

What's the Tea

Gossip and the Production of Black Gay Social History

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During a research trip to Washington, DC, to conduct archival on the intertwined history of black, gay, black gay identity and urban development politics in the nation's capital since desegregation, at the Library of Congress, I went to dinner with a black gay man and native Washingtonian who shared a rather scandalous piece of gossip with me concerning the family life of a DC politico who plays a prominent role in my larger project. I instantly became excited at the prospect that this individual would agree to an interview, contributing a bit of salacious intrigue to his explication of local politics. However, when I asked him to go on record with his story, he refused, citing that he had always preferred to work for gay rights “behind the scenes,” rather than in public and did not wish to embarrass the family. Pleasure soon soured into disappointment. **His disinterest in transforming his story into a reproducible and verifiable document foreclosed its potential inclusion within a social history project.**

Though I will not reveal the details of his story here, this issue's mandate to queer archives invites a closer look at the methodological and historiographical problems that sit at the heart of our interaction. While queer historians are familiar with reluctant witnesses to the history of sexuality, at the gap between these two research experiences—the systematic perusal of the archival collections and

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the messier transmission of gossip between two black men in a Dupont Circle gay bar—lies an opportunity to ask **if gossip could function as an archive of experience even as it resists recognition and institutionalization.** Moreover, how might gossip authorize black queer subjects to speak back to modern identity politics?

In addition to the immediate mandate of this issue, the preceding questions invite a timely reevaluation of the primary assumptions of social history given the sea change in the structure and logic of oppression produced by the ascendancy of neoliberalism within US political culture in recent decades. Founded at the height of the student movements of the 1960s and 1970s, social history initially confronted a world where **power reproduced itself** by systematically silencing and excluding nonelite, white, male, and heteronormative voices from participation within institutional power.¹ Because historical narratives produce and police the borders of full citizenship, social historians aligned themselves with labor, ethnic, black, women's, and LGBT studies movements to expand archival territory devoted to minoritarian experience in hopes of cementing marginalized communities' sense of communal and national belonging amid structural vulnerabilities and exclusions.

Yet given the significant black feminist and black queer studies literature that illustrates the West's transhistoric inability to recognize black gender and sexual formation outside of the context of theft and captivity, **historians cannot presume that black sexual minorities encountered the politicization of gay visibility after Stonewall in a parallel or analogous relationship to sexual marginality as with their white counterparts.**² As C. Riley Snorton notes, because the queer threat of black sexuality emerges from its seemingly boundless capacity for duplicity, a range of governmental and cultural regulatory bodies have emerged in the United States that ritualistically surveil and expose that for black people which is censured to the private sphere for whites.³

In what follows then, I trace histories that condition the entry of black articulations of same-sex desire into the archives, engage the structural vulnerabilities that limited the preservation of a black LGBT past in postwar decades—pivotal years for the formation of modern sexual politics—and, finally, read *Blacklight*, one of the earliest newsletters produced by and for black gay, lesbian, and bisexual readers as an archive of black queer gossip discourse that actively pushes back on the efficacy of identitarian politics from 1979 to 1985.

For most of the twentieth century, evidence of black same-sex desire entered historical archives through multiple layers of translation structured by the omnipresent nature of the West's surveillance of black sexuality. It is not coincidental, for example, that one of the most important recent works on black lesbian experience at the turn of the century is Cheryl Hicks's history of incarcerated women in New York City.⁴ While Hicks notes incarcerated black women who, prison officials and case workers at least believed, were unapologetic about their desire for women, it is impossible to separate their evaluations from broader rhetorics that framed black

women in prison as sexual predators. As both the historical and literary work on black cultural production during the Harlem Renaissance indicates, black people, queer or not, who wanted to publicly display their genius were forced to rely on racialized networks of exchange and patronage, be they performative, sexual, or both.⁵ As Chad Heap indicates, many of the sociological studies documenting various modes of queer black sexuality in the urban North and before World War II did so amid the uneven playing field of slumming culture, where observers' access to the security of whiteness necessarily shaped the behavior of their sources.⁶ Nor should we forget that even evidence of same-sex longing among the black elite often comes to us under duress. Take, for example, the letters and diaries of DC socialite Angelina Grimké, who, according to Genny Beemyn, hid explicit identification with homosexuality because of a perennial fear that her father spied on her.⁷

With few exceptions, histories of white gay, lesbian, or transsexual experience prior to World War II had to rely on similarly compromised sources given the criminalization of homosexuality in the pre-Stonewall era. However, as the post-World War II decades ushered in a massive upheaval in the rhetorical, performative, and psychological dimensions of sexual identification in the United States, so too did proximity to white, middle-class masculinity structure how same-sex desire was experienced and documented. While white gay and lesbian experience could continue to be found in the arrest records of police departments bent on "cleaning up" urban vice districts, or in the reports filed on antihomosexual employment purges from the Lavender Scare to the Save Our Children campaign, predominately white homophile organizations provided gay men and lesbians wrestling against the pressures of heteronormativity with access to correspondence and meeting space designed to lessen social isolation. For white lesbians unable to resist the inexorable inertia of marriage, opportunities for same-sex desire occasionally opened within the private domestic sphere of postwar suburbia. As Nicholas Syrett's work indicates, white male business travelers took advantage of their greater access to the invisibility provided by short-term mobility to indulge in same-sex activity away from home.⁸

By contrast, because the vast majority of black sexual minorities were as likely to be caught up in the daily struggle of surviving the postwar urban crisis, documented evidence of black homosexuality became, as Kevin Mumford argues, evidence of the "pathology" of the ghetto.⁹ While sociology told policy makers that "damaged masculinity" explained black participation in antisocial behavior, urban anthropology produced the most widely distributed documentation of black homosexuality as an index of inner-city poverty. Studies like Ulf Hannerz's *Soulside: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community* and Elliot Liebow's *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*—both based in "the Washington ghetto"—not only helped establish the ethnographic method; they were international best sellers, with *Tally's Corner* selling over a million copies worldwide since its 1967 publication.

While urban sociology in the Moynihan era was concerned with quantify-

ing the rate of “dysfunctional” family structure in the inner city, anthropologists worked out of their discipline’s imperialist penchant for translating the foreign other into understandable terms. As Mitchell Duneier notes of *Tally’s Corner*, “Liebow took his readers into the social world of a group of black men in their twenties and thirties to explain why they seemed so different from white middle-class Americans in the priority they placed on holding down a job and in their commitment to their children, wives, lovers, and friends.”¹⁰ Indeed, as Charles Lemert’s 2003 foreword to *Tally’s Corner* indicates, black inner-city sexuality offered anthropologists the starkest illustrations of the necessity of the project of cultural translation between “the ghetto” and the middle class. In chapter 5, “Lovers and Exploiters,” Liebow recalls the experience of witnessing “Sea Cat,” one of his anonymous informants, getting ready for a night on the town. “I flopped on his bed to wait for him and a package of prophylactics fell out from under the mattress. In replacing it, I discovered a dozen or more similar packages. I asked Sea Cat if he always used them. . . . ‘It depends on the girl. If she’s nice, . . . the kind I wouldn’t mind helping out, then I don’t use them. But if she’s not nice, I don’t take any chances.’”¹¹ While lauding Liebow for achieving so “intimate” a relationship with his informants such that he took liberty to “flop” on Sea Cat’s bed, Lemert also characterizes Sea Cat’s “weird reply” as establishing the rationale for the study itself by establishing “a distance, bridged by the talk of sex, between the apparently opposite sexual ethics of the middle classes and the street-corner man.”¹²

Equally concerned with disrupting Patrick Moynihan’s pathology thesis through anonymous translation of black experience, urban anthropologists deployed black homosexuality as an index of how inner-city poverty demanded survival strategies that disintegrated social and material borders that kept sexual deviance behind closed doors in the suburbs. In Hannerz’s work, black homosexuality functions as a metric of the inability of “ghetto” families to protect precocious children from awareness of deviant sexuality. “Very casual observations in the ghetto also lead one to believe that male homosexuality is not particularly infrequent in the community. Small ghetto boys are well aware of what a ‘faggot’ is (but also what a ‘bulldagger’—lesbian—is; there are obviously sociopsychological forces propelling toward female homosexuality as well).”¹³

Liebow offers a more specific example of this phenomenon by way of “Calvin,” whom Liebow describes as “a frail and ailing forty-year-old alcoholic and homosexual.” Calvin shared an apartment with “Charlene,” who was the on-again, off-again paramour of one of Liebow’s street-corner men protagonists, “Leroy.” Liebow describes Charlene as regularly placing the couple’s children in Calvin’s care, despite his reputation as a homosexual, sex worker, and petty thief. “Even more than to Leroy,” Liebow writes, “the children were attached to Calvin. When he could summon the courage, Calvin often interceded on their behalf when their mother was dealing out punishment. There was little Calvin did not do for the

children. He played with them during the day when they were well and stayed up with them at night when they were sick.” Liebow also transforms “Calvin’s” sexual subjectivity into evidence that poverty generates desperate sexual behavior among the black urban poor. “During one period, when [Calvin] had resolved to stop his homosexual practices (he had been married and a father), he resumed them only on those occasions when there was no food or money in the house and only long enough to ‘turn a trick’ and get food for the children.”¹⁴ Writing amid the simultaneous pathologization of homosexuality and black poverty, Liebow’s Calvin serves the dual purpose of revealing the extent to which inner-city poverty robbed black parents of their ability to properly protect their children from potentially damaging sexual practices and of advancing the notion that black homosexuality, like other forms of antisocial behavior, was itself a constituent of the urban crisis.

In neither Hannerz’s nor Liebow’s work do black queer protagonists take center stage. Calvin is not one of the “streetcorner men”; he only appears in the margins of Leroy and Charlene’s story. Had he been, given Liebow’s expansive interviews with his main characters, it might be possible to view Calvin as an agential participant in the construction of Liebow’s archive. As is, Liebow conditions our engagement with Calvin’s homosexuality on its utility within his primary claim that, rather than “damaged masculinity” at the hands of a black matriarch, the deviances of the ghetto are desperate responses to poverty. Liebow’s and Hannerz’s methods, which included offering subjects cash and anonymity in exchange for their stories, only heighten the exploitation at the root of their public excavations of black sexuality. Indeed, both studies were conducted in 1960s Washington, DC—a city with fewer and fewer economic opportunities for black residents without college degrees—where Liebow relied on the economic vulnerability that he argued produced Calvin’s homosexuality to gain access to the interior lives and sexual practices of “the ghetto” as a whole. Given the proliferation of federal and academic studies on black poverty in DC, might it be possible that resistance to positivist political and archival projects speaks to an acknowledgment of the exploitative component of these relationships?

White and black queers’ differing relationship to the urban crisis also shaped their access to the storage space necessary to preserve textual evidence of their experiences. For example, black Protestant congregations played a vital role organizing the distribution of federal antipoverty dollars to neighborhoods within John F. Kennedy’s and Lyndon B. Johnson’s Great Society initiatives. In crafting the Great Society’s Model Cities program, a new strategy for urban renewal meant to encourage African American’s sense of full citizenship by allowing them to contribute to urban renewal planning in their neighborhoods, policy makers relied on black churches to legitimize their programs. While few funds actually made their way to black congregations in Washington before the rebellions that erupted in the wake of the April 1968 slaying of Martin Luther King Jr., the Johnson and then the Richard M.



Nixon administration's fear that another "riot" was imminent pushed the federal government into action. Between 1968 and 1978, 523 housing units in DC were constructed or rehabilitated under the auspices of black churches.¹⁵ While the paltry number speaks to the failure of the federal government to provide housing for the territory's poorest residents, it also suggests that the stakes of access to subsidized housing were significant for black sexual minorities. How might the combination of residential instability endemic to publicly subsidized housing and the sexual regulation of congregations interact to discourage the accumulation of black gay archives? Considering the limited access to storage space, the need to move at a moment's notice, and the institutional support that came from church members, queer black Washingtonians may have needed to make quick-dash decisions surrounding what to keep and what to discard.

By the late 1980s, the stakes of articulating an LGBT identity were profoundly different for inner-city African American and white queers. The HIV/AIDS epidemic sparked new "radical" gay political formations, which increasingly, and understandably, understood the cost of invisibility as death. As the epidemic launched a nationwide backlash against visible homosexuality, predominately white organizations like ACT UP ignored gay liberalism's concerns with upsetting the sensibilities of the broader public and testified to their grief, trauma, and injury in as many public forums as possible. The HIV/AIDS epidemic also encouraged greater numbers of black queer people to identify with gay liberalism, believing it to be their duty to direct funding for HIV/AIDS resources to underserved black communities.

Simultaneously though, if publicly testifying to their vulnerability to injury amid the AIDS epidemic expanded the influence of white gay politics and, as Christina B. Hanhardt argues, secured their access to discrete gay territory in the city, black queer voices could still be manipulated for projects outside of their control.¹⁶ Indeed, in late 1980s DC, real estate developers wielded black testimony to claim control over valued urban land that played host to black queer leisure. In 1987, a newly formed investment group called the Franklin Square Association opposed the liquor license renewal of the Brass Rail, one of DC's oldest black gay clubs, on the grounds that it was a "public menace." While by no means one of the most well-respected, or even well-liked, clubs in town, the Brass Rail had faithfully served its clientele in the New York Avenue red-light district since the mid-1960s.¹⁷ Yet in their brief before the Alcohol Control Board, the Franklin Square Association used black queer experience and testimony against the bar's owners. Franklin Square Association lawyers called metropolitan police sergeant John Hickey to testify about "five reported cases of drug arrests inside the Brass Rail" and complaints from patrons "who claimed they had been victims of beatings and a throat slashing." While it is unclear whether the police responded to the reports filed by patrons, in the public transcript of the liquor license hearing, those complaints were remade into an argument for the elimination of not only the Brass Rail but all establishments that

catered to black sexually marginalized communities.¹⁸ Only a year later, the Franklin Square Association succeeded in blocking a proposed downtown “nightclub zone” that would concentrate “sexually oriented businesses” into the downtown area after recent reforms to the District liquor law made it more difficult for bars in commercial areas to remain open. **While black queer people were not part of either process, their experience and their vulnerability to street crime became a rationale for eliminating their own access to leisure space in the city, rather than an argument that the public recognize their humanity.**

By contrast, evidence of white gay and lesbians’ greater access to urban land served as a buffer between the documentation of gay history and the economic instability of post–civil rights DC. The most expansive collection of postwar gay experience in the nation’s capital is the Frank Kameny papers, currently housed in the manuscripts division of the Library of Congress. Kameny’s longtime position as the most important gay civil rights activist in the District, and arguably the nation, before the AIDS epidemic makes his records the ideal choice for integration into the nation’s narration of itself. The collection is voluminous, including his constant correspondence with DC newspapers, local politicians, federal lawmakers, and officials as well as activist colleagues around the nation. Kameny kept every member directory, group charter, newsletter, and pamphlet produced by those organizations he was a part of or corresponded with. However, while Kameny consistently pushed white gay and lesbian groups to diversify, his collection contains scant records of black gay and lesbian experience.

Simultaneously though, the *Washington Blade*’s coverage of the news that Kameny’s records would be institutionalized reveals the way differing scales of urban precarity structure access to archives during a period of profound urban transformation. Here is how *Blade* reporter Charles Francis recalled his trip to Kameny’s home in Mount Pleasant before Kameny’s death: “Well into his 80s, he climbed into the attic to join me in a dusty netherworld of political papers. Boxes by the score overflow with single-spaced, multi-page typewritten letters and carbons, newsletters, transcripts, umpteen boxes of Washington Blades, every gay publication from ‘Drum’ to ‘One’ and two black typewriters that looked like anvils. . . . The man saved everything. He never moved. He never discarded. He never denied gay history.”¹⁹

Kameny’s residential stability (he never moved) and his allegiance to gay visibility (he never denied gay history) speak to a certain kind of urban privilege in the neoliberal city. Even though Kameny’s annual income never fully recovered after he was fired during the Lavender Scare, he was able to maintain a residence in Mount Pleasant large enough for him to hold on to an enormous number of documents for decades. The immaculate quality of the material, its lack of stains or wrinkles or deterioration all speak to Kameny’s geographic fixedness within a neighborhood that, like so many interracial communities in northwestern DC, experienced a

profound decline and then gentrification between the 1960s and the turn of the century. In covering Kameny's residential stability as a political virtue, rather than a metric of economic privilege, the *Blade* reifies the naturalization of whiteness in gay politics by positioning it exclusively as the result of hard work and personal responsibility.

The emergence of a black gay political and cultural movement, centered in mid-Atlantic and West Coast cities from the late 1970s to the emergence of the black HIV-AIDS epidemic, ushered in a new era in black sexual minorities' relationship to the politics of political and historical visibility. Indeed, the Washington Metropolitan Area was a capital region for the movement as Billy Jones and Louis Hughes founded the DC and Baltimore chapters of what would become the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gay Men (CBLG) in 1978.²⁰ Colevia Carter and Valerie "Papaya" Mann helped establish the Sapphire Sapphos in 1981 and, in that same year, Howard University Professor James S. Tinney attempted to create a "Black Lesbian/Gay" archive collection within Moorland Spingarn Library.²¹ In 1979, the Washington Chapter of the Gay Activist Alliance elected Mel Boozer that organization's first black president. A year later, Boozer became the first openly gay black person to be nominated for vice president at the 1980 Democratic convention.²²

Yet despite the achievements of these individuals, they represent only a small microcosm of nonheterosexual black people in the nation's capital. Particularly for Boozer, their participation in white gay politics at times produced resentment among black gay Washingtonians who were utterly disinterested in alliance, be it political or romantic, with white gay men or formal politics in general. As Sidney Brinkley, publisher and editor of the Washington-based black gay and lesbian publication *Blacklight* wrote of DC's black gay political groups in 1983, "neither DCCBG [DC Coalition of Black Gays] nor Sapphire Sapphos can claim much influence beyond its membership."²³ Elaborating on "Black gay" ambivalence toward these groups, Brinkley writes, "It is an insular community and much of the activity occurs behind closed doors."²⁴

Evidence of these tensions can most readily be found in the pages of *Blacklight*, which ran from 1979 to 1985. Founded by Brinkley, an early member of the CBLG, *Blacklight* offers textual evidence of black Washingtonians' ambivalence toward the politics of visibility and their interest in "spilling tea" (gossiping) as a mode of political analysis. In one of *Blacklight*'s earliest issues, Bill Stevens answers readers' questions about what participation in "gay rights" actually looks like for black gays and lesbians. His report proved less than encouraging. Stevens articulated the frustration of having to represent the entirety of the black gay experience for white gay organizers. "Because you will be one of few Black Gay activists, you will be expected to address every issue, attend every meeting and be involved in every project. Expected by whom? By Whites. If you miss a meeting, they will use that to reinforce previously held attitudes that Blacks don't care."²⁵ Stevens's pro-

Under GRACE'S Hat

Welcome to this little corner, "Under GRACE'S Hat." Believe me, it's one place to be!!! This corner in future issues will attempt to keep you abreast of some happenings and events going on in the metropolitan area as well as provide a place for the exchange of some ideas. It's going to be hot, saucy, sexy, bare, square, in, out, on top, up under, —do I have to go on?
If there are any questions, complaints, items, or events that



then, the new group, SPIRIT OF LIFE, gave one a few weeks after THE CONSTITUENTS were supposed to. It was kinky but had no spirit or life...

meets at 7pm every Monday in B21, Douglass Hall on Howard's campus...
On the subject of the Gay murders, GRACE is very happy to hear that a task force between the LAMBDA and the COALITION OF BLACK GAYS is assist-

Under Grace's Hat, *Blacklight* 3, no. 4 (1982): 14. Illustration by Ossipio

posed solution was to avoid “living up [to] their expectations. Set your priorities and your own pace.”²⁶ Despite his criticisms of representational politics, Stevens had little that was positive to say about the potential for intraracial cooperation by black gay men and lesbians in predominately white groups. “As for the Blacks you will come into contact with, the Lesbians will lean toward feminism but will not be as radical as their White counterparts. . . . As for the Black Gay men overall very little political awareness exists, but there will be individuals who will do what they can. However, don't expect too much.”²⁷ Rather than white racism within gay politics, Stevens's column suggests that a profound, yet playful, disinterest in the efficacy of political mobilization might animate black gay disinterest in activism.

Blacklight readers played significantly closer attention to Under Grace's Hat, a semiregular, and utterly hilarious, gossip column pseudonymously penned by “Grace.” While Grace spent her time “serving tea” and getting the denizens of black gay Washington together on a regular basis, her column spoke to some black queer subjects' understanding of their position in Snorton's “glass closet.” In two stories in the October 1982 issue, Grace indicated her belief that her readers did not understand that “the closet” did not function in similar ways for black gays as it did for other sexual minorities. Grace used the two stories to illustrate this notion. First, in typically audacious fashion, after asking readers if they had “heard about that party that was given in N.E. not too long ago,” Grace writes: “Well it seems that one of the guests he was into . . . (Dare Grace say it?) *fist-fucking*. Well, another guest was very interested and decided he would like to do it while the other guest watched.”²⁸ After taking the blame for such a display—“After all, in one of Grace's recent columns she did say that live entertainment does add a touch of class to

an affair; however, she was not referring to *that* type of entertainment”—Grace chided the party’s organizer for ever expecting their activities to avoid the light of day. “Yes dear, we understand that it *was* a private party. Yes dear, we understand that it *is* none of our business. But, face it honey, this is Washington, D.C. and, with the crowd you’ve been running with, there is no such thing as privacy!”²⁹ Later on, Grace addressed concerns that her columns had recently gone too far, revealing hints as to the identity of a reader who was currently seeking security clearance with the federal government. She responded with the following:

Now dears, let’s be realistic. We are living in America. America runs nothing so efficiently as she does her FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] and CIA [Central Intelligence Agency]. The person in question has been gay since day two (he somehow missed day one). If indeed they are investigating him they must already have a folder full of information. Anyway, Grace did not say he was gay; she just said he lived with his lover. But, if he is so concerned, he should give up his lover. Better yet, give him to Grace ‘cause Lord knows, the man is *fine*.³⁰

In both instances, Grace’s reading of the impossibility of privacy for those “running” in Washington’s black gay circles offers insight into a potential source of queer black ambivalence toward political mobilization. **In the face of the federal government’s massive accumulation of the authority to investigate and expose, in light of queer black Washingtonians’ historically compromised access to sexual privacy, the liberatory power of “coming out” may have emerged as anticlimactic, a continuation of the sexual order rather than an intervention against it.**

Indeed, as members of DC’s black gay social clubs consistently attest, the ultimate goal was to work “behind the scenes” to advance gay rights, rather than out in public. As Aundré Scott, co-owner of DC’s most popular black gay disco, the Clubhouse, told the *Washington Post* before the 1978 DC mayoral and city council elections: “Every candidate I know of has some member of my club on their campaign committee. They may not know that these people are gay, but they don’t need to know right? No matter who wins, black gays are going to have some influence in this city. If you want to call gay kids spies, then we have spies in every camp.”³¹ Lacking confirmation from any of the campaign committees in question, Scott’s statement is unquestionably gossip. Yet in shining a light on black gays’ comprehensive infiltration of local politics Scott also articulates a notion of gay political power that is not beholden to visibility and instead takes recourse within private spaces available to “spies.” Scott’s decision to spread gossip about black gay presence within local politics with the *Washington Post* also represents an oddly public gesture toward discretion, one that disrupts any effort to characterize modern black gay experience or politics as operating within a public/private binary.

While features like Under Grace’s Hat reflected the sensibilities of DC’s

black gay elite, *Blacklight* also functioned as a critical bridge between those black Washingtonians committed to being out and those who chose to remain unidentified, while also playing fast and loose with the very notion of ever-present risk that encircled some black gay Washingtonians' lives. Gossip emerged as a strategy to bring media and police attention to a series of murders committed against black gay men in the District. In a 1981 column, titled "Rough Trade," Brinkley brought attention to a rash of murders committed against gay men in the city in the previous twelve months. Brinkley introduced the story by referencing a wave of attacks on black children in Atlanta, perhaps as a means of figuring a closer relationship between the shared vulnerability of black children and black gay men, rather than positioning the story within the context of DC's "crime problem." He writes: "We are all familiar with the murders that have taken place in Atlanta. But closer to home, right here in Washington, D.C., there have been a number of murders of another type. Gay murders. The straight media often times do not report it as such, but *we* know. We know because many of the victims have been friends and family."³²

By September, there were eleven such murders, with eight of the victims African American. **In emphasizing a general "we" who was aware of the actual nature of the crimes, Brinkley speaks to a broader, if unnamed, community who not only knew the sexual identity of the victims but also knew of the economies of desire that attract black gay men to their victimizers.** Brinkley writes that future murders are inevitable because "too many Gay men are into hustlers or rough trade. You've seen the type—they're usually dirty, foul mouthed, under educated, sexually repressed, emotionally immature and angry. Unfortunately, too many Gay men equate those 'qualities' with being a 'real man' and eagerly pay for a few minutes of one-sided sex. Sometimes they pay with their lives." On the one hand, Brinkley reproduces rhetoric popular within urban antiviolence activism that linked the maladjustments of racialized poverty to urban violence.³³ On the other hand, at the end of his column Brinkley chooses not to call on protection from the police, or even any formal political organization. Instead, he writes: "How do we as family, friends or concerned citizens bring an end to these attacks? The answer is *we* can't. The solution lies solely within the future victims. Until they decide to re-evaluate their self-concept and their concept of manhood . . . there is very little we can do. If you know someone who likes his trade rough, have him think about this: The next one he picks up . . . may kill *him*." In repeating the emphasis of "we," Brinkley actively embraces the impossibility of black gay engagement with formal politics, offering instead solutions that stress internal transformation or private, interpersonal conversation. While *Blacklight* consistently showcased positive coverage of public forums on black gay issues, the magazine regularly suggested that visibility could not ameliorate the community's challenges.

The AIDS epidemic brought *Blacklight* to a rather abrupt end in 1985. A 1983 feature issue on the spread of the disease in black communities illuminates

the way rumor, as well as gossip, produced a unique queer black political subjectivity. Titled “The File on Aids,” the issue included an interview with Vinod Modi, chief of infectious diseases at Howard University Hospital, who answered questions about how AIDS was spread and whether blacks were more or less susceptible to the disease. In the same issue though, Brinkley offered space to Ron Simmons, a radical black gay nationalist who in 1989 went on to found Us Helping Us, a black gay AIDS community organization.³⁴ Drawing connections between the CIA’s alleged distribution of germs into the New York subway, the United States’ complicity with Japan’s Devil’s Brigade, and the Tuskegee experiment, Simmons points out that AIDS is “a government experiment on a grand scale” and that “the intended target of this experiment is not gay people; it’s black people.”³⁵

Simmons’s assessment of AIDS speaks to his connection to indigenous black political culture in DC, a city where conspiracy theory has historically informed the disfranchised population’s relationship to structural inequality in the federal territory. For example, as early as the Nixon administration, the District’s black radio DJs, street-corner preachers, and beauty salon technicians began to spread rumors of “the Plan,” which predicted that African Americans would be expelled from Washington, DC, by the year 2000 and, as one unnamed woman told the *Washington Afro-American*, put “on a reservation like the Indians soon unless we get ourselves together.”³⁶ So too do conspiracy theories concerning the planned nature of HIV/AIDS proliferate in black communities in Washington and around the nation. Then-senator Barack Obama’s otherwise smooth post-Iowa caucus run for the 2008 Democratic primary was partially derailed when his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, accused the federal government of manufacturing AIDS to kill the black community. Similar notions circulate within a range of black community spaces from barbershops to radical blogs. As Simmons argued in his 1983 essay, public discourse on AIDS only seemed to confirm that the disease was designed to eliminate unwanted populations at home and abroad: “The type of people most likely to contract AIDS were identified as ‘drug addicts, Haitians and gays.’ Note that these are segments of the population that white America is least concerned about.”³⁷ Simmons connects the inevitable failure of a black gay response to AIDS as the result of political apathy, but for him that apathy emerges in black gays’ ambivalent relationship to the black community. “Some Black gays have become defensive adults who rigidly hold to Eurocentric definitions of ‘gay rights’ while remaining ambiguous about their relationship to the overall Black community. Thus, most Black gays will probably accept the official explanation of AIDS, rather than acknowledge the historic Black struggle and the possibility that AIDS is a government conspiracy.”³⁸ Here, then, Simmons positions rumor and innuendo about the origins of AIDS as an example of rational historicism and engagement in “gay rights” as the form of false consciousness.

Conclusion

This essay's persistent gesture towards "gossip" is in part structured by the way the HIV-AIDS epidemic has narrowed the documentary record for black LGBT experience in the postwar decades. Washington, DC is relatively fortunate in this regard. In addition to *Blacklight*, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center's James Tinney papers, the Schomburg's Essex Hemphill/Wayne Moreland collection, offer critical glimpses into black gay life before the crisis. Under Mark Meinke, the Rainbow History Project has conducted dozens of interviews with black gay Washingtonians, many of them native to the city, and makes audio files and transcripts available to researchers. Yet, even in Washington, the HIV-AIDS epidemic utterly reworked both the archival landscape for black gay history and the black gay community's relationship to a politics of visibility.

It is in response to the epidemic that DC's black gay social clubs banded together to organize an education forum on HIV-AIDS in the black community, even as they began to lose members at an alarming rate. *Blacklight*'s promotion of the forum was published in one of the magazine's final issues, before Brinkley escaped Washington for the Bay Area. While the CBLG held a fundraiser for Marion Barry's 1982 re-election campaign, it was the astronomical HIV-AIDS infection rates in the city's prison system that brought Billy Jones to the floors of Congress in 1987, articulating the unique needs of black gay men both within and outside of the prison system. Black gay and lesbian Washingtonians begin to appear as political agitators in the personal papers of DC city councilmembers in the late 1980s and early 1990s, demanding state funds to construct clinics and provide services outside of Washington's now gentrified gay-friendly neighborhoods. **Tragically then, as the HIV-AIDS epidemic robbed black gay communities of invaluable intergenerational cultural memory, it produced a critical mass of politically and historically legible black gay subjects in Washington, and around the country, for the first time.**

The persistence of high HIV-AIDS infection rates among black gay or same-gender loving men in the present day has produced projects designed to excavate a usable black gay history from within the overwhelming loss suffered by those who survived the epidemic. In addition to the Queer Newark Oral History Project, Charles Stephens's Counter Narrative Project and Dan Royles's African American HIV-AIDS Activism Oral History Project are working to stitch together black gay activist histories designed to ameliorate the trauma of survivors and inspire black lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and same-gender-loving people who continue to struggle against an intersecting matrix of structural and quotidian oppression. Still, the history illustrated above instructs us to think how we can also narrate the experience of **black gay subjects who resisted power by sidestepping or rethinking the very category of the political representation.**

Notes

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