Defender*, 22 January 1938, 18.

¹⁰¹ Grantmyer, 986.

During the 1930s, Ralph Matthews, reporter and later editor of the eastern seaboard's most popular black newspaper, the Baltimore *Afro-American*, wrote regularly on black homosexuality with his articles often printed on the paper's front page. The newspaper, whose circulation more than doubled during the 1930s, peaking at over 104,000, reached African Americans up and down the east coast of the US, including many southern states.¹⁰² In addition to his stories about the "pansy balls" held in Baltimore, Washington, DC, Philadelphia, and other major cities,¹⁰³ Matthews also explored other ideas and concerns about black homosexuality and occasionally printed his readers' reactions. In response to an article Matthews wrote about a Baltimore pansy ball in March 1931, for example, he received "fan mail" that he described as "letters, calling [me] all sorts of mean names and suggesting the most uncomfortable places to go before and after death," as well as numerous letters asking him to "inform them when the next affair of this sort comes off," reflecting both the rise of anti-homosexual attitudes among some black readers as well as a sustained fascination among others.¹⁰⁴

Matthews and his readers, as well as other black journalists during the thirties, reflected the increasingly widespread scrutiny of homosexuality among "normal" educated African Americans. In a 1930 article, one reporter expressed rising concern

¹⁰² Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998), 17.

¹⁰³ Articles on "pansies" are numerous during the decade. See, for example, Ralph Matthews, "'31 Debutantes Bow at Local 'Pansy' Ball," *Afro-American*, 21 March 1931, 1; and "5,000 at N.Y. Pansy Ball," *Afro-American*, 7 March 1936, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ralph Matthews, "Watching the Big Parade," *Afro-American*, 28 March 1931, 6.

about lesbianism among black inmates in a Baltimore women's reformatory.¹⁰⁵ The *Pittsburgh Courier's* Floyd Snelson raised the alarm in March 1932 that there was a "Strange 'Third' Sex Flooding Nation." After reporting the lurid details of that month's Harlem "pansy ball," Snelson concluded, "A time must never come when a callous and cynical America will laugh at the horrid antics of such people."¹⁰⁶ In a 1934 column, Matthews expressed alarm that drag balls, which were once more private affairs, were becoming more visible, and "freaks of every nature are turned on a defenseless public." Linking the moral degeneracy of these events with the repeal of prohibition, Matthews suggested that homosexuality was increasing because public disapproval had declined.¹⁰⁷

While the *Afro-American* offered the most frequent news and discussions of black homosexuality that southern African Americans would have read, one columnist for the *Atlanta Daily World* addressed the topic on more than one occasion and offered a powerful condemnation of homosexuality in November 1934. Referring to the sins of Sodom and Gomorrah, he wrote, "This is an evil that is not confined to the ignorant but claims its victims among the learned of the land." He went on to demand that the

¹⁰⁵ "Girls Eat with Their Hands at Melvale," *Afro-American*, 1 March 1930, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Floyd G. Snelson, "Strange 'Third' Sex Flooding Nation, Writer Reveals," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 March 1932, 6.

¹⁰⁷ Ralph Matthews, "The Pansy Craze: Is It Entertainment or Just Plain Filth?" *Afro-American*, 6 October 1934, 7.

government take measures against “sodomy and unnatural habits” as it had with other infectious diseases.¹⁰⁸

In addition to the article that opens this chapter, several of Matthews’ articles from the thirties suggest that educated African Americans were aware of emerging scientific and psychological studies about “abnormal” sexuality and gender performance. In April 1932, Matthews wrote an article titled “Are Pansies People?” in which he discussed recent scientific research about gender inversion and hermaphroditism, and quoted another contemporary article that claimed, “The third sex is flooding America. It is no longer confined to side streets and obscure corners. Queer people, both men and women, who do not love or feel like ordinary men and women, are increasing.” Referring specifically to lesbians, the article continues, “This group preys upon inexperienced girls. Its members tempt the girls with clothing, marihuana [*sic.*] and liquor and if successful add their victims to the group.”¹⁰⁹

While Matthews and some of his readers seemed disturbed by the increasing visibility of “pansies,” a few articles and reader responses seemed more sympathetic. Matthews printed a letter in May 1931 from a reader in Chicago, defending “pansies” by describing the less conservative ideas about sexuality held by the French and Germans, listing a number of famous homosexuals throughout history, and asking “Why, though should [homosexuals] be singled out and ogled as curiosities and monstrosities? Their lives, to them, are normal. I believe that every person should be the sole judge of his

¹⁰⁸ I.P. Reynolds, “What Sam of Auburn Avenue Says: Medical Science Should Study this Evil,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 8 November 1934, 8.

¹⁰⁹ Ralph Matthews, “Are Pansies People?” *Afro-American*, 2 April 1932, 3.

morality.”¹¹⁰ Another reader, a self-identified pansy, “confessed” to Matthews, hoping to convince another young queer black man “not to give up the real happiness of her whole life for such a strange life among men.”¹¹¹ Clearly, homosexuality had become visible—and thus a cause of discussion and concern—in black communities outside of Harlem during the 1930s.

In the South of the 1920s and 30s, the lives and relationships of queer African Americans are considerably less visible outside of these newspaper accounts and have remained largely absent from literature on the Jim Crow era.¹¹² These silences in the secondary literature of the era, however, do not indicate the absence of same-sex relationships among Southern blacks and between southern blacks and whites, nor should they be taken to suggest that homosexuality did not concern southerners of both races. As scholars of the Jim Crow era have shown, white southerners were obsessed with black sexuality, encoding their fears—particularly those of black men raping white women—into southern laws and customary extralegal violence such as lynching.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ Ralph Matthews, “It’s Nobody’s Business: In Defense of Pansies,” *Afro-American*, 9 May 1931, 9.

¹¹¹ Ralph Matthews, “It’s Nobody’s Business: A Pansy Bares His Soul,” *Afro-American*, 13 September 1931), 15.

¹¹² Most historians consider the Jim Crow period in the South as extending from the beginning of black disfranchisement in the 1880s and 90s to the mid-1950s or 60s, when the legal foundations of segregation and disfranchisement were dismantled by Civil Rights Movement activists and the federal government. Whites used lynching and other forms of racial violence to terrorize black men and women and demonize black sexuality throughout this period, but these tactics were especially prevalent between the 1880s and 1930s. Because of the dearth of primary sources about same-sex desire in the Jim Crow South, and because this period encompasses the years of the Great Migration in the North, I have chosen to include sources from earlier decades in the South.

¹¹³ See, for example, Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

There is some evidence to suggest the general perception among both middle- and working-class African Americans that northern cities were more accepting of homosexuality. During the early twentieth century, Americans came to increasingly associate homosexuality with the urban environment.¹¹⁴ *Pittsburgh Courier* reporter Floyd Snelson argued about drag balls, that, “These dances should be stopped before they become the usual thing and our South is effected with the virus of the perverted.”¹¹⁵ Recounting a police raid of a “pansy ball” in Washington, an *Afro-American* columnist wrote, “these brethren or ‘sisters,’ unwanted in Washington, will be welcomed in New York where over a thousand of the neuter gender of both races will dance this week at the annual dance of the Hamilton Lodge. The pansy motto should be: ‘Young lady, go North.’”¹¹⁶ This perception held true for working-class black lesbian Mabel Hampton, who recalled meeting many other black lesbians who had fled the South when she moved to New York City as a young girl in the 1920s. Years later when Hampton’s wife Lillian Foster—also a black lesbian who moved from the South during the Harlem Renaissance Era—tried to convince Mabel to visit the South again, Hampton refused, saying “with my nasty temper they’d lynch me in five minutes because [...]

¹¹⁴ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 118.

¹¹⁵ Floyd G. Snelson, “Strange ‘Third’ Sex Flooding Nation, Writer Reveals,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 19 March 1932, 6.

¹¹⁶ “Young Pansy, Go North,” *Afro-American*, 17 February 1934, 4.

they'd see me walking down the street holdin' hands with some woman they'd want to put me in jail."¹¹⁷

A possible exception to the idea that the South was less sexually permissive than the North is the city of New Orleans. Famous for its French Quarter and vice districts, New Orleans has long been known as having one of the South's most visible queer communities, and the Jim Crow era is no exception. New Orleans' vice districts reflect a fascination among whites with black sexuality that was similar to the white fascination with Harlem's drag balls and interracial sex parties. New Orleans Madam Nell Kimball recalled in the early 1930s, "It used to be a secret that sex between men existed; at least everyone acted as if it did not exist. It was not rare." Describing the queer sex trade in the city, Kimball highlighted class distinctions among white southern queers. While "low folk" were known to engage in "buggery" and incest, "middle and upper class inverts had to come together in dark corners and place their secrets in the hands of greedy people who often blackmailed them."¹¹⁸

Kimball described an all-male brothel on Baronne Street run by a man called Miss Big Nellie, who threw huge parties for black male prostitutes and their white customers:

It was a hell of a queen's ball at two in the morning. Most of the gowns were off, and some of the most respectable people you ever saw were

¹¹⁷ Oral History of Mabel Hampton, Mabel Hampton Papers, Box 2, Folder 5, Lesbian Herstory Archives of the Lesbian Historical Educational Foundation, Brooklyn, NY.

¹¹⁸ Nell Kimball, *Nell Kimball: Her Life as an American Madam* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970), 198.

playing at 69 on the staircase, and a daisy chain was going full blast in the parlor, linked buggery like a goddamn caterpillar.¹¹⁹

According to Kimball, light-skinned African American boys and young men called “goldskins,” many of whom were orphans or homeless, found employment in New Orleans’ vice district, where the demand for black male prostitutes was significant.¹²⁰ Kimball also recalled her own female prostitutes engaging in lesbian relationships when they were not servicing johns.¹²¹

Queer African Americans made themselves visible in southern cities to at least some extent. As Kimball remembered, “screaming faggots in silks and satins” held their own “balls and fetes,” much like their northern counterparts.¹²² One particularly “nervy gay” female impersonator in Jackson in the 1930s was known to prance down the city’s main street in makeup and a “wide-brimmed yellow leghorn hat.”¹²³ Within smaller southern black communities during the Jim Crow Era, sources on same-sex desire and relationships are even more elusive. Surely, queer African American men and women would have found encounters with other African Americans less risky than encounters with whites. Jazz musician George Washington, who was raised in the South and went on to play with Benny Carter and Louis Armstrong, enjoyed romances and casual

¹¹⁹ Kimball, *Nell Kimball*, 199.

¹²⁰ Kimball, *Nell Kimball*, 198.

¹²¹ Natasha L. McPherson, “There Was a Tradition Among the Women”: New Orleans’s Colored Creole Women and the Making of a Community in the Tremé and Seventh Ward, 1791-1930,” Ph.D. dissertation, 2011, 63.

¹²² Kimball, *Nell Kimball*, 198.

¹²³ Howard, *Men Like That*, 79.

encounters with numerous black men and women as he toured the South in the 1930s. In St. Louis, for example, he had an ongoing romance with a “swell guy” he described as “the man type,” suggesting that he was masculine or a trade.¹²⁴ Other encounters Washington had with black men in the South were somewhat more complicated to negotiate. One man he met in Richmond, VA “tried so hard to find me some fish so at 5:30 am after the dance, after rejecting about 5 different girls I cruised him up to my room for a drink and told him I wanted him. He said why didn’t I hint it earlier in the night we both could have been knocked out and had plenty of rest instead of chasing those fish.”¹²⁵ This account suggests that while homosexual relationships and sex occurred between black men in the South, pursuing such encounters were not without risk. Washington’s numerous accounts of affairs with women also reflect that, as other scholars have argued about other gay communities during this period, homosexual acts among men in this context did not necessarily indicate a strictly defined sexual preference or orientation.

Where same-sex encounters occurred across the color line in other contexts in the Jim Crow South, with or without the consent of both parties, black men could easily be accused not only of posing a threat to white womanhood, but also a threat to white manhood. In March of 1912, two African-American male millworkers, Joe Brinson and Frank Whisonant, were lynched in Blacksburg, SC after a white male millworker claimed that they forced him to drink whiskey and perform oral sex on one of them. While

¹²⁴ George Washington to Glenn Carrington, 9 February 1941, Box 9, Folder 6, GC Papers.

¹²⁵ George Washington to Glenn Carrington, 20 April 1941, Box 9, Folder 6, GC Papers.

conflicting accounts of what the press called the “unmentionable act” suggest that the encounter was consensual, as with similar rape accusations from southern white women during the Jim Crow Era, few southern whites questioned the guilt of these two black men once the accusation had been made.¹²⁶ The fact that all three of the men, as well as the most likely culprits in the lynching were millworkers, sharing the same economic status and living conditions, meant that race stood as the only obvious difference in their social standing in the midst of a changing and industrializing southern textile industry that threatened their control over their labor and their families. As historian Bryant Simon has argued, “even more than the rape of a white woman, the rape of this white man by another man graphically represented male millworkers’ deepest fears of emasculation. That the perpetrators were African Americans magnified the offense.”¹²⁷

This violent episode was part of broader patterns of pathologizing black sexuality that began during slavery and persisted throughout the twentieth century, taking on their most violent and gruesome form with the lynching of black men in the Jim Crow South. The coupling of racism with anti-homosexuality was not uncommon. As one white queer observer recalled in 1914, “It scarcely needs to be mentioned that Americans frequently blame one or the other ethnic group for homosexuality.” He went on to cite a Southern criminologist who blamed the rise of male prostitution on Italian immigrants, and the widespread tendency he had seen to assume a high rate of

¹²⁶ Bryant Simon, *Fabric of Defeat: The Politics of South Carolina Millhands, 1910-1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998) 11-13.

¹²⁷ Simon, *Fabric of Defeat*, 14.

homosexuality among the “yellow-skinned population.”¹²⁸ Historian William Eskridge has cited a connection between the growing social hysteria about the predatory tendencies of both lesbians and homosexual men in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with fears of the black rapist, arguing that the country as a whole “was in the throes of a sex panic.”¹²⁹ As sodomy laws became increasingly directed at homosexual acts, the vast majority of those charged with sodomy or sexually “deviant” behavior in the South in the decades before World War II were African Americans.¹³⁰ In addition to the image of the black rapist, Eskridge explained, “the association of blacks with sodomy, prostitution, and rape not only helped construct a public consensus that people of color were a degraded, sex-crazed race, but also helped exclude black men from public citizenship.”¹³¹

By the late 1930s, northern cities began cracking down on vice with renewed enthusiasm. Authorities in cities like New York and Chicago saw significant increases in arrests for sex offenses, and working-class and poor blacks and immigrants became favorite targets of police harassment.¹³² Reflecting this increased concern about sexual deviance, black newspapers reported much less frequently on drag balls and increased coverage of sensational accounts of homosexual criminality and depictions of gays and

¹²⁸ Katz, *Gay American History*, 51.

¹²⁹ William Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003* (New York: Viking Press, 2008), 40.

¹³⁰ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 70.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Terry, *An American Obsession*, 277, and De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 130.

lesbians as social threats. As the decade came to a close and World War II approached, African American race leaders continued to show a sustained belief that respectability was essential for racial progress, and that overt homosexuality precluded respectable status. Despite these concerns, wartime mobilization would create unprecedented opportunities for the growth and visibility of queer black culture.

Chapter 2

“The Perplexing Problem of Sex Inversion”: World War II and the Politics of Black Homosexuality

“The perplexing problem of sex inversion seemed to be as much a part of the armed forces as counting cadence in drill or the welcome notes of ‘chow call,’” wrote journalist Ples Weston in the November 1946 issue of the St. Louis-based *Negro: A Review*. “Sex morality was preached time and time again but homosexuality could not be stamped out.” Reflecting the continued engagement of educated African Americans with contemporary medical and psychiatric literature, Weston warned that masturbation could cause insanity, and suggested that the single-sex environment of the military was to blame and that “many of these individuals manifested these tendencies for the first time in the armed forces.”¹³³

Weston’s claim that wartime mobilization created more openings for same-sex encounters was accurate, but the nature of his concern also reveals the complicated status of homosexuals within black communities during and immediately after the war. Weston seemed particularly worried that while some of these men who engaged in sexual “inversion” felt “insecurity and shame,” others were “arrogant” and some

¹³³ Ples Weston, “Sex Inversion...In the Armed Forces,” *Negro: A Review*, 1 November 1946, 64-65.

“seemed to take it as a matter of course. They went around talking as though they were women and called each other pet names like, Mother Rose or ‘Pretty Patsy’ and one was affectionately called ‘Good-Stuff.’” Such behavior, he concluded was “the evil which undermined [*sic.*] and robbed many youths of their sacred endowment from god, the potency of manhood,” and was “as much an evil as prostitution if not more so.”¹³⁴

During the World War II period, queer African Americans found new opportunities to act on same-sex desire in the context of the military and wartime mobilization. Moreover, they participated in the growth of urban gay and lesbian subcultures across the country, which—although still racially segregated—made same-sex desire much more visible to Americans of all races. The war years also further inspired African Americans, regardless of sexuality, to fight for racial justice, and simultaneously sparked the beginnings of identity-based politics among white gays and lesbians.¹³⁵ In the context of this black politicization, however, issues of sexuality increasingly became a cause for concern.

Even as working-class queer blacks found themselves more comfortable in working-class and poor black communities than they did among white gays and lesbians, more middle-class black Americans accepted prevailing discussions among physicians and psychiatrists of homosexuality as a mental disorder or disease, complicating the status of middle-class queer African Americans and paving the way for many black Americans to embrace the postwar period’s emphasis on sexual conformity. The

¹³⁴ Weston, 65.

¹³⁵ See, for example, D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*.

continued desire of some African Americans for bourgeois respectability and the increasing importance of racial solidarity and conformity to middle-class values in black arguments for full citizenship meant that despite black political mobilization and the increased visibility of homosexuality during World War II, queer African Americans' politicization was not yet possible.

As the 1930s drew to an end and the country began preparing for entry into World War II, African Americans found themselves still facing Jim Crow segregation and racial violence even as they once again readied themselves to join their country's fight for freedom and democracy abroad. While wartime mobilization brought increased prosperity, and unemployment all but disappeared, African Americans worked to take advantages of wartime opportunities, despite continued discrimination in the military and the workplace. As historian Patricia Sullivan explained, "The massive defense build-up that began in 1939 fueled the industrial boom that lifted America out of the Depression but left blacks on the periphery." But in this context African Americans found opportunities for resistance, and "the issue of jobs and economic equality took on even greater urgency."¹³⁶

While the New Deal in the 1930s had brought about the shift of many black Americans' political allegiance to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Democratic Party,¹³⁷ World War II politicized African Americans on an unprecedented scale. Membership in the country's leading civil rights organization, the NAACP, multiplied exponentially

¹³⁶ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 242.

¹³⁷ See, for example, Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

during the war, both in the urban North and the rural South.¹³⁸ Wartime mobilization created openings both for racial conflict and for challenges to institutionalized racism. As Sullivan argued, “Migration of blacks north and west to centers of industrial production was matched by the influx of black soldiers into the South to train in army camps, multiplying the sites of racial contact and conflict.”¹³⁹ In contrast to their experiences during and immediately after the first World War, however, African Americans had a sufficient political foundation by World War II that they managed to pressure the federal government to act against racial discrimination in wartime industries by establishing the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC), and with the Supreme Court decision *Smith v. Allwright*, which outlawed the white primary.

Coinciding with the expansion of African American political activity during World War II, gay men, lesbians, and queer sexuality in general became at once more visible and—continuing the trend that began in the 1930s—more subject to scrutiny. Wartime mobilization disrupted the traditional family structure, bringing young men and women—who might have ordinarily gone from living with their parents to living with a spouse—away from their families and communities and into the military or into cities to work in wartime industries. This disruption created spaces, as John D’Emilio explained, wherein “families endured prolonged separations, divorce and desertion occurred more frequently, and the trend toward greater sexual permissiveness accelerated.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 267.

¹³⁹ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 242-43.

¹⁴⁰ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 23.

The war brought many of these young people into the military environment, and because of the military's focus on recruiting young, single men and women with no dependents, this population included disproportionately high numbers of gay men and lesbians.¹⁴¹ As pioneering historian Allan Bérubé has argued, "The massive mobilization for World War II relaxed the social constraints of peacetime that had kept gay men and women unaware of themselves and each other, 'bringing out' many in the process." Wartime migration to cities and the same-sex organization of the US military were major factors in this process. "Gathered together in military camps," Bérubé continued, these men and women "often came to terms with their sexual desires, fell in love, made friends with other gay people, and began to name and talk about who they were." Outside the military base, these men and women, "discovered and contributed to the rich gay nightlife—parties, bars, and nightclubs—that flourished in the war-boom cities."¹⁴²

Although queer African Americans faced the additional challenges of racial discrimination, they also participated in and helped to shape the wartime gay world, while still maintaining ties with their families and communities. Mobilization for the second World War, then, was especially significant for queer African Americans, strengthening calls for racial justice, making same-sex desire even more visible to black men and women, and creating more opportunities for queer Americans of all races to

¹⁴¹ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 24 and 27.

¹⁴² Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010 [1990]), 6.

engage in same-sex relationships and forge bonds of love and friendship with other queer men and women.

For queer young black men, World War II offered not only an opportunity to travel around the world, but also a chance to explore same-sex relationships and forge community with other queer black soldiers, both on military bases and in the growing gay nightlife in cities. “You’d be surprised to see the queer people in Uncle Sam’s Army,” remarked jazz musician George Washington in a letter to his former lover in 1943.¹⁴³

One young African American Brooklyn native, Ronald Sanders,¹⁴⁴ reveled in the opportunities for casual sex that the military environment provided. “There’s one piece of trade down here that keeps my heart aflame and my ass afire,” he wrote to his friend and former lover Glen Carrington in 1944, “Every time he passes my ass-hole twitches ‘Ain’t Gon Study War No More.’”¹⁴⁵ Sanders seemed to enjoy the transgressive nature of his same-sex relationships, referring to himself and other men with feminine names or pronouns and taking pleasure in flaunting his most recent “piece of trade” or “camp” in public. “I took two ‘fay’ not fag – chickens to the Howard Theatre with me today,” he wrote in 1942. “Boy you should have seen those heads turn around. I wasn’t bothered. Oh well, you only live once.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ George Washington to Glenn Carrington, 9 January 1943, Box 9, Folder 6, GC Papers.

¹⁴⁴ Name changed because of privacy restrictions.

¹⁴⁵ Restricted Letter, 3 February 1944, Box 8, Folder 3, Glenn Carrington Papers, 1921-1971, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript Archive and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

¹⁴⁶ Restricted Letter, 17 July 1942, Box 8, Folder 3, GC Papers.

Sanders' letters recounted numerous stories of casual sexual encounters with other soldiers,¹⁴⁷ but they also reflected wartime racial tensions and the sense of racial community he shared with other gay African-American soldiers. "Yes here am I in 'Hang a Nigger,' N.C.," he wrote from a southern military base in February 1944, "and I haven't left the Camp Area at all except for Tuesday and Wednesday night when I played with a 'Fay' band at the 'Hotel Monroe' and the 'Country Club.' The boys who I played with are really 'in there.' We got gay to the very gills. But of course I behaved like the perfect lady I am." As Patricia Sullivan explained, "Areas hosting military camps were cauldrons of racial tensions and violence,"¹⁴⁸ a situation that would have forged strong bonds between black soldiers. Others of Glenn Carrington's correspondents shared similar stories that suggest that queer black soldiers gravitated toward each other and enjoyed their own unique social circles as a way of surviving both racism and antihomosexuality.

Although only about 150,000 women served in the military, World War II also created opportunities for black lesbians to form relationships with other women in the military and the workplace. Women in the military faced a different set of regulations than male GIs because female sexuality was policed differently within American society, and as Leisa D. Meyer argued in her study of the WAC during World War II, obvious cases of lesbianism represented "the apotheosis of cultural anxieties over women's entrance into the military."¹⁴⁹ Military officials' goal with regard to lesbianism in the

¹⁴⁷ See, for example, Restricted Letter, 15 February 1944, GC Papers.

¹⁴⁸ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 269.

¹⁴⁹ Leisa D. Meyer, *Creating GI Jane: Sexuality and Power in the Women's Army Corps During World War II* (1996), 149.

military was to preserve the image of military women as chaste and respectable, while still filling the need for wartime womanpower. Generally speaking, scrutiny of lesbianism temporarily lessened during the war, in contrast to popular images of lesbians as “monstrosities” during the 1930s or mentally ill in the post-war period. Because women’s labor in nontraditional jobs became essential to the war effort, Lillian Faderman contended, “female independence and love between women were understood and undisturbed and even protected.”¹⁵⁰ In wartime industries, women also found themselves in increasingly female-centered social networks after so many young men left to fight abroad. As John D’Emilio argued, “by expanding the social space in which women predominated, the war opened possibilities for lesbians to meet at the same time that it protected all-female environments from the taint of deviance.”¹⁵¹ In larger cities, lesbian bar culture began developing during the war, and while these bars mostly remained segregated, black lesbians occasionally ventured into predominately white lesbian bars in cities like Buffalo, New York.¹⁵²

These openings for same-sex female desire were not equally available to women of all backgrounds, however, and women were not entirely protected from undesirable or “blue” discharges as a result of same-sex intimacy. Butch/femme lesbian couples—particularly the butch member—were the most visible examples of lesbianism in the military, and therefore more often targeted for discrimination. Moreover, the

¹⁵⁰ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 119.

¹⁵¹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 29.

¹⁵² Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 38-42.

butch/femme relationship was much more prevalent among working-class and poor minority women, while middle- and upper-class white women maintained their late 19th and early 20th century tradition of “romantic friendships,” which were not overtly sexual or transgressive of feminine gender roles. As Meyer argued, the contempt that military officials showed for working-class lesbianism was based in white middle- and upper-class ideas about the working-class and nonwhites, which “ascribed to them a more vulgar and obvious sexuality, and assumed their greater sexual immorality.” Ultimately, Meyer contended, while “romantic friendships” in the WAC were usually ignored or tolerated, “both the greater visibility and assumptions about sexual aggressiveness contributed to the general hostility toward butch women,”¹⁵³ many of whom were African American, and some of whom were undesirably discharged for their sexuality and gender performance. Butch black women in wartime industrial work also sometimes faced workplace discrimination and firing because of the combined forces of racism and homophobia.¹⁵⁴

Military life and the combat experience made homosexuality visible to and fostered same-sex intimacy among black men and white men alike. During the war, African American men were often assigned to the same types of jobs as white gay men. As Bérubé argued, “Some of the service duties considered appropriate for gay male GIs were those into which black male soldiers were channeled as well. To release white soldiers for combat, the Army and Navy assigned black men to” manual labor and

¹⁵³ Meyer, *Creating GI Jane*, 151.

¹⁵⁴ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 56.

service jobs,¹⁵⁵ which feminized black men in the context of the war effort. GIs aped effeminate behavior and stereotypical gay behavior as a way of relieving tensions in military camps. Men even danced together in military canteens, a behavior for which gay and lesbian civilians risked arrest. “Crowded into port cities,” John D’Emilio explained, “men on leave or those waiting to be shipped overseas shared beds in YMCAs and slept in each other’s arms in parks or in the aisles of movie theaters that stayed open to house them. Living in close quarters, not knowing whether they would make it through the war, and depending on one another for survival, men of whatever sexual persuasion formed intense emotional attachments.”¹⁵⁶ Although such intimacies occurred almost exclusively within the boundaries of racial segregation, in such an environment, queer relationships often went unpunished or even ignored.

Performances featuring drag queens or female impersonators were common in the military during the war, and as Bérubé explained, “these shows produced by and for soldiers were as vital to the war effort [as the USO], incidentally providing gay male GIs with a temporary refuge where they could let their hair down to entertain their fellows.”¹⁵⁷ Similar to some of Harlem’s drag shows of the 1920s and early 30s, female impersonation in the military served to entertain mostly heterosexuals, but because of the scarcity of women at military camps, wartime drag shows often included female impersonators who were not necessarily queer. Moreover, the fact that these shows

¹⁵⁵ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 58-59.

¹⁵⁶ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 25-26.

¹⁵⁷ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 67-68.

were performed for heterosexual audiences made them less threatening. As historian Brett Beemyn has argued, these performers, “were isolated individuals who, rather than receiving validation for their cross-dressing, were often seen as a curiosity or laughed at for it.” While the drag balls that drew in huge crowds of mostly black gay men and lesbians in Chicago’s South Side during the war, for example, offered drag queens a safe space for transgressive gender and sexual expression, the military’s drag performances were “limited to a heterosexually controlled space.”¹⁵⁸

Black GIs also participated in segregated performances that featured female impersonation. Soon after Broadway’s *This is the Army* opened in 1942, black soldiers began developing a similar show called *Uncle Sambo*, which featured black men in drag. Interestingly, these performances reflected more of a willingness to transgress gender boundaries than racial segregation. Although some soldier shows featured integrated casts, they typically segregated black and white performers for dance numbers, including those that featured men of both races in drag. Even in shows that featured white male GIs in blackface, impersonating both black men and women, the blackfaced performers did not dance with whites, as Bérubé explained, “so that even in blackface the taboo on interracial couples was not broken.”¹⁵⁹

Black men’s expressions of femininity and same-sex desire in the context of World War II military service did not come without complication, however. Because of the association of drag performance with flamboyantly feminine homosexuality in urban

¹⁵⁸ Beemyn, “A Queer Capital,” 194.

¹⁵⁹ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 79-80.

areas, those men who participated in military drag shows risked exposing themselves to ridicule, speculation about their possible queerness, and heightened scrutiny from their superiors.¹⁶⁰ Ronald Sanders, for example, clearly understood the dangers of flaunting his same-sex encounters when he wrote in the early days of his military service, “I am being constantly annoyed by a fellow who is in charge of my group, so therefore I must choose my wording with some precaution.”¹⁶¹ Drag shows during the war, then, occupied a complicated position wherein the behavior of those GIs whose gender performance or sexuality was typically viewed as suspect or transgressive was temporarily condoned, even if it was only as an object of fascination. “The ‘Queens’ here are something awful,” one of Glenn Carrington’s former lovers wrote him from the Navy, “they wear make-up, long blood red finger nails, and to top it off they are wearing magnificent ‘Pomps’ some are three inches high.”¹⁶² Such openings for gender nonconformity did not, however, come without personal risk or official scrutiny. As Bérubé explained, “At a time when the military was beginning to identify and discharge homosexual personnel, officials did not want the public to think that, by sponsoring drag routines, they condoned effeminacy or homosexuality.”¹⁶³

Another outlet for same-sex desire that grew in prominence during the war was the world of gay bars and nightclubs. In addition to the continued migration of African

¹⁶⁰ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 68.

¹⁶¹ Restricted Letter, 2 July 1942, Box 8, Folder 3, GC Papers.

¹⁶² Ralph Butler to Glenn Carrington, 16 September 1945, Box 4, Folder 15, GC Papers.

¹⁶³ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 68.

Americans to larger cities, black gay men and lesbians involved in the military effort participated in what Bérubé called, “a flourishing gay nightlife” in urban centers near military bases.¹⁶⁴ Establishments that catered to gay and lesbian clientele were often in the same areas of cities that attracted soldiers, which meant that gay nightlife became more visible to outsiders, both black and white, during the war.¹⁶⁵

The continued segregation in these cities, along with the Army’s practice of sending black GIs to segregated and inferior locations for their paid leave during the war, meant that the gay nightlife outside of military bases remained mostly segregated as well.¹⁶⁶ Although some historians have argued for the significance this growing gay bar culture as the foundations for the politicization of gays and lesbians in subsequent decades,¹⁶⁷ segregation in these gay social and cultural institutions created a major divide between black and white queer communities, and served to exclude blacks from the nascent queer organizing that occurred in the decade following the war. In the South as well, gay subcultures remained strictly segregated throughout the 1940s.¹⁶⁸ While queer social spaces remained limited in the South during the war, queer white southerners, many of whom moved from rural to urban areas during the war, congregated in places like Atlanta’s Piedmont Park and gay tearooms. In Memphis,

¹⁶⁴ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 98.

¹⁶⁵ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 116.

¹⁶⁶ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 108.

¹⁶⁷ Primarily John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics*, Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls*, and others who have focused almost exclusively on white gays and lesbians.

¹⁶⁸ Howard, *Men Like That*, xiv.

urban migration led to the formation of lesbian softball leagues in the 40s. Some southern cities—although on a much smaller scale than those in the North—saw the advent of gay bars during and immediately after the war. Jackson and Atlanta, for example, both had gay bars by the late 1940s.¹⁶⁹ Since these early southern gay bars would have almost certainly catered to an exclusively white clientele, interracial encounters had to occur in public spaces. As Brett Beemyn has argued in his study of queer African Americans in Washington, D.C., “many Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals did not frequent bars with a primarily gay clientele or socialize just with other gays. And since many African Americans already had a ‘collective consciousness’ and were politically active as Blacks,” gay bars played less of a role in the formation of gay black identity than they did for gay white identity.¹⁷⁰

For those gay and lesbian African Americans who wanted to continue having same-sex relationships after returning from the war, the dual forces of racism and antihomosexuality made their lives and choices complicated. Poor and working-class blacks who lacked the resources to live privately and independently like many white gays, often had to decide whether to try and live as homosexuals in straight black families, communities, and institutions, or whether to try and engage with more privileged—and often racist—white gay culture.¹⁷¹ Whereas many white gays and

¹⁶⁹ See John Howard, “The Library, the Park, and the Pervert: Public Space and Homosexual Encounter in Post-World War II Atlanta,” and Daneel Burning, “Softball and Alcohol: The Limits of Lesbian Community in Memphis from the 1940s through the 1960s,” in *Carrying On in the Gay and Lesbian South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 113-114, 124, and 203; and Howard, *Men Like That*, 95.

¹⁷⁰ Beemyn, “A Queer Capital,” 188.

¹⁷¹ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 246.

lesbians severed ties with or moved away from their families during the war, black gay men and lesbians more often maintained ties with their families and black communities within big cities because of segregation, economic necessity, racial solidarity, or simply because they found black heterosexuals more welcoming than white gays and lesbians. One of the few black women that Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis interviewed for their history of Buffalo's working-class lesbian community, Debra, found her family more accepting of her lesbianism than any of the book's white interviewees. While Debra rarely discussed her sexuality with her family and was careful to protect them from any potential "trouble" that her sexuality could have caused, for the most part, her family knew about and accepted her sexuality, and she maintained her social ties to Buffalo's black community.¹⁷²

Black queer social life often took place within heterosexual black institutions and social spaces. Queer African Americans in Washington, DC, for example, often attended house parties or rent parties during the 1940s held by heterosexual African Americans or patronized black restaurants and bars. Others held or attended parties or went to bars that catered exclusively to a black gay, lesbian, and bisexual clientele.¹⁷³ Black lesbians often preferred house parties during the 1940s because in even mid-sized cities, there were too few black lesbians to sustain an exclusively black lesbian bar.¹⁷⁴ Some queer African Americans felt pressure from within their communities to exhibit

¹⁷² Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 61-62.

¹⁷³ Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 190.

¹⁷⁴ Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 42.

racial solidarity and eschew white establishments. Alabama native Todd Grison, who moved to Detroit after the war, for example, once “ventured into a white gay bar to see what it was like, but he ‘really got the cold shoulder, no one would even talk to me.’ When his black friends found out, they accused him of ‘goin’ hiking on us,’ of thinking that he was better than they were.”¹⁷⁵

The occasional exceptions to this segregation sometimes occurred in black communities where a working-class black gay culture was well established before the war, and these interracial interactions were often as a result of white men looking for black sexual or romantic partners. In Harlem, for instance—one of the few places that continued the drag ball traditions of the 1920s and 30s—queer African American GIs found a well-established gay culture, and found opportunities for same-sex friendships and interracial sexual encounters at the Mount Morris Baths, or bars like Lucky’s Rendezvous and Phil Black’s Fun Makers Club. In Chicago, where many white gay men congregated in hotel bars to pick up soldiers,¹⁷⁶ Finnie’s Club was one of the few establishments that featured drag performers and catered to an interracial clientele throughout the war.¹⁷⁷ These transgressions of segregation did not necessarily indicate an absence of racism, however; throughout the century, many whites who pursued black sexual partners did so out of an erotic fascination with blackness that was based

¹⁷⁵ Quoted in Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 246.

¹⁷⁶ De la Croix, *Chicago Whispers*, 162.

¹⁷⁷ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 116.

on the same sorts of stereotypes about black hypersexuality that was used in other contexts as an excuse for racial violence and segregation.¹⁷⁸

Despite the decline of drag balls in most cities during the war, the working-class black drag queens who rebelliously walked the streets of Harlem and Chicago's South Side remained some of the most visible examples of gay life during the war. Harlem's drag balls continued to draw gay African Americans from across the country, especially from places like Washington DC, which witnessed a wartime crackdown on cross-dressing and other forms of "vice."¹⁷⁹ As one scholar has argued, in the context of the increased scrutiny and criminalization of homosexuality that began in the 1930s and escalated during and after the war, the visibility of black drag queens in Chicago had political implications. "Unlike most of their middle-class white male counterparts," Allen Drexel contended, "drag queens in Chicago were highly visible participants in an evolving tradition of gay, often black gay, stylistic/performative transgressions of heterosexual standards."¹⁸⁰ Less formal and less public than Harlem's extravagant drag balls, Chicago's "Finnie's Balls," named after the black gay hustler and gambler who started them, were typically staged in rented rooms or ramshackle taverns, catering to

¹⁷⁸ Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 201.

¹⁷⁹ Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 192.

¹⁸⁰ Allen Drexel, "Before Paris Burned: Race, Class, and Male Homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935-1960," *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*, Brett Beemyn ed. New York: Routledge (1997), 123.

poor and working-class blacks in the South Side where gay men and lesbians danced together, safe from the heterosexual gaze.¹⁸¹

In Chicago's South Side, drag queens were hardly immune from harassment or violence, but were to some extent accepted as part of black working-class culture during the 1940s. "Nancy Kelly," a young gay black man who moved with his family from New Orleans recalled the first time he saw a drag queen in Chicago, around 1938 or 1939:

The first drag queen I saw was Joanne, and I saw Joanne at the corner of 31st and State Street. And they guys was laughin', you know, so I laughed too, until I saw her. She was standing on the corner with her hand on her hip, her hair drawn to the back into the ponytail like, you know. But they wasn't botherin' her or nothin'...She worked at the Cabin Inn, you know. They'd do her, you know. I was fascinated...I knew I was gay since I was twelve years old. But I just watched her. That makeup was scintillating. And I thought, 'I'm gonna do that.'¹⁸²

Although these young black men laughed at Joanne, they still considered her an acceptable sexual partner. In another instance, Kelly recalled his mother and sister who, while occasionally calling him "sissy," still defended him against other family members and "church women" who made fun of his effeminate mannerisms and his participation in the drag scene. "My uncle was the same way," he remembered. "'cause the boys was gonna beat my up one day—they's so hard on the queens—and they told my uncle, 'He's a sissy' and he says, 'Well, he's *my* sissy!' and he had the biggest fight on 45th Street. My uncle whipped all those little punks up there."¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Drexel, "Before Paris Burned," 132-133.

¹⁸² Quoted in Drexel, "Before Paris Burned," 124.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Drexel, "Before Paris Burned," 128-129.

While Kelly's experience can be taken as somewhat representative of working-class black attitudes toward homosexuality, the class-based values that influenced African Americans' ideas about sex and gender during the Harlem Renaissance continued to create divisions between middle- and working-class blacks of all sexual persuasions during the 1940s. Ronald Sanders poked fun at his own inferior class status in a letter his professional educated former lover, "Glenn you must remember you are a man of caliber," Sanders wrote. "Oh darling my ass bleeds for you. I can see the headlines — Extra! Extra!! Blue blood killed while accompanying gutter-snipe on a exploration trip thru the east side slums. Of course you're the blue blood. [...] And too Glenn, I don't think your contours would look well through bars." While Washington, D.C.'s working-class black gay men frequented the Cozy Corner, another bar Nob Hill, according to

, catered to middle-class black gay men in the postwar period. Working-class black drag queen Pat Hamilton recalled that Nob Hill's customers "wanted you to be light; they wanted you to be a postal worker, or a doctor, or something in that area. They were very 'snooty' because they were mainly men [in] suit and tie, [with] briefcase. Nobody really knew they were gay."¹⁸⁴ This description reflects both class and color prejudice, as well as a tendency among gay members of the black middle-class to avoid flamboyant displays of their sexuality.

Despite the opportunities that wartime mobilization brought, some GIs who had same-sex experiences during the war tried and failed at fitting into straight society after

¹⁸⁴ Quoted in Beemyn, "A Queer Capital," 187.

the war, and many, both black and white, felt pressure to conform to heterosexual marriage, despite the greater sexual freedom they had experienced during wartime. As one white GI recalled,

They would go home, [after having] had an experience or a friendship in the service with a man. They'd say "Well, the war's over and I'll put that behind me. Now I'm going home and I'm going to marry and we're going to settle down." They'd go home and they could not fit in. Everything was too odd. They had responsibilities and there was a lot of peer pressure: get married, have kids, start a home. They just weren't ready. They they'd come back to New York. We would say, "Well, you can go back all you want, but it won't work. Because you're gay."¹⁸⁵

Black GI's—particularly those from middle-class "respectable" backgrounds—faced similar pressure from their families and communities. Despite expressing his affections for some of the younger "boys" in the Army, black GI Walter Woodley wrote to a friend in 1942 that he was "thinking seriously of getting married in the near future. I have a lovely Girl in Jamaica [Queens]. She has a good education and also has personality."¹⁸⁶ Todd Grison, an African American vet who experienced his first same-sex encounter in the Army moved home to Alabama after the war and married a woman he had gotten pregnant. Unable to deny his same-sex desire, Grison soon divorced his wife and moved to Detroit, where he integrated himself into the city's black gay social circles.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 247.

¹⁸⁶ Walter Woodley to Glenn Carrington, 10 July 1942, Box 9, Folder 10, Carrington Papers.

¹⁸⁷ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 246.

In addition to familial pressure to deny same-sex desires, queer men and women faced heightened public scrutiny, which began with attempts to limit the number of homosexual military personnel through a screening process that became increasingly influenced by psychoanalysis.¹⁸⁸ Moving away from the model that criminalized homosexual acts, military psychiatrists developed screening procedures, often based on stereotyped ideas about gay male behaviors, to prevent gay men from entering the military. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, however, the military could not afford to reject able-bodied men, regardless of sexuality.¹⁸⁹ Ironically, then, military officials during World War II codified discrimination against homosexuals through an official screening process, while simultaneously allowing the vast majority of those gay men and lesbians to slip through the process to meet the war's increasing demands for manpower. As Allan Bérubé explained, this process was fraught with complications and contradictions: "The antihomosexual wall that psychiatrists began to build around the military during World War II, although full of holes, was a new feature of the American sexual landscape. Posted at the gates were the psychiatric examiners, many of them looking for hidden homosexuals while trying to meet military quotas and not ruin rejectees' lives." Despite its relative ineffectiveness, this military screening process had significant implications for the status of gay men and lesbians in American society, in

¹⁸⁸ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 8.

¹⁸⁹ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 2.

that it “introduced to the military the idea that homosexuals were unfit to serve in the armed forces because they were mentally ill.”¹⁹⁰

While black newspapers in the 1920s and 30s did reflect some engagement on the part of educated African Americans with medical and psychiatric studies about homosexuality, the military screening process put into place during the war raised the profile of these studies, or as John D’Emilio has described it, “catapulted the psychiatric profession into the lives of millions of Americans. [...] Increasingly, Americans began to view human sexual behavior as either healthy or sick, with homosexuality falling into the latter category.”¹⁹¹ Medical studies on sexuality such as 1930s study by New York’s Committee for the Study of Sex Variants came to public attention during this era and tended to link racial and sexual deviance, a trend that would have caused concern among black leaders. As Jennifer Terry has revealed, the study reflected “a link in the medical imagination between blackness and hypersexuality.” In instances involving black lesbian subjects, for example, researchers fixated on several women with large clitorises, with which several bragged they were able to penetrate female sexual partners. According to Terry, this “clinical reading of lesbian masculinity in female genitals,” served to reinforce these stereotypical ideas about black sexuality.¹⁹² In the same study, one doctor explained a black woman’s “‘promiscuous’ bisexuality” as “evidence of the dangers of race mixing” that had occurred over generations among

¹⁹⁰ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 33.

¹⁹¹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 17.

¹⁹² Terry, *An American Obsession*, 205.

whites, blacks, and Indians. As Terry observed, such sentiments reflect an “underlying agenda concerning eugenics and the maintenance of race purity.”¹⁹³

As public awareness of such medical and psychological studies of homosexuality increased, so too did the awareness of medical and psychological treatments or “cures” for homosexuality and gender nonconformity. One of the earliest medical studies that attempted to treat homosexuality with hormone injections was published in 1941 and used an effeminate gay black man as its primary subject.¹⁹⁴ While such studies were hardly widespread, there is evidence to suggest that such recent medical developments were visible to those queer African Americans who might have been looking to better understand and alleviate their own sexual conflicts. By the World War II period, black activist and writer Pauli Murray had struggled for decades with what she described as an “inverted sex instinct,” which included a masculine gender identity and attraction to women. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, however, terms like “transgender” or “transsexual” were not available to Murray, who sought out medical explanations and treatments. After reading a 1939 article in the *New York Amsterdam News* about testosterone treatments for male homosexuality, she contacted the clinic named in the article, hoping to receive male hormones because of her strong “desire to be male.” The clinic would not administer male hormones, but offered to correct her condition with female hormones, an offer she could not bring herself to accept.¹⁹⁵ Although awareness

¹⁹³ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 247.

¹⁹⁴ Katz, *Gay American History*, 167.

¹⁹⁵ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 36-37.

of transsexuality and sex-reassignment procedures did not become widespread until the early 1950s, it is nonetheless significant that medical explanations for homosexuality and gender nonconformity became visible to African Americans—including queer blacks like Murray—during the World War II era.

Following a shift that began in the late 1930s, drag balls declined as a subject of interest in black newspapers and periodicals during the war, and the few articles and opinion pieces that addressed sexuality reflected, that along with much of the rest of the country, educated African Americans came to discuss and understand homosexuality less as a subject of fascination and more as a disease or mental defect. The few articles in black publications that address homosexuality during the early years of the war focused on particularly gruesome examples of criminal behavior on the part of gay men and lesbians. *The Pittsburgh Courier*, for example, reported in December 1939 of an incident where “homosexual love, tintured with jealousy” resulted in a working-class black Philadelphia woman murdering another woman with whom she had an “unnatural relationship.”¹⁹⁶ Several months later, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported on “one of the most sordid, fiendish crimes in the history of Philadelphia” wherein a woman and her female lover allegedly murdered the woman’s newborn baby.¹⁹⁷

In addition to such sensational stories of lesbian criminality, some black journalists offered sustained discussions on homosexuality as a mental disease and

¹⁹⁶ “Philly Woman Kills ‘Friend’: Strange Romance Ends in Murder,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 December 1939, 23.

¹⁹⁷ “Discovers Dead Baby’s Body on Street Wrapped in Towel,” *The Philadelphia Tribune*, 28 March 1940, 2.

social problem. Almena Davis, founder of the *Los Angeles Tribune*, which served LA's black community during the 40s and 50s, with a peak circulation of 25,000, offered a lengthy piece on the "forbidden" topic of homosexuality in November 1943. Claiming to have read extensively on the subject, Davis concluded that homosexuality "is, for the most part, a psychological defect," citing two homosexual acquaintances who admitted wishing they could change "back" to being heterosexual. Davis pointed to a recent psychological study, admitting that she believed "that all people are bi-sexual to puberty," at which point their experiences determine their sexual orientation. In response to historical studies of homosexuality among the Greeks, Davis responded, "Yes, there has always been homosexuality, but there has always been tuberculosis, and syphilis, insanity, and scarlet fever, and women dying in child birth," and suggested that society should respond to homosexuality as it does to these other maladies.¹⁹⁸

Davis's column also suggests the continued influence of socioeconomic class on black attitudes toward homosexuality. At the beginning of the article, Davis suggested that her subject matter was taboo because "the subject in polite society is sort of déclassé. And in—shall we say, impolite society, it is considered naïve to see anything sufficiently unusual about it to warrant discussion." In other words, homosexuality was not something that respectable blacks discussed, but something that was prevalent to the point of being common among the poor and working class. Later in the article, Davis argued that for homosexual men and lesbians, "there is no chance for marriage to what they most desire [...]; nor children by that beloved; nor respectable status with that

¹⁹⁸ Almena Davis, "How 'Bout This?" *Los Angeles Tribune*, 8 November 1943, 11 and 19-20.

beloved in society. And if you don't think that is important, you must be very young because, as it has been well said, 'No matter how circuitous the route, the ultimate craving is for respectability.'¹⁹⁹ Davis reflects a view suggesting that for some prominent African Americans in the World War II period, exclusive heterosexuality remained a prerequisite for inclusion in respectable society.

While white gays and lesbians faced similar scrutiny during the war, for African Americans, the specter of sexual deviance—still raised as a justification for racial violence in the South and the exclusion of blacks from full citizenship—had greater potential consequences than it did for whites. The perception that African Americans were especially prone to sexual perversion persisted into the World War II period and continued to permeate medical and psychiatric studies of sexuality. Despite the growing challenges to the customs and laws that had pathologized and punished blackness for centuries, African Americans, particularly black men, continued to face heightened scrutiny about their sexuality; and as legal scholar William Eskridge has argued, “white people’s discipline of hypersexualized black bodies” was directly linked to African Americans’ increasing politicization during the 1930s and 40s. While lynch mobs had been mostly replaced by legal lynchings by the World War II period, evidence suggests that “police attention to sodomy continued to focus disproportionately on black men.” While authorities often targeted black men for sex offense arrests, they were also more likely to give black defendants harsher sentences for their sex crimes, particularly if the victim or fellow participant was white. “The focus on minorities’ supposed animalistic

¹⁹⁹ Davis, 11 and 20.

sexual conduct and the widespread concern with maintaining boundaries or purity connected racism to homophobia in a complicated way,” argued Eskridge. “Society was more likely to be harsh on the black or brown man or woman who dared to have sex with whites of the same sex.”²⁰⁰ Referring to the favorite excuse of southern lynch mobs accusing their victims of raping white women, C.A. Ellwood, writer for a prominent Midwestern black newspaper, expressed outrage in 1945 at the continued use of textbooks claiming, “that the tropical climate has developed ‘socially undesirable traits in the masses of the American Negro today,’ and [the author] says also, ‘nature fixed in the Negro strong sex tendencies.’” While Ellwood’s concern does not directly address homosexuality, he does reflect the sustained concern among many African Americans that white Americans perceived them to be sexually “degenerate,” and thus “morally unfit” for full citizenship.²⁰¹

The war had strikingly similar affects on gay communities and African-American communities in that both groups faced similar types of discrimination in the military—particularly the blue or undesirable discharge—both groups experienced some relaxation of discrimination while overseas, and both groups were politically emboldened by their involvement in the war effort. While gays and lesbians generally lacked the political organization to protest this treatment, African Americans had the NAACP and a vast array of newspapers to mobilize against discrimination. As Patricia

²⁰⁰ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 81-82.

²⁰¹ C.A. Ellwood, “The Negro Is Immoral, Degenerate?” *Negro: A Review*, 1 June 1945, 69. Article states that it is “Condensed from the *Black Dispatch*,” which presumably refers to the Oklahoma-based black newspaper.

Sullivan explained, “From the start of the defense buildup, the [NAACP] and the black press worked aggressively to expose how racism jeopardized national defense efforts.”²⁰²

Although African Americans mostly worked through these institutions to target racism, the use of blue or undesirable discharges, which were neither honorable nor dishonorable, was one form of wartime discrimination that affected gay soldiers as well as black soldiers, and *The Pittsburgh Courier* took the lead in attacking the policy toward the end of the war. Official government figures from 1946 estimated the number of blue discharges from the US Army to be about forty-two thousand.²⁰³ The discharges affected mostly male GIs, about ten thousand of whom were black and about five thousand of whom were homosexual. The Navy also expelled about four thousand veterans with undesirable discharges. As Allan Bérubé explained, “Most had been discharged for vague ‘undesirable traits of character’ by officers who wanted to get rid of ‘problem’ soldiers—blacks, homosexuals, and psychopathic personalities (alcoholics, drug addicts, liars, ‘troublemakers’)—without giving them a court martial.”²⁰⁴ In some cases, racial discrimination was so severe that black GI’s faked homosexuality in order to get discharged, even if that discharge was not honorable.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 267.

²⁰³ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 232 and 348, n.9.

²⁰⁴ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 232.

²⁰⁵ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 233.

By the end of the war, the high numbers of soldiers given these types of discharges and the disproportionate numbers of those who were African American prompted a significant campaign to protest not only the racial discrimination that was evident in the blue and undesirable discharges, but to more broadly attack the effects of the policy on all American GIs. In October 1945, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the nation's most popular black newspaper, launched its campaign against the blue discharge,²⁰⁶ warning its readers not to "accept the Blue Discharge as a quick means of getting out of the Army," and instructing them on how to protest the denial of their GI Bill benefits.²⁰⁷ These initial articles prompted "an avalanche of letters from holders of the blue discharge and interested citizens who considered the situation an outrage," suggesting that average literate black Americans objected to this kind of discrimination, despite the paper's acknowledgement that the blue discharge was often also given for homosexuality.²⁰⁸ "There is no twilight between honor and dishonor," the *Courier* proclaimed in its appeal to the US Congress to stop the discharges.²⁰⁹ The paper framed its campaign not only in terms of stopping discrimination against African Americans, but instead went out of its way to make it "clear that it is fighting for the rights of the 37,000

²⁰⁶ "Courier Probing 'Blue Ticket,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 October 1945, 1 and 10.

²⁰⁷ "Warning: All Soldiers," and "Blue Discharge Holders," both in *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 October 1945, 1.

²⁰⁸ "Courier Probing 'Blue Ticket,'" *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 October 1945, 10.

²⁰⁹ "Courier Asks Limit on Army Blue Discharges," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 October 1945, 1 and 5.

white veterans involved as well as for those of the 10,000 Negroes involved,”²¹⁰ and many of those vets, both black and white, were clearly discharged for homosexuality.

The *Courier's* campaign reached Congress in November 1945 in the form of the “The House Report, ‘Blue Discharges,’” which included a reading of the *Courier's* articles into the congressional record. As Allan Bérubé explained, the report “used a rhetoric of rights and injustice that explicitly mentioned gay discharges as among those who had been treated unfairly,” and “congressmen were surprised to find that any blue-discharge veterans had risked exposing themselves to further stigmatization by protesting their mistreatment.”²¹¹ The *Courier's* efforts and Congress's response, then, not only revealed the Army's discrimination against African Americans, but also specifically called into question the practice of targeting gays and lesbians for discrimination in the armed forces.

While the postwar period would see both the beginnings of gay and lesbian political mobilization and the further politicization of African Americans, the two groups' struggles for full citizenship faced different levels and types of resistance from the American public and the federal government. As Margot Canaday has argued, “as a national policy of second-class citizenship for homosexuals was constructed across the federal bureaucracy,” during the mid-twentieth century, “an administrative apparatus dedicated to racial (and sometimes gender) equality was simultaneously being built up

²¹⁰ “Blue Discharges Reach the US Senate,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 20 October 1945, 1 and 4.

²¹¹ Bérubé, *Coming Out*, 234.

over those same years.”²¹² Moreover, by the second world war, African Americans had a decades-long foundation of political organization to force the federal government to take some of the first meaningful legal and legislative steps against racial discrimination by outlawing the white primary and establishing the FEPC. At the same time, the government was more firmly codifying discrimination against queer Americans, who had no similar political foundations to organize against such measures.

This increasing concern with homosexuality that had begun to grow in the 1930s not only continued expanding in the form of government policy during and after World War II, but is also reflected in a growing obsession with homosexuality among the American public, including much of the African American middle class. Some African American journalists in the immediate postwar period seemed especially concerned about the affects that the military experience had had on black men’s sexuality. In addition to the article that opens this chapter, the St. Louis-based *Negro: A Review*, ran another article in the fall of 1946 that discussed the problems of homosexuality, gender nonconformity, and other forms of “perversion” that had occurred during the war, and that some African Americans saw as a continuing social problem. “One of the gravest problems of the post war period is sex perversion,” cautioned Paul Denson. “It is considerably worse today than it was when the boys returned after World War I, and told of, and practiced the strange experiences they had had across the French Pond.” Citing several different so-called authorities, Denson warned that, “there are no less than 250 different kinds of perversion,” and went on to cite examples ranging from

²¹² Canaday, *The Straight State*, 258.

sadomasochism to urination fetishes. “We are all familiar with homosexuality,” he continued. “Interestingly enough some of the great scholars and builders of the race were men whose sex life was twisted and abnormal. It is often said without contradiction that the great potato wizard, Dr. Carver, was not permitted to be alone with boys for fear he would molest them.”²¹³

Despite Denson’s acknowledgement of such celebrated queer black leaders, he praised efforts to “weed them out” of black institutions and colleges. His article concluded by suggesting that, “Every community should have a fund set aside to establish an organization to study the cause and cure of sex perversion.” And Denson was sure to explain, “Consoling to say the least is the fact that the Negro is not the only culprit in this connection. Bad as his deeds are, they are mild as compared with those of the whites.”²¹⁴ Denson’s article not only reflects a serious concern with the “abnormal” sexuality among African American men returning from the war, but also of its affects on black communities, as well as an awareness that black sexuality was subject to comparison with white sexuality.

The World War II period was clearly a turning point in terms of queer visibility across the country. Military and civilian life changed in ways that brought queer men and women in contact with others like them and allowed unprecedented opportunities for the formation of same-sex relationships and communities. The segregation that persisted in these nascent gay communities, however, meant that queer African

²¹³ Paul H. Denson, “Problem Number One...Perversion,” *Negro: A Review*, 1 October 1946, 1-3.

²¹⁴ Denson, 3.

Americans typically maintained ties with their families and communities, members of which were increasingly concerned with the impact of homosexuality on black political progress. As World War II came to a close and the Cold War intensified, concern over the social implications and dangers of homosexuality became a subject of intense scrutiny and homosexuality became a tremendous social liability; and as queer whites emerged from the war with newfound social cohesion, queer African Americans found their communities engaged in a more pressing battle that required racial solidarity to take precedence over their queer identities.

Chapter 3

"Can Science Eliminate the Third Sex?": Containment and the Politics of Black Homosexuality in the Early Cold War

In a January 1953 article in *Jet* magazine, blues singer Gladys Bentley—the same Bentley who spent much of the 1920s and 30s dressing as a man and married a white woman in Atlantic City— triumphantly revealed herself to have changed “from ‘third’ sex to true female”:

‘For many years,’ she wrote, ‘I lived in a personal hell. Like a great number of lost souls, I inhabited that half-shadow no-man’s land which exists between the boundaries of the two sexes. Throughout the world there are thousands of us furtive humans who have created for ourselves a fantasy as old as human civilization itself; a fantasy which enables us, if only temporarily, to turn our backs on the hard realism of life.... Society shuns us. The unscrupulous exploit us. Very few people understand us.’ For years, she starred in show business, both as Bobbie Minton the male impersonator, and as Gladys Bentley. But, she pointed out, ‘I violated the accepted code of morals that our world observes...I was a big successful star—and a sad, lonely person—until the miracle finally happened and I became a woman again.’

In the article, titled “Can Science Eliminate the Third Sex?” Bentley attributed her transition—essentially from butch lesbian to feminine heterosexual—to the wonders of modern medicine. “Finally going to a physician, she was told, ‘Your sex organs are infantile. They haven’t progressed past the stage of those of a fourteen-year-old child.’” After a six-month course of female hormone shots to “overcome predominant male

hormones,” Bentley reported that she had overcome her affliction and married a man after “a whirlwind love affair.”²¹⁵

Bentley’s account of her previous life and *Jet*’s sensationalized account of her transition reflect how, against the backdrop of black political mobilization and the strong anticommunist sentiment that permeated early Cold War America, many African Americans shared in what one historian has called an “American obsession” with homosexuality.²¹⁶ This obsession, rooted in several decades of medical and psychological studies, cast homosexuality as a disease that posed a danger to society and was in need of curing. This characterization allowed national leaders to link sexual nonconformity with political nonconformity, both of which, they argued, threatened national security. White and black Americans alike bought into politicians’ efforts to link gays and lesbians to the threat of communist subversion. As national officials attempted to contain the spread of communism at home and abroad in the decade and a half following World War II, African Americans began mobilizing unprecedented political efforts against segregation and disfranchisement, and white gays and lesbians began mobilizing politically. In this context, homosexuality became a subject of intense discussion and unprecedented scrutiny by African Americans, but that development did not necessarily indicate the rejection of queer African Americans from their communities. Largely excluded from early homophile organizations, black gays and lesbians nonetheless managed to maintain ties with their communities and play integral

²¹⁵“Can Science Eliminate the Third Sex?” *Jet*, 22 January 1953, 46-48.

²¹⁶ Jennifer Terry, *An American Obsession*.

roles in the emerging civil rights movement during the 1950s, even though those roles were often limited.

Continuing trends that began in the 1920s and 30s, black newspapers from the postwar and early civil rights eras reflected continued and increasing interest among African Americans in homosexuality, as well as further engagement with scientific and medical studies on the subject. Black newspapers became an important space for negotiating issues related to homosexuality within black communities across the country. These accounts and commentaries also revealed a wide range of concerns and ideas among African Americans about the causes and social implications of same-sex desire as well as possible treatments or “cures” for nonnormative sexuality.

While doctors and psychologists had been studying and reporting on nonnormative sexuality since the 1890s, the institution of military screening procedures for weeding out homosexuals during World War II had given legitimacy to these studies and the postwar period saw a dramatic increase in medical and psychiatric interest in homosexuality. Alfred Kinsey’s famous studies of male and female sexuality—published in 1948 and 1953 respectively—brought homosexuality even more into the public eye. Although the Kinsey Reports surveyed only white Americans, its findings were a subject of interest for educated African Americans during the postwar period. In a column for the *Chicago Defender*, NAACP President Walter White cited the 1948 report as evidence against white efforts to impugn African Americans’ “loose morals,” citing among the report’s findings the 37% of Kinsey’s subjects who admitted to having engaged in homosexuality. White argued that “there ought to be shamefaced silence” on the part

of racist whites and then jokingly suggested mailing copies of the report to white supremacist politicians and defenders of lynching as a means of pointing out their hypocrisy for demonizing black sexuality.²¹⁷ According to one of the country's most prominent and influential African Americans, then, deviant sexuality should have been a cause for shame, particularly among whites.

Other articles and commentaries in black newspapers about the Kinsey Reports focused less on the racial implications of the study and more on the incidence of homosexuality, which most agreed was a cause for serious concern. Despite Kinsey's assessment that his studies showed homosexuality to be normal and natural, most Americans interpreted his findings as evidence of a country in moral decline.²¹⁸ One article suggested solutions to the "problem" of homosexuality, ranging from "trial marriage or improved prostitution," to religion.²¹⁹ A prominent *Chicago Defender* columnist claimed several years after the reports were issued that "many serious social scientists, psychiatrists, analysts, and sociologists" had since refuted Kinsey's findings and claimed that he "exaggerated the incidence of homosexuality," and treated immoral behavior with too little concern.²²⁰ Kinsey's 1953 report on women raised particular concerns for *Atlanta Daily World* reporter John Geiger, who claimed that a "women's

²¹⁷ Walter White, "People, Politics and Places," *Chicago Defender*, 28 February 1948, 15.

²¹⁸ David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 54.

²¹⁹ "Authors Discuss Sex Behavior in Males," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 27 March 1948, 15.

²²⁰ Alfred Duckett, "The Third Sex: Analysts Rap Kinsey Report," *Chicago Defender*, 9 March 1957, 11.

sexual revolution” was occurring, pointing to the incidence of premarital sex and homosexual experiences as evidence.²²¹ These articles clearly reflect heightened concern about the prevalence of homosexuality following the Kinsey Reports. Moreover, these responses show the acceptance by some African Americans of the postwar cultural emphasis on traditional gender and sexuality.

Black newspapers and periodicals reflected a continued engagement with other contemporary medical and psychiatric theories on homosexuality as well. Through the work of psychiatrists and doctors during the mid-twentieth century, Lillian Faderman explained, “Every aspect of same-sex love this came to be defined as sick.”²²² As Americans looked toward “experts” to solve social problems, these medical professionals gained new prominence and influence in the postwar world. As Carolyn Lewis has demonstrated, doctors “situated themselves as the guardians of the sexual well-being of Americans in the early decades of the Cold War.”²²³ Moreover, their theories were applied broadly to issues ranging from national security to criminality and medical professionals exercised significant influence on how the legal system and American society approached homosexuality well into the 1960s.²²⁴

²²¹ John Geiger, “Kinsey Report Shows Women’s Sexual Revolution Underway,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 20 August 1953, 1.

²²² Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 133.

²²³ Carolyn Herbst Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality: Sexual Citizenship in the Cold War Era*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press (2010), 2.

²²⁴ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 18.

Reflecting these trends, the prevalence of homosexuality in prison was a subject of interest for black newspapers throughout the late 1940s and 1950s. Homosexual relationships among both male and female inmates were often cited as reasons for prison violence or as evidence of the deplorable conditions and moral depravity forced on blacks in prison. In 1947, for example, black inmates in South Carolina were beaten to “quell a near riot” that began with several “homo-sexual prisoners who fought over their male paramours.”²²⁵ Such reports continued to appear regularly in black newspapers throughout the 1950s. A 1958 report on an Albany, New York women’s prison, for example, raised concern that authorities were ignoring the incidence of “homosexual practices and mistreatment of women inmates” in a facility that was sixty percent black.²²⁶ These articles subtly imply that subjection to homosexuality was simply another form of degradation blacks faced in a racist legal system.

Newspaper accounts also reflect concerns by elite and middle-class African Americans about the effects of homosexuality on black boys and girls. In a 1955 article, one writer described homosexuals as predators who “devote their time to enticing our youngsters into their ranks.”²²⁷ In juvenile facilities and training schools for black youths, Virginia education board members argued in 1947 that sex segregation could become

²²⁵ “Prison Superintendent Okays Beating Inmates,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 16 August 1947, 21.

²²⁶ Sara Slack, “Albany Denies Ignoring Homosexuality Reports,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 3 March 1958, 3.

²²⁷ Jessie B. Boone, “Homosexuals,” *Our Grapevine*, 21 December 1955, 34.

“breeding grounds for sexual maladjustments and homosexual fixations.”²²⁸ Of particular concern, one writer claimed, was the prevalence of interracial lesbian relationships in one reformatory, where “difference in skin color in many instances seemed to serve as a functional substitute for difference in sex.” He went on to describe the fetishized sexuality of black men and women by whites as a cause for such attractions.²²⁹

The most extreme accounts of moral outrage over homosexuality that appeared in black newspapers focused on the ways that it supposedly contributed to criminal activity ranging from pedophilia to murderous rampages. In cases where gay men or lesbians were involved in crimes during the late 1940s and 1950s, black journalists made explicit connections between the crime and sexual deviance, often by listing a suspect’s homosexuality alongside his or her other criminal characteristics. In an article about a “brutal lust murder,” for example, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* described the perpetrator as a “homosexual and accused dope addict.”²³⁰ The black press dubbed twenty-year-old African American Lawrence Goldsby of Pine Bluff, Arkansas, for example, the “mad dog killer” for his shooting rampage on a Cleveland city bus that killed three civilians and a police officer in 1952. In the course of Goldsby’s trial, authorities questioned his sanity, and reporters never failed to mention that he “admitted being a homosexual.”²³¹

²²⁸ “Schools for Wayward Youths Are Criticized,” *Norfolk New Journal and Guide*, 29 November 1947, 1.

²²⁹ Louis Martin, “Dope and Data,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 October 1958, 10.

²³⁰ “Brutal ‘Lust Murder’ Baffles Police,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 15 January 1953, A1.

²³¹ “‘Mad Dog’ Killer Indicted,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 24 May 1952, 5.

Although a judge ultimately ruled Goldsby sane enough to stand trial, evaluations by psychiatrists described him as an “emotionally unstable; homosexual,” and cited “evidences of sex deviation, inability to effect normal adjustment, a poor work record, poor social adjustment,” and a “psychopathic personality.”²³² Goldsby’s defense attorney traced his maladjustment to “a severe sex shock when a homosexual took advantage of Goldsby when [he] was a child.”²³³ During the course of the trial, Goldsby reportedly “began laughing uncontrollably” when a “psychiatrist described him as a hopeless homosexual” who once considered an operation to make him sterile.²³⁴ Although the Cleveland jury found him guilty, perhaps out of pity for Goldsby’s psychological afflictions, they recommended mercy to spare him from the death penalty.²³⁵

Black newspapers also reported on several scandalous incidents involving love triangles and murders motivated by infidelity among queer African Americans. In one case, a young black woman, Betty Butler, a mother of two, was convicted and sentenced to death for the 1953 murder of Evelyn Clark in a “love slaying,” which was reportedly Butler’s response to Clark’s attempts to continue engaging in “immoral acts” with her.²³⁶

²³² “Bus Slayer Found Sane!” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 7 June 1952, 1A and 3A.

²³³ “Goldsby Trial Opens; Minor Calls Him Crazy,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 13 September 1952, 1A.

²³⁴ “Giggling Goldsby Indifferent While He’s Called Crazy,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 20 September 1952, 1A.

²³⁵ “Life Term for Cleveland Bus Slayer,” *Chicago Defender* 4 October 1952, 13.

²³⁶ Ray Paul, “Asks Death Penalty for ‘Woman Lover,’” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 14 March 1953, 1A.

The case attracted significant attention from the Cincinnati community, and “the courtroom was crowded and during the testimony on sex, a pin could have been heard to drop.”²³⁷ The following year, the *New York Amsterdam News* reported on “the fatal meat cleaver bludgeoning” of a man by his “friend, a man police described as a ‘pervert, with homosexual tendencies,’” citing acquaintances who suspected the two men “of unnatural sexual relations.”²³⁸ In a 1955 case that the *Cleveland Call and Post* compared to the Betty Butler murder, black Cleveland woman Alice Campbell shot and wounded her roommate, Odell Williams, in an altercation Campbell claimed began with Williams making unwanted “homosexual advances toward her.”²³⁹ For queer African Americans in the postwar and early civil rights era, black newspapers provided few, if any, positive or even neutral images of homosexuals, and numerous examples of their criminality, sickness, and moral inferiority.

Transsexuality attained an unprecedented level of visibility in the postwar period following the 1952 case of former GI Christine Jorgensen, the first widely-known instance of an American undergoing sex reassignment surgery. Jorgensen’s transition, which was reported on the front page of the *New York Daily News*, and her willingness to discuss her life with the press made transsexuality a prominent matter of public discussion during the 1950s. As Joanne Meyerowitz explained, Jorgensen’s visibility

²³⁷ “Betty Butler Case Ends in Chair Verdict,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 21 March 1953, 1A.

²³⁸ “Meat Cleaver Killer Suspect Held in Bronx,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 November 1954, 1.

²³⁹ “Critically Wounded Girl Says Roommate Shot Her,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 26 November 1955, 7D.

made her at once a subject of public fascination, “a titillating tale of sexual transgression,” an important symbol of affirmation for transgender individuals of all races and backgrounds, and a means to begin educating the public on the differences between homosexuality, transsexuality, and intersexed conditions.²⁴⁰

Reflecting this increased visibility and dialogue about transsexuality among African Americans, *Jet* magazine reported in 1953 on the case of Charles Robert Brown, a “shake dancer and professional female impersonator” who planned to travel to Europe for a sex change operation so he could marry his male partner, which would make him the “first Negro ‘transvestite’ in history to transform his sex.” The article went on to describe Brown as a Navy veteran who resisted medical advice to have the “female glands” that supposedly caused his condition surgically removed, and chose instead to have his “male sex organs” removed.²⁴¹ While such visibility may have brought comfort to individual African Americans struggling with gender nonconformity, the increased public attention to transsexuality also heightened postwar anxieties over gender and reinforced the authority of medical explanations for nonnormative gender and sexuality.²⁴²

Reflecting an engagement with these newspapers’ interest in homosexuality, some black readers turned to advice columnists with their questions and worries. One woman, concerned about her eighteen-year-old son’s homosexuality asked *Chicago*

²⁴⁰ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 52-53.

²⁴¹ “Male Shake Dancer Plans to Change Sex, Wed GI in Europe,” *Jet*, 18 June 1953, 24-25.

²⁴² Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 68.

Defender columnist Rev. Oscar Green how she could help her son, saying that she was afraid to tell the young man's father or talk to anyone else about it. Greene suggested that the woman "discuss this with your family doctor," and advised her that "homosexuality will respond to certain kinds of psychotherapy." He also urged her to think of her son as "sick" rather than perverted, suggesting that the young man's homosexuality was the possible result of "negative experiences in [his] early childhood," that led him to be "afraid of the opposite sex."²⁴³ As this article demonstrates, during the 1950s, parents often accepted such views of homosexuality as sick, and thus became concerned with their children did not conform to traditional sex and gender roles.²⁴⁴

In addition to advice columnists, scientists and self-proclaimed medical authorities on the subject of homosexuality often contributed to black newspapers and magazines. For those readers who wondered about their own or a loved one's possible homosexuality, these "experts" consistently cited family problems or unstable childhoods as the cause of sexual nonconformity, and recommended psychotherapy as a treatment or cure. Dr. Ellis Johnson wrote in the *Chicago Defender* in 1952, for example, of a patient whose queer desire could be traced to his "unstable home where the illness of his father and an over-anxious, worrying mother had given him anxiety

²⁴³ Oscar Greene, "Living Day to Day," *Daily Defender*, 18 November 1957, 15.

²⁴⁴ Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 133.

even in childhood.” Johnson then sang the praises of psychoanalytic therapy to treat such a condition.²⁴⁵

Several years later, the *Defender* ran a five-part series on homosexuality by prominent black writer, poet, and businessman Alfred Duckett. Claiming to have “talked with psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, ministers, physicians and plain ordinary people,” Duckett sought to “enlighten the readers”²⁴⁶ on subjects including “The Bible and Homosexuality,” gay history, homosexuality in prison, lesbians, and the Kinsey Report. Interestingly, the paper’s editors felt led to include a note before each column emphasizing the importance of Duckett’s work to educate readers with scientific knowledge about homosexuality, calling his series a “public service.” While most of Duckett’s series covered familiar territory, he did raise some unique topics. In his column on prison, Duckett drew extensively from the recollections of Haywood Patterson, one of the nine “Scottsboro Boys,” wrongfully convicted of gang-raping two white women in 1931 in Alabama, who portrayed himself as somewhat of an authority on homosexuality in prison. Having initially resisted engaging on same-sex relationships while unjustly imprisoned, Patterson eventually gave into the “cravings inside of him pushing him into the same perverted way of life which he had once mocked.” Patterson went on to describe the elaborate system of “wolves” and “gal-boys” in prison, whose

²⁴⁵ Ellis Johnson, “Are You Crazy? Session With Psychiatrist Would Help Dispel Anxiety and Guilt,” *Chicago Defender*, 7 June 1952, 15.

²⁴⁶ Alfred Duckett, “The Third Sex: The Bible and Homosexuality,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 February 1957, 1.

relationships often caused jealousy and even murder among inmates.²⁴⁷ Patterson's status as a well-known victim of the racist southern court system and his initial resistance to homosexuality in prison cast him as a somewhat sympathetic character in Duckett's article, a noticeable contrast to other black reporters' depictions of homosexuality during the 1950s.

Duckett's article on lesbianism, taken with several other black newspaper reports on lesbianism and the aforementioned attention to lesbian criminality, reveal a growing tendency to portray lesbians in particular as hidden predators. As several historians have demonstrated, in mid-twentieth century America, the prevailing images of homosexuals were that they were predatory, particularly toward children, and that lesbians in particular were "sickos."²⁴⁸ Duckett cited a recent medical study that suggested there were "twice as many female as male homosexuals," but "99 out of every 100 Lesbians are fairly successful in hiding their strange sex habit" by marrying men and simply remaining "sexually cold," or in some cases, marrying a gay man. Because affection between women is more socially acceptable, Duckett claimed, lesbianism was easier to hide.²⁴⁹ An earlier article in the *New York Amsterdam News* made a similar suggestion that lesbianism was less visible and more easily hidden than

²⁴⁷ Alfred Duckett, "The Third Sex: Prisons Create Sex Problems," *Chicago Defender*, 23 February 1957, 11.

²⁴⁸ See, for example, Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 40 and Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 130.

²⁴⁹ Alfred Duckett, "The Third Sex," *Chicago Defender*, 2 March 1957, 7.

male homosexuality.²⁵⁰ In a sensational 1959 account of prostitution, the *Chicago Defender* reported that lesbians had taken control of pimping in urban black neighborhoods across the country. “Female panderers, sharp, and shrewd, tough and cruel” wrote reporter Dan Burley, “now sport the big Cadillacs, Buicks and Chryslers, operate wide-flung ‘stables’ of broads; set up central ‘telephone exchanges’ for call girls in all parts of the city, take care of the payoffs to vice cops and ‘whip the broads in line.’” These “lady lovers,” he continued, were “rolling in money,” and remained mostly immune from prosecution because “Judges simply refuse to believe that female homosexuals have grown so many in number that they today control a vast segment of the prostitution racket.”²⁵¹ This article is particularly revealing not only in its linking of lesbianism with “vice,” but also because it is attempting to raise awareness about both the supposed increase in lesbianism and the social ills connected with that increase, which authorities seemed unable to understand.

The late 1940s and early 1950s witnessed a rise of anticommunism in American politics and culture that far eclipsed previous periods of anticommunist sentiment and became intricately tied to fears of the homosexual menace. Following the war, many Americans saw a return to “normalcy” as the reestablishing of the traditional white middle-class family, with women in the home and men in the workplace, which left little

²⁵⁰ C. Gerald Fraser, “The Homosexual: How He Thinks of Himself,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 February 1955, 5.

²⁵¹ Dan Burley, “Bares New Moves in Vice System Operating in City,” *Chicago Defender*, 24 January 1959, 9.

room for same-sex desire.²⁵² This urge toward heterosexual marriage, children, and traditional family in the postwar period included Americans of all races and classes, and tended to view unmarried people as suspicious.²⁵³ Cold warriors saw homosexuals, in John D’Emilio’s words, as “slaves to their perverted desires,” whose sexual affliction would lead them to betray their country. Masculine women and feminine men undermined the traditional family, upon which American superiority rested.²⁵⁴ These concerns about sexual and gender conformity, or what Elaine May called “sexual containment,”²⁵⁵ were often racialized. As historian Carolyn Lewis has argued, medical professionals during the 1950s studied African Americans only to demonstrate sexual “abnormalities” and “insisted that differences of race, ethnicity, religion, and especially class posed serious problems to the marriage relationship.”²⁵⁶

In this context, government officials—on both sides of the political aisle—latched onto anticommunist fears and used them to justify attacks on political opponents, civil rights leaders, organized labor, New Deal reforms, and those Americans who, in one way or another, failed to conform to the prevailing political and cultural consensus of the era. The Kinsey report convinced cold warriors not only that homosexuality was

²⁵² Faderman, *Odd Girls*, 134.

²⁵³ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 79-80.

²⁵⁴ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 49.

²⁵⁵ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families During the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 114.

²⁵⁶ Lewis, *Prescription for Heterosexuality*, 43-44.

more prevalent than previously thought, but that it was also more difficult to identify.²⁵⁷ As David Johnson has demonstrated, gays and lesbians were deemed “security risks” in the nation’s fight against communist subversion and purged from the federal government during the early Cold War because they were thought to be especially vulnerable to blackmail. Despite the lack of attention to this “lavender scare” from scholars, Johnson contended, “many politicians, journalists, and citizens thought that homosexuals posed more of a threat to national security than Communists.”²⁵⁸ While Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed the government had been infiltrated by communists, Deputy Undersecretary John Peurifoy, announced 91 homosexual “security risks” in the US State Department and began efforts to purge these supposed homosexuals from the government in 1950. Many Americans, according to Johnson, took these purges as evidence “that the State Department—perhaps the entire government—was infiltrated with sexual perverts.”²⁵⁹ By the mid-1950s, President Eisenhower had revised Truman’s Loyalty Program to include “sexual perversion” as legitimate grounds for firing government workers; the FBI was routinely conducting surveillance of Civil Service Commission applicants and employees; and the rates at which suspected homosexuals were being purged from the military had reached twice the levels of such discharges during World War II.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁷ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 42.

²⁵⁸ Johnson, *Lavender Scare*, 2. See also, John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 40.

²⁵⁹ Johnson, *Lavender Scare*, 1.

²⁶⁰ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 44 and 46.

African Americans were made aware of these purges through black newspapers, and seemed to accept the idea of a connection between communism and homosexuality. The *Atlanta Daily World* reported on the State Department's campaign against "security risks" in May 1951, explaining that when a Senate committee began investigations the previous summer, "there had actually resigned 105 employees who had been determined to be homos," with others still under investigation and more having resigned in the face of possible scrutiny.²⁶¹ Black newspapers also reported on scandals involving accused homosexual communist sympathizers in the US government. One such scandal was a senator's accusation that one of Joseph McCarthy's spies who reported to him on US diplomatic personnel in Switzerland was actually "an admitted homosexual ex-Communist" himself.²⁶²

African Americans were certainly aware of and in many cases helped to promote this rhetorical and ideological linkage between communism and homosexuality, and some black leaders and organizations—particularly during the early civil rights era—attempted to distance themselves from affiliations with both in order to gain racial equality. In a 1950 column, *Pittsburgh Courier* executive editor P.L. Prattis pointed out the injustices of Jim Crow railroad segregation in a fictional account contrasting the treatment of African Americans to that of communists, homosexuals, gamblers, Asians, and swindlers, all of whom would have been allowed to sit next to a white person on his hypothetical Jim Crow train, despite their moral or cultural inferiority. The article also

²⁶¹ Louis Lautier, "Capital Spotlight," *Atlanta Daily World*, 1 May 1951, 6.

²⁶² "McCarthy Spy Is Admitted Sex Deviate," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 27 October 1951, 1B. See also "Bell Ringers," *Chicago Defender*, 27 October 1951, 10.

reflected an awareness of the so-called “lavender scare” because Prattis’s homosexual character had recently “lost his job when the [State] department began to cleanse itself of its HOMOSEXUALS.” Other articles in black newspapers also reflected a belief that homosexuals were vulnerable to blackmail.²⁶³

Charges of communism and homosexuality were coupled and used against African Americans with increasing frequency in the aftermath of the 1954 *Brown* decision. Not only were sodomy laws enforced with unprecedented frequency during the decade, but they continued to be disproportionately used against African American men.²⁶⁴ Black political mobilization created a backlash in which whites redoubled efforts to portray African Americans as sexually deviant.²⁶⁵ White southerners hoping to undermine the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement frequently combined accusations of communist sympathies with accusations of homosexuality; as John Howard has demonstrated, however, while much of the rest of the country was increasingly hostile toward homosexuality during the 1950s, that hostility was slower in coming to the South. Examining police crackdowns on sex between men and public responses to homosexual scandals, Howard identified “a significant change in mainstream notions of deviant sexualities” between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s, “a change resulting from broader sociopolitical transformations forged primarily by black Mississippians. [...] Over the course of ten years, a vibrant, ever more successful civil rights movement would

²⁶³ See, for example, “Ex-Con Nabbed in \$500 Extortion Plot,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 26 August 1954, A5.

²⁶⁴ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 75 and 81.

²⁶⁵ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 81.

become connected in the minds of many Mississippians to queer sex, among other suspect practices and ideologies,” including communism.²⁶⁶ While the next chapter will deal more fully with the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, it is important to realize that the state-level campaigns to root out suspected homosexuals and communists—particularly those involved in civil rights organizing—took their cues from the federal government and began in the mid-1950s with the formation of state agencies like the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission and the Florida Legislative Investigative Committee.

The Florida Legislative Investigative Committee (FLIC)—nicknamed the Johns Committee after its leader, Florida governor Charley Johns—began in 1956 with the purpose of undermining civil rights efforts in the state. As governor in the early 1950s, Johns had led attacks on teachers who supported the NAACP and participants in the Tallahassee Bus Boycott. Under Johns’ direction, the committee targeted racially liberal university professors and investigated NAACP members. As one historian has argued, “By the mid-1950s, the reality of black southerners’ heightened activism, coupled with the aftershocks of McCarthyism and the increasing visibility of homosexual communities, inspired a new wave of storytelling that drew on cultural narratives about political, racial, and sexual deviance.” Similar to how Howard described massive resistance in Mississippi, FLIC, “tied these stories together in an effort to create a single,

²⁶⁶ Howard, *Men Like That*, 129.

comprehensive, and coherent way of making sense of a turbulent, changing world.”²⁶⁷

But as the FLIC’s efforts continued, historian James Schnur explained, “Johns faced the specter of informing his senate colleagues that his committee had failed to demonstrate communist complicity by either the NAACP or the academic community.” When this initial project proved a disappointment, then, Johns “decided to shock lawmakers” into pursuing homosexuals as their new target.²⁶⁸ In a fashion similar to the state department’s purges, the Johns Committee intimidated suspected gay men and lesbians, many of whom resigned rather than face the committee’s scrutiny. While other southern politicians such as George Wallace and James O. Eastland linked “perversion” with communism and civil rights efforts in their public speeches, the Johns committee went far beyond other states in targeting homosexuals.²⁶⁹

Although FLIC investigated faculty at white colleges and universities throughout Florida, they also investigated faculty at the historically black Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FAMU) in 1956, which further reflects the linking of blackness with sexual deviance. Through interrogation, a FLIC investigator forced some FAMU students to claim that a significant proportion of the school’s faculty had engaged in homosexuality. As Schnur has explained, FLIC investigators “frequently asked gay African Americans if they had ever engaged in acts with whites of the same sex.” Taking

²⁶⁷ Stacy Lorraine Braukman, “Anticommunism and the Politics of Sex and Race in Florida, 1954-1965” Ph. D. diss. (1999), iii.

²⁶⁸ James A. Schnur, “Closet Crusaders: The Johns Committee and Homophobia, 1956-1965,” *Carryin’ On in the Lesbian and Gay South*, John Howard, ed. (1997), 134.

²⁶⁹ Braukman, “Anticommunism and the Politics of Sex,” 3.

“perverse pleasure from discrediting African Americans” the committee “used their resources to embarrass blacks who supported the civil rights movement.” In one instance, investigators even compiled a file on black educators who allegedly “derived sex satisfaction through the rectum.”²⁷⁰

The culmination of the Johns’ Committee’s campaign against homosexuals was the 1964 publication of a pamphlet entitled “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida.” The pamphlet featured a photo of two men kissing on its cover and contained explicit pictures and descriptions of queer sex acts, gay slang, and child pornography as part of its attempt to shock Floridians into rooting out the “homosexual menace.” Invoking recent medical and psychological literature, including the Kinsey Reports, the pamphlet characterized homosexuals as predators who lurked in every corner of every community, and who “have an insatiable appetite for sexual activities and find special gratification in the recruitment to their ranks of youth.” Although the pamphlet did not use overtly racial language in describing sexual deviancy, it did raise the alarm that homosexuality was increasing in the state, due to recent political developments. Moreover, the pictures of pale, blond haired boys and young men cast as victims of homosexual perversion, clearly played to the racial sympathies of FLIC’s intended audience.²⁷¹

One of the most conservative black intellectuals of the era, George S. Schuyler, also echoed some of the moral and political criticisms that white opponents leveled at

²⁷⁰ Schnur, “Closet Crusaders,” 140.

²⁷¹ “Homosexuality and Citizenship in Florida: A Report of the Florida Legislative Investigation Committee,” Tallahassee: Florida Legislative Investigation Committee (1964).

civil rights leaders and organizations. In a 1958 column for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, Schuyler blamed “the serious economic and social evils” in black communities for delaying racial equality. Among the social ills he described were the high number of African Americans in jails and asylums, Harlem’s liquor stores—which he described as “thicker than cockroaches in a Klansman’s kitchen”—and the general lack of motivation on the part of black leaders to address these issues of moral degeneracy. Black newspapers, he claimed, would rather report on a “horrible murder, [or] a homosexual ball with perverts in costume,” than the real issues that plagued black communities and postponed equality.²⁷²

Although Schuyler was on the more conservative end of the black political spectrum during the civil rights era, the primacy of anticommunism in American politics following the second world war had serious consequences for black leftists. Before the Cold War, politically active African Americans often turned to the communist party, which, along with the NAACP, was one of very few organizations during the early twentieth century to openly denounce segregation and fight for black civil rights. Consequently, many seasoned black activists who became leaders in the postwar period had to downplay or repeatedly renounce their previous affiliations with communist groups. As historian Mary Dudziak argued, the international pressures brought about by the Cold War “would soon simultaneously constrain and enhance civil rights reform.” While the inherent contradictions between racial discrimination and democracy ultimately forced the US government to act on civil rights reform, Dudziak contended,

²⁷² George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 11 January 1958, A2.

“the primacy of anticommunism in postwar American politics and culture left a very narrow space for criticism of the status quo.”²⁷³

For civil rights organizations in the 1950s, this narrowing of political dialogue meant figuring out how to deal with the presence of well-respected and experienced activists who had current or previous radical sympathies. In her study of sexuality and citizenship, Margot Canaday explained that “homosexuality mattered most to state officials in the place where citizenship was defined.”²⁷⁴ Although Canaday made that statement in reference to women’s integration into the military, it holds true for African Americans as well who were fighting for their integration as full citizens in American society. “Civil rights groups had to walk a fine line,” Dudziak explained, “making it clear that their reform efforts were meant to fill out the contours of American democracy, and not to challenge or undermine it.”²⁷⁵ To defend themselves against charges of subversion, the NAACP under executive secretary Walter White passed a resolution in 1950 to investigate and purge communists from the organization’s ranks.²⁷⁶ For White’s successor Roy Wilkins, the Cold War’s continued influence meant framing the NAACP’s goals, in Dudziak’s words, “as part of the struggle against communism.”²⁷⁷

²⁷³ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 13.

²⁷⁴ Canaday, *The Straight State*, 176.

²⁷⁵ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 11.

²⁷⁶ Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, 370.

²⁷⁷ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 29.

The civil rights era's most visible gay African American, Bayard Rustin, was already a seasoned activist by the postwar period, and had learned toward the end of the war that his open homosexuality and his brief flirtation with communism as a young man were liabilities for those people and organizations with whom he worked. Born to an unwed mother and raised by his grandparents in New England, Rustin acknowledged and acted upon his attraction to other men from the time he was a teenager. During the war, Rustin—who was a Quaker—worked with the pacifist social justice organization Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and was imprisoned as a conscientious objector. During his stay in prison he led nonviolent protests against the racial segregation of inmates. In the wake of this rebellion against prison authority, Rustin's sexuality first became truly problematic when he was punished for having sex with two other inmates. Writing to his mentor, FOR's AJ Muste in 1944, Rustin came to fully realize how politically vulnerable his sexuality made him and its potential implications for his work:

It was my own weakness and stupidity that defeated the immediate campaign and jeopardized immeasurably the causes for which I believe I would be willing to die. [...] When success was imminent in our racial campaign my behavior stopped progress...I have misused the confidence the negroes here had in my leadership; I have caused them to question the moral basis of nonviolence; I have hurt and let down my friends over the country.²⁷⁸

Although Muste allowed Rustin's continued involvement with FOR during the postwar period after Rustin left prison, his relationship with Muste was strained, and his sexuality ultimately doomed his leadership in the peace movement. Muste urged Rustin to control his sexual urges for the sake of his role in the nonviolent movement, but

²⁷⁸ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 104.

Rustin refused.²⁷⁹ While in Pasadena for a speaking event in 1953, Rustin was arrested for having sex with two young white men in their car, and as his biographer John D’Emilio explained, his “world began to unravel.” Having previously promised Muste that he would curtail his promiscuity to avoid reflecting poorly on FOR, Rustin immediately resigned. Although only a handful of California newspapers had publicized the arrest, FOR released a statement that circulated among Rustin’s peers in the peace movement, thus tarnishing his reputation.²⁸⁰

By the 1953 arrest, Rustin had been under FBI surveillance for several years, and Rustin suspected that the FBI may have set him up for the arrest in Pasadena to undermine his civil rights work.²⁸¹ His arrest in Pasadena followed him and continued to haunt his career in the black freedom movement. As D’Emilio argued, “It severely restricted the public roles he was allowed to assume. Though he fought his way back from the sidelines, he did so at a price.” Despite mentoring Martin Luther King, Jr. in Gandhian nonviolence—the philosophy that arguably became a cornerstone of the movement—Rustin “remained always in the background, his figure shadowy and blurred, his importance masked. At any moment, his sexual history might erupt into consciousness.”²⁸²

²⁷⁹ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 171.

²⁸⁰ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 191-193.

²⁸¹ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 75.

²⁸² D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 193.

While early civil rights leaders had to deal with the political implications of homosexuals within organizational ranks, they were not the only members of black communities for which homosexuality became an increasingly prevalent issue of concern during the 1950s. Not uniformly or disproportionately homophobic, African Americans across the country thought and talked about homosexuality, and many queer African Americans remained or became respected leaders of their communities and civil rights organizations, despite the Cold War era's pervasive anti-homosexuality. In the face of white supremacy, queer African Americans eschewed any sort of identity-based sexual politics and joined in racial solidarity with other African Americans, many of whom accepted gays, lesbians, and bisexuals as friends, family, and community leaders despite varying degrees of knowledge about individuals' sexual proclivities.

On occasion, newspapers printed responses from African American readers about homosexuality. The *New York Amsterdam News* printed a response from a 17-year-old gay man in 1955 questioning much of the era's prevailing wisdom about homosexuality, offering skepticism on the use of psychoanalysis to "cure" homosexuals, and suggesting that homosexual acts between consenting adults should be treated as more normal.²⁸³ While such strong defenses of homosexuality were extremely rare in black newspapers of the 1950s, this response represents an important alternative to most of the views typically expressed in black newspapers, a response that queer African Americans might have found to be a comforting alternative to the era's dominant narratives about homosexuality. Reader reactions to a 1957 article in the *New*

²⁸³ "The Other Side: A Homosexual Replies," *New York Amsterdam News*, 26 March 1955, 17.

York Amsterdam News on gay men in Harlem ranged from “‘gay’ people suffer from mental disturbances” and “You people ought to be ashamed of yourselves,” to more supportive responses like “Harlem society is full of queers, both male and female so why bring the small fry down.” Jesse De Vore, the journalist who published both the original piece and compiled the reader responses commented in reply to his audience that “Most Harlem homosexuals falling into the reserved category, have good jobs,” and are generally more accepted by Harlem’s middle class.²⁸⁴ A month later, the *New York Amsterdam News* published several “Sidewalk Interviews” with black New Yorkers, asking them to weigh in on the question “Are homosexuals a menace to our society?” All four respondents agreed that they were a menace, adding justifications that included homosexuals’ disgraceful behavior, their predatory nature toward children and teenagers, and references to Sodom and Gomorrah.²⁸⁵

The variety of articles and responses from readers reveal African Americans to be varied in their attitudes toward homosexuality. While individual writers positioned themselves as black America’s authorities on homosexuality, by keeping the black public abreast of contemporary medical and psychiatric literature, publishing articles and editorials from respected black leaders and “experts” on homosexuality, and printing reader responses, black newspapers positioned themselves as a primary medium for dialogue about homosexuality and negotiation as to its meanings and implications for black communities during the 1950s.

²⁸⁴ Jesse De Vore, “Article On Homosexuals Drew Fire,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 October 1957, 28.

²⁸⁵ Milton J. Mallory, “Sidewalk Interviews,” *New York Amsterdam News* 16 November 1957, 7.

A student of Countee Cullen, African American writer and activist James Baldwin realized his attraction to men at a young age. Growing up in Harlem in the 1930s, Baldwin's early years were complicated by a strained relationship with his stepfather and ambivalence about his sexuality. When Baldwin was 13, he was groped by an older man, which, according to his longtime friend and biographer David Leeming, both "horrified and aroused" him. Baldwin subsequently turned to religion, becoming a minister as a teenager, in an attempt to "protect himself from himself."²⁸⁶ When he was 16, however, Baldwin began a relationship with a much older man, which forced him to reconcile the tensions between his sexuality and his involvement with the church, ultimately leading him to accept his sexuality and move to Greenwich Village. As Leeming explained, "The boy preacher had to leave the church to save his soul."²⁸⁷

By the 1950s, Baldwin had more or less come to terms with his same-sex desire and queer themes permeated his writing. Baldwin's novels often sparked controversy for their queer characters and obvious homoeroticism. Like Baldwin's relationships, his fictional characters frequently transgressed sexual and racial lines, and his writing occasionally ignited controversy.

While his first novel, *Go Tell it On the Mountain* (1953), did not overtly focus on homosexuality, his editors found his depiction of black sexuality somewhat scandalous. In response to proposed revisions to some of the more "obscene" language, Baldwin wrote his editor at Knopf, "What, by the way, is wrong with the word 'cock'? Nobody

²⁸⁶ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 23-25.

²⁸⁷ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 31.

objects to it in Shakespeare – but, then, Shakespeare can't be dragged into court.”

Baldwin also insisted that the final revisions include a scene in which a black boy gets an erection during his baptism.²⁸⁸ Although Baldwin's white editor was concerned with the era's censorship laws rather than any implications the book might have had for black civil rights, Baldwin's response shows both his comfort with portraying African Americans as overtly sexual beings during an era of sexual conformity, and his determination to deal frankly with sexual subjects.

This determination followed Baldwin into subsequent novels and at least to some extent complicated his writing career. In 1956, while the Cold War was in full swing, Baldwin published *Giovanni's Room*, which contained explicitly homosexual characters. Baldwin later recalled the book to be his “favorite” of all his writings. “It cost me more,” he said in a 1964 interview. “It was very hard for me to write that book. [...] I thought I'd never finish that either. But mainly [...] I was afraid. Of, you know, writing a book on that subject.”²⁸⁹ Baldwin's editors shared his concern, “They said—if I published it, it would ruin my career. [...] Because I was a Negro writer,” writing about homosexuality. “I was a Negro writer and I would reach a very special audience,” he continued. “And I would be dead if I alienated that audience. That, in effect, nobody would accept that book, coming from me. [...] My agent told me to burn it.”²⁹⁰ Baldwin's

²⁸⁸ James Baldwin to Philip Vaudrin, n.d., 1952, Series 1, Box 121, Folder 2, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Records, 1873-1996, Harry Ransom Center, Austin, Texas.

²⁸⁹ Reminiscences of James Baldwin, 1964, Volume 2, 99, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Collection.

²⁹⁰ Reminiscences of James Baldwin, 1964, Volume 2, 103, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Collection.

editor at Knopf—with the encouragement of Alfred Knopf himself—rejected the manuscript for its homosexual themes. As Leeming explained, “A black writer was one thing; a black homosexual writer was simply too much for the public to bear.”²⁹¹

Baldwin’s account of publishing *Giovanni’s Room* reflects an assumption on his editor’s part that African Americans in the 1950s would not accept his writing for its overt homosexuality; but the book ended up being quite successful. Baldwin subsequently sold *Giovanni’s Room* to a European press, after which Dial press in the US finally published it, and it received generally positive reviews. Although Baldwin was initially concerned with his family’s response to the novel’s homosexuality, they too seemed unbothered by its content.²⁹²

After moving to Paris for a few years, Baldwin returned to the states to lend his support to the growing Civil Rights Movement. As he traveled the American South in the late 1950s, Baldwin was struck by the sexual elements of the South’s racial caste system, particularly the ways in which lynching and segregation were based on white southerners’ fascination with and hatred of black male sexuality. “When, one evening, a white man of some authority—one of those who might traditionally have participated in his castration had he been a lynch victim—made sexual advances towards him,” Baldwin’s biographer recounted Baldwin thinking, “we were both, abruptly, in history’s ass-pocket.”²⁹³

²⁹¹ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 113.

²⁹² Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 128.

²⁹³ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 141.

While the racial politics of the era overshadowed the possibility of any sort of black queer identity politics, black gay life continued to flourish throughout the country, remaining mostly segregated from white gays and lesbians. Gay bars from the rural South to the urban North remained segregated during the 1950s, and few queer African Americans found themselves comfortable or welcomed by white gay social circles. In rural areas where queer African Americans were not numerous enough to support an exclusively black gay bar, queer black men searched for sexual partners in regular black bars. As Howard explained, “At midcentury a ‘punk’ could ‘blow’ and otherwise heterosexual male, if the mood was right. With the help of good beer and good cheer, many a rural black man dropped his pants ‘behind a nightclub.’” Although they were discouraged from overtly sexual behavior in these establishments, like dancing together, “Men-desiring-men were apparent.”²⁹⁴

As they had throughout the century, black gay men and lesbians often retained—either by choice or economic necessity—close ties to larger black communities. In Philadelphia, for example, black lesbian Elizabeth Terry remembered mostly white gay men living in the city’s gay neighborhood Center City during the 1950s, and “Most African American gay and lesbian people that I met during that time, if they were from Philly, lived in the neighborhood that they grew up in.”²⁹⁵ Black gays and lesbians in Philadelphia socialized with each other mostly in private homes or black

²⁹⁴ Howard, *Men Like That*, 98-99.

²⁹⁵ Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004), 34.

clubs, where they typically “toned down” their queer behavior. In historian Marc Stein’s interviews with gay and lesbian Philadelphians, he found less social division between black gay men and lesbians than between white gay men and lesbians. As one of his narrators suggested, “Among black people, we don’t have as much of an option to subdivide ourselves. We can’t afford really to lessen our power,” which suggests that racial solidarity was important to queer black Philadelphians.²⁹⁶

Queer African Americans also did not often find themselves welcomed into the nascent white gay rights movement—or homophile movement—that began in the postwar period and spread during the civil rights era. Scholars of the modern gay rights movement have agreed that the national obsession with uncovering and rooting out homosexuals during the early Cold War had the unintended consequences of heightening queer visibility and creating a backlash among those who were persecuted that resulted in the formation of a homophile movement.²⁹⁷ The Mattachine Society, the first national gay rights organization was founded by Harry Hay in 1951, and the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), the first national lesbian organization, began in 1953. These early organizations comprised the homophile movement and chapters appeared across the country during the following two decades. Although Mattachine began as a radical organization, and many of its original leaders were members of the Communist party or avowed socialists, the anticommunist pressures of the 1950s resulted in the organization being taken over by more moderate leaders and renouncing communism

²⁹⁶ Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 41-42.

²⁹⁷ See, for example, D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 52, and Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*.

within a few short years of its founding. Nonetheless, the very survival of homophile organizations in the 1950s is remarkable.²⁹⁸

The homophile movement remained relatively white, middle-class, and conservative throughout the decade, encouraging its members to wear gender appropriate attire and avoid overt displays of sexuality and non-gender-conforming mannerisms.²⁹⁹ Although a handful of queer African Americans joined homophile organizations, most were black professionals,³⁰⁰ and even racially progressive homophile groups would likely not have welcomed working-class minorities. When black social worker Glenn Carrington expressed interest in helping to start a New York chapter of Mattachine in 1955, the organizational committee sent him information, including a memo titled "Aims and Principles of the Mattachine Society," which explained, "Although the Mattachine Society is a non-sectarian organization and is not affiliated with any political organization, it is, however, unalterably opposed to Communists and Communist activity and will not tolerate the use of its name or organization by or for any Communist group or front."³⁰¹ The few African Americans who sought to join homophile organizations, then, would have had to conform to these

²⁹⁸ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, chapters 4 and 5.

²⁹⁹ Craig M. Loftin, "Unacceptable Mannerisms: Gender Anxieties, Homosexual Activism, and Swish in the United States, 1945-1965," *Journal of Social History* 40 (3) (2007), 577-596.

³⁰⁰ In addition to Carrington, black lesbian writer Lorraine Hansberry was briefly involved with DOB in the 50s. D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 114.

³⁰¹ Organizational Committee of the New York Chapter of the Mattachine Society to Glenn Carrington, 19 December 1955, and "Aims and Principles of the Mattachine Society," n.d., Personal Papers Series, Box 2, Folder 2 – Mattachine Society, 1955-65, Glenn Carrington Papers, 1921-1971, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript Archive and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

standards of comportment, as well as the organization's growing hostility to communism.

Racism among white queers, also served to deter black gays and lesbians from visiting gay bars throughout the civil rights era, but it did not always indicate a reluctance to engage in interracial sex. As one white Philadelphian recalled, "If you went to bed with a black person, they would say you were an dinge queen...It was years and years and years before I ever told anyone that I did something with a black person. And then when I told one of my friends about it, my friend said, 'Oh, I'm so glad you told me because I did too.'"³⁰² As in previous decades, black neighborhoods and establishments were often more welcoming to black gays and lesbians than white communities were to white queers. White Detroit Mattachine member Dorr Legg, whose lover was black, recalled the couple being accepted in the city's black community, but subject to police harassment and "terrible traumas of prejudice and hatred" elsewhere in the city.³⁰³ Just as white New Yorkers found themselves fascinated with fetishized black sexuality as it was represented for white audiences during the Harlem Renaissance, the taboo of interracial sex continued to provide a mixture of shame and exhilaration for some queers of both races. New York social worker, Glenn Carrington, had several white lovers during the 1950s. One of his young white lovers seemed particularly titillated by

³⁰² Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves*, 65.

³⁰³ Quoted in D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 88.

the transgressiveness of crossing racial lines, asking Carrington to tell him whether he had ever “had anything to do with” other white boys.³⁰⁴

In the postwar years, drag balls continued to be a major part of working-class black life in larger cities like Detroit, New Orleans, Washington, D.C., Harlem, Philadelphia, and Chicago, but black newspapers—whose extensive coverage of black drag balls in the 1920s and 30s is documented in the first chapter—reported on them with decreasing frequency, despite increased black journalistic interest during the 1950s and 60s in other topics related to homosexuality. Newspaper reports on drag shows from the 1950s were decidedly more condemnatory of their subjects, such as a 1951 article buried on the 28th page of the *New York Amsterdam News* about a “freak joint” in Greenwich Village, described as a “hangout for moral degenerates,” whose liquor license had been revoked “for permitting sex perverts to congregate on the premises, selling to an intoxicated person and allowing a known homosexual entertainer to give lewd performances.”³⁰⁵

Historian Thaddeus Russell has cited 1954’s *Brown* decision as the historical moment when black newspapers in Detroit, Chicago, and New York stopped publicizing drag shows. Russell explained this shift as part of a broader effort by middle- and upper-class civil rights leaders to remove “black sexual deviancy [...] from public view,” in order

³⁰⁴ Restricted Letter, 4 June 1952, Box 7, Folder 10, Glenn Carrington Papers, 1921-1971, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript Archive and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

³⁰⁵ “‘Freak Joint’ Loses Battle Over License,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 23 June 1951, 28.

to strengthen their fight for citizenship rights.³⁰⁶ One of the only other mentions of drag performers in black newspapers during the 1950s was a multipart series in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1955 that raised the alarming question “Are the Fairies Running Harlem?” Seemingly unaware of Harlem’s decades-long tradition of lavish and well-publicized fairy balls, the first article claimed that “the third sex has invaded and captivated Harlem,” describing effeminate gay men as “this perverted sex group, which preys on the young and morally weak,” and suggesting that they had infiltrated every corner of Harlem and were actively recruiting others to their lifestyle.³⁰⁷ The second article in the series described the coupling of fairies—effeminate gay men—with other men, the social circles these fairies created, and offered psychological explanations for their behavior.³⁰⁸ While not focused exclusively on drag performances, this series indicates a broader shift away from the mixture of fascination and exoticism that often appeared in articles about fairies from the pre-war period.

In rural areas, where black queer populations were too small to sustain exclusively black gay bars or drag shows, same-sex desire took different forms. As John Howard has argued about Mississippi, queer interactions were far from invisible for rural southerners of all races and classes, and often began, at least for boys, during childhood and early adolescence. “Gang bangs and corn-holing, while linguistically unscientific and not altogether intimate in practice, nonetheless loomed large in the

³⁰⁶ Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” 114.

³⁰⁷ “Are the Fairies Running Harlem?” *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 February 1955, 5.

³⁰⁸ “Are the Fairies Running Harlem?” *New York Amsterdam News*, 19 February 1955, 6.

minds of those seeking sexual options,” and were seldom punished. “The sanctioned sexual and gender experimentation of boys and young men in small towns and rural communities, as well as the clandestine but commonplace adult and intergenerational queer acts” offered queer black boys alternatives to exclusive heterosexuality.³⁰⁹ And because most boys abandoned such sexual play in adolescence and went on date and marry women, childhood same-sex interactions did not exclude a person from heterosexuality. Chapel Hill civil rights leader Quinton Baker, for example, recalled “all kinds of sexual fooling around with young people, boys with each other” as part of his childhood, but not something that was especially taboo, and not something that was particularly important in realizing his own homosexuality.³¹⁰

Black churches during the early Cold War and civil rights era were complicated sexual spaces. Some of the early movement organizations, most notably the SCLC, found their leadership in black churches, and some of these leaders were far from gay-friendly; but as one of the primary social institutions for blacks in the rural South, churches served as an important place of queer interaction. Church events for youth were often sex-segregated, and some protestant churches even held drag performances. While for most churchgoers, drag shows were, to use Howard’s words, “good clean fun, for others it gave rise to complicated thoughts and feelings, many of which went against the

³⁰⁹ Howard, *Men Like That*, 21.

³¹⁰ Chris McGinnis Interview with Quinton E. Baker, 23 February 2002, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

grain.”³¹¹ Moreover, in the rural South, boys and men sometimes used church buildings, which often remained unlocked, for sexual encounters with other boys and men.

Queer black men sang in their church choirs, served as church leaders, and met other queer black men for friendship, sex, and companionship. Although queer black Mississippians often knew that homosexuality was a sin, until the late 1960s, most churches were “remarkably silent with regard to homosexuality.” A Harlem church organist and choir leader who admitted to his interviewer that he was “somewhat ‘gay’ himself,” for example, told the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1957 that “many of the men singing in the choirs of Harlem’s biggest churches are ‘gay.’”³¹²

While Howard’s rural southern black ministers avoided discussions of homosexuality, the attitudes of more prominent black religious leaders toward homosexuality during the 1950s reflect broader shifts in black politics that occurred during the decade. Charismatic black religious leaders like Detroit’s Prophet Jones and Sweet Daddy Grace—both of whom openly transgressed “respectable” gender and sexuality—enjoyed tremendous popularity among the black working class during the postwar period and the early 1950s,³¹³ despite the escalating federal campaign against homosexuality. Prophet Jones was effeminate and openly admitted to his congregation that he “lived a different life from that of most men,” which included having “never had sexual intercourse with a woman.” Jones lived in an extravagant mansion with his male

³¹¹ Howard, *Men Like That*, 52.

³¹² Jesse De Vore, “Singer Says Many Men in Harlem Choirs are ‘Queer,’” *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 October 1957, 1.

³¹³ Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” 109.

companion, James Walton, encouraged his working-class followers to enjoy luxury and leisure, and offered a decidedly nontraditional theology. As historian Thaddeus Russell has explained, Jones “even interpreted the Book of Genesis as antiheterosexual, preaching that Eve was the forbidden fruit and that the cohabitation of the sexes transgressed the law of God.”³¹⁴ While Sweet Daddy Grace was not openly queer, he also encouraged his working-class congregants to embrace life’s luxuries, and his services were often extravagant and “sexually charged.”³¹⁵

As the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum in the mid-1950s, however, working-class religious figures like Jones and Grace proved to be anomalies that, although significant in showing the variety of black religious styles, were not representative of most African Americans. Over the course of the 1950s, they were dislodged by the growing allegiance to more respectable middle- and upper-class religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. Following in his father’s footsteps, Harlem minister Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. was the most outspoken anti-gay black public figure during the early Civil Rights Era. In a 1951 article for *Ebony* magazine, Powell took aim at “Sex in the Church.” The article began with veiled references to the extravagant funeral for Prophet Jones’ recently deceased male companion, explaining that this popular religious leader and the deceased “had been sharing an unnatural relationship for a number of years,” about which his congregation

³¹⁴ Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” 110-111.

³¹⁵ Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” 112.

was aware.³¹⁶ Powell decried what he saw as a tendency among black clergy and congregations of allowing “degenerate ministers” into their churches, who placed “undue emphasis on sex,” a problem that he claimed was common among “leaders of so-called religious cults,” again taking aim at the likes of Sweet Daddy Grace and Prophet Jones.³¹⁷

The problem was so widespread, Powell argued, that black ministers needed to lead educational programs to “stem the growing influence of abnormal sex practices in youngsters, to save these youngsters from the horrible no-man’s land of sex.” Powell called for “swift action to check the ‘boys with the swish and the girls with the swagger,’” and contended that the church should provide sex education to help “these haunted people who are touched with such degeneracy.”³¹⁸ The significance of Powell’s pronouncements should not be underestimated. Not only was Powell a US Congressman and the pastor of Harlem’s Abyssinian Baptist Church—quite possibly the largest black Baptist congregation in the nation—but black newspapers across the country reported on and reprinted portions of his *Ebony* article, suggesting his words reached the vast majority of literate blacks in the country.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Russell, “The Color of Discipline,” 112-113.

³¹⁷ Adam Clayton Powell, “Sex in the Church,” *Ebony*, November 1951, 27-34.

³¹⁸ “Adam Powell Blasts Sex Degenerates,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 9 October 1951, 13.

³¹⁹ In addition to the *Philadelphia Tribune* article cited above, Powell’s remarks were printed in similar articles titled “Powell Blasts Sex Degenerates,” in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 25 October 1951, B1; *The Negro Star*, 19 October 1951, 1; and the *Arkansas State Press*, 12 October 1951, 1.

While black ministers other than Powell occasionally addressed homosexuality in the early 1950s,³²⁰ black churches both within and outside of the rural South were more likely to directly address topics related to homosexuality by the end of the decade. In addition to Howard's findings about Mississippi churches, black newspapers reported much more frequently on ministers and congregations who talked about homosexuality as the civil rights era progressed. In 1958, for example, Fort Valley State College, a black college in Georgia, held a "Marriage and Family Conference," in which ministers were included as speakers about "proper relationships," and fielded questions from students about homosexuality, among other topics related to sex.³²¹

This trend toward greater discussion of homosexuality was not limited to churches. As the 1950s came to a close and the civil rights movement approached its peak in the early 1960s, national interest in homosexuality increased dramatically and it thus became a more pressing political issue for black leaders. While the 1960s saw the persistence of many of these 1950s trends and attitudes, the success of the Civil Rights Movement fostered a racial solidarity that in some ways managed to transcend sexual differences.

³²⁰ See also, for example, "Bishop Strikes at Homos in Society," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 October 1955, 12.

³²¹ "Fort Valley Holds Marriage Conference," *Atlanta Daily World*, 22 March 1958, 1.

Chapter 4 Homosexuality and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s

In August 1963, South Carolina US Senator Strom Thurmond, who had established himself as both a staunch segregationist and a zealous anticommunist, launched an attack against March on Washington organizer Bayard Rustin. Before the United States Congress, Thurmond accused Rustin of being a communist and a homosexual.³²² Rustin had been affiliated with communist organizations as a young man—as had many African Americans who were politically active before World War II—and he had never attempted to conceal his homosexuality, which made him a perfect target, representing many of the things Thurmond and his fellow white southerners believed was wrong with the Civil Rights Movement. While the response among fellow civil rights leaders to Rustin’s 1953 arrest in Pasadena had been to relegate him to the sidelines of civil rights organizations and keep him out of the public eye, the response to this scandal was quite different; with the March on Washington quickly approaching, Rustin’s fellow organizers and African Americans across the country rushed to defend him as a capable organizer and a respectable leader, and accused Thurmond of resorting to unscrupulous tactics to try and undermine the movement.

³²²John D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 346-349.

That same year, as the Civil Rights Movement was reaching its peak, black newspapers carried numerous stories about homosexuality. These articles ranged from blaming diseased homosexuals for the recent alarming rise in syphilis cases³²³ and warning readers that homosexuals posed a threat to children,³²⁴ to reporting a scandal involving a black D.C. pastor accused of same-sex affairs³²⁵ and an announcement of a public panel discussion on homosexuality led by the Kinsey Institute.³²⁶ At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, homosexuality loomed large in the minds of African Americans across the country, and these articles reflect a wide range of ideas about homosexuality among African Americans. Attempts to discredit civil rights organizations and activists by associating them with communism and homosexuality continued into the 1960s, but ultimately resonated less deeply with black Americans as the movement reached its peak than it had in previous decades. Despite continued concern over the impact of homosexuality on society, when faced with the choice between standing behind the openly gay Bayard Rustin or distancing themselves from him, many black Americans supported him.

During the 1960s queer African Americans prioritized racial solidarity over their status as sexual minorities to help fight for black civil rights. Heterosexual African

³²³ "\$10 Million Sought For VD Control as Disease Rises," *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 March 1963, 7.

³²⁴ Mark Bricklin, "Sex Fiends May Prey on Your Child: Beware," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 6 August 1963, 2.

³²⁵ Art Peters, "Bishop Shelton Called 'Religious Racketeer' in D.C.," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 14 September 1963, 1.

³²⁶ "Set Homosexual Discussions For Aug. 31-Sept. 1," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 24 August 1963, 4.

Americans were also pushed to wrestle with the decision of whether to include queer African Americans in the fight for citizenship despite the possible liabilities of associating with “sexual deviates.” When speaking about the topic of homosexuality, many elite and middle-class African Americans revealed varying levels of homophobia during the 1960s; but when dealing with individual gays and lesbians, most were willing to accept the value of queer African Americans to black communities and the Civil Rights Movement. While homosexuality certainly complicated the work of prominent national leaders like Bayard Rustin, the movement’s success during the 1960s created opportunities for queer leadership, and queer men and women gained respect and admiration of their communities and political organizations. Although black gays and lesbians organized along racial lines during the decade, they did not yet organize as queer blacks; but the Civil Rights Movement created openings for same-sex desire, queer leadership, and the expansion of identity-based politics that would inspire gay rights activists of all races in subsequent years.

The 1960s saw the persistence of the postwar period’s emphasis on sexual conformity and fear of the diseased homosexual menace. Gays and lesbians were still considered security risks and fired from government jobs during the decade. Scandals like the arrest of President Lyndon Johnson’s close advisor, Walter Jenkins, for engaging in sexual activity with another man in a YMCA restroom, kept the fears of the “lavender scare” alive in the minds of many Americans.³²⁷ Moreover, leading medical and psychoanalytic authorities maintained their emphasis on homosexuality as a disorder

³²⁷ Johnson, *The Lavender Scare*, 197-198.

that could be cured with proper intervention.³²⁸ As the 1960s progressed, however, cracks began forming in the Cold War consensus and the generation of baby boomers that began coming of age challenged ideas of sexual and gender conformity. While the sexual revolution would continue well into the 1970s, many of the youth that came to participate in the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, had different ideas about sexual morality than their parents. As William Eskridge explained, “Old taboos were falling [in the mid-1960s], including those against interracial sexuality, sex outside marriage, and oral sex.”³²⁹ While the taboo against same-sex desire did not fall away as quickly, these liberalized views of sexuality created spaces for more dialogue.

Following national trends, discussions of homosexuality became even more numerous in black newspapers than they had been in previous decades.³³⁰ African Americans were talking about homosexuality more than ever before, and those discussions became more nuanced and urgent in the context of the escalating Civil Rights Movement and the spirit of revolution that was beginning to develop among younger activists.

Black papers and reader responses reveal the persistence of many postwar views on homosexuality. In the 1960s, attention to homosexuality as one of the many problems facing African Americans in prison increased dramatically. Black newspapers carried regular stories exposing authorities’ inattention to the “problems” created by

³²⁸ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 365.

³²⁹ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 158.

³³⁰ Martin Duberman showed that there was a major increase in newspaper articles on homosexuality between 1962 and 1965. Duberman, *Stonewall*, 97.

homosexual inmates,³³¹ and the complicity of guards and other prison officials in “condoning [...] homosexuality within the penal institutions.” As one former inmate recounted to Cleveland’s black newspaper, “Hardly a month passes without a stabbing or clubbing which usually results from a homosexual affair.”³³²

Sex between inmates had racial implications as well. At Pontiac Prison in Illinois, interracial homosexual sex became a charged issue in August 1966. The *Daily Defender* reported that interracial relationships among male inmates were the result of “myths” about black male sexuality, and claimed that “the officials are not overtly concerned about homosexual relations—as long as they are not inter-racial.” The situation at Pontiac became such a problem that prison officials began segregating inmates.³³³ While white authorities saw homosexuality as acceptable—or at least inevitable—in prison, then, interracial sex was simply too transgressive. A similar problem, papers reported, plagued sex-segregated schools, one of which was supposedly “overrun by ruthless gangs of Lesbian girls.”³³⁴

During the 1960s, black newspapers reported frequently on the rise in syphilis cases, often blaming the increase on prostitutes and the promiscuous habits of homosexual men. Citing a Los Angeles physician, the *Atlanta Daily World*, for example,

³³¹ See, for example, “Menard Laxity Charged,” *Daily Defender*, 30 November 1965, 3.

³³² Gene Chatman, “Ex-Inmate Says Ohio Pen Heads Condone Perversion,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 1 June 1968, 1A. See also “30 Cook County Jail Guards In Hot Water,” *Daily Defender*, 2 January 1968, 6.

³³³ Luther Hicks, “Interracial Sex Banned at Pontiac Prison,” *Daily Defender*, 17 August 1966, 5. See also “Mixed Prison ‘Marriages’ Pose Headache for Authorities,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 27 August 1966, 4.

³³⁴ “School Studies Sex Pervert Charges,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 April 1963, 48.

reported a recent “phenomenal increase’ in homosexually transmitted venereal infections” across the country. Unfortunately, the doctor claimed, “homosexuals seldom understand the urgent need for routine venereal disease examinations,” and since “the aggressive male homosexual ‘often achieves a fantastic number of sexual contacts,’” controlling the outbreak would be challenging.³³⁵ Similar articles appeared through the mid-60s in the *Chicago Defender*, *New York Amsterdam News*, and the *Pittsburg Courier*,³³⁶ suggesting that many of the country’s literate African Americans would have at some point read accounts that promoted the image of gay men as diseased and sexually promiscuous, images against which many African Americans during the civil rights era were already fighting, and from which they would have wanted to distance themselves.

Black newspapers also gave significant attention to gay criminality during the 1960s. In Atlanta in 1964, a black man was given the death penalty for the murder of his common-law wife and her female lover, whom he killed in the “heat of passion.”³³⁷ In a similar 1967 case, a black “father of seven” in Los Angeles reportedly “went out of his mind” and murdered his wife’s lesbian lover after finding the two women naked in bed

³³⁵ “Syphilis Increase Is Blamed on Homosexuals,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 15 June 1962, 3.

³³⁶ See, for example, “Doctors Alarmed Over Syphilis Increase,” *Daily Defender*, 14 September 1961, 9; “\$10 Million Sought For VD Control as Disease Rises,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 March 1963, 7; Whitelaw McBride, “People in the News,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 October 1963, 13; and “Venereal Disease Up 300 Percent,” *Daily Defender*, 24 November 1965, 15.

³³⁷ “Death Penalty in the Slayings of 2 Women,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 14 February 1964, 1.

together.³³⁸ Sensational accounts involving murderous homosexuals continued to appear in black newspapers from across the country throughout the civil rights era.

One of the most sensational cases of the 1960s was the murder of Kenneth Mack Robinson—nephew of black baseball star Jackie Robinson—by a crazed white lesbian in Pasadena in the summer of 1967. Described by the *Los Angeles Sentinel* as a “23-year-old mini-skirted white woman,” Denise Marie Casco reportedly killed and mutilated Robinson’s body after being forced at gun point to spend “a night and most of a day with a man whose very masculinity caused an upsurge of bestiality and sadism,” brought on by “fear of having sexual relations with men.” Capitalizing on stereotypes about sick homosexuals and rapacious black men, Casco’s defense attorney sought to characterize his client as having been driven insane by her attraction to women and Robinson’s forcing “her to commit ‘sexual indignities.’”³³⁹ The case made the front page of both the *Sentinel* and the *Philadelphia Tribune* several times over the next few months, where Casco was described as hating sex and having “strong lesbian tendencies” that fueled her crime.³⁴⁰ After an all-white jury convicted Casco of manslaughter and a subsequent hearing declared her innocent by reason of insanity, Jackie Robinson and his family accused the LA district attorney of leniency and imposing a “double standard of justice.”³⁴¹ The *Sentinel*’s reports continued describing Casco not only as a lesbian but

³³⁸ “Man Kills Woman in Bed with Wife,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 4 May 1967, A1.

³³⁹ Joe Bingham, “‘Lesbian Limbo’ Told in Pasadena,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 25 May 1967, A1.

³⁴⁰ “Pasadena Slayer ‘Hates’ Sex,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1 June 1967, A1.

³⁴¹ “Jackie Robinson’s Family Blasts D.A.,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 June 1967, A1.

also repeatedly referred to her risqué clothing, on one occasion calling her “a miniskirted hippie” which suggests the paper’s sympathy with Robinson. In the same article, the *Sentinel* revealed that after several months in a mental hospital, Casco was once again facing criminal charges in several other violent crimes.³⁴² The *Philadelphia Tribune* also continued to follow the case into the fall of 1967, describing Casco as “emotionally unbalanced,” but also seemed to suggest that Casco’s four-month sentence in a mental hospital was lenient.³⁴³

The frequency of these stories and their prominent placement in black newspapers—often on the front page—suggest that African Americans shared in the continuing “American obsession” with homosexuality during the 1960s.³⁴⁴ In response to crimes like these, black newspapers sometimes offered warnings and advice to readers that perpetuated a pathologized image of homosexuality. *Philadelphia Tribune* writer Fred Bonaparte warned his readers in 1963 that “middle-sexers” were the “most brutal of [the] murdering breed” and cited a local white medical examiner’s findings that “Suicide and Homosexuality among Negroes is on the rise here along with homosexual murders.”³⁴⁵ In an article several months later, another *Philadelphia Tribune* writer Mark

³⁴² “Lesbian Killer Jailed,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 9 November 1961, A1.

³⁴³ “Girl Who Killed Jackie Robinson’s Nephew Freed From Mental Hospital,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 21 November 1967, 4.

³⁴⁴ Terry, *An American Obsession*.

³⁴⁵ Fred Bonaparte, “Homosexuality, Suicides Raising City Official Tells Morticians,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 25 May 1963, 3.

Bricklin warned readers of “sex fiends,” who “may prey on your child” and in some cases, turn their victims into homosexuals.³⁴⁶

Readers wrote into black newspapers about homosexuality more frequently during the 1960s than during the postwar period. One young woman wrote the *Daily Defender*'s advice columnist, concerned that her math teacher, who had taken a special interest in mentoring her, might be a lesbian. While the girl clearly liked and respected her teacher, she was afraid that the “mannish-looking woman” might “make some kind of move which will not be right.” The columnist advised the girl not to jump to conclusions about whether the teacher was a lesbian. If it turned out that the teacher was a lesbian, however, the columnist said she would consider her “dangerous” and the girl should “report her” to school authorities. If the teacher was not a lesbian, her behavior showed that “she is still quite a sick, lonely woman who is unable to control herself.”³⁴⁷ This exchange suggests that even behavior that raised the suspicion of lesbianism was enough to consider someone “sick” and predatory. In another case, a woman wrote to *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist “Lady Fortune” asking advice on her own attraction toward women. “Of course I know it’s against the moral laws of mankind,” she confessed, “but I’ve been having affairs with other women for ten years.” Her letter continued, asking Lady Fortune how to reform herself. Fortune replied that the woman’s problem was more “mental” than “physical,” and suggested the woman phone

³⁴⁶ Mark Bricklin, “Sex Fiends May Prey on Your Child: Beware,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 6 August 1963.

³⁴⁷ Ruth Gibbs, “Aunt Ruth,” *Daily Defender*, 2 August 1966, 18.

her directly for advice on how she could still “be saved for some man to marry and give you kids.”³⁴⁸

Along with these perceptions of homosexuals as diseased and dangerous, the postwar coupling of antihomosexuality with anticommunism persisted into the 1960s. Despite the purging of communists from several prominent organizations during the 1950s, anticommunism still proved problematic for the movement. During a 1963 meeting at the White House, for example, President Kennedy strong-armed Martin Luther King, Jr. into firing one of his closest advisors, Jack O’Dell, because of O’Dell’s socialist views.³⁴⁹

Although Rustin’s sexuality and his brief affiliation with the Young Communist League certainly fueled criticism from southern sources, those public attacks were not the only ways in which his sexuality complicated his activism. From the beginning of his involvement with King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Rustin was treated as a possible liability, particularly when working in southern states.³⁵⁰ And even before Thurmond’s attack, other threats came from within the movement. As Rustin biographer John D’Emilio explained, “Rustin’s sexuality and radical politics made him [...] unpalatable” to some of the ministers involved in the SCLC, and despite his strong relationship with King, Rustin’s sexuality once again forced him to leave his job, but in 1960 through no action of his own.

³⁴⁸ Lady Fortune, “Doc Wilson, the Man Who Knows,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 29 October 1966, 4A.

³⁴⁹ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 850.

³⁵⁰ D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 237.

As King, Rustin, A. Philip Randolph and the SCLC planned to protest the 1960 Democratic and Republican National Conventions, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP felt that King and Rustin were encroaching on the NAACP's realm of political activity. When Wilkins did not receive a timely response to his objections, he appealed to Harlem minister and US congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., known for his outspoken antigay views, who threatened to publically accuse King of having a homosexual relationship with Rustin. "Martin new goddamn well he couldn't have that kind of information," Rustin later recalled. "You can't sleep with a guy without his knowing it." In attempt to avoid scandal, Rustin offered King his resignation from the SCLC, and King accepted it without hesitation.³⁵¹

This incident reveals the complicated status of homosexuals in the SCLC, the civil rights organization most closely rooted in the black church. King's advisor Clarence Jones recalled Powell's "attitude toward homosexuality was prototypical of the black ministers of that time. They had no hesitation about speaking about homosexuality publicly and denigrating it in a public speech by saying something like... 'I hope Martin King has better sense than to hang out with that fag.'"³⁵² According to the SCLC's Rochelle Horowitz, a close friend to Rustin, pressures from other ministers weighed heavily on King's decisions in 1960. "It was a fairly homophobic church," she recalled, "And there were Northern SCLC ministers who were gay and who were in the closet, and they didn't like the discussion [about Rustin's homosexuality] coming out. Bayard

³⁵¹ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 296-298.

³⁵² Michael G. Long, *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life In Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), 238-239.

would talk about them in a not-too-friendly way. ‘These faggots are hiding,’ he would say, ‘and that makes them hostile.’”³⁵³

These descriptions of the SCLC suggest that while some black ministers were outspokenly homophobic, they were willing to accept the presence of homosexuals in their ranks as long as those people remained closeted.³⁵⁴ Rustin’s experience in 1960 also suggests that King and others were willing to overlook Rustin’s homosexuality unless it seemed likely to become a public issue that could negatively affect the movement or its leadership. Soon after Rustin’s resignation from the SCLC, he was invited to attend a SNCC conference, but then disinvited because the sponsoring AFL-CIO threatened to cut funding if he spoke. SNCC’s Jane Stenbridge quit the organization in protest of the decision and in support of Rustin, but SNCC’s decision remained, essentially cutting Rustin out of the southern movement altogether.

For the next two years, King and the SCLC treated Rustin as a pariah, but he maintained a close relationship with movement and labor leader A. Philip Randolph who brought Rustin back on board to help plan the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The initial response among black civil rights leaders was mixed. King had to some extent already brought Rustin back into the SCLC fold, so he supported Rustin’s leadership in the march planning.³⁵⁵ But the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins and the Urban League’s Whitney Young objected to Rustin’s leadership because of his previous

³⁵³ Long, *I Must Resist*, 240-241.

³⁵⁴ See also Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 329.

³⁵⁵ Long, *I Must Resist*, 261.

communist affiliations and the Pasadena arrest, and King seemed unwilling to challenge them. Randolph and CORE's James Farmer defended Rustin, resulting in Randolph agreeing to be the leader, with Rustin as his second-in-command. Although Randolph was the official leader, Rustin's colleagues gave him most of the credit for organizing the march, and Randolph called him "Mr. March-on-Washington."³⁵⁶ Privately, King continued to worry about Rustin taking on a public role once again, a concern that proved legitimate when the FBI tipped off Thurmond about Rustin's arrest in Pasadena.³⁵⁷

In early August, 1963, less than a month before the march, Thurmond leveled the aforementioned accusations at Rustin in front of the US Congress, once again raising the twin specter of communism and homosexuality, and bringing unprecedented attention to Rustin's personal life and his role in the movement. But instead of allowing Rustin to throw himself under the bus as he had done with FOR and the SCLC, Rustin's fellow civil rights leaders rallied to support him.³⁵⁸ Wilkins and King both offered public statements in Rustin's defense.³⁵⁹ Randolph defended him in the press, speaking "for the combined Negro leadership," and "voicing my complete confidence in Bayard Rustin's character, integrity, and extraordinary ability." Randolph mentioned Rustin's arrests for political activism, but also addressed the Pasadena arrest. "That Mr. Rustin

³⁵⁶ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 339.

³⁵⁷ Long, *I Must Resist*, 262.

³⁵⁸ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 349.

³⁵⁹ Long, *I Must Resist*, 263.

was on one occasion arrested in another connexion [*sic.*] has long been a matter of public record, and not an object of concealment,” Randolph’s statement continued. “There are those who contend that this incident, which took place many years ago, voids or overwhelms Mr. Rustin’s ongoing contribution to the struggle for human rights. I hold otherwise.” Speaking of Thurmond and others who would attack Rustin, Randolph wrote, “They seek only to discredit the Movement and to emasculate its leadership.”³⁶⁰

Rustin also received letters of support and declarations of loyalty from march groups across the country, calling Thurmond’s remarks “slander,” expressing “profound indignation” over the attack, and sharing frustrations over Thurmond’s attempt to “weaken the cause by means of personal abuse and vilification.”³⁶¹ The black press also came to Rustin’s defense. According to the *Philadelphia Tribune*, “Efforts to smear Dr. Martin Luther King having failed, foes of civil rights, last week, began a muck-raking assault upon two of the Atlanta leader’s aides.” The article described the “sex perversion” charge against Rustin without casting doubt on its credibility, but concluded that “the motive of the expose has been to discredit the civil rights movement.”³⁶² The following month, *Jet* magazine hailed Rustin as the “Controversial Hero” of the march, praising his talents as an organizer, his work ethic, and his reliability, despite his arrests

³⁶⁰ Statement by A. Philip Randolph, 12 August 1963, Reel 8, Bayard Rustin Papers, Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Interestingly, Wilkins and Randolph also joined together in 1964 to criticize a proposed ban on homosexuals in the Job Corps, see “Protest Ban on Perverts,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 November 1964, 1.

³⁶¹ Elsie Gilman to Bayard Rustin, 17 August 1963, and Rose V. Russell to Bayard Rustin, n.d., Reel 7, Bayard Rustin Papers, Davis Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

³⁶² “Civil Rights Foes Smear 2 King Aides,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 13 August 1963, 2.

and previous work with Communists.³⁶³ Among those who came to Rustin's defense, then, not one attempted to deny Rustin's homosexuality, and all seemed to agree that his skill as an organizer for racial justice was more important than his sexuality.

The outpouring of support Rustin received following Thurmond's attack was unprecedented. As John D'Emilio argued, the political dynamics of the movement and Thurmond's attack necessitated such a response. "Because the accusation was so public, because it was leveled by a white supremacist, and because it came just two weeks before an event on which the movement was banking so much civil rights leaders had to rally to Rustin's defense." Later in his life, Rustin remembered the incident as "the best thing [Thurmond] could have done for me." Recalling Wilkins' unexpected support Rustin said, "Any number of people's attitude would have been, 'I told you so!' [...] Roy's attitude was 'We're not going to let him get away with this kind of attack.'"³⁶⁴

The success of the March on Washington and the outpouring of support Rustin received in response to a direct attack on his sexuality and previous communist affiliations reflected both the momentum that the Civil Rights Movement had achieved by 1963 and the affect that movement politics had on how black leaders addressed issues of sexuality. While Rustin's open homosexuality had proven a liability to FOR, King, and the SCLC, and while Rustin was thus forced to remain at the margins of the movement, by 1963, his work as an effective organizer for racial justice trumped the

³⁶³ "Bayard Rustin: Controversial Hero of March on Washington," *Jet*, 12 September 1963, 8-9.

³⁶⁴ D'Emilio, *Lost Prophet*, 349.

potentially negative implications of his homosexuality in the eyes of many black Americans, some of whom still considered homosexuals dangerous and diseased.

Martin Luther King, Jr. has been widely memorialized as the century's most influential civil rights leader, which has led to considerable speculation in recent years about his views on homosexuality during his lifetime and whether or not he would have supported the modern gay rights movement. While some of King's advisors and family members have spoken out in recent years against gay rights, others have suggested that because of his politics toward the end of his life, he likely would have been supportive.³⁶⁵ Posthumous speculation aside, King addressed the issue of homosexuality rarely. Possibly the only instance where he did so in writing was a 1958 advice column in *Ebony* magazine. In response to a young man who admitted, "I feel the way about boys that I ought to feel about girls," King explained that his problem was "not at all an uncommon one," and that it was most likely a result of cultural rather than innate factors, and suggested that the writer seek the help of a psychiatrist.³⁶⁶ Chapel Hill civil rights leader Quinton Baker recalls thinking that King "was not very comfortable with gay people in the movement," particularly with the "flamboyant" nature of Rustin's sexuality."³⁶⁷ Despite King's limited discussion of homosexuality during his lifetime, his close relationship to Rustin suggests that although he may have been personally

³⁶⁵ See, for example, Robert Stacy McCain, "King Would Have Supported Gay 'Marriage,' Ex-aide Says," *The Washington Times*, 14 January 2005.

³⁶⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., "Advice for Living," *Ebony*, January 1958, 34.

³⁶⁷ Chris McGinnis Interview with Quinton E. Baker, 23 February 2002, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

uncomfortable with homosexuality or concerned about it as a political liability, he nonetheless respected Rustin and valued his contribution to the movement.

King's relationship with James Baldwin was somewhat more complicated. By the early 1960s, Baldwin's works had already caused controversy for their depictions of sexuality, and as Baldwin became more involved with the movement, his sexuality became a cause for concern among movement leaders. In addition to his aforementioned works, his 1962 novel, *Another Country*, brought scrutiny for its depictions of interracial sex and same-sex desire. Although the black press gave Baldwin favorable reviews, white newspapers were mixed in their responses to the novel; and despite becoming a bestseller, *Another Country* was banned on several college campuses.³⁶⁸ Black readers also expressed objections to the novel. In one instance, a reader criticized the *Chicago Defender* for its positive review of the novel, declaring himself "thoroughly convinced that not the interracial nature of the novel, but rather the heinous, disgusting, revolting and abominable homosexual theme," was the book's problem.³⁶⁹

Following this controversy, Baldwin took on the civil rights struggle in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), encouraging "relatively conscious" whites and blacks to fully commit to the movement, in hopes that "we may be able, handful that we are, to end the racial nightmare, to achieve our country, and change the history of the world."³⁷⁰ With his

³⁶⁸ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 200-205.

³⁶⁹ "Raps Defender's Defense of 'Another Country,'" *Chicago Defender*, 9 January 1965, 9.

³⁷⁰ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 214.

increasing interest in activism and the publication of *The Fire Next Time* at the height of the movement, Baldwin established himself as one of the movement's spokesmen and members of the press turned to him for commentary on the Civil Rights Movement with increasing frequency, a position that made some of his less radical contemporaries like King uncomfortable.

While King's official reason for denying Baldwin a chance to speak at the 1963 March on Washington was that Baldwin was not well enough informed about the movement, several scholars have suggested that Baldwin's sexuality and gender presentation concerned King. According to one historian, "The argument was that Baldwin's homosexuality, his unconfident masculinity [...] completely disqualifies him as a representative spokesman."³⁷¹ Quinton Baker, who also knew Baldwin, recalled there being "a bit of tension between Dr. King and James Baldwin because of James Baldwin's sexuality. And certainly, he was not hiding anything from anybody."³⁷² Several of King's advisors expressed concern with both Baldwin's and Rustin's homosexuality. King's attorney, Clarence Jones, stated that the SCLC "could hardly afford to have candid homosexuals close to the seat of power."³⁷³ Their concerns about Baldwin being a liability for the movement were not without foundation. After Baldwin attended a meeting with Attorney General Robert Kennedy and other civil rights leaders, including

³⁷¹ Quoted in Douglas Field, "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin: Sex, Privacy, and Black Nationalist Fervor," *Callaloo* 27 (2) Spring 2004, 461.

³⁷² Chris McGinnis Interview with Quinton E. Baker, 23 February 2002, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

³⁷³ Field, "Looking for Jimmy Baldwin," 461.

King in 1963, the FBI began surveillance on Baldwin, focusing on his sympathies with communist Cuba and his homosexuality.³⁷⁴ Those sympathies eventually led Baldwin to join more radical organizations like SNCC and CORE.³⁷⁵

While Rustin's and Baldwin's experiences illuminate how the politics of homosexuality played out in the highest circles of movement leadership, they were hardly the only queer African American in the movement. The black Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s created spaces for queer individuals and in some cases, fostered queer relationships and interactions. Aaron Henry, who assumed the top leadership position in the Mississippi NAACP after Medgar Evers' murder in 1963, would probably be considered bisexual by today's standards. As John Howard has demonstrated, Henry remained a beloved and respected leader for thirty years, despite several well-publicized arrests for sexual encounters with men. In 1962, Henry was arrested for allegedly soliciting sex from an 18-year-old white hitchhiker whom he had given a ride. Although the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission did not specifically target homosexuality as Florida's Johns Committee did, they "relished the utility of such phenomena as tools of scandal," Howard explained.³⁷⁶ As Henry later recalled,

I was convinced that they were trying to destroy my effectiveness in a movement where most of the participants at the time were men. I felt that the arrest was an attempt to prevent people, particularly the young men who were so very important to us, from participating in a movement where they might be accused of homosexuality.³⁷⁷

³⁷⁴ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 225.

³⁷⁵ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 256.

³⁷⁶ Howard, *Men Like That*, 160-161.

³⁷⁷ Howard, *Men Like That*, 160.

While Howard admitted that the Sovereignty Commission “may have helped orchestrate” the arrest to discredit Henry, he takes issue with other historians’ tendency to dismiss the charges as “trumped up,” because of Henry’s behavior in subsequent years. Although he remained married to a woman, “Henry repeatedly evaded charges of homosexuality,” including another arrest in 1972 for soliciting sex from a male undercover agent. Later in his life, however, Henry shows less concern for concealing his same-sex desires, keeping extensive “correspondence from men—often young, often white—whom he met on his numerous trips both inside and outside the state.”³⁷⁸

By the late 1970s, Henry lived more or less openly with a young man as his companion while serving in the state legislature.³⁷⁹ As Howard has explained, “Throughout the period, homosexual relationships most commonly coexisted—‘on the side’ [...]—with heterosexual relationships,” which in Henry’s case, allowed him the freedom to remain married to a woman and pursue sex with men. Despite at least four separate arrests for homosexual conduct, Mississippi blacks reelected Henry to the presidency of the NAACP every year for more than three decades. “If Henry’s so-called private life seemed a little suspicious,” Howard observed, “little harm came to his public life.”³⁸⁰

³⁷⁸ Howard, *Men Like That*, 161-162.

³⁷⁹ Howard, *Men Like That*, 163.

³⁸⁰ Howard, *Men Like That*, 165.

Other queer African Americans became well-respected civil rights leaders in their own communities. In Hollandale, Mississippi in 1963, a local organizer who housed activists from other states and helped blacks register to vote, John Howard described as “A respected member of the Masons,” who “was also known as a bisexual and an operator of two houses of prostitution.”³⁸¹ Quinton Baker, who served as the president of the NAACP chapter at North Carolina Central University in Durham recalled that gay people “were all over the place” in the movement. During his work with the North Carolina movement, Baker dated a white male activist, a fact that he remembered was well-known among his fellow activists, but never caused any problems. “In Chapel Hill the leadership was pretty much gay,” Baker recalled, estimating that a “majority of the leadership” and about twenty percent of the participants in the local movement were queer.³⁸² For these and other queer civil rights activists, their leadership abilities and commitment to the cause of racial equality was more important in the eyes of most African Americans than their sexuality.

While most of the rest of the country saw the height of communist and homosexual persecution during the 1950s, efforts to root out such subversives intensified in the Deep South during the early 60s. This rhetorical linkage of sexual deviance and civil rights activism in Mississippi escalated and became increasingly associated with “outside agitators” between 1961’s Freedom Rides and 1964’s Freedom Summer. In some ways, white southerners’ fears were accurate. The youthful nature of

³⁸¹ Howard, *Men Like That*, 118.

³⁸² Chris McGinnis Interview with Quinton E. Baker, 23 February 2002, Southern Oral History Program Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

civil rights activism during the 1960s also created spaces for queer desire and queer and gender nonconforming people found the student counterculture of the decade more accepting than mainstream society.³⁸³ In the summer of 1964, more than a thousand students descended on Mississippi to register African Americans to vote, conduct freedom schools, and challenge segregation. The Mississippi Freedom Summer Project, organized by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) brought white northern students, seasoned activists, and southern African Americans together in a politically and racially charged environment where physical violence and death were constant threats. While the movement in Mississippi was hardly a hotbed of the sexually revolutionary ideas associated with the mostly white student counterculture of the 60s and 70s, for many of these youth, both black and white, Freedom Summer provided an unprecedented opportunity to transgress traditional boundaries of sexual and social behavior, and the political passions that these students brought to Freedom Summer often played out in sexual terms.

For some white Freedom Summer volunteers, having sex with a black person was the ultimate means of proving his or her political commitment to the movement. As white SNCC worker Penny Patch remembered, “We were young, we were living in wartime conditions. We were always afraid; we never knew whether we would see one another again. We were ready, black and white, to break all the taboos. SNCC men were

³⁸³ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, 194.

handsome, they were brilliant, they were brave, and I was very much in love.”³⁸⁴

According to Doug McAdam’s extensive interviews of Freedom Summer volunteers, there was “a great deal of sexual experimentation” with more than half of those interviewed describing “the summer as their first experience with the kind of open sexuality that came to characterize the era.” Another white volunteer recalled her experience as “the most open, adventurous sex I’ve ever had,” before the sexual liberation and women’s movements of the late 60s and 70s made sex into something more politically complicated for her.³⁸⁵

While interracial sex among the summer volunteers may have been the most visible—and in terms of internal SNCC politics, the most problematic—expression of sexuality that summer, same-sex relationships occurred as well and were similarly significant to their participants both personally and politically. As one activist recalled, “In the midst of a movement that was not directly related to sexual orientation but more involved in day-to-day social justice issues with a common enemy, the movement would bring you closer together.”³⁸⁶ Howard showed that “locals and volunteers cautiously explored sexualities across the color line” during the summer of 1964. Among those northern white volunteers was nineteen-year-old Burton Weiss of Brooklyn who shared a “two room shack” with black seventeen-year-old Jonah Jenkins and his

³⁸⁴ Constance Curry, et. al., *Deep In Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 155.

³⁸⁵ Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 143-144.

³⁸⁶ James T. Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life, 1948-1968* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), 148.

grandfather, and the two youth developed what he later remembered as a “special friendship.” “Practically naked” because of the heat, he recalled, they shared a small bed, often becoming “entangled during sleep.” While “‘nothing was ever said,’ the two clearly ‘loved each other,’” and once kissed while working in the garden together.³⁸⁷ Violating taboos against both interracial and homosexual sexuality, this relationship unfolded as a result of the unique living conditions and sexually liberating atmosphere of the summer project.

Doug McAdam’s study of Freedom Summer workers two decades later revealed only a few volunteers who self-identified as gay or lesbian in their interviews, but remarked that marriage rates among former volunteers were significantly lower than the national average, and disproportionately lower among females. McAdam suggested that these statistics reflect the costs of continued participation in radical politics, not necessarily sexual orientation.³⁸⁸ John Howard took issue with McAdam’s assessment, however, suggesting a broader link between racially controversial politics and a more general “egalitarian and idealist” setting of Freedom Summer in which “as civil rights were won, queer rights issues resounded just beneath the surface.”³⁸⁹ The youthfulness and transgressive attitudes of the summer project workers toward interracial sex suggest that Freedom Summer, at the very least, provided queer volunteers of both

³⁸⁷ Howard, *Men Like That*, 119.

³⁸⁸ McAdam, *Freedom Summer*, 220-221.

³⁸⁹ Howard, *Men Like That*, 119.

creates a more sexually open environment to experiment and act on taboo sexual desires, including same-sex attractions.

Southern white politicians took the lead in linking antihomosexuality and anticommunism in the American political mind, and in using the two to attack the black freedom struggle. In addition to individual efforts like Strom Thurmond's 1963 attack on Bayard Rustin, some state governments created special committees to hamper the work of civil rights organizers. In the cases of Mississippi and Florida, state governments established special task forces that perpetuated this linkage of civil rights activism with homosexuality and communism. Similar to the aforementioned Florida Legislative Investigative Committee (FLIC), Mississippi established its State Sovereignty Commission in 1956, to—in official terms—“prevent encroachment upon the rights of this and other states by the Federal Government.” Historian John Dittmer has described the Commission as “homegrown McCarthyism” and “a secret police force that owed its primary allegiance to the Citizens' Council.”³⁹⁰ The State Sovereignty Commission investigated civil rights organizations like the NAACP, as well as residents of and visitors to Mississippi, whom they deemed “subversive.” As the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) prepared for their 1964 Freedom Summer project, Sovereignty Commission investigators focused their attentions on these “outside agitators,” meeting with local law enforcement throughout the state and explaining, in the words of one investigator,

³⁹⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 58.

that communists “were the main force behind all of the racial unrest” and characterizing the summer project volunteers as “communists, sex perverts, odd balls, and do-gooders.”³⁹¹ As a white attorney wrote to President Lyndon Johnson in the summer of 1964, many white Mississippians believed that “Prior to the invasion of Mississippi, we had only one known Communist in Mississippi. I dare say now that we have several hundred.”³⁹² Mississippi’s white newspapers suggested not only that the student activists flocking into their state were communists, but implied their femininity or sexual nonconformity by linking masculinity with violence, and in John Howard’s words, “cast a movement billed as nonviolent as therefore unmasculine and perhaps queer.”³⁹³

These successful efforts by politicians and white southerners to link homosexuality with communism and use them both to discredit the Civil Rights Movement had a significant impact on the movement and generated a variety of responses from African Americans. Some more conservative African Americans in Mississippi, for example, agreed that these “outside agitators” were doing more harm than good. Percy Greene, publisher of the black newspaper the *Jackson Advocate* accused Freedom Summer volunteers of creating “racial antagonism and confusion.” As Howard explained, Percy “felt that many were communists, blindly pursuing ‘some kind of utopia’ [...and] urged them to return ‘to their own states where much work on the

³⁹¹ Quoted in Yasuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 159.

³⁹² James E. Welch to Lyndon B. Johnson, 28 August 1964, PL/ST 24, Box 53, Folder 11/23/63-8/30/66, Political Affairs Series, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library.

³⁹³ Howard, *Men Like That*, 146.

Negro question is still needed, and leave the affairs of Mississippi to the White people and Negroes of the state.’”³⁹⁴

Conservative black journalist George Schuyler openly accused activists of being homosexuals and communists. In February 1964, Schuyler lamented how “the hapless Negroes have been progressively unfortunate in the individuals whom they have accepted or have had foisted upon them as leaders.” After mentioning an unnamed civil rights leader who he claimed “is known by me to have been deep in the Communist conspiracy for 20 years (in addition to being ‘queer’ for an equal time),” Schuyler made thinly veiled references to Martin Luther King and his relationship with Bayard Rustin and Jack O’Dell:

One of our most nationally ballyhooed persons who has successfully bamboozled blacks and whites into making him a little ikon was surrounded by two Communists who were forever at his side for five years, along with assorted fellow travelers. One of these Reds admits he was a member of the Young Communist League (and has twice been arrested as a homosexual) turned up later as one of the March on Washington leaders, and recently masterminded the senseless school boycott in New York.³⁹⁵

Later that year, Schuyler took aim at COFO and SNCC in the wake of the Mississippi Summer Project. He criticized the NAACP for failing to keep these radical organizations under control. “That is their business to know,” he wrote, “if an outfit bearing their name and imprint is or is not loaded down with misfits, crackpots, homosexuals, and Communists as COFO has been shown to be.”³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Howard, *Men Like That*, 149.

³⁹⁵ George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 15 February 1964, 11.

³⁹⁶ George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 26 December 1964, 10.

As historian John Howard has demonstrated, white Mississippians continued to obsess over the issue of interracial sex as civil rights activities escalated in the state, but they also fixated on the stereotype of the northern white beatnik homosexual male. The Ku Klux Klan and White Citizens' Councils explicitly linked the threats of "homosexuals," "sex perverts," communists, and "atheistic murderers" in their literature,³⁹⁷ reflecting the sustained linking of antihomosexual and anticommunist attitudes as the 1960s progressed in the South.

While queer life remained mostly segregated during the civil rights era, the social and political changes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement and the dismantling of legal segregation created openings for integration, a process that many members of the queer community would say has yet to see completion, particularly in the South. As Howard explained, "Parallel black and white queer realms cautiously intermingled after the early sixties [...]. Whereas before, same-sex interracial intercourse usually involved advances by white men of privilege on their black class subordinates, desegregation enabled more—if seldom more egalitarian—interactions across the racial divide. Obstacles remained; racism persisted."³⁹⁸

Even outside of the South, de facto segregation continued within queer communities and the burgeoning homophile movement. Homophile activists were inspired by African Americans' successes in pushing the federal government to bar legal discrimination, but were frustrated that gays and lesbians were excluded from these

³⁹⁷ Howard, *Men Like That*, 149.

³⁹⁸ Howard, *Men Like That*, xvi.

victories.³⁹⁹ Homophile organizations like the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis grew during the 1960s, but still failed to attract significant African American participation.⁴⁰⁰ As John D’Emilio has demonstrated, the spirit of protest in the 1960s emboldened homophile activists, particularly those on the east coast. Washington Mattachine leader Frank Kameny, for example, was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement to pursue more militant tactics, which in turn attracted more members to the organization.⁴⁰¹ Despite the growth of the homophile movement, queer African Americans either did not find these organizations welcoming or felt that racial justice was a more pressing issue.

Within black communities during the civil rights era, queer black life was still visible, even if it was often overshadowed by racial turmoil and circumscribed by movement politics. Although some black ministers were outspokenly homophobic, black churches remained important centers for social interaction in black communities, particularly in the South. “While church teachings might alienate those outside the orb of procreative heterosexual marriage,” Howard contended, “church social events [...], church gender distinctions, and even church architecture participated in the construction of queer concepts and queer sex.”⁴⁰² Howard found that both black and white United Methodist Church pastors, for example, recalled that neither they nor

³⁹⁹ Johnson, *Lavender Scare*, 196.

⁴⁰⁰ Johnson, *Lavender Scare*, 194.

⁴⁰¹ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 150 and 173.

⁴⁰² Howard, *Men Like That*, 52.

their colleagues spoke overtly about homosexuality in their sermons.⁴⁰³ “Although Protestant doctrine would more explicitly condemn homosexuality along with a rising gay activism after the 1960s,” Howard continued, “houses of worship nonetheless proved useful meeting grounds throughout” the civil rights era.⁴⁰⁴ As the black ministers in SCLC showed in their treatment of Rustin and Baldwin, middle-class black church leaders were often willing to tolerate the presence of queer African Americans, and even appreciate their contributions to black communities and congregations; as William Eskridge has observed, however, that tolerance was limited to those who “did not ‘flaunt’ their homosexuality.”⁴⁰⁵

Black churches occasionally sponsored talks on or discussions about homosexuality in the 1960s. At Mount Zion Baptist Church in Los Angeles, for example, a group of local ministers sponsored a “Leadership Day” in 1962, followed by a sermon on “The Destruction of Adultery, Fornication and Homosexual Acts.”⁴⁰⁶ By 1968, the *Philadelphia Tribune* reported two churches in New York that were focusing their newsletters on the position of homosexuals in the church.⁴⁰⁷ While such examples are hardly frequent, the fact that black churches were weighing in on homosexuality at all

⁴⁰³ Howard, *Men Like That*, 31.

⁴⁰⁴ Howard, *Men Like That*, 56.

⁴⁰⁵ Eskridge, *Dishonorable Passions*, 142.

⁴⁰⁶ “Leadership Day at Mt. Zion,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 1 November 1962, A14.

⁴⁰⁷ “2 Church Journals Devote Issues to Homosexuality,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 16 January 1968, 13. The racial composition of these two churches is not clear from the article or the church names, but the appearance of this article with other articles on black churches suggests the paper deemed the church publications of interest to their black readership.

during the 1960s reflects the extent to which the changing political status of both blacks and homosexuals was forcing black institutions to deal with the controversial issue.

Dialogue about homosexuality in black communities continued to increase in the late 1960s and 1970s, driven by the evolving racial and sexual politics of the era. While queer African American activist had mostly remained rooted in the black Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s, the following decade created opportunities for the emergence of queer black identity politics that took inspiration from both the Black Power and gay liberation movements.

Chapter 5

“Caught Between Two causes, Two Movements, Two Revolutions”: Sexuality, Black Power, and the Emergence of Queer Black Identity Politics

Black sexologist Robert Staples wrote extensively on black sexuality in *Ebony* magazine during the 1970s. His articles described contemporary trends and shifts in black sexual attitudes during the sexual revolution and black power era. In a 1973 article, titled “Sex and the Black Middle Class,” for example, Staples argued that premarital sex was becoming increasingly acceptable among middle-class African Americans in the context of the shifting sexual and racial politics of the period. “Previously,” Staples wrote, the black middle class, “had very rigid moral standards because it wanted to avoid any association with the ‘permissive’ sexual behavior of lower-class blacks.” But in recent years, those standards have given way to “a greater appreciation of, and pride in, black culture.”⁴⁰⁸ This shift that Staples identified reflected the larger changes occurring in black politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s that included a rejection of white culture and a celebration of blackness.

While most of Staples’ writings focused on black heterosexual behavior, he did address homosexuality in a manner that was at once revealing and problematic. “One of the effects of the sexual revolution is the increase in ‘visible’ homosexuality,” he explained in a 1974 article. “It is one area of the changing sexual values that has

⁴⁰⁸ Robert E. Staples, “Sex and the Black Middle Class,” *Ebony* August 1973, 106-107.

significant black participation.” After referring to the prevalence of homosexuality in prison, Staples argued that black men’s “reasons for turning to homosexual lifestyles vary, raging from a desire to escape family responsibility to acquiring money through prostitution.” While certainly not accepting of homosexuality, Staples’ tone is considerably less condemning than the rhetoric of earlier “experts” that explained homosexuals as diseased and in need of curing and homosexuality as a serious social and moral problem. Indeed, Staples neither condemned homosexuality nor did he suggest that gays and lesbians threatened the social order; he did, however, reveal that heterosexual African Americans’ often considered homosexuality as endemic to white culture. “There are indications,” Staples claimed, “that there is a lower proportion of black male homosexuals than white ones.” Black lesbians, he contended, were even less prevalent and visible than black gay men. Moreover, “many black lesbians are deeply involved in the white homosexual community.”⁴⁰⁹ Staples’ writing revealed, then, the extent to which black gays and lesbians remained somewhat outside of middle-class black life, despite the shifts he observed toward more permissive sexuality among members of that demographic.

While public responses to such claims about homosexuality by queer African Americans would have been few and far between in earlier decades, black gays and lesbians challenged perceived attacks and misrepresentations with increasing frequency in the late 60s and 70s. In a Milwaukee-based gay newsletter, for example, African American lesbian Diane Bogus penned an open letter responding to Staples’

⁴⁰⁹ Robert Staples, “Has the Sexual Revolution Bypassed Blacks?” *Ebony* April 1974, 112.

misconceptions about black homosexuality and trying to correct some of his reasoning. Black homosexuals, Bogus argued, had been excluded from previous studies of homosexuality, and they often did not want to involve themselves in the gay liberation movement, so they remained less visible than white homosexuals. Moreover, she explained, “if all Black lesbians were enumerative, and therefore a visible whole, they would be subjected to the same controversy that embroils the larger homosexual society, plus they would experience a special kind of Black oppression,” so many black lesbians understandably chose to maintain privacy. Bogus also attributed the limited visibility of queer African Americans to the nature of the Civil Rights Movement, arguing that “heretofore, the focus of the Black community has been racial. The Black community itself has been preoccupied with gaining equality and civil rights, thus, for [African Americans] to have stopped dealing with the major concerns of racial discrimination and oppression to investigate Black homosexuality, would have been like having all the king’s men go look for Little Boy Blue instead of continuing to try to put together our broken Humpty of race relations.”⁴¹⁰

Staples’ writings suggest that as the sexual revolution, gay liberation, and feminist movements were gaining strength and the black freedom struggle was shifting toward more militant racial politics during the late 1960s and 1970s, many African Americans of all socioeconomic classes became more accepting of nonnormative sexuality. To be sure, homosexuality remained an issue of some concern in black

⁴¹⁰ S. Diane Bogus, “The Reality of the Black Lesbian,” *GPU News* 8:1 (October 1978), 17-20. Overflow Box 1, African Ancestral Lesbians Subject Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives of the Lesbian Historical Educational Foundation, Brooklyn, NY.

communities; black responses to gay liberation were varied; and homosexuality continued to complicate black racial politics. Bogus' response reveals, however, that in the context of the changing black freedom struggle and these shifts in sexual attitudes, black gays and lesbians found unprecedented opportunities for the formation of political identities during the overlapping black power and gay liberation eras. Whether they joined white-dominated gay liberation organizations or incorporated the racial rhetoric of black power into their own unique brand of queer black identity politics, queer African Americans actively pushed back against attempts to deny their existence or the significance of their layered racial and sexual identities.

After the Civil Rights Movement's legislative victories of the mid-1960s, African Americans still faced systemic racism and economic inequality. As the decade progressed, it became clear to many black Americans that nonviolent tactics might not be sufficient to achieve full citizenship, and end racial discrimination and de facto segregation. Building on a long tradition of more militant resistance to discrimination, the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and 1970s fundamentally altered the black freedom struggle and American racial politics through its nationalist emphasis, its celebration of blackness, and its rejection of white social and cultural standards.⁴¹¹

As the black freedom movement shifted, so too did the gay rights struggle. Although a few African Americans participated in early homophile movement organizations like the Mattachine society or the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), most queer

⁴¹¹ Peniel Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, New York: Henry Holt and Company (2006), xviii.

African Americans found these white-dominated groups unwelcoming or even hostile.⁴¹² But an important shift took place in gay politics during the late 1960s that made the gay movement more compatible with the broader politics of the student left and black power. The homophile organizations of the postwar period were often conservative and reserved in their protest tactics in comparison to the more radical student left and black power movements during the mid-to-late 1960s. While many of the old guard of gay leaders emphasized middle-class respectability and eschewed overt sexuality or gender nonconformity, younger gay activists, radicalized by other political movements of the era, did not find their own revolutionary sexual politics welcome in these existing homophile groups.⁴¹³ As John D’Emilio has argued, the generation of gay men and lesbians who were coming of age during the late 60s and 70s were particularly captivated by the era’s “new culture of protest.” And while organizations like the Mattachine society continued working toward reform, the “unresponsiveness of homophile activists guaranteed that when the decade’s radicalism did reach homosexual men and women, it would spawn a movement that would rapidly overwhelm its predecessor.”⁴¹⁴

When working-class bar patrons fought back against a police raid of the Mafia-owned gay bar, the Stonewall Inn on June 28th, 1969, the gay rights struggle was forever changed. The Stonewall Inn, located in New York’s Greenwich Village, which was

⁴¹² For example, a black college student served as president of the Syracuse Mattachine branch in the late 60s. See D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 200.

⁴¹³ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 224.

⁴¹⁴ D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 231.

frequented by mostly working-class transsexuals and gay men, witnessed frequent raids by police; but on June 28th, its patrons had had enough, and their resistance erupted into several days of rioting against police.⁴¹⁵

While there is some question among witnesses and historians as to the level of black participation in the Stonewall riots,⁴¹⁶ the uprising is significant for the history of queer African Americans because it resulted in the formation of a gay liberation movement that created many more opportunities for black inclusion and leadership.⁴¹⁷ While the tendency to consider Stonewall as the beginning of the gay rights movement in America is somewhat misleading, it did represent an unprecedented show of militancy on the part of gays and lesbians. As Allen Ginsberg recalled after wandering into the Stonewall Inn for the first time during the days of rioting, the bar's gay patrons were "beautiful—they've lost that wounded look that fags all had 10 years ago."⁴¹⁸

For working-class queer African Americans in New York, resisting police was not necessarily something new. The legacies of resistance to racial discrimination and police

⁴¹⁵ For a detailed account of the Stonewall Riots, see David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots that Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2004).

⁴¹⁶ While John D'Emilio described the bar's patrons as mostly "young and nonwhite," (see D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 231.) other accounts focus primarily on white participants. In Duberman's work, the only African American he focused on, Yvonne Flowers, was actually out of town during the riots themselves and thus did not participate. Carter's work is quite detailed, but noticeably lacking in information about the role of African Americans in the riots. Carter explained that there are numerous and often conflicting accounts of the bar and the uprising, but focuses almost exclusively on white patrons, mentioning only that one witness "felt that the patrons included more blacks and Latinos" by the late 1960s than in previous years (See Carter, 114).

⁴¹⁷ See, for example, "Gay Liberation Front Struggles 'For an Oppressed Minority'" *Philadelphia Tribune*, 22 September 1970, 6, which mentions numerous black men involved in the city's Gay Liberation Front chapter; also, Audrey Weaver, "'Gay' Guys Movement in Midwest is going Strong," *Chicago Defender*, 31 October 1970, 8, which mentions a "Black Caucus" of the city's Gay Liberation group.

⁴¹⁸ Duberman, *Stonewall*, 208.

harassment, and the rich history of working class black queer culture in Harlem in some sense made them the logical leaders of an act of resistance such as the Stonewall Riots.

As a white participant recalled,

Once we saw that there was resistance going on, we got quite excited. I mean, part of me wanted to stop them and make them behave because I was such a horrible, little middle-class person. On the other hand, there was part of me that exulted in their rebellion. If there hadn't been black and Puerto Rican guys—some of them drag queens—I don't think it would have ever taken place. Those were kids who were used to resisting the cops—they just hadn't resisted them before as gays.⁴¹⁹

Following Stonewall, gay activists in New York founded more radical gay liberation organizations such as the Gay Liberation Front and the Gay Activists Alliance that more accurately reflected their revolutionary politics, and in these groups, African Americans found themselves not wholly included, but at least more welcome. When black lesbian Yvonne Flowers attended a DOB meeting in the early 1960s, she was met with shock and thinly veiled hostility; but when she attended early meetings of gay liberation groups following Stonewall, she “found just enough black faces to keep her coming back” to meetings.⁴²⁰ Still, racial tensions troubled gay liberation groups and often led queer African Americans to see other political outlets.

Regardless of the extent to which black individuals were involved in the revolutionary racial and social justice movements of the era, gay liberation was still

⁴¹⁹ Mark Griffin, “White Party,” *Genre Magazine*, 1 April 2006. Clipping in Box 7, Stonewall Subject File, Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript Archive and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

⁴²⁰ Duberman, *Stonewall*, 234.

visible through black newspapers, and gay people were important members of black families, churches, and communities. While some African Americans continued to express homophobic ideas about the origins and nature of homosexuality, increasing numbers of heterosexual African Americans accepted or even embraced the gay liberation movement's arguments for equal rights.

While perceptions of homosexuality definitely shifted toward greater understanding and acceptance during the late 60s and 1970s, black newspapers reflect continued concerns by some heterosexual African Americans about the social implications of homosexuality, and continuing perceptions of homosexuals as criminally inclined. Papers published sensational stories with titles like "'Homosexual Jealousy' Behind Bus Driver's Slaying,"⁴²¹ "Hint 'Homo' Relationship in Roommates Slaying,"⁴²² and "Male Sex For Sale Ring Member Guilty of Murder,"⁴²³ in which deviant sexuality was assumed to play a role in the reported crimes.

While several articles during the 1970s linked venereal diseases to homosexuality,⁴²⁴ significantly fewer articles appeared during this time that characterized gays and lesbians as diseased and in need of "curing." This trend reflects the success of queer activists in revising the previous half-century's prevailing

⁴²¹ "'Homosexual Jealousy' Behind Bus Driver's Slaying," *Afro-American*, 21 November 1970, 19.

⁴²² George Todd, "Hint 'Homo' Relationship in Roommates Slaying," *New York Amsterdam News*, 10 February 1973, C1.

⁴²³ David Wilson, "Male Sex For Sale Ring Member Guilty of Murder," *Cleveland Call and Post*, 20 May 1978, 1A.

⁴²⁴ See, for example, "Disease Can Ruin Your Life," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 15 February 1972, 7, and Gay Pauley, "The VD Epidemic Among Teens," *Daily Defender*, 14 May 1975, 14 (the same article also appeared in the *Atlanta Daily World*, 22 May 1975, 15).

professional wisdom about homosexuality, most dramatically demonstrated in the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association's list of mental disorders in 1973.⁴²⁵ While many stereotypes persisted into and beyond the 1970s, this shift away from attempts to "cure" homosexuality shows that attitudes were slowly changing.

The stereotype of the predatory lesbian also persisted in black newspaper accounts into the black power and gay liberation era, but in contrast to earlier decades, queer readers pushed back against such negative depictions. When the *New York Amsterdam News* printed an article in 1975 titled "Lesbianism Is Charged at All Girls' School," which detailed "rumors of acts of sexual molestation committed by lesbian gang members,"⁴²⁶ they received a strong response from gay liberationists. The National Gay Task Force wrote the paper, arguing that "The headline gave the impression that to be a lesbian is a crime. It isn't a crime, and we want to make it clear that most lesbians are decent law-abiding citizens."⁴²⁷

In the early years of gay liberation, black newspapers published stories on the efforts and inner workings of the gay liberation movement frequently, reporting on gay rights protests and early pride marches,⁴²⁸ and meetings of the various new gay

⁴²⁵ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 367.

⁴²⁶ "Lesbianism Is Charged at All Girls' School," *New York Amsterdam News*, 5 November 1975, A1.

⁴²⁷ "'Gays' Protest Amsterdam News Headlining," *New York Amsterdam News*, 12 November 1975, A12.

⁴²⁸ See, for example, "150 Homosexuals Parade Before Independence Hall to Protest Maltreatment," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 12 July 1969, 5; and "City's First Gay March Set," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 27 May 1972, 6.

liberation groups.⁴²⁹ One of the few white reporters for the *Philadelphia Tribune*, Len Lear, reported regularly on gay liberation events and groups as the movement grew in the years following Stonewall. In an article on the Gay Liberation Front, he presented a sympathetic portrait of homosexuals, who for years “have been viewed as outcasts by American society to be despised and punished at worst and pitied or tolerated at best.” The GLF, he pointed out, “sees homosexual oppression as being related to the oppression of racial and political minorities,” and quoted several queer African Americans who were part of the organization.⁴³⁰ Articles like these not only made the gay liberation movement more visible to African Americans but also showed that there was at least some measure of black participation in gay liberation organizations.

In several instances, black newspapers published responses from readers and members of black communities on gay rights issues, a majority of which were generally supportive of gays and lesbians. When the *Chicago Defender* polled four random black men in 1969 about whether they thought homosexual sex between “consenting adults” should be legalized, three of the four said that it should be legal.⁴³¹ Polls like these often revealed some ambivalence among heterosexual African Americans about gay people, but support for their legal rights. In a 1978 six-person survey in the *New York Amsterdam News*, for example, five of the six respondents said that they thought

⁴²⁹ See, for example, “Homosexual Political Forum is Set,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 23 June 1970, 5.

⁴³⁰ Len Lear, “Gay Liberation Front Struggles ‘For an Oppressed Minority,’” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 22 September 1970, 6.

⁴³¹ “Inquiring Photographer,” *Daily Defender*, 13 November 1969, 21.

homosexuals should not be discriminated against in hiring for public service jobs like policemen and teachers. While three of the supporters were simply supportive of nondiscrimination, two were more revealing of their personal feelings about homosexuality, with one saying, "Since we live in a democratic society, [...] I feel homosexuals should have the same chance as everyone else. Personally I don't like them, but they have to live too."⁴³²

When the New York City Council was considering an antidiscrimination ordinance in 1974, prominent African American minister and politician Carl McCall published a piece in the *New York Amsterdam News* calling the bill "long overdue." McCall challenged the members of the city council's minority caucus who were not supporting the bill, "wondering why any member of the Minority Caucus would not support a bill designed to protect the civil rights of a minority." McCall went on to suggest that minority council members might be concerned about "backlash" from antigay constituents, or that they might be prioritizing racial issues, but reminded readers to "remember that issues like women's rights or gay rights cut across racial and ethnic lines," and urged them to contact their city council representatives in favor of the ordinance. McCall also asked readers to reevaluate their views on homosexuality based on recent developments in psychological literature that sought to move away from defining homosexuality as a disease.⁴³³ A month later, the paper reported that out of six

⁴³² "Tex Harris' Roving Camera," *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 April 1978, A6.

⁴³³ H. Carl McCall, "Civil Rights and Personal Attitudes," *New York Amsterdam News*, 6 April 1974, A5.

members of the minority caucus (which included four African Americans and two Latinos), four voted in favor of the gay rights bill and one abstained.⁴³⁴

After the gay rights bill was defeated, the *New York Amsterdam News* polled several random black readers. While one of the six respondents condemned homosexuality from a biblical perspective and two others expressed hesitance about homosexuals holding certain jobs, the other three respondents were generally opposed to discrimination against gays and lesbians. Lorraine Farrell of Manhattan, for example, said “homosexuals should have the same opportunity in employment as anyone else. [...] He without sin, let him cast the first stone.”⁴³⁵ In several cases, black heterosexuals wrote into papers to defend gay rights. One woman wrote to *Chicago Defender* advice columnist Alice Claire saying she “believes in the rights of homosexuals to be free and open in their sexual choices,” and explaining that she was “outraged” over a recent incident where a lesbian couple was arrested for trying to obtain a marriage license.⁴³⁶

Advice columns and articles from black newspapers in the late 1960s and 1970s also reflect the shifting attitudes among African Americans about sexuality and the growing visibility of gay liberation. While some readers wrote to advice columnists still sometimes focused on medical explanations and expressed concerns about how parenting affected sexuality, there was considerably less emphasis on trying to “cure”

⁴³⁴ “How They Voted on Homosexuality,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 June 1974, B1.

⁴³⁵ Tex Harris, “Tex Harris’ Roving Camera,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 13 July 1974, A4.

⁴³⁶ Alice Claire, “Ask Alice,” *Daily Defender*, 6 November 1975, 20.

homosexuality,⁴³⁷ and many more readers who wrote in to offer support and acceptance of gay rights even if they did not quite condone homosexuality. Moreover, both readers and columnists mentioned these shifting attitudes directly. In a speech delivered by black Judge Bruce Wright at the State University of New York and represented in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the judge declared, “It is clear that being a homosexual [...] is no longer the problem it used to be. Many prominent people are coming out of closets, happy to be known as card-carrying members of the Gay Liberation.”⁴³⁸ The *Chicago Defender’s* Alice Claire, responding to one reader’s concern about a homosexual man living in his neighborhood, wrote in 1975, “More and more homosexual relations between consenting adults is [*sic.*] being upheld by law. It is an erroneous concept that homosexuals constitute a danger to public morals.”⁴³⁹ Later that year, Claire responded to a reader’s question wondering if her gay adult brother could be “helped,” advising the reader that, not only could her brother not be “helped,” but that “in light of the new attitudes toward homosexuality, I’m not sure that he needs help. [...] Perhaps it may be painful to your ‘straight’ style of living, but you must adjust to it.”⁴⁴⁰

⁴³⁷ See, for example, Arletta Claire, “Mom Worries About ‘Sissy’ Son,” *Daily Defender*, 4 February 1970, 10, in which Claire advises a mother that “there is no cure for homosexuality.”

⁴³⁸ Bruce Wright, “Judge Bruce Wright Tell It Like It Is,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 28 December 1974, C3.

⁴³⁹ Alice Claire, “Ask Alice,” *Daily Defender*, 4 February 1975, 14.

⁴⁴⁰ Alice Claire, “Ask Alice,” *Daily Defender*, 9 December 1975, 14.

The relationship of heterosexual African Americans to the gay liberation movement ranged from condemnation to support. Comparisons between racism and homophobia were particularly revealing, and yielded mixed results. White gay activists often drew such comparisons as an appeal for solidarity among persecuted minorities. In 1975 the *New York Amsterdam News* published a letter from the National Gay Task Force's media advisor Loretta Lotman, encouraging the paper's readers to see the similarities between racism and homophobia, and denouncing the latter among African Americans.⁴⁴¹ Such comparisons sometimes resonated with African Americans. The *Philadelphia Tribune's* advice columnist, for example, counseled a 15-year-old gay student whose classmates were harassing him to present such a comparison to his tormenters. "You classmates at school deserve a good talking to," he suggested. "They would be the first ones to shout 'discrimination' if they were victimized because of their color. Yet they see no harm in discriminating against you because you are a homosexual." He then suggested the teen contact a homophile organization for help.⁴⁴²

While some African Americans accepted the similarities between racism and homophobia, others rejected attempts to conflate the two. As one columnist for the *Cleveland Call and Post* argued in a piece on the sustained prevalence of racism in the mid-70s, "In the minds of many of us, racism is still America's gravest problem—not the rights of women or homosexuals. If we resolved the difficult issues of women's rights and effected more humane treatment of homosexuals, a black woman would still be

⁴⁴¹ Loretta Lotman, "A Gay Sister's Objections," *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 February 1975, A4.

⁴⁴² "Mr. Help!" *Philadelphia Tribune*, 14 June 1969, 2.

segregated against and a minority homosexual still would find his inalienable rights violated.”⁴⁴³ While this columnist was arguing that racism was a more severe form of discrimination than homophobia, other African Americans rejected the comparison from a moral standpoint. As one reader wrote to the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1977, “The fact that both Blacks and gays represent minorities is not an automatic consignment to like status.” The reader went on to argue that homosexuality was a choice, and a “perversion,” an “abomination,” and a “distortion of natural processes,” none of which are true of blackness. “I say to equate gay liberation with Black civil rights is an outrage at which I take extreme umbrage,” she concluded.⁴⁴⁴

While attempts to simply conflate black civil rights with gay rights often frustrated African Americans, links between the two movements were undeniable. Gay liberation activists gained experience in and drew inspiration from the black freedom struggle, and even as the movements at times seemed to compete for the loyalties of queer African Americans, they shared a spirit of reform and revolution. In many ways because of the efforts of gays and lesbians, heterosexual African Americans became increasingly outspoken about their tolerance—or in some cases outright support—for queer Americans and their civil rights.

Clearly, there were important differences between racism and homophobia and the struggles against each; there were, however, meaningful ways in which the two movements overlapped and influenced each other. The radical politics of the student

⁴⁴³ George M. Daniels, “Racism,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 3 April 1976, 2B.

⁴⁴⁴ Eve Clyburn, “A Bad Equation,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 9 July 1977, A4.

left, black power, and women's liberation all contributed to an atmosphere of sexual permissiveness and nonconformity that fostered the aforementioned shift from the more conservative middle-class homophile movement of the 1950s and 60s to the militant and celebratory gay liberation movement of the 1970s. Queer activists drew much of their inspiration from the black freedom struggle. In addition to the important roles played by queer African Americans in the Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s, many white gay activists began their careers as activists in the black freedom struggle. As John D'Emilio explained, to many white gay activists "the civil rights struggle, from the Montgomery bus boycott to the sit-ins and freedom rides, offered compelling evidence of the success of direct action techniques in combating discrimination."⁴⁴⁵

Even as the black freedom movement became more militant, some gay rights activists took their cues from black organizations. In San Francisco, for example, gay men formed a group called the "Lavender Panthers" in response to recent unsolved beatings and murders of gay men. Clearly mimicking the armed militancy of the Black Panthers, the Lavender Panthers patrolled the streets wielding sawed-off pool cues and encouraged gay residents to arm themselves with guns and spray paint to defend themselves against attacks that local police seemed reluctant to investigate.⁴⁴⁶

Gay liberationists often sought collaboration with Black Panthers and the radical student left, both out of a shared sense of revolutionary purpose and to increase the

⁴⁴⁵ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 223.

⁴⁴⁶ "Lavender Panthers," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 November 1973, A12.

visibility of their cause. Gay Liberation Front members, for example, participated in several demonstrations against the Vietnam War in New York and Washington in 1969 and 1970. GLF members also spoke at a rally in 1970 supporting imprisoned Black Panthers Bobby Seale and Ericka Huggins, and sent a contingent to the Panthers' national meeting that same year.⁴⁴⁷

At least one prominent African American leader from this era, Black Panther Party co-founder Huey Newton, recognized a kinship among the revolutionary spirits of black power, gay liberation, and women's liberation. In an August 1970 speech, Newton declared that women and homosexuals were also oppressed groups, and African Americans should, therefore, "unite with them in a revolutionary fashion." Newton acknowledged "insecurities" among African Americans about homosexuality, explaining that, "our first instinct is to want to hit a homosexual in the mouth and to want a woman to be quiet [...] because we're afraid we might be homosexual and [...] because [a woman] might castrate us or take the nuts that we may not have to start with."⁴⁴⁸ Under Newton's leadership, black power activists built on this shared revolutionary spirit. In 1970, for example, the Black Panthers collaborated with gay liberation and women's liberation activists in an attempt to revise the US Constitution to eliminate discrimination.⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁷ D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics*, 233.

⁴⁴⁸ Huey Newton, "A Letter from Huey to the Revolutionary Brothers and Sisters About the Women's Liberation and Gay Liberation Movements," in *Traps: African American Men on Gender and Sexuality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 281.

⁴⁴⁹ "Attempts to Rewrite U.S. Constitution Abandoned," *Daily Defender*, 1 December 1970, 9.

The relationship between gay liberationists and Black Panthers was complicated by the desire from some members of both groups to form alliances and the somewhat frequent homophobia articulated by some Black Panthers. Black Panther leaders often used homophobic language at rallies,⁴⁵⁰ and the group's newspaper often leveled charges of homosexuality at their enemies ranging from anti-union businesses⁴⁵¹ to capitalists⁴⁵² to Ronald Reagan,⁴⁵³ indicating their disgust for homosexuality. Huey Newton once accused Eldridge Cleaver of being a "latent homosexual" after Cleaver's falling-out with the Panthers, and described having once witnessed Cleaver "engage in a 'passionate' embrace" with James Baldwin.⁴⁵⁴ Despite this sometimes homophobic rhetoric, however, the Black Panthers were far from monolithically homophobic.

Although homophobia certainly affected the lives of queer African Americans, the revolutionary spirit of the 1970s created opportunities for them to critique homophobia and correct misconceptions about black homosexuality. While some black heterosexuals suggested that homosexuality was more prevalent among whites than blacks—militant black writer Leroi Jones, for example, called homosexuality "the white man's weakness"⁴⁵⁵—queer African Americans fought against attempts to make them

⁴⁵⁰ Sears, *Rebels*, 89.

⁴⁵¹ "Black Panther Caucuses," *Black Panther*, 2 February 1969, 16.

⁴⁵² George Murray, "George Murray Reflects," *Black Panther*, 5 October 1968, 6.

⁴⁵³ Dynamite, "A Letter to Thurgood Marshall From the Black Ghettos of America," *Black Panther*, 15 January 1969, 6.

⁴⁵⁴ "Huey Slaps Eldridge," *Daily Defender*, 12 April 1973, 4.

⁴⁵⁵ Sears, *Rebels*, 31.

invisible in both black and gay communities. In an essay titled “Some Thoughts on Black Homophobia, or You Ain’t a Proper Niggah,” a black lesbian who wrote under the name “Gwendolyn,” identified several “myths” about homosexuality that she saw as especially prevalent among African Americans: “1) Homosexuality is a ‘White Problem’ 2) Racism is more of a burden than homophobia 3) Homosexuality is a threat to the ‘family,’ therefore to the race and therefore genocidal” and finally, “4) There’s no such species as a black homosexual.”⁴⁵⁶ Myths like these worked together to suppress queer black visibility and undermine queer African Americans’ claims to their dual racial and sexual identities, but more and more, queer blacks rejected these myths.

In contrast to earlier eras, black gays and lesbians spoke out with growing frequency through advice columns in newspapers about their lives and identities, thereby creating an alternative public construction of black queerness that was based on their own lived experiences. A reader named Tony declared to *Daily Defender’s* Arletta Claire in July 1970 that he was homosexual, “But I am not afraid, ashamed or embarrassed.” He continued by making a case for gay liberation. “For too long,” he held, “homosexuality has been treated as an illness—as a dirty, filthy, degenerate thing. To me, homosexuality is no more than a different part of life, another side of the coin that sooner or later is going to have to be accepted.”⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁶ Gwendolyn, “Some Thoughts on Black Homophobia, or You Ain’t a Proper Niggah,” *Lesbians Rising* (Fall 1978).

⁴⁵⁷ Arletta Claire, “Homosexual Speaks Out Society Narrow Minded,” *Daily Defender*, 13 July 1970, 8.

Gender nonconformity and transsexuality also appeared more frequently as a topic of black newspaper articles during this era. The Baltimore *Afro-American* gave a lengthy review a new book titled *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* in 1969, which offered a sympathetic take on transsexuality, taking care to distinguish it from homosexuality. “Transsexuals behave like normal people who have the misfortune to feel trapped in the body of someone of the opposite sex,” the reviewer explained.⁴⁵⁸

Transgender African Americans also made themselves more visible to the rest of their communities by telling their stories in letters to advice columnists. In response to Tony’s letter, “Miss Peaches,” a self-proclaimed member of the “third sex” wrote to Claire a couple of weeks later, explaining that she was married to a man and lived as a woman, but was “as normal as anyone,” and hoping for more understanding for her and people like her.⁴⁵⁹ Several years later, a man named Lionel wrote into the *Daily Defender* asking for advice because he was considering sex reassignment surgery. “I know I would be much happier as a woman,” he explained. “I am not really a homosexual; it is a physiological thing.” The advice columnist reacted sympathetically to the letter and suggested that Lionel look into Johns Hopkins’ because they were known to be the “authority on sex changeover procedures.”⁴⁶⁰ In a rather spirited defense of transsexuality, Mark Sage wrote to the editor of the *Philadelphia Tribune* in 1978 that he was “sick of the degree of ignorance” that the paper’s readers revealed in other letters

⁴⁵⁸ “New Light on Sex Change,” *Afro-American*, 22 November 1969, 5.

⁴⁵⁹ Arletta Claire, “Two Readers Write in to Answer to Homosexuals,” *Daily Defender*, 21 July 1970, 8.

⁴⁶⁰ Alice Claire, “Ask Alice,” *Daily Defender*, 22 October 1974, 12.

to the editor. “A transsexual is not so by choice,” Sage contended. “A man or woman doesn’t just wake up one day and decide to change sex. It is a decision forced on the person by nature.” Sage went on to explain the role of hormones in gender identity and how transsexuality was different from homosexuality.⁴⁶¹

Queer African Americans criticized black homophobia, explaining it as result of white oppression and the desire among some blacks to achieve respectability, a goal that became increasingly suspect in light of Black Power’s emphasis on racial pride. As black lesbian activist Yvonne Flowers contended, “much of the homophobia that exists in the black community is a function of middle-class aspirations, and the taking on of the narrow values of that class.”⁴⁶² “During this time of crisis,” Gwendolyn wrote, “the oppressor class can not tolerate cohesive liberation struggles and must therefore promote the idea that Gay liberation is antagonistic to Black liberation. Consequently the oppressed group (Blacks, in this case) become sub-oppressors.” Black homophobia, then, was the result of an urge toward whiteness. “Much of the Black Community,” she continued, “maintains a somewhat hopeful relationship with the dominant culture. Most people would like to ‘make it,’ [...] which in turn means internalizing some aspects of the oppressor’s myths and values.”⁴⁶³ Gwendolyn offered the example of the “standard heterosexual notion (picked up by Black heterosexuals) that Lesbianism is a ‘threat’ to the family,” a notion that she suggests does not fit with the “much broader”

⁴⁶¹ Mark Sage, “Sick of Ignorance,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 5 September 1978, 4.

⁴⁶² Duberman, *Stonewall*, 13.

⁴⁶³ Gwendolyn, “Some Thoughts on Black Homophobia, or You Ain’t a Proper Niggah,” *Lesbians Rising* (Fall 1978).

concepts of family held by African Americans.⁴⁶⁴ Flowers, Gwendolyn, and many of their queer black contemporaries thus found the black power era's rejection of conformity and assimilation to middle-class white values as empowering not only to their racial identities but also their sexual identities.

By the late 1960s, queer African Americans had claimed their places as participants and often leaders in the black freedom struggle, and they continued to engage with the shifting racial politics of the movement. As one of the most outspoken gay black men of the twentieth century, James Baldwin's racial politics radicalized during this period. He had supported King's shift toward northern racial issues and against Vietnam, but as his biographer and friend David Leeming recalled, by the mid-60s, Baldwin, "like many other black intellectuals, was frustrated with the civil rights movement itself," and supported radicalization of SNCC and CORE.⁴⁶⁵ Frustrated by the continuing racial violence and the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Baldwin embraced the leadership of Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, and Bobby Seale.⁴⁶⁶

Baldwin's relationship with black power leaders reflected the varied responses to homosexuality among this more militant generation of African American political leaders. By the late 60s, Baldwin's work was widely admired by black nationalists and liberal whites alike, and he had forged friendships earlier in the decade with both

⁴⁶⁴ Gwendolyn, "Some Thoughts on Black Homophobia, or You Ain't a Proper Niggah," *Lesbians Rising* (Fall 1978).

⁴⁶⁵ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 256.

⁴⁶⁶ Leeming, *James Baldwin*, 285 and 292.

Malcolm X and Elijah Muhammad.⁴⁶⁷ Baldwin had known Carmichael for years before Carmichael embraced black power, and he considered Huey Newton a friend. By the time Baldwin met Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver in 1967, however, Cleaver had written “Notes on a Native Son,” an essay brutally criticizing Baldwin’s homosexuality and accusing him of worshipping white men.⁴⁶⁸

Reflecting the broader themes of black power’s critique of white cultural hegemony, Cleaver’s writings often railed against how African Americans were “indoctrinated with the white race’s standard of beauty,” which caused black men to reject black women and betray their race. “I know that the black man’s sick attitude toward the white woman is a revolutionary sickness,” he wrote from prison in 1965. “It keeps him perpetually out of harmony with the system that is oppressing him.”⁴⁶⁹ While Cleaver recalled having liked Baldwin’s early writings, by the time Baldwin published *Another Country*, Cleaver had come to the conclusion that Baldwin’s work represented “the most grueling, agonizing total hatred of the blacks, particularly of himself,” Cleaver contended, “and the most shameful, fanatical, fawning, sycophantic love of the whites that one can find in the writings of any black American writer of note in our time.”⁴⁷⁰

Cleaver’s essay, which was published in 1968 as part of his best bestselling collection *Soul on Ice*, did not limit itself to Baldwin alone, but offered a broader

⁴⁶⁷ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 70.

⁴⁶⁸ Leeming *James Baldwin*, 292.

⁴⁶⁹ Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul On Ice* (New York: Dell Books, 1968) 10 and 16.

⁴⁷⁰ Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 98-99.

interpretation of homosexuality among black men as a form of racial self-hatred. “It seems that many Negro homosexuals,” Cleaver claimed,

acquiescing in this racial death-wish, are outraged and frustrated because in their sickness they are unable to have a baby by a white man. The cross they have to bear is that, already bending over and touching their toes for the white man, the fruit of their miscegenation is not the little half-white offspring of their dreams but an increase in the unwinding of their nerves—though they redouble their efforts and intake of the white man’s sperm.⁴⁷¹

Black men having sex with white men, according to Cleaver, not only represented a loss of power and masculinity, but facilitated the worship of whiteness. “When he submits to this change and takes the white man for his lover [...],” Cleaver continued, “he focuses on ‘whiteness’ all the love in his pent up soul and turns the razor edge of hatred against ‘blackness’—upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself.” And James Baldwin, Cleaver concluded, was a prime example of this “racial death-wish.”⁴⁷² Despite the tension Cleaver’s essay caused between him and Baldwin, the latter came to respect Cleaver’s work as a writer and activist.

As Cleaver’s writings suggest, racial and sexual politics were intricately intertwined, and interracial relationships between men and between women were just as fraught with personal and political tension as were their heterosexual equivalent. Melvin Dixon often found himself torn between his sexual and romantic desires for white men and his frustration with white society.⁴⁷³ A college student during the height

⁴⁷¹ Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 102.

⁴⁷² Cleaver, *Soul On Ice*, 103.

⁴⁷³ See, for example, “7 January 1971,” Box 1, Folder 6 Melvin Dixon Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

of the black power movement, Dixon's identification with the political rhetoric of black power—and particularly with Cleaver's writings—further complicated his thoughts about interracial gay relationships. Rather than feeling rejected by Cleaver's rhetoric about homosexuality and black masculinity, Dixon incorporated it into his own ideas about the revolutionary potential of black gay men, thoroughly politicizing their sexual relationships. "The black homosexual [...] must perpetuate the ideal of black masculinity...black manhood," he wrote. "He cannot afford an interracial relationship for that sexual experience neutralizes his blackness in the deification or love of white men. The black homosexual who goes for white men over black men is in effect selling his blackness for a quick screw."

Despite his own repeated relationships with white men, Dixon saw profound political implications in these relationships and expressed a strong ideological aversion to them. "We cannot afford [to have sex with white men] in a revolutionary environment," he argued, "because black masculinity is being compromised, sterilized, and minimized to the level of a well-hung stud who feeds the pale faggot the rich seed of blackness. The seed is wasted," he continued. "It's like sowing the seeds of a new black nation in the pale dry desert of a gaping queen's hollow ass."⁴⁷⁴ The cost of loving a white man, sexually or otherwise, was denying one's own racial pride. While interracial gay sex had been common—particularly between men—for the better part of a century, the politics of black power demanded that gay black men critique the racial

⁴⁷⁴ Melvin Dixon, "The Militant Fag or the Revolutionary Homosexual?" n.d., Melvin Dixon Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

power dynamics that circumscribed their sexual relationships and in some cases served to objectify them.

As black power and gay liberation emerged and developed somewhat simultaneously, queer African Americans found themselves torn between commitments to racial justice and the desire to celebrate their sexuality. As one black lesbian wrote, being queer and black often required a person to declare his or her “allegiance (either you’re black or you’re ‘something else’).”⁴⁷⁵ These competing loyalties were further complicated by homophobia among African Americans and racism among white homosexuals. In this context, Melvin Dixon struggled with his layered identities, wondering, “if the movement is to free all black people where does the black homosexual fit in? [...He] is caught between two causes, two movements, two revolutions.”⁴⁷⁶ Reflecting back on the late 1960s, Diane Bogus recalled, “my self-identity was total-Black, and aside from an abiding distrust of the white oppressor, the Black nationalism of that period made it a somewhat traitorous act to be attached to any white organization,” which made her and other black lesbians reluctant to join gay liberation groups.⁴⁷⁷ Bogus also addressed the reluctance to “come out” in the midst of a society wherein homophobia existed among all races and groups. “Once visible,” she claimed, “a Black lesbian, like all enumerated homosexuals, will be no less a sinner in

⁴⁷⁵ Gwendolyn, “Some Thoughts on Black Homophobia, or You Ain’t a Proper Niggah,” *Lesbians Rising* (Fall 1978).

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷⁷ S. Diane Bogus, “The Reality of the Black Lesbian,” *GPU News* 8:1 (October 1978), 17-20. Overflow Box 1, African Ancestral Lesbians Subject Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives of the Lesbian Historical Educational Foundation, Brooklyn, NY.

the eyes of the church, no less sick, in the eyes of the head doctors, and no less perverted in the eyes of greater society.”⁴⁷⁸

Racism created harsh divisions between black and white lesbians that one lesbian activist, “Margaret,” characterized as reminiscent of the fetishization of black sexuality inherent in Harlem’s white cabaret audiences of the 1920s: “You like to watch us dance for you but you never ask us to dance with you. You imagine/think/fantacize [*sic.*] we fuck better which either keeps you on our backs or miles away.” Margaret’s reflections on white women’s treatment of black lesbians reveal the failure of the mainstream feminist and gay rights movements to fully understand the lives and address the needs of queer people of color. “You use our blackness as an excuse more than we do and you never try to see the pain behind all our laughter,” she continued. “When you are around us you talk black and we find ourselves talking white and you even come to our parties bringing a 1969 Aretha Franklin record and when we confront you, you say we’re too powerful to deal with and you don’t come to our neighborhood after dark except in groups when your men have raped us (you too) for over 300 years.”⁴⁷⁹

Out of their frustrations with the male-dominated Civil Rights Movement and the heterosexual- and white- dominated feminist movement, black lesbians forged their own identity-based political organizations in the 1970s. Many black lesbians felt

⁴⁷⁸ Bogus, “The Reality of the Black Lesbian,” 17-20.

⁴⁷⁹ Margaret, “Black and Blacklesbian,” *The Lavender Woman* (November 1971), 4. Overflow Box 1, African Ancestral Lesbians Subject Files, Lesbian Herstory Archives of the Lesbian Historical Educational Foundation, Brooklyn, NY.

burdened by the interlocking oppressions they faced at the hands of both black men and white men and women. In Yvonne Flowers' experience, she felt no more welcomed as a butch black lesbian among black organizations. "Whenever she had joined a black-oriented march, demonstration, or sit-in," Martin Duberman explained, "she had come away angry and disappointed at the black male's macho insistence on running the show and on relegating women to an 'appropriately' subordinate role."⁴⁸⁰

While shared ideas about revolution existed among African Americans, feminists, and gays and lesbians and seemed like a possible goal for Margaret and other queer blacks, there were significant obstacles preventing such alliances. "I can't call you my sister until you stop participating in my oppression," she wrote. "You can't have a struggle without all oppressed people—and black women, particularly black lesbians, have struggled harder than anyone. You need us and we can work and will work with you if only you accept us where we've been. Where we are, where we come from." For Margaret and others, then, racial and sexual identities could not be separated or prioritized, but must be accepted and treated as intertwined.⁴⁸¹ To address the realities of these interlocking identities, black lesbians sometimes left male-, white- or straight-dominated gay or feminist organizations and formed their own groups, like the Black Lesbian Counseling Collective or the Salsa Soul Sisters, which later became African Ancestral Lesbian United for Societal Change.⁴⁸²

⁴⁸⁰ Duberman, *Stonewall*, 267.

⁴⁸¹ Margaret, "Black and Blacklesbian," 4.

⁴⁸² Duberman, *Stonewall*, 268-269.

In the South, gay political organizing was even more problematic for African Americans. In the wake of Stonewall, southern gays and lesbians also sought to capture the era's revolutionary spirit and founded organizations like the Mississippi Gay Alliance and chapters of the Gay Liberation Front in southern cities including Austin, New Orleans, Louisville, Columbia, Richmond, Auburn, Gainesville, and Tallahassee.⁴⁸³ Like northern homophile and gay liberation leaders, many of the gays and lesbians who participated in southern organizations had gained organizing experience in the Civil Rights Movement during the 60s. Despite these attempts at southern gay liberation, continued red-baiting and sustained racism complicated these efforts more than in the urban north. Straight white Mississippians still linked ideas of racial change with ideas of sexual deviance and the communist threat in the black power era.⁴⁸⁴ While most black newspapers from cities like Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles reported on controversies over local and state antidiscrimination ordinances or moral concerns over homosexuality in the mid-70s, for example, the *Atlanta Daily World* reported on a Georgia state legislature debate in which opponents of the Equal Rights Amendment suggested that the measure would facilitate the rise of communism and "homosexual marriages."⁴⁸⁵

While gay liberationists made inroads in southern cities like Atlanta, the continuing effects of racism in rural areas often made queer African Americans reluctant

⁴⁸³ Sears, *Rebels*, 58.

⁴⁸⁴ Howard, *Men Like That*, 234.

⁴⁸⁵ Sam Miller, "Equal Rights Amendment Defeated by Georgia House," *Atlanta Daily World*, 31 January 1974, 2.

to involve themselves in what John Howard described as “yet another white-controlled, white-dominated institution. Though homosexuality and gender insubordination clearly weren’t just a white thing, gay political organizing for the most part was.”⁴⁸⁶ While the number of exclusively gay bars in the South increased dramatically during the early 1970s, and played an important role in gay southern political organizing, most remained segregated.⁴⁸⁷ As James Sears demonstrated in his study of the post-Stonewall South, despite a handful of southern black queers who organized politically, “nonwhites were generally absent from southern corridors of gay power. In the South the only gay province of the ‘talented tenth’ of men of color was female impersonation.”⁴⁸⁸ While queer black southerners eventually did begin organizing politically, racism among white gays largely delayed this process until the late 1970s and early 1980s.⁴⁸⁹

Despite the slower pace of change in the South, southern African Americans were no more monolithically hyperhomophobic than northerners. Atlanta’s first black mayor Maynard Jackson proved a strong ally for the city’s gay community, even in the face of white conservative protest, when he proclaimed a “Gay Pride Day” in 1976. Following the examples of cities like San Francisco and Minneapolis, Jackson said the resolution “does not condone homosexuality,” but “supports the rights of a group of

⁴⁸⁶ Howard, *Men Like That*, 239.

⁴⁸⁷ Sears, *Rebels*, 82-83.

⁴⁸⁸ Sears, *Rebels*, 285.

⁴⁸⁹ Sears, *Rebels*, 297.

Atlanta citizens to seek public discussion and legislative action on the issue.”⁴⁹⁰ The following year, facing reelection, Jackson partially caved to pressure and declared “Civil Liberty Days” instead of a gay pride day,⁴⁹¹ but his proclamation the previous year was nonetheless unprecedented in the 1970s South.

While black gays and lesbians outside of the South often found gay liberation organizations lacking in attention to racial concerns, the divide between black and white gay culture also became less rigid. A 1971 drag ball in Cleveland, for example, was sponsored by The Fun Club, which was a newly-formed “bi-racial social club.”⁴⁹² Although such events had historically included interracial participation, the organization of a specifically biracial queer social organization would have been unusual in earlier decades.

Black churches, often derided by black queer activists for seemingly endemic homophobia, grappled with questions of gay rights during the late 1960s and 1970s. In the tradition of Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Jr., some black churches and ministers remained vocal in their condemnation of homosexuality. The Alabama Baptist State Convention was one of the first black denominations to officially oppose homosexuality as a source of “moral and spiritual decay,” at their 1972 meeting, at which they also

⁴⁹⁰ “Mayor Jackson Still Defends ‘Gay Day’ Proclamation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 1 July 1976, 1.

⁴⁹¹ “Mayor’s Proclamation Fails to Pay Tribute to Fete Set By Gays,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 26 June 1977, 1.

⁴⁹² Roland A. Forte, “And A Gay Time Was Had by All,” *Cleveland Call and Post*, 27 November 1971, 12A.

officially stated their opposition to legalized abortions.⁴⁹³ Factions within the African Methodist Episcopal church began discussing their official stance against homosexuality in 1976, and by 1978, at least one AME District Congress had officially declared its disdain for “the increased openness by those who are practicing homosexuals,” and as a denomination, “categorically, unreservedly and unequivocally reject the concept of homosexual marriage.”⁴⁹⁴ Individual black Christians and ministers also spoke out in the pulpits and in the black press condemning homosexuality.⁴⁹⁵

The official statements of black ministers and denominations did not, however, always indicate the realistic status of queer African Americans in their churches. Queer African Americans and their supporters have often pointed out the hypocrisy of black churches that denounce homosexuality from the pulpit, yet seem to ignore the obvious presence of gay choir members, ministers, musicians, and others. Sam Hunter, a black drag queen who grew up in upstate South Carolina, for example, sang in his church choir and felt accepted by his family and all-black community.⁴⁹⁶ Memphis drag queen Miss Peaches remained active in his church while becoming a celebrated female impersonator, earning the “Miss Black Memphis” title eleven years in a row, and hosting

⁴⁹³ “Alabama Baptist Convention Executive Board Adopts ‘Fundamental Principles,’” *Atlanta Daily World*, 20 August 1972, 7.

⁴⁹⁴ Yvonne Shinhoster, “AMEs Urged to Redefine ‘Mission,’” *Atlanta Daily World*, 24 June 1976, 1, and Virgie W. Murray, “Music Highlights District Congress,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 6 July 1978, C8.

⁴⁹⁵ See, for example, Florence Wortham, “What Does the Bible Say?” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 August 1976, C7, and “Rev. W.L. Banks Writes: Choice,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 31 December 1977, 16.

⁴⁹⁶ Sears, *Rebels*, 151.

buffet flats.⁴⁹⁷ As one *Los Angeles Sentinel* reader argued, “Our society is full of hypocrisy [...] Your churches are filled with homosexuals who claim to be leaders of Christ—leaders such as ministers and musicians.”⁴⁹⁸ In another letter to the *Chicago Defender*, an openly gay black minister expressed frustration at his denomination’s unwillingness to ordain him because, “I know some of the top hierarchy are closet gays. [...] They are hypocrites and ought to be exposed.”⁴⁹⁹ As E. Patrick Johnson has demonstrated in oral histories of southern gay black men, until recent years, black churches often approached gays and lesbians among them with a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. As Johnson explained, “many black churchgoers are familiar with ministers who preach homophobic sermons but are known to have dalliances with their male parishioners.”⁵⁰⁰

Church remained a complicated space for queer African Americans, but even some black and interracial churches created welcoming spaces for gays and lesbians during the late 1960s and 1970s. Interracial denominations from the northeast with long histories of progressive politics such as the Quakers and the United Church of Christ were by far the most welcoming denominations for queer African Americans. The Quakers represented the most progressive denomination when it came to gay

⁴⁹⁷ Sears, *Rebels*, 154.

⁴⁹⁸ “Sentinel Readers Comment on Issues,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 8 February 1973, A6.

⁴⁹⁹ Alice Claire, “Ask Alice,” *Chicago Defender*, 15 March 1975, 13.

⁵⁰⁰ E. Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 183.

liberation, actively seeking to recruit gay leadership.⁵⁰¹ And while the denomination was predominantly white, one of the most visible gay black men of the 20th century, Bayard Rustin, counted himself among its members, which suggests that the denomination could have been a viable alternative for queer African American Christians. As multiple black newspapers reported in 1975, the United Church of Christ, which had a long history of black membership beginning with their predecessor's early stance against slavery during the 1600s, voted in 1975 to support gay rights and make an effort to address the "special needs of homosexual and bisexual ministers."⁵⁰² Even the board of the more mainline United Methodist Church, which included both black and white Methodist congregations, encouraged its members to "adopt a more open policy toward church membership for homosexuals," in the mid-70s.⁵⁰³ As with many mainline protestant denominations, however, official denomination policies rarely had much of an affect on the politics of individual congregations.

Still other black churches and ministers sought to approach homosexuality with compassion and a sense of justice, even if they found it morally suspect. In a two-part series in the *New York Amsterdam News*, prominent Harlem black Catholic Priest Lawrence E. Lucas suggested that despite his own moral concerns about homosexuality, justice demanded that religious morality be taken out of legal decisions about gay rights. "On the basis of justice," Lucas argued, "I would feel obliged to vote in favor of

⁵⁰¹ "AFSC Implementing Affirmative Action Plan," *Philadelphia Tribune*, 2 May 1978, 22.

⁵⁰² "Church and Sex," *Chicago Defender*, 26 July 1975, 8. The same article also appeared in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 9 August 1975, 6.

⁵⁰³ "Church Weighs Gays Plea," *Chicago Defender*, 1 November 1975, 4.

[...a provision] outlawing discrimination against homosexuals in hiring and housing. But circumstances make it extremely difficult to be energetically involved in such a cause.”⁵⁰⁴ In another instance, the predominantly black Progressive National Baptist Convention criticized Anita Bryant’s anti-gay campaigns, saying that “Homosexuals are human beings and must be treated as human beings,” and suggesting that Bryant was using homosexuals as a “whipping boy” for more complex social problems.⁵⁰⁵

As an alternative to other mainline protestant denominations, gay Christians began establishing branches of the Metropolitan Community Church, which was founded in California in the late 60s with the specific purpose of ministering to gays and lesbians. Black newspapers reported on the rise of MCC congregations, which would have at the very least suggested to gay readers that affirming churches existed.⁵⁰⁶ In the South, MCC churches did not become prevalent until the early 1980s and even then were so thoroughly dominated by whites that queer African Americans often felt more at home in non-affirming black churches.⁵⁰⁷ Even if the churches were welcoming to African Americans, black visitors often felt, as Johnson explained, that “the music isn’t as good, the service isn’t ‘black’ enough.”⁵⁰⁸ Queer black Christians, then, were often forced to choose a somewhat closeted life in a black church or a sexually open life in a

⁵⁰⁴ Lawrence E. Lucas, “Justice and the Homosexual,” *New York Amsterdam News*, 15 October 1975, A5 and 22 October 1975, A5.

⁵⁰⁵ “PNBC to Hold Meeting,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 January 1978, C8.

⁵⁰⁶ Frank A. Sharp, “Homosexual Clergyman Suspended From Methodist Ministry by Texas Conference,” *Philadelphia Tribune*, 29 June 1971, 21.

⁵⁰⁷ Howard, *Men Like That*, 253.

⁵⁰⁸ Johnson, *Sweet Tea*, 184.

church whose rituals were unfamiliar and that may have failed to fulfill their social and spiritual needs.

Later in the decade, as social conservatives mobilized on a grassroots level and began pushing back against the perceived excesses of the 1960s,⁵⁰⁹ black newspapers continued their coverage of gay activists efforts to secure legal rights and social acceptance, but some reported regularly on conservative campaigns against gay rights. In contrast to other black newspapers, the *Atlanta Daily World* reported on conservative activist Anita Bryant's anti-gay campaigns frequently during the late 70s and even printed a letter that Bryant wrote to the paper's editor defending her stance against "militant homosexuals" who "want to recruit our children under protection of the laws of our land."⁵¹⁰ Responses to Bryant were mixed. In a 1978 column, the *Pittsburgh Courier's* Mattie Trent confessed, "As a young person I was absolutely against homosexuality, but now I understand it. There are just as nice homosexuals as heterosexuals. [...] I believe people like Anita Bryant and others talking about homosexuals just want a platform."⁵¹¹ In contrast, a black Muslim minister in New York called Bryant "right on target," and contended that it was a "pity that this Christian woman has to lead the way for the church including all its male members."⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁹ On the rise of this grassroots "new right," see, for example, Donald Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁵¹⁰ Anita Bryant, "Letter to the Editor," *Atlanta Daily World*, 22 June 1979, 6.

⁵¹¹ Mattie Trent, "Live and Let Live," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 4 February 1978, 17.

⁵¹² "Black Muslim Minister Raps Koch, Praises Anita Bryant on the Homosexual Question," *New York Amsterdam News*, 14 January 1978, B1.

The growth evangelical protestant conservatism during the late 1970s created the foundations for a severe backlash against gay liberation and black power. As Jennifer Terry has argued, despite the successful efforts by queer activists to move gay life out of the closets and to challenge ideas about homosexuality as a disease or mental disorder, “The idea that homosexuality was contagious, pathological, and possibly curable” continued to resonate with many Americans into the late twentieth century.⁵¹³ This backlash escalated in the early 1980s, when gay men in urban areas began developing rare forms of cancer and pneumonia that were eventually diagnosed as secondary symptoms of a disease originally called Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, which would soon be changed to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Even though the pathologizing of both black and gay sexuality had begun fading by the end of the gay liberation and black power eras, HIV/AIDS revived these images, compounding the disease’s effects on black and gay communities.

⁵¹³ Terry, *An American Obsession*, 376.

Conclusion

“I’m dying. Richard is dying. Buzz, Stefan, Marcellus, Darryl, Greg, Grid, Chester, Eddie Schwartz; we are all dying. And so many others,” wrote Melvin Dixon in January 1990.⁵¹⁴ So end the stories of countless queer black men in the late 20th century. AIDS changed gay communities and poor black communities across the country, bringing with it agonizing death and reviving the specter of sexual deviance so long aimed at both queers and African Americans.

This dissertation stops before the onset of the HIV/AIDS crisis because the epidemic fundamentally changed the gay rights movement; as gay men lost not a few, but numerous friends and lovers, and as public health authorities and the federal government turned a blind eye to this plague that was disproportionately affecting their communities, gays and lesbians had no choice to focus their political efforts on saving lives and stopping further infections. Through the leadership of organizations like the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power (ACTUP) and Gay Men’s Health Crisis, concerns like gay marriage and workplace discrimination were pushed to the sidelines, as were dialogues over identity-based issues like racism in the gay liberation movement. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge not only the queer black lives prematurely aborted by the

⁵¹⁴ Melvin Dixon, “2 January 1990,” Box 1, Folder 17, Melvin Dixon Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

AIDS epidemic, but also the ways in which racism and homophobia still circumscribed their lives and deaths.

After the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements declined, racial inequality remained, and black men and women faced the frustrations of trying to overcome racism in a country that increasingly tried to deny its existence. With the rise of the new right, the increased visibility of gays and lesbians, and the AIDS crisis, homophobia saw a resurgence in both black and white communities. Following a decade of increased queer black visibility brought about by the advent of queer black identity politics, the 1980s and 90s saw the rise of homophobia and images of diseased homosexuals across America. But among African Americans, this new homophobia remained as much intertwined with black politics as the rejection of homophobia was with the racial solidarity of the civil rights era.

For some, racial solidarity still trumped sexual nonconformity. James Baldwin saw the status of gays and lesbians in black communities as relatively accepting compared to white communities. "I don't know of anyone who has denied his brother or his sister because they were gay," he said in a 1984 interview. "No doubt it happens. [But] a black person has got quite a lot to get through the day without getting entangled in all the American fantasies." Suggesting that racial solidarity took precedence among African Americans, he said "the sexual question comes after the question of color. It's simply one more aspect of the danger in which all black people live. [...] The gay world as such is no more prepared to accept black people than anywhere else in society,"

Baldwin explained. "It's a very hermetically sealed world, with very unattractive features, including racism."⁵¹⁵

By the late twentieth century, some queer African Americans, however, were beginning to experience the types of homophobia and familial rejection that had previously been characteristic of the white gay experience, which is perhaps why modern white gay rights activists tend to assume that blacks are and have always been hyperhomophobic. Of course, some queer African Americans were accepted by their families, churches, and communities; but as increasing numbers of African Americans became more socioeconomically mobile, the specter of the AIDS-infected black queer loomed large. In 1986 Joseph Beam wrote, "My body contains as much anger as water. [...] I am angry because of the treatment I am afforded as a Black man. That fiery anger is stoked by my community because I am gay. I cannot go home as who I am. When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black Press, the Black church, Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection?" Two years later, Beam died of AIDS at the age of thirty-three.

Over the course of the twentieth century, black Americans went from a segregated, disfranchised minority for which arbitrary white violence was a constant threat and for whom legal equality seemed a distant dream, to politically empowered, legally equal citizens. Queer African Americans went from being freaks who had to

⁵¹⁵ 1984 interview quoted in Kai Wright, "In Search of Homo Harlem – and a New Black Gay Reality: Up From RuPaul," *The Voice* (June 21-27, 2000), clipping located Harlem Subject File, Box 3, Black Gay and Lesbian Archive, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscript Archive and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library.

choose between respectable status or sexual freedom at the margins of society, to political actors who attacked the interlocking oppressions of race, gender, and sexuality, and proudly claimed both their racial and sexual identities. These remarkable transitions do not mean, however, that racism and heterosexism have ceased to complicate their lives, their relationships, and their status within American society. What I have attempted to show in this dissertation is not only how and why African Americans' attitudes toward homosexuality have shifted along with and because of shifts in black politics, but also the ways in which queer African Americans have carved out spaces for themselves as vital members of their families and communities, as agents in shaping working-class black culture, and as political, cultural, and intellectual leaders.

This dissertation is only one step in chronicling the histories of queer African Americans. The role of race in the HIV/AIDS crisis of the 1980s deserves considerable attention if we are to fully understand modern causes for homophobia in black communities. Scholars must also seek new sources on homosexuality in the Jim Crow South, particularly among rural communities, where the historical silences remain vast. Although queer blacks were visible to their families and communities, the vast majority of them remain invisible to historians. Queer African Americans deserve to have their stories told.

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