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Maxwell Richardson  
*Yale University*

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## Racial, Gender, and Sexual Imagery and the Black Queer Man

an Excerpt from "I Cannot Go Home as I Am: Exploring Identity in Black Queer Men at Yale in the Context of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic"

Maxwell Baker Richardson<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Yale University

### Abstract

Situated in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, Black queer men were and continue to be one of the most affected groups by the epidemic. Looking back as to why, it is very apparent that intersecting themes of racism, homophobia, and masculinity norms, among various other forces contribute to the difficulty many Black queer men had in accessing agency in the epidemic. Through oral histories, as well as analysis of primary source material from the 1980s, I examine the topic of racial, gender, and sexual imagery as it informs and impacts the Black queer male identity throughout this time.

In the early 1980s, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention came out with what is now known as the very first report of AIDS in the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, detailing a rare cancer found in 5 previously healthy gay men.<sup>1</sup> The race of these men was unknown, but what would follow this announcement would be an onslaught of images of dying white gay men, like in the picture below, implying the epidemic was one that did not affect Black people. In reality, 1980s report of census data and AIDS statistics show that Black people made up around 31% of persons with AIDS despite only making up around 12% of the population in the United States – a stark overrepresentation from their population makeup.<sup>2</sup> This characterization represents the birth of the construction of AIDS as a “gay white disease” as pictures of young previously healthy

gay white men, now emaciated and stricken to hospital beds, grazed across televisions all around the world and allowed people to adopt the outlook: “It’s their problem. Not mine.” The emphasis placed in the word “their” comes out of the belief many straight people had that AIDS was a disease that people contracted through the practice of “immoral” behavior, in this case, a sexual culture among gay men that emphasized pleasure and community over the procreative objectives that stress duty and urgency.<sup>3</sup> These beliefs were served in conjunction with a heavy influence of the Christian faith deeming men having sex with other men as incorrigible, thus suggesting that AIDS was, in fact, a punishment for the immoral behavior gay men participated in.<sup>4</sup> The image of what it was to be a Black queer man that was most popularly demonstrated in the media was one

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Twenty-Five Years of HIV/AIDS--United States, 1981-2006," *MMWR. Morbidity and mortality weekly report* 55, no. 21 (2006). 585.

<sup>2</sup> Center for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV and AIDS – United States, 1981-2000, (2001).; Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race,

1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for the United States, Regions, Divisions, and States, 56 (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Evelyn Hammonds, "Race, Sex, AIDS: The Construction of 'Other'," *Radical America*, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Hammonds, "Race, Sex, AIDS: The Construction of 'Other'."

that was guilty and, in many ways, did not deserve salvation in this deadly epidemic. Throughout this piece, I hope to examine many of these forces by focusing on some of the contexts that helped to shape the image of a Black gay male during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, including: the childhood experiences of many from home life, to experiences in school, church, and other aspects of the Black community, portrayals of Black people and gay people in the media especially in the context of HIV and AIDS, and the preceding Civil Rights and Gay Liberation movements that impacted the freedoms of Black queer men, as well as complicated them.

In discussing how Black gay male identity is constructed, I first examine how racial imagery plays a significant role in how one's Blackness and queerness are perceived individually, in order to imagine how both would be perceived together. In discussing B.R.'s experience growing up, he discussed how his family instilled within him a relatively strong Black identity within him.<sup>5</sup> His parents were of West Indian descent, and most of his childhood was formed off of the West Indian Black identity as opposed to the African American Black identity. Within this, he introduced the perspective of American Black people and Non-American Black people in saying how in his community, no one wanted to be identified as being an American Black person, in addition to how the African Black identity was better.<sup>6</sup> This clash reflects on the historical divide between different members of the Black diaspora in the United States. Living with a history of white supremacy, Black Americans were subject to a lot of racist depictions in the media, from the welfare queen to the gangster, to the history of minstrelsy in an attempt to further dehumanize Black

Americans through the placement of animalistic and "uncivilized" (read: non-white) attributes.<sup>7</sup> Along with these characterizations came stereotypes that Black Americans were lazy, unintelligent, and hypersexual among many other bigoted illustrations.

These depictions served as the backdrop to the introduction of new affirmative action policies in the 1970s. Affirmative action was aimed at increasing Black representation in the workforce/education through having race-conscious hiring or admissions policies due a history of underrepresentation and/or policies specifically preventing Black Americans from being able to access certain spaces like certain white collar positions and certain universities.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Black Americans were able to begin to access spaces that were never possible to access before, in addition to women and other marginalized groups. However, the existence of mischaracterizations of Black people (in addition to continued racism), dissenting opinions would argue that Black Americans did not deserve to access those spaces because they did not earn the right to access those spaces, as white people had done previously. This idea was exacerbated through the misconception, but widely spread belief, that Black Americans were stealing opportunities from much more deserving white folks, and the mischaracterizations were once again brought up. Advancing to the 1980s when Black Americans were attributed to be stricken with AIDS, as well as having the Reagan inspired "War on Drugs," it once, again gave Black Americans the image of being criminals, on top of the historical stereotypes surrounding Black Americans, creating more and more animosity towards Black people.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> B.R., "B.R. Oral History," interview by Maxwell Richardson, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> B.R., interview.

<sup>7</sup> Alberto G. Urquidez, "Jorge Garcia and the Ordinary Use of 'Racist Belief,'" *Social Theory & Practice* 43, no. 2 (2017): 235.; Henry Louis Gates Jr., "America's Second Sin," *TIME Magazine*, 2019. 44.

<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth S. Anderson, "Racial Integration as a Compelling Interest," *Constitutional Commentary* 21, no. 1 (2004): 35.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Johnson, "Reflections on Teaching *The Wire*: Developing a Racial Pedagogy," *Radical Teacher*, no. 112 (2018): 7.; Jacob Levenson, *The Secret Epidemic: The Story of AIDS and Black America* (Pantheon Books, 2004): 190.

All the while, Black people who were recent immigrants from Africa, therefore, not personally implicated in the significant racist history in the United States towards Black people, had a front row seat into experiencing the negative stereotypes Black Americans had and white Americans' tendency to group all Black people together, regardless of ethnicity. For this reason, many Black Africans in the United States sought to distance themselves from Black Americans and to create this distinction by being everything that Black Americans weren't. Where Black Americans were "lazy," Black Africans were hardworking. Where Black Americans were "stealing spots," Black Africans sought to show that they were earning those spots like other white Americans.<sup>10</sup> B.R. described how he witnessed this perspective in his parents, while emphasizing while they didn't expressly say it his parents had that mentality.<sup>11</sup> The importance in considering this viewpoint from B.R.'s Black West Indian, non-American, background is tantamount, as it helps to set the scene for how the Black American identity is constructed in the Post-Civil Rights Movement era in the eyes of those situated outside of the embodiment. It appears that by white people as well as other people of color, even other Black people, Black Americans seemed to have a significantly negative perception.

Looking at closer at how Black Americans were viewed in the 1970s and 1980s, and placing it within the context of the ongoing Gay Liberation Movement, it introduces the inquiry as to why many Black Americans were not able to fully embrace and be a part of the Gay Liberation Movement. The "free love"

campaign inspired by the Gay Liberation Movement is powerful and liberating for so many, but at the same time, emphasized eurocentric beauty standards, painting sexual liberation as a concept only attainable for white people.<sup>12</sup> Notions of Black women as being promiscuous, an antiquated stereotype with roots of origin from antebellum slavery, that has long allowed for the sexual violence against Black women with no repercussions, as well as the notions of Black men being promiscuous, animalistic, and threats to white women, allowing for the continued persecution and physical/sexual violence on Black men, as well as the increased commodification of the Black male body by white gay men as "exotic" figures.<sup>13</sup> It is hard to join forces or to compare the two movements because to overtly do so would be risking the reignition of these stereotypes, and to further ignore the racist undertones of the Gay Liberation Movement.<sup>14</sup> Advancing 10 years later into the 1980s to when AIDS became more present in the US consciousness, this hyper sexualization and criticism of gay male sexual practices, deeming them deserving of the plague and undeserving of significant intervention. In reality, it could have simply been easier to not acknowledge the plight of AIDS in the Black community when it was referred to as a "gay disease" in order to escape these negative sexual stereotypes, as well as because so many other issues were affecting Black communities on a daily basis, like the war on drugs, and Reagan's increased policing on Black communities.<sup>15</sup>

Concurrently, the archetype of the Black queer man men is cast in the role of the lying, cheating husband who has

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer V. Jackson and Mary E. Cothran, "Black versus Black: The Relationships among African, African American, and African Caribbean Persons," *Journal of Black Studies* 33, no. 5 (2003). 590.

<sup>11</sup> B.R., interview.

<sup>12</sup> Kent W. Peacock, "Race, the Homosexual, and the Mattachine Society of Washington, 1961-1970.," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 25, no. 2 (2016). 279.

<sup>13</sup> Martha Hodes, "The Sexualization of Reconstruction Politics: White Women and Black Men in the South after the Civil War,"

*Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (1993). 402.; Darius Bost, "Loneliness: Black Gay Longing in the Work of Essex Hemphill," *Criticism* 59, no. 3 (2017). 366.

<sup>14</sup> Charles I. Nero, "Black Gay Men and White Gay Men A Less Than Perfect Union," in *Out In The South*, ed. Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law (Temple University Press, 2001). 117.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson, "Reflections on Teaching The Wire: Developing a Racial Pedagogy." 7.

sex with men behind his wife's back, only to come home and infect his wife with HIV that would eventually result in her death implicating traits of deceitfulness, dishonesty, and apathy to the Black queer male character. In these characterizations, Black queer men are alienated and seen as a threat and are shown that to claim a Black gay male identity would mean that one would either die from AIDS, or give it to someone they loved because that's what happened to their family member(s). Black gay male subjects being seen as the problem, in many ways it necessitated a defense from this threat of homosexuality with, of course, homophobia. When critics of this homophobia argue back by comparing the plight of gay people to be akin to the plight of Black people, some [Black people] resent the association of Blacks and gays, because they view gays as deviants, who hurt the Black community.<sup>16</sup> So what, exactly, are Black queer men to do? This added burden of having to deal with such negative perception in the midst of a plague that is taking out many of their loved ones as well as themselves, for Black queer men, according to B.H., HIV just appeared as cross to bear. In the time, due to this such negative perception, it designates the mere choice to become sexually active, for gay men in general, as one that comes with the high risk of potentially dying. For him, coming into college and realizing this grim reality, he came to important conclusions while on campus surrounding HIV around personal behaviors surrounding safe sex. He engaged in very little sex on campus in an active effort to avoid exposing himself to HIV. He was very particular about who he would engage sexually with, and thus who he would take the risk for.

L.A. describes how both during the 1980s and 1990s as well as in modern consciousness; Black queer men are dying

because of dogma.<sup>17</sup> This dogma persists in the form of stigma, particularly the stigmatization of femininity cast on a male canvas and sexuality as examples of historical genocide to the Black man and to the Black race. In reality, HIV illuminated a lot of this. Specifically, HIV pulled the covers back on [the desires of] masculine men that directly responded to this narrative of femininity, as the idea of two Black men having sex points to the reality of one being penetrated.<sup>18</sup> Knowing that penetration is associated with submission which is associated with femininity, the idea of a Black man being gay and having sex points at a larger issue in the Black community about their men being "feminized".<sup>19</sup> Even though male queerness doesn't necessarily depend on femininity, it has been given that attribute as a way to bring criticism upon male queerness and also controversially changes gender from its traditional fixed orientation, to one that is more fluid. Especially when applied to a historical context, to apply femininity to a Black male figure is akin to violating that figure, as brutal assaults, including rape, against Black men during the era of slavery in the United States were done as an attempt for white slaveowners to prove that they are more dominant (read: masculine) than the submissive (read: feminine) Black man. The historical trauma has cemented a very tenuous relationship between Black masculinity and femininity in general, and any attempt to "feminize the Black man," or an attempt to define masculinity as fluid not fixed is one that is inherently an action by the white supremacist American society they lived in. At the end of the day, a Black man is supposed to marry and be with a Black woman, not another man, so he may have kids with her and to further expand the Black race. The idea that a Black man might want to get penetrated during sex, an action typically thought of as submissive which is connoted

<sup>16</sup> Lynn Ricot, "Supporting Gay Rights as Human Rights," *Yale Daily News* 1993, 53. 6.

<sup>17</sup> L.A., "L.A. Oral History," interview by Maxwell Richardson, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> L.A., interview.

<sup>19</sup> Mimi Schippers, "Black Respectability in a Perfect World The "Down Low," Polyamory, and Bisexuality in E. Lynn Harris's *Invisible Life*," in *Beyond Monogamy, Polyamory and the Future of Polyqueer Sexualities* (NYU Press, 2016). 104-5.

often with a feminine act, compounded with the effect of AIDS of degrading one's masculinity through the deterioration of the body in essence represents a direct effect of a man's betrayal of his masculinity.

Tracing back to this "immoral behavior" (described earlier) that gay men would participate in, specifically pointing to the sexual practices involving non-monogamy, public sex, and group sex a portion of gay men of all races would participate in, specifically in the time of the Gay Liberation Movement.<sup>20</sup> Thus, when AIDS first started impacting gay men in these cities, far too many, including the government, maintained a position of apathy because in some ways, this was a consequence of gay men's poor behavior and immoral actions. Similarly, for smaller cities, were able to overlook this overwhelming malady since it seemed to only happen to "immoral people" in big cities, so cities, like New Haven, that were far smaller would be less likely to be at risk of these issues. Despite the reality that AIDS knew no race, in this time of "the plague" as B.H. describes it, AIDS is being advertised as a white gay male disease, much to the erasure of Black presence in the epidemic. Cathy Cohen examines this perspective in her book *Boundaries of Blackness*, she details how various Black news sources, like the *Amsterdam News*, didn't really talk about the effect of HIV/AIDS in Black communities, or if they did, they would talk about Black queer men in the larger context of gay men and AIDS as an attempt to admonish gay men for helping to spread the virus.<sup>21</sup> This is unsurprising and helps to make a case where the burgeoning of Black gay organizations in the late 1970s started out of the

Black perspective being silenced by white gay men and lesbians.<sup>22</sup>

The effects of the erasure of Black voices in the HIV/AIDS epidemic are two-fold: on behalf of the mainstream media that supports white supremacy as well as through a lot of the Black community's insufficient coping mechanisms to properly deal with the HIV/AIDS epidemic and its presence in the Black community as a result years of racial trauma. Having white gay men as the poster children for the HIV/AIDS epidemic implicates whiteness a veil over the more contentious queer identity allows them to overcome this immoral nature that was given to gay men. When Rock Hudson died of AIDS, the fact that he was Ronald Regan's white friend superseded all past erasure. Ronald Regan's "guy" died rather than some faggot, and that driving force – seeing many gay white men as having proximity to straight white men, thus placing their white maleness above all – helped to drive more action regarding AIDS because whiteness, above all other forces, was the indicator of morality, and who deserved to be saved from this plague.<sup>23</sup> Black gay people already had to deal with the fact that their Blackness already made them unworthy of being saved from this epidemic as it always had, the effects of which were, of course shown through a lack of representation in the media and increased barriers to health care.<sup>24</sup> But to add queerness to the equation would be the final nail in the coffin. Returning to the history of sexualization of Black bodies, many Black institutions found it easier to simply avoid conversations on sex and sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Concurrently, white gay men were reluctant to

<sup>20</sup> Ariella R. Rotramel, "U.S. Presidents and LGBT Policy Leadership, Civil Rights, and Morality Claims, 1977–2015," in *The Gendered Executive*, ed. Janet M. Martin and MaryAnne Borrelli, A Comparative Analysis of Presidents, Prime Ministers, and Chief Executives (Temple University Press, 2016). 133-4.

<sup>21</sup> Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness* (The University of Chicago Press, 1999). 199.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 94.

<sup>23</sup> The term "faggot" is used here in order to emphasize the animosity held towards gay men in this era, as well as to offer a

glimpse at how proximity to privileged positions or people allows one to be named, rather than just exist as a label. See Joseph Vogel, "The Welcome Table Intimacy, AIDS, and Love," in *James Baldwin and the 1980s, Witnessing the Reagan Era* (University of Illinois Press, 2018). 75; Tim Dean, "The Psychoanalysis of AIDS," *October* 63 (1993). 99.

<sup>24</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 195, 293.

<sup>25</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 72-3.

have a Black gay victim because that would dare put them on the same playing field, in turn forcing White gay men to also deal with the burden of Blackness. On the other hand, Black institutions, like Black media outlets, as well as segments of the Black church were reluctant to have a Black gay victim because knowing what was said about gay men who had AIDS, would once again thrust these hypersexualized images of Black people onto the entire community again, since a large part of the narrative of HIV/AIDS was that the spreading of HIV was as a result of the “irresponsible behavior” of gay men.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the abhorrent treatment of Black gay AIDS victims by segments of the Black community, B.H. discusses the myth of homophobia being worse in the black community, claiming that the portrayal of Black homophobia being a greater evil than white homophobia serving as a function of the larger forces of both homophobia and racism.<sup>27</sup> It is easier to point out the flaws of an already stigmatized community at struggling to accept another without taking into account the generational trauma regarding sex that has made topics on sex, sexuality, family making, and other intersecting topics, incredibly difficult to discuss and accept when they go against norms of the Black community. What isn't as closely examined is that these norms in many ways existed as a survival tactic. This phenomenon has been referred to as “Posttraumatic Slave Syndrome” that has given rise to many behaviors or beliefs in an attempt to protect Black people.<sup>28</sup>

**“To be Black, gay, and a man all at the same time through this epidemic is to be ignored, whether partially or completely because even as parts of you are seen more and more, other parts are scrutinized and left behind, again and again.”**

Institutions that also had the mission of protecting Black people, like the Black church, proliferated homophobia, and in a culture where Black people are, on average, more connected to faith-based traditions that encourage a straight lifestyle, it helps to provide an etiology for the belief that Black people are more homophobic.<sup>29</sup> Continuing with this posttraumatic slave syndrome theory, preserving heterosexuality meant preserving the Black family which meant preserving Black people. Creating a static Black masculine figure rebels against the historical degradation of Black men through sexual violence, animalistic body stereotypes, and a reputation of being a threat to the white world. Conversely, the basis of homophobia among white people is not built out of the same racial apocalyptic worldview, while still present, and issues such as protecting the white family are not nearly as important because of the lack of a threat of white families in the first place. Nevertheless, it doesn't excuse both communities' mistreatment and damage that has been subjected upon queer bodies.

A notable difference between the institutions that promote homophobia in both Black and white communities is that the Black church exists as a main staple in the Black community, serving as a symbol of resilience, safety, and community, while the church in the white community has not held nearly the political and historical significance, thus casting Black people as more religious. Not to mention, a lot of these Black comedians contributed to a

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 35, 199.

<sup>27</sup> B.H., "B.H. Oral History," interview by Maxwell Richardson, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Marjorie J Hill, "Is the Black Community More Homophobic?: Reflections on the Intersectionality of Race, Class, Gender, Culture and Religiosity of the Perception of Homophobia in the

Black Community," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 17, no. 2 (2013). 210.

<sup>29</sup> Hill, "Is the Black Community More Homophobic?: Reflections on the Intersectionality of Race, Class, Gender, Culture and Religiosity of the Perception of Homophobia in the Black Community." 212.

compilation of Black ephemera uniting many Black people all over the United States, giving support and unity.<sup>30</sup> Another example situates predominately white areas like Kokomo, Indiana launched campaigns against Ryan White, a kid who had AIDS, discriminating against him and his family in schools, work, and other places<sup>31</sup>. The reactions and homophobic sentiments were of similar degree among white and Black men, but the portrayal of issues, like of Bush and Reagan as “cautious,” and “busy,” while Black preachers were cast as “fanatics,” Black comedians were cast as “crude,” and Black rappers were cast as “bad influences”.<sup>32</sup>

In the midst of all of the homophobia emitted towards queer people, J.P. insists that one of the most powerful aspects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic was its ability to combat homophobia through this newly created intersection between medicine, politics, and identity.<sup>33</sup> “It made a whole generation of men and women stand up and say, ‘You cannot ignore us anymore.’”<sup>34</sup> Despite AIDS being continually swept under the rug, medicine eventually needed to plead to the government for more resources as more and more AIDS patients came in, many of whom died as hospitals began to get overwhelmed.

Additionally, T.C. goes on to describe the moment he sees Marlon Riggs’ film *Tongues United* and being able see one of his only true visuals of Black men and the HIV/AIDS epidemic which really affected him and showed [him] how Black men with HIV are more othered than white men with HIV.<sup>35</sup> T.C. acknowledges that, primarily, the stories he heard regarding HIV in the media weren’t Black queer stories, but

mainly the stories of upper-class white gay men as he cited films like *An Early Frost* and *Longtime Companion*, to which one could easily make the comparison of the bulk of the subjectivity of AIDS sufferers in these movies to that of in Yale student activism, and even in organizations like ACT UP of which had a large influence of Yale students, including the leadership of Yale alum, Larry Kramer ’55.<sup>36</sup> It is stories and representation from Black queer men like Marlon Riggs that reiterate the words Dr. Perlotto stressed earlier, “We will not be ignored.” While many efforts between the 1970s and 1990s created more and more undue burdens on Black queer men, a lot of their identity was built out of the desire to make their voices heard from their own mouths, not those of others.

Throughout this analysis, I sought to investigate how outside forces and influences created and shaped a Black gay male existence, from experiences growing up, to intersecting social movements, to topics such as racial imagery. The reality is, being a Black gay man in the 1980s and 1990s was shaped by the effects from the Civil Rights and Gay Liberation Movements, by affirmative action allowing for Black people in the United States to be able to access higher education and jobs in a magnitude that was not seen before. It is shaped by the various parts of the Black community shedding lights on a Black identity that was separate from these stereotypes that were hurting Black people day after day, even if it is to the detriment of certain members of the Black community. Being a Black gay man is living in a world that continues to believe that AIDS doesn’t happen to Black people while day after day Black

<sup>30</sup> Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman, “Comedians’ Perspectives on the Intersections of Art and Activism,” in *A Comedian and an Activist Walk into a Bar, The Serious Role of Comedy in Social Justice* (University of California Press, 2020). 139.

<sup>31</sup> Allen Safianow, “The challenges of local oral history: The Ryan white project,” *Indiana Magazine of History* 112, no. 1 (2016). 34.

<sup>32</sup> Jeanita W. Richardson and Kim A. Scott, “Rap Music and Its Violent Progeny: America’s Culture of Violence in Context,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 71, no. 3 (2002). 178.

<sup>33</sup> J.P., “J.P. Oral History,” interview by Maxwell Richardson, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> J.P., interview.

<sup>35</sup> T.C., “T.C. Oral History,” interview by Maxwell Richardson, 2019.; Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*. 97.

<sup>36</sup> George Chauncey, “Gay at Yale: How Things Changed,” *Yale Alumni Magazine*, 2009.



people continued to die. To be Black, gay, and a man all at the same time through this epidemic is to be ignored, whether partially or completely because even as parts of you are seen more and more, other parts are scrutinized and left behind, again and again.

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