

ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: EVIDENCE OF BEING: URBAN BLACK GAY MEN'S LITERATURE AND CULTURE, 1978-1995

Darius Bost, Doctor of Philosophy, 2014

Dissertation directed by: Professor Christina B. Hanhardt
Department of American Studies

Professor Psyche Williams-Forsen
Department of American Studies

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary study of black gay men's literary and cultural production and activism emerging at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the United States, focusing in particular on cultural formations in Washington, DC, and New York City. Through an exploration of the work of black gay male writers and activists from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, this study argues that recognizing the centrality of trauma and violence in black communities means accounting for its debilitating effects, alongside its productivity in areas such as cultural and aesthetic production, identity-formation, community building, and political mobilization. Though black gay men's identities were heavily under siege during this historical moment, the project shows how they used literary and cultural forms such as poetry, performance, novels, magazines, anthologies, and journals to imagine richer subjective and social lives.

This project makes three key interventions in the existing scholarship in African American studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Queer Studies, and Trauma Studies 1)

the project recovers a marginalized period in U.S. histories of race and sexuality, in particular the renaissance of black gay literary and cultural production and activism from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s 2) the project examines how black gay men have used literary and cultural production to assert more complex narratives of racial, gender, and sexual selfhood 3) the project explores how historical trauma has functioned as both a violently coercive, as well as a culturally and politically productive force in black gay lives.

The project focuses on cultural movement activities in two cities, Washington, DC, and New York City, to offer a more broad, comparative perspective on urban black gay subcultural life. The first section on Washington, DC, explores the work of DC-based writer and activist Essex Hemphill, and the black LGBT-themed magazine, *Blacklight*. The second section on New York City looks at black gay writer's group, Other Countries Collective, and writer and scholar Melvin Dixon's novel, *Vanishing Rooms*. The study includes individual black gay voices, positioning these voices alongside larger structural transformations taking place in cities during this moment. It also foregrounds the efforts of self and social transformation that emerged through black gay collectivities.

Evidence of Being: Urban Black Gay Men's Literature and Culture, 1978-1995

By

Darius Bost

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2014

Advisory Committee:

Associate Professor Christina B. Hanhardt, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Psyche Williams-Forson, Co-Chair
Associate Professor Elsa Barkley Brown
Assistant Professor Keguro Macharia
Associate Professor Michelle V. Rowley
Professor Nancy L. Struna

© Copyright by

Darius Bost

2014

To

My late grandparents, John I. and Flowree Joseph

Acknowledgements

I want to begin by thanking my committee members: Dr. Christina B. Hanhardt, Dr. Psyche Williams-Forson, Dr. Michelle V. Rowley, Dr. Keguro Macharia, Dr. Nancy L. Struna, and Dr. Elsa Barkley Brown. Thank you Dr. Hanhardt for your mentorship, for believing in this project, and for affirming me as a scholar. Your teaching and advising changed the trajectory of my research, and you continue to inspire me to develop my work to its fullest potential. I enjoyed getting to know you as a person at our U Street coffee shop meetings, and I look forward to many more. Dr. Williams-Forson, thank you for being an advocate, for the many phone conversations, and for helping me to remember why I write. You have modeled what it means to be an engaged scholar. Dr. Macharia, you have been a careful and generous reader, a great mentor, and you believed in the project from the beginning. Your close engagement with my work has been transformative to the project. Thank you! Dr. Rowley, you are one of the best teachers I've ever had! Your teaching was foundational to this project. You somehow had answers to my questions, though they were not fully formed, and you created a classroom environment where I felt safe to ask them. Dr. Struna, thank you for being a supporter from my entrance into the program up until now, as I am about to graduate. As my program advisor and my first instructor in sexuality studies, you were the first person to tell me to situate my work within the scholarly discourse about "the black family." Thank you for your hard work on behalf of the department and for all of your support. Dr. Barkley Brown, I was very honored that you graciously accepted my invitation to join the committee as I neared the end of the project. Thank you for being a careful reader, and for your helpful feedback. I greatly admire your work.

I am also thankful for various other supporters of my work. Thank you to the faculty of the department of Women's studies, where I received a graduate certificate. Thanks to the New York Public Library for their support of this project through the Martin Duberman Visiting Scholars program. I am also grateful to the Provost's office at the University of Pennsylvania for their support of this project through the Penn Predoctoral Fellowship, and to the departments of Africana studies and English for hosting me while I completed this project. Thank you especially to my faculty mentors Drs. Heather Love and Herman Beavers. I am also grateful to my wonderful colleagues in Africana studies: Garry Bertholf, Alden Young, Grace Saunders Johnson, Clemmie Harris, and Nichole Carelock. Thank you for making the department of Africana studies feel like home. I look forward to all of your future accomplishments.

I would be remiss without thanking the members of the S.P.A.C.E. writer's collective, who are dear friends and fellow fugitives on this journey through the academy. Thank you to: Angelique Nixon, Marlon Moore, LaMonda Horton-Stallings, Marlo David, Treva Lindsey, Rachel Robinson, Sophia Buggs, Nicky Banton, and Kevin Dada. All I can say to this wonderful network of scholar-friends is thank you for providing a space of retreat and belonging.

A special thank you also goes to my dear colleagues and friends at the University of Maryland, especially: Michelé Prince, Jennie Chaplin, Jarah Moesch, Terrance Wooten, Paul Saiedi, Melissa Rogers, Cristina Perez, Jessica Walker, Lara Torsky, Jessica Vooris, Doug Ishii, Betsy Yuen, Stephanie Stevenson, Tiffany King, Gabriel Peoples, Maria Vargas, T'sey-Haye Preaster, Renina Jarmon, and many more. Thank you for the conversations in the graduate student lounge, over drinks, over dinners, during parties and gatherings, and during the many free car rides I received. In sum, thank you for being a friend!

I have to thank my amazing group of friends, who keep me sane: Eddie Perry, Clifton Williams, Jermaine Bozier, Marvin Mabini, and Chantis Parks. The phone calls and group texts, listserv discourse, the crazy nights out and the house parties, the group vacations and family gatherings have all meant the world to me. Eddie Perry and Anthony Long have provided me with a home away from home in the DMV. Big shout-out to my good girlfriends, near and far: Jerri Fuller, Arnita Wofford, and Valerie Smith. Jerri Fuller, my Saturday night dance partner and Sunday morning prayer partner, I will miss you so much! I would not have made it through this if it were not for each and every one of you! I love y'all!

And last, but certainly not least, I want to thank my mom, Martha Johnson, and my brother, Justin Moody, for loving me. Thanks to my aunts and uncles and cousins, who have been patient, not fully knowing what I was doing, or why it was taking so long, but have remained proud, nonetheless! I am finally out of school, ya'll. Thanks for the love and support over these many, many years.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 1: Introduction: On Black Gay Being..... | 1 |
| Chapter 2: Mediating In/visibility: <i>Blacklight</i> and Black Gay Culture and Politics in Washington, DC..... | 28 |
| Chapter 3: Loneliness: Black Queer Longing in the Work of Essex Hemphill..... | 77 |
| Chapter 4: Post-Mortem Politics: Other Countries Collective and Black Queer Mourning..... | 117 |
| Chapter 5: Geographies of the Self: Reading Racial Injury Through the Queer Urban Landscape in Melvin Dixon's <i>Vanishing Rooms</i> | 155 |
| Chapter 6: Conclusion: New Hope? "Post-AIDS" Black Gay Subjectivity in an Ongoing Epidemic of Violence..... | 194 |

Chapter 1: On Black Gay Being

In the introduction to his 1991 edited volume, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, black gay poet, essayist, and activist Essex Hemphill describes his search for a black gay literary heritage. Situating his work within a black gay literary tradition was important to him, but he saw as the ultimate goals of his quest “affirmation, reflection, and identity” and “the *necessary* historical reference for [his] desires,”[his emphasis].¹ Hemphill sought after an archive of black gay men’s writing because it was critical to his identity formation. He notes that the search at times proved futile, due to “long-standing constructions of fear, denial, invisibility, and racism,” but he continued to look “for evidence of things not seen, black gay experiences on record, evidence of ‘being’ to contradict the pervasive invisibility of black gay men.”² Through the use of quotation marks, Hemphill sets ‘being’ apart as a key term, suggesting that the term means more than mere biological existence, gesturing more toward the embodied subjectivities of black gay men.

Hemphill’s ‘being’ more closely aligns with Frantz Fanon’s conception of being, or “the lived experience of being black,” advanced in the seminal study, *Black Skin, White Masks*.³ In this study, Fanon explores the connections between black interiority and

¹ *Brother to Brother*, p. xxi

² *Ibid*, p. xxi

³ In “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” Sylvia Wynter argues that Fanon’s chapter, traditionally translated as “the fact of blackness,” in which he introduces the concept of sociogeny, deals more with “the subjective character” of the experience of the black, “of what it is like to be black within the terms of the mode of being human specific to our contemporary culture,” p. 3

the social world, between the group and the individual. Fanon theorizes how histories of colonialism have shaped blackness so that it operates solely as the racial other of whiteness, and how whiteness secures its universality by excluding blacks from the possibility of subjecthood.⁴ In so doing, Fanon emphasizes how subject formation occurs in history, and is shaped by social and cultural conditions. Similarly, Hemphill demonstrates how histories of racism, and an attendant culture of fear and denial, have fostered “the pervasive invisibility of black gay men.” Hemphill’s search for “evidence” to counter these forces of abjection demonstrates how these identity-negating forces have shaped his own subject formation.

Extending Fanon’s theories to the consider black male homosexuality, Robert Reid-Pharr argues that “the Black,” who had been conceptualized in modern slave culture as an inchoate, irrational non-subject has, in the late twentieth century, produced its own normativity and bid for inclusion in the liberal nation-state by violently othering the black male homosexual: “To strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis, is to return the community to normality, to create boundaries around Blackness, rights

⁴ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon theorizes blackness as pathology, as the racial Other central to the production of Western notions of progress, civility, psychic and social normativity. The “black man” is different from Western notions of man because “he must be black in relation to the white man” (90). Fanon’s theorization of sociogeny introduces a post-colonial conception of black being, theorizing how the white gaze induced the arrival “of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro” (95). For Fanon, whiteness constructs itself as unmarked and universal, and depends on blackness as the racial other necessary for its coherence. But whiteness does so through excluding blackness from the realm of cultural signification necessary for subject formation. Thus, the black man exists only as a representative type constructed by the white man, always representing the collective rather than the individual. “Wove[n]. . . out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories,” the black man is spatially and temporally fixed, and thereby sealed into a “crushing objecthood.”

that indeed white men are obliged to recognize.”⁵ Reid-Pharr shows how gay identity poses a further dilemma to the lived experience of blackness, in that post-Civil Rights claims to rights and inclusion in the U.S. nation-state have depended upon marking non-heterosexual formations as the black nation’s constitutive outside. Furthermore, post-Stonewall, white LGBT communities increasingly strategized their claims for rights and inclusion through asserting their race and class privilege, thereby distancing the LGBT movement from the lived experience of blackness.⁶ Given black gay men’s invisibility within Civil Rights and LGBT movement politics, and attendant forms of cultural representation, Hemphill and his contemporaries created their own cultural movement to assert their ‘being,’ that is, the lived experience of being black gay men.⁷

As Hemphill moves through the literary and historical periods of 20th century African American expressive culture, he distinguishes the period of the late 1970s up until the time of *Brother to Brother’s* publication in 1991 as a critical moment for black gay literary and cultural production. He identifies the beginning of publishing “overt homoerotic verse” with the 1977 publication of black gay writer Adrian Stanford’s book

⁵ “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh.” *Black Gay Man: Essays*, p. 104.

⁶ Urvashi Vaid, *Virtual Equality*; Marlon Ross, “What’s Love But a Second Hand Emotion?: Man-on-Man Passion in the Contemporary Black Gay Romance Novel” *Callaloo* 36.3 (2013): 669-687

⁷ My focus on black gay men stems from theorizations by scholars such as Hazel Carby (1998), Phillip Brian Harper (1998), Marlon Ross (2004) and Robert Reid-Pharr (2001), who have demonstrated how black culture is gendered as masculine, and thus any compromise to black masculinity is rendered as a threat to black identity as a whole. The black gay male cultural movement that I explore was heavily indebted to the rise of black lesbian feminist since the early 1970s, and developed through coalitions with black women. In the introduction to *In the Life*, Joseph Beam mentions as influence a range of women of color (lesbian) feminist texts. He writes, “Their courage told me that I, too, could be courageous. I, too, could not only live with what I feel, but could draw succor from it, nurture it, and make it visible” (13).

of poetry, *Black and Queer*. Hemphill also mentions that Stanford was murdered in Philadelphia in 1981. Stanford's murder brings to the fore the central tension of this dissertation: the proliferation of black gay men's artistic production from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s as a mode of (collective) self-making coincides with widespread violence directed toward urban black communities in general, and urban black gay communities in particular. Indeed, black gay men's cultural production and activism proliferated at a time when state-based and intra-racial violence posed a tremendous threat to their lives. This dissertation asks, How did these experiences of trauma and violence shape black gay men's individual and collective self-making practices? And how did this outpour of literary and cultural production and activism represent and address their individual and collective experiences of trauma and violence? Though their identities were under siege (a positionality endemic to the lived experience of blackness in an anti-black world), the black gay writers and activists that I focus on in this study used literary and cultural forms such as poetry, performance, novels, magazines, anthologies and journals to imagine more sustainable subjective and social lives.

My dissertation, "Evidence of Being: Urban Black Gay Men's Literature and Culture, 1978-1995," argues that recognizing the centrality of trauma and violence in black communities means accounting for its debilitating effects, alongside its productivity in areas such as cultural and aesthetic production, identity-formation, community building, and political mobilization. "Evidence of Being" makes three key interventions in the existing scholarship in African American Studies, Gender and Sexuality Studies, Queer Studies, and Trauma Studies 1) this project recovers a marginalized period in U.S. histories of race and sexuality, in particular the renaissance

of black gay literary and cultural production and activism from the late 1970s to the mid-1990s 2) the project examines how black gay men have used literary and cultural production as a way to assert more complex narratives of racial, gender, and sexual selfhood 3) it explores how historical trauma has functioned as both a violently coercive, as well as a culturally and politically productive force in black gay lives.

In this introduction, I first contextualize the outpour of black gay male literary and cultural production as a movement, specifying how psychic and social violence against black gay men became a core, collectivizing concern of these black gay artists, activists, and intellectuals. I also claim urban black gay cultural activism as foundational to contemporary black, queer, and queer of color politics. Building on the work of black queer scholars, I then theorize what I see as a queer relationship between trauma and black gay culture and politics, arguing that trauma also engendered cultural and political possibilities for black gay men in the Age of AIDS. Finally, I trace how black gay men used literary and cultural forms to create selves, given their exclusion from the universal subjectivity imagined in queer and trauma theory, and the pathological constructions of black gay identity envisioned in liberal social psychology and black liberationist psychiatry. I conclude this chapter by mapping out my critical methodology, and by offering an overview of the four individual case study chapters and conclusion that make up this dissertation.

A Black Gay Renaissance

This project is a cultural history of black gay movement activities taking place in Washington, DC, and New York City from the late 1970s through the 1990s. Black gay artists utilized various cultural forms to narrate the experiences of black gay men and the

political issues they faced: novels by Melvin Dixon, Randall Kenan, Larry Duplechan, Steven Corbin, E. Lynn Harris, and James Earl Hardy; literary anthologies by Joseph Beam, Essex Hemphill, and Assotto Saint; literary journals by Blackheart Collective and Other Countries Collective; performance groups such as Other Countries, CINQUE and Pomo Afro Homos; films by Marlon Riggs and Isaac Julian; and the photography of Lyle Ashton Harris, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, and Glenn Ligon, to name a few major contributors. Black gay periodicals also thrived, exemplified in the widespread distribution and consumption of newspapers like Calvin Lowery's *Moja*, magazines like the DC-based *Blacklight* and *Black/Out*, and the LA-based *BLK*. Black gay men's support and discussion groups, such as Gay Men of African Descent in New York City, Adodi and Unity, Inc. in Philadelphia, Brother to Brother in Los Angeles and Chicago, Gay Men United in Oakland, and Us Helping Us in Washington, DC, also formed during this critical moment. Their most prominent political contributions were their attempts to transform the very categories of "gay" and "black" through their cultural work.

Scholars often cite and anthologize the work of prominent figures of this movement, like Melvin Dixon, Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill, but there has been very little sustained critical attention to their individual works, nor efforts to contextualize the emergence of the cultural movement in which they took part. Discussing this "boom" in black gay male cultural production, José Muñoz argues that the unifying aspect of this movement is the (re)telling of elided histories, over and above the formation of a collective identity:

If one were to describe the unifying concepts, potencies, and tensions that bind these artists as something we might call a movement, beyond and beside the simple fact of "identities," it would be the (re)telling of elided histories

that need to be both excavated and (re)imagined, over and above the task of bearing the burden of representing an identity that is challenged and contested by various forces, including, but not limited to, states that blindly neglect the suffering bodies of men caught within a plague, the explosion of “hate crime” violence that targets black and gay bodies, and a reactionary media power structure that would just as soon dismiss queer existence as offer it the most fleeting reaction.⁸

Muñoz describes the linkages between these geographically disparate movement activities as stemming from their “shared relationship to power.”⁹ More specifically it was their shared relationship to forms of epistemological, psychic, and social violence that linked this movement. In the only full-length study of the literature and cultural production of this period, Simon Dickel also notes “the precarious position of black gay men during the 1980s and their need to be validated and recognized in a larger scheme.”¹⁰ He argues that black gay cultural artists during this moment signified on the works of black queer literary figures of earlier periods, like James Baldwin and the black queer literati of the Harlem Renaissance, in order to validate their identities amidst the identity-negating forces of racism and homophobia, discursive constructions of gayness as whiteness, and the threat of HIV/AIDS.¹¹

⁸ José Muñoz, *Disidentification*, p. 57

⁹ In “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” Cathy Cohen argues for a queer politics that accounts for the differences amongst those living in the margins, even as it acknowledges their shared relationship to power.

¹⁰ Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay*, p. 9

¹¹ My use of the term “signified” draws on the work of Charles Nero, vis-à-vis, Henry Louis Gates’ theory of signifying in black literature and culture. In Charles Nero’s groundbreaking essay, “Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature,” anthologized in *Brother to Brother*, he asks, “How have black gay men created a positive identity for themselves and how have they constructed literary texts which would render their lives visible, and therefore valid?” (229). Nero builds upon Henry Louis Gates’s theory of signifying, which assumes a shared knowledge between communicators, allowing for information to be given indirectly.¹¹ Furthermore,

What makes this archive all the more significant is that the forces mentioned above also ushered a majority of the artist and activists of this period to premature deaths. HIV/AIDS in particular not only became a traumatic force that wiped out a majority of these black gay male cultural producers, it also became a force that continues to vanish their legacies from cultural memory.¹² Because many of these artists died early in their careers, and due to the stigma and shame attached to their identities and their deaths from AIDS complications, their work remains marginal within African American scholarly and popular discourse. By recovering the work of these black gay writers and activists, I hope to establish the movement as a crucial moment in African American and queer literary and cultural history, as it was central to the development of black gay aesthetics, politics, and cultural criticism.¹³ I consider this movement to be a distinctly black *gay* (and lesbian) cultural and political movement, but my treatment of this movement functions to explore its queer politics.¹⁴ By queer politics, I mean the scholarly and activist

signifying is rooted in the black oral tradition. Nero believes that signifying permits black gay men to revise the black experience and create a space for themselves. Nero writes: “Partly as a reaction to racism in gay culture, but mostly in response to the heterosexism of black intellectuals and writers, African American gay men signify on many aspects of the ‘Black Experience’ in their literature” (235).

¹² In *If Memory Serves*, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed have pointed out how the cultural forces associated with the AIDS crisis during this period occasioned an “unremembering” amongst contemporary queer subjects and in queer theory.

¹³ In *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*, African American literary scholars Caroline Gebhard and Barbara McCaskill reframe the period commonly referred to as ‘the nadir’ as ‘post-bellum, pre-Harlem,’ foregrounding the rich history of aesthetic experimentation and political activism obscured by a focus on black victimization during the “nadir,” deemed one of the worst historical periods of American race relations. My work builds on this re-periodization to think about this moment of trauma and loss also an important cultural moment of black gay aesthetic experimentation and political activism.

¹⁴ I use the term “gay” to preserve the integrity of their identity claims. These writers used the nomenclature “black gay” in several of their texts, including: *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, *Other*

paradigm that exists in critical relation to identity politics, liberalism, and normativity. I will demonstrate why their use of the nomenclature “black gay” should not exclude them from the activist foundations of queer politics. Close readings of their cultural work reveal a complex critique of identity, normativity, and liberalism that exists in tension with their racial, sexual and class identifications. Furthermore, what is queer about this black gay male cultural movement is that it emerged in and through the (extra)ordinary forms of violence black gay men faced during this period. Throughout each case study chapter, I demonstrate how traumatic affects such as loneliness, pain, grief, fear and shame archive a history of loss even as they evidence black gay men’s political longing for (collective) self and structural transformation against the forces of normativity, forces that threatened their livelihood and their cultural legacy.¹⁵ Through archival research, oral history narratives, and literary close readings of black gay men’s literary and cultural production, I document the unexpected political feelings, collective action, and expressive cultures that emerged even in a heightened moment of black gay trauma, injury, and death.

Countries: Black Gay Voice, Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS. Writing during the rise of queer theory and activism, black gay men became subject to critique for their subscription to identity politics, see for example, Arthur Flannigan-Saint Aubin, “Reading Black Gay Male Discourse”; Darieck Scott, “Jungle Fever”; Dwight McBride, “Can the Queen Speak.” I also use the terms “queer” and “same-sex desiring” throughout this dissertation to refer to those who do not self-identify as gay. I also use the term “queer” to describe affects, political feelings, socialities and geographic sites that produce alternative ways of being in the world, modes of being and ways of knowing that disrupt normative theoretical or identity categories.

¹⁵ In “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” Roderick Ferguson argues that the forces of normativity have foreclosed prior critical discourses that “tried to thwart normalization” by “making minoritized practices. . . artistic and activist practices into historic quests for legitimacy and evaluating legitimacy through how well we surrender claims to sex and sexual heterogeneity.” Ferguson references black queer artistic practices as one such “minoritized practice” subject to the forces of normalization, p. 193.

My dissertation also mines this history of loss to unearth the legacy of this black gay cultural renaissance for contemporary black, queer, and queer of color politics. Even though these black gay men moved toward collectivity and mobilized against intersecting forms of state power through political activism and cultural expression, this did not prevent the onslaught of deathly violence. But their political failures were not defeat. They used their last life force to publish work that might sustain the “post-AIDS” black (queer) subjects that they envisioned as the beneficiaries of their cultural work and activism. Melvin Dixon writes in his iconic speech, “Somewhere Listening For My Name” given at 1992 OUTWRITE conference just six months before his death from AIDS-related complications, “I may not be around to celebrate with you the publication of gay literary history. But I’ll be somewhere listening for my name. . . You, then, are charged by the possibility of your good health, by the broadness of your vision, to remember us.”¹⁶ Dixon’s speech haunts me because it reveals that the current lack of sustained critical attention to these men’s work, and the fact that the majority of their work remains out of print, constitutes a second injury: black gay men’s cultural contributions continue to disappear from memory and history without notice.

However, Dixon’s speech is not just a forceful plea for their work to be remembered, the line ‘the possibility of your good health’ propels his vision beyond the AIDS crisis, and reaches into the future towards “post-AIDS” subjects. Thus, this project considers how Dixon’s politics—a queer form of politics that do not cease in the face of and even after death—might be useful for our thinking about anti-blackness and anti-queerness in the contemporary moment. Dixon’s speech suggests that black queer politics

¹⁶ Melvin Dixon. “Somewhere Listening for My Name.” *Other Countries*, ed. *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, 1993.

might also reside at the parting of voice and flesh, where black queer desire exceeds the body's undoing, and still demands something in the present. The black gay body is a site of loss in the 'Age of AIDS,' but the archive of black gay cultural production that I consider operates of a specter of polyvocal black queer desire, a listening for its name, a body of traumatic knowledge that extends beyond the AIDS crisis into our present reckoning with the converging forces of anti-queerness and anti-blackness. Black gay men's cultural narratives may not guide us forward or even speak to us at all, but this dissertation asks, without fear of failure, how might these black gay men's narratives speak to black people's ongoing struggles against trauma and violence, especially in light of the virtual explosion of HIV infections in black communities across the globe?

Reading Black Gay Subjectivity

In her examination of how African American studies, gay and lesbian studies and feminism have chosen their "proper objects" at the exclusion of black queer subjects, Sharon P. Holland states, "black queer subjectivity is the body that no one wants to be beholden. . . . queer black bodies have to search in outrageous places to find voice—they have to come back from the dead to get the recognition they deserve."¹⁷ This dissertation takes this claim seriously, and unleashes the power of black gay subjects to speak from the dead. More specifically, I turn to an archive of black gay male intimacy with deathly violence to examine how the "space of death" became a productive site for black gay (collective) self-fashioning.¹⁸ The narratives I consider provide a more complex mode of

¹⁷ Sharon Holland, *Raising the Dead*, p. 120;

¹⁸ In "Culture of Terror-Space of Death," Michael Taussig argues that the space of death is crucial to the creation of meaning and consciousness. He defines the space of death as "a threshold, yet it is a wide space whose breadth offers positions of advance as well as of extinction" (1).

thinking about the relationship between black gay subjectivity and epistemological, psychic, and social damage.

The distortion of the black gay male image in white gay culture, symbolized especially in the controversy over the photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe, has been well documented by critics.¹⁹ Responding to the negation of the black gay male image by white men, Isaac Jackson, founding member of the New York City-based writer's group, Blackheart Collective, writes that black gay men must create their own movement to counter identity-negating forces:

The white gay male movement is not equipped to help me integrate my gayness and my blackness. It has no intention of listening to what we have to say, let alone the voices of our black sisters. . . We have to change all of this. In so doing, we must form an autonomous black gay movement. . . [W]e have to reach out to the brothers who are isolated from each other, caught in a damaging web of self-images that are the negative creations of white men.²⁰

But this “damaging web of self-images” did not only come from white men. In *Brother to Brother*, Ron Simmons, Charles I. Nero, and Marlon Riggs also chart out the pervasive distortion of the image of black gender and sexual variant subjects in black political,

¹⁹ By “the black gay male image,” I do not mean to suggest a monolithic understanding of black gay identity, but rather how distorted representations of black gay men produced racial and sexual fantasies or “controlling images” that obscured their complex subjectivities. See for example, Kobena Mercer, “Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe,” *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*; Kobena Mercer, Houston Baker Jr, and Manthia Diawara, “Just looking for trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and fantasies of race,” *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*; Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer, “Race, Sex, Politics and Black Masculinity,” *Unwrapping Masculinity*; Essex Hemphill, “Does Your Mama Know About Me?” *Ceremonies*, p. 37-42.

²⁰ Isaac Jackson, “Some Thought of Black Gay Liberation,” *Blackheart 1: Yemonja*. Charles Michael Smith. BookmavenBookMaven Blog. January 9, 2013. Accessed February 21, 2014.

popular, and literary cultures.²¹ While these scholars find it important to contest the narrow conceptualization of black gender and sexual diversity within these fields, their work foregrounds the primary task of black gay movement building as self-definition rooted in positive constructions of black gay identity. Simmons calls for the development of “a new epistemology, a new way of knowing” that focuses on “develop[ing] an affirming and liberating philosophical understanding of homosexuality that will self-actualize black gay genius.”²² Black gay movement intellectuals like Jackson and Simmons called for a cultural movement that promoted forms of self-knowledge that would reclaim the black male homosexual from prevailing and pervasive discourses of damage.

“Evidence of Being” focuses on how black gay men’s literary and cultural narratives were essential to fulfilling this aspect of the movement’s aims. I read black gay male literature and culture as a “contested field[s] of self-production.”²³ In *Disidentifications*, José Muñoz argues for literature and cultural production as a “technology of the self,” and asserts that this fictional self is a “disidentificatory self whose relation to the social is not overdetermined by universalizing rhetorics of selfhood.”²⁴ These “universalizing rhetorics of selfhood” abound in fields of knowledge that might otherwise provide a way forward in explorations of the complex relationship between black gay subjectivity and damage, a relationship Hemphill gestures toward

²¹ Ron Simmons, “Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals”; Charles I. Nero, “Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature”; Marlon Riggs, “Black Macho Revisited: Confessions of a Snap Queen.”

²² Ron Simmons, “Some Thought on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals, *Brother to Brother*, P.224

²³ José Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, p. 20

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 20

through his emphasis on ‘being.’ While the psychoanalytically informed fields of queer theory and trauma studies have depended upon ahistorical notions of the psyche and universalized notions of human subjectivity, antiracist discourses—from liberal social psychology to black liberation psychiatry—have diagnosed black gender and sexual variance as a psychopathological symptom of racism.

Black queer studies scholars such as E. Patrick Johnson and Marlon Ross have challenged the foundational assumptions of queer theory, unearthing how theorizations of queer subjectivity as a fluid and anti-essential formation have depended upon either the disavowal or the fixity of racialized bodies.²⁵ Trauma studies scholars Maurice Stevens and John Rich have examined how processes of racialization have constituted black bodies as “phobic objects,” thereby marking them as the constitutive outside of traumatized subjectivity.²⁶ Historians Daryl Scott and Kevin Mumford have outlined how postwar liberal social scientists mapped the damages of U.S. racism onto the psyches of black people; Mumford looks in particular at how social psychologists and policy makers

²⁵ E. Patrick Johnson inquires about the utility of Judith Butler’s notion of performativity to racialized and classed subjects, “. . .but what is the utility of queer theory on the front lines, in the trenches, on the street, or any place where the racialized and sexualized body is beaten, starved, fired, cursed—indeed, when the body is the site of trauma? (*Black Queer Studies*, p. 129); About Eve Sedgwick’s foundational theory of the “epistemology of the closet,” Marlon Ross argues that “the fascination with the closet as the primary epistemological device defining sexual modernity—results in a sort of racial claustrophobia, the tendency to bind both intragender desire and modernity within a small but deep closet containing elite European men maneuvering to find a way out.” (*Black Queer Studies*, p. 171)

²⁶ Maurice Stevens discusses how race has functioned to “otherize” bodies deemed the “ultimate source of phobia” outside of the realm of the traumatizable—“not possessing the psychic interiority necessary for identification and institutional legibility” (“From the Past Imperfect”). In *Wrong Place, Wrong Time*, John Rich elaborates upon the racial and gender politics that circumscribe the trauma narratives of urban black male subjects, and how their labeling as “thugs” and “beasts” on their medical care—sometimes not being treated for pain or how their occasional violent resistance to medical care is understood as symptomatic of their inherent deviance.

that informed Patrick Moynihan's infamous "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" deemed male effeminacy and homosexuality as psychopathological symptoms of racism.²⁷ Black liberation psychologists and psychiatrists such as Nathan Hare, Frances Cress Welsing, and Alvin Pouissant rejected racial liberal damage discourse and embraced more positive constructions of black self-image, yet they did so at the expense of black male gender and sexually variant subjects, labeling gender non-conformity and homosexuality as pathological symptoms of the psychic damage accrued from racism.²⁸ This theoretical double bind has constituted black gay subjectivity as an impossible *object* of inquiry.

My project seeks to move beyond this intellectual impasse by demonstrating how black gay men used literary and cultural forms for (collective) self-creation, outside of narrow, deterministic readings of racial, gender, and sexual identity formation. In this dissertation I will explore how this archive of black gay literature and cultural production poses a challenge to liberal, anti-homophobic, and anti-racist knowledge forms that have historically pathologized black gay subjectivity. Ernesto Martinez argues that the stories and narratives of queer people of color, though not free from ideology and contradiction, operate as a complex archive that challenges modes of knowledge production that have emerged from subjugation and distortion.²⁹ Throughout this dissertation, I explore how black gay intellectuals, artists and activists have used narrative forms to contest these pathologizing discourses of black queerness, even as they drew upon these discourses in

²⁷ See Daryl Scott, *Contempt and Pity*; Kevin Mumford, "Untangling Pathology: The Moynihan Report and Homosexual Damage, 1965-1975"

²⁸ See Nathan Hare, *The Endangered Black Family*; Frances Cress Welsing, *The Isis Papers*; Alvin Pouissant, "Sex and the Black Male," *Ebony Magazine*, August, 1972, p. 117-118.

²⁹ Ernesto Martinez, *On Making Sense*, p. 5

their negotiations of the psychic and social damages accrued from living and dying as racial and sexual minorities in the 1980s and 90s.

Queering Racial Trauma and Injury

Black feminist scholars such as Erica L. Johnson, Deborah Walker King, Lisa Woolfork, and Jennifer Griffiths have explored the politics of pain and trauma in black culture.³⁰ These scholars argue that traumatized and pained black bodies act as texts upon which the experiences and memories of the African American past can be inscribed. Furthermore, they challenge the foundational assumptions of trauma theory—which argue that the extreme nature of traumatic events is such that they resist full articulation through language—by demonstrating how African American cultural narratives provide a means to represent the “unrepresentable” experiences of trauma.³¹ While these scholars subvert the dominant paradigms of trauma theory, they have been less attentive to how certain shameful and perverse aspects of the African American traumatic past remain “unspeakable” and “unrepresentable.” In her influential study of shame, race, and trauma in the novels of Toni Morrison, J. Brooks Bouson illuminates how scholars have “downplay[ed] the violent, even perverse, subject matter of Morrison’s novels.”³² Bouson comments on how academic critics have sometimes admitted that studying racism is

³⁰ Erica L. Johnson, “Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories” *Anthurium*; Deborah Walker, *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*; Lisa Woolfork, *Embodying American Slavery in Contemporary Culture*; Jennifer Griffiths, *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women’s Writing and Performance*

³¹ Foundational trauma studies scholars, such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dominick La Capra, and Geoffrey Hartman emphasize the “unspeakability” and “unrepresentability” of trauma, since extremely violent events fail to register as memories in the brain, and require an empathic listener to confirm that the event occurred.

³² J Brooks Bouson, *Quiet As It’s Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, p. 3

often “unsettling, if not discomfoting, ” precisely because that history is often violent and perverse. This lack of attention to the violent and perverse aspects of the past, I argue, also is linked to a larger discourse of black respectability politics in African American studies.

In his study of how compulsory heterosexuality has governed the project of African American history, Matt Richardson illuminates how the scholarly tradition of representing black people as decent and moral historical agents has meant erasing diverse genders and sexualities in black history. More specifically, Richardson takes on Darlene Clark Hine’s groundbreaking article, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women in the Middle West.”³³ In the article, Hine argues that black women’s historical struggles for bodily integrity created a “culture of dissemblance,” in which their behaviors and attitudes gave the appearance of openness and disclosure, while actually shielding the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors. Richardson maintains that the “culture of dissemblance” often operates a veil of heterosexual respectability. The culture of dissemblance permits black women to omit the shameful and perverse details of their sexual lives and allows black historians to omit these details as a strategy for history. But the erasure of diverse genders and sexualities in black history is precisely the site that marks their presence, Richardson contends: “Far from being totally invisible, the ‘queer’ is present in Black history as a threat to Black respectability.”³⁴

While the scholar’s “queer” critique of the “culture of dissemblance” rightly unveils its disavowal of diverse genders and sexualities in the African American

³³ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Preliminary Notes on the Culture of Dissemblance.” *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 912-920.

³⁴ Matt Richardson, “No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality,” *Journal of Women’s History* 15.3 (2003)

traumatic past, I would like to examine the queer relationship between trauma and historical agency, more broadly. Darlene Clark Hine also claims the experiences of rape and domestic violence as hidden factors that informed major social protest and migratory movements in Afro-American history: “The combined influence of rape (or the threat of rape), domestic violence, and economic oppression is key to understanding the hidden motivations informing major social protest and migratory movements in Afro-American history.”³⁵ In claiming a connection between rape and domestic violence and social protests, Hine implies that subjects can fully claim injury as a force of historical agency. Injury constitutes subjects, however, making it impossible to fully claim it as a source of historical agency. Judith Butler argues in her examination of the role of injury in queer politics, “One does not stand at an instrumental distance from the terms by which one experiences violation. Occupied by such terms and yet occupying them one’s self risks a complicity, a repetition, and relapse into injury.” Subjects who face these risks, also have, as Butler notes, “the occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury, of an interpellation one never chose.”³⁶ My project mines the productive tension between the power of injury in subject constitution and the occasion of subjects to work injury’s mobilizing power. It is in this productive tension that I locate queerness. I use the term “queerness,” to claim a relationship, albeit non-deterministic, between traumatic injuries—often thought to be subject shattering and politically unproductive—and black political subjectivities and collectivities formed in and through occasions to work injury’s

³⁵ Darlene Clark Hine, “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women,” *Signs* 14.4 (1989): p. 913.

³⁶ Judith Butler, “Critically Queer,” *Bodies That Matter*, p. 123

mobilizing power.³⁷ I want to emphasize how racial and sexual violence present the “occasion to work the mobilizing power of injury,” while also acknowledging trauma’s isolating and debilitating effects on individual subjects, and how, in collective mobilization centered on injury, “one’s self risks complicity, repetition and relapse into injury.”

Queer studies scholars such as Ann Cvetkovich, Kathryn Bond Stockton, Omese’eke Natasha Tinsley, Darieck Scott, Christina Sharpe, and Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman have further shaped my thinking about the relationship between trauma and racialized genders and sexualities.³⁸ These scholars have re-evaluated the forces of shame, trauma, violence, abjection, and injury, arguing that (erotic and political) power might be obtained in public, sexual, and literary cultures formed in and around traumatic affect and experience, while also attending to how histories of racial and sexual violence continue to make black subjects. My research builds on the work of these scholars to

³⁷ In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman argues that traumatic events “shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others” and “cast the victim into a state of existential crisis” (p. 51). In “Black Rage and Useless Pain,” Aida Hussein traces black liberationist discourse—including psychiatrists William Grier and Price M. Cobbs, and artists/activists Nikki Giovanni and Amiri Baraka—who saw pain as “useless” and as a counter-idea to political progress and psychic healing of the black community in the face of Dr. Martin Luther King’s assassination. Black liberationists championed “black rage,” because it “wards off the debilitating, defeatist alternative of black despair—a racialized variant of Freudian melancholia, in which the bereaved retreats from the social world and thus also from the space of political possibility” (307). My work demonstrates how black gay men broke with black liberationists not only due to their homophobic discourse, but because the movement’s masculinist affective politics were not always useful in black gay struggles against homophobic violence and HIV/AIDS. Black gay men politicized pain and grief and saw in it a “space of political possibility.”

³⁸ See Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; Kathryn Bond Stockton, *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame*; Omese’eke Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic”; Darieck Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*; Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*; Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, *Against the Closet*

demonstrate how the heightened state-based and intra-violence from the late 70s to the mid-90s traumatically impacted black gay communities, even as the historical traumas of HIV/AIDS, homophobic violence, and racism during this moment presented the occasion for black gay men to mobilize against these forces. I understand the proliferation of black gay literature and cultural production and movement activities during this same period as archiving both the traumatic cultural losses of this moment and the injuries accrued to black subjects from heightened forms of epistemological, social, and psychic violence, as well as archiving the evidentiary trace of the ‘mobilizing’ power of traumatic injury in black gay men’s cultural and political movement activities.

Methods

Drawing on methods from literary studies and history, “Evidence of Being” recovers an archive of black gay men’s literary and cultural production and activism in Washington, DC, and New York City. My study is roughly periodized around the AIDS crisis in the U.S.—from the announcement of a ‘gay cancer’ in 1981 to the 1996 mass distribution of protease inhibitors and combination therapy drugs that would see the first decline in AIDS-related deaths. My desire for black gay cultural history is admittedly reparative, in the sense that it seeks to redress the continuing elisions of black gay men’s cultural contributions in the historical record. Rather than privilege the appearance of AIDS as a temporal marker, I begin my study in 1978 by tracing the early formations of the “Third World Gay” movement in Washington, DC, and the subsequent formation of DC-based, black gay and lesbian-themed magazine, *Blacklight*, the first widely-distributed magazine of its kind in the United States. In so doing, this project pushes against overwhelming narratives of traumatic loss that, I believe, have perpetuated the

lack of sustained critical attention to this period. I end the study in the year of Essex Hemphill's death from AIDS-related complications in 1995, just before the FDA approved the release of protease inhibitors, the first effective treatment for AIDS. By ending my period of study in 1995 with Hemphill's death, I hope to suggest that this history is neither "consoling" nor "shattering" to contemporary claims to black gay identity.³⁹

Through literary analysis of poetry, novels, essays, and close textual analysis of magazines, newspapers, published interviews, and other archival materials, I historicize this black gay cultural movement as foundational to the black studies, queer studies, and black queer studies. Since black gay men have been marginalized within dominant LGBT political and cultural discourses, and within popular and political discourses emerging from black communities, I turn to black gay male poetics and politics as primary historical "evidence" through which to gain a better understanding of black gay men's social worlds in the 1980s and 90s.⁴⁰ I also draw on published interviews with artists and activists, oral history narratives recorded by and original interviews with

³⁹ In *Feeling Backward*, Heather Love suggests that queer scholars need not let go of histories of identity, but rather its affirmative basis: "Rather than attempt to 'overcome' identity, I want to suggest a mode of historiography that recognizes the inevitability of a 'play of recognition,' but that also see these recognitions not as consoling but as shattering." Love believes that the problem of queer historiography is not with attempts to recognize and situate one's self in history for our own present identity formations, but in the consistent search for valorization and affirmative aspects of the past, rather than the identity-shattering aspects. The significance of my archive is that the representations of black gay identity it contains do not give way to either "consoling" or "shattering" forms of recognition.

⁴⁰ In *On Making Sense*, Ernesto Martinez argues that "through a greater attention to the subjective levels of reality—particularly through the careful study of stories and narratives that arise from the experience of queers of color and other marginalized people—we gain better knowledge about our shared social world." p. 5

survivors of this movement to provide a more textured look at black gay social life in the period. Through these varied sources and tools, I have constructed an interdisciplinary methodology that puts queer theory and trauma theory in conversation with black gay literary and historical analysis.

I have chosen to focus on artistic and social movement activities in two cities, Washington, DC and New York City, to offer a more broad, comparative perspective on urban black gay subcultural life. Scholars have devoted very little attention to Washington, DC, as a key site in the emergence of LBGT culture and politics in general, and black LGBT culture and politics in particular. And while New York has been understood as one of the centers of LGBT social movement and cultural activities, scholars have been less attentive to the contributions of racial minorities. Harlem has been the site to which scholars have turned in their explorations of New York City's black gay life, but my study focuses on black gay cultural formations that identify the Greenwich Village neighborhood as their locus of activity. By focusing on Dixon's novel, set in 1970s Greenwich Village, and Other Countries Collective, which met weekly at the LGBT Center in The Village, I hope to reconsider the neighborhood, one of the most renowned cultural markers of "gay New York," as a multiply determined site of racial and sexual identity formation.

Also, I have honed in on these two cities because of the interaction between the individuals and collectives that I focus on in this study. DC-based Essex Hemphill led workshops and performed with Other Countries Collective. Other Countries performed at Nob Hill bar in Washington, DC. Melvin Dixon served as poetry editor of Other Countries Collective, and contributed to the Hemphill edited *Brother to Brother*. Sidney

Brinkley's DC-based *Blacklight* circulated in New York City, and would have been read by New York's black gay community. My research on these disparate activities as a movement largely stems from the mutual influence of these individual and groups, while also attending to the local specificities that shaped each individual or group's efforts.

I look at particular individuals as well as collective groups in my study. Through attention to individual artists like Essex Hemphill and Melvin Dixon, I demonstrate how black gay artists often positioned their work within the context of larger political issues facing the black community, and alongside larger structural transformations taking place in cities during this moment. Hemphill's poetry imagines loneliness as a collective feeling shared by black gay men, and larger black communities, both parties longing to reunite in a time of black/gay crisis. Hemphill often set his poetry and prose amidst the neoliberal cultural landscape of black Washington, DC, demonstrating his belief that black gay liberation could only be manifested through alleviating the structural conditions that were negatively affecting (urban) black life. Melvin Dixon's novel, *Vanishing Rooms* privileges the voices of black gay men, white working class, and black women, otherwise rendered marginal in cultural representations and memories of radical gay male sexual cultures in 1970s New York City. In so doing, he demonstrates how radical gay male sexual formations, understood as foundational to contemporary queer politics, cannot be understood outside the context of larger political struggles of marginal subjects in the race and class-stratified city. My project sets individual black gay voices against the backdrop of larger cultural and political transformations taking place in cities, while also attending to the heterogeneity and specificity of the various voices within the black gay cultural movements in cities across the black diaspora.

My focus on black gay collectives intervenes in the literature in African American studies and black queer studies, which has primarily focused on individual black queer voices. As a nationally circulated and globally conscious news source, *Blacklight* documented an emerging “Third World Gay” movement, while also representing the richness and complexity of black lesbian and gay local culture and politics in Washington, DC. I focus on “social” sites of self-transformation like DC’s male social clubs. I also demonstrate how the networks of care developed in a local black gay nightclub served as a foundation for grassroots political organizing against HIV/AIDS in black Washington, DC. My chapter on Other Countries Collective documents the rich history of anti-AIDS cultural activism in black gay communities in NYC at the height of the AIDS epidemic, obscured by popular and scholarly attention given to direct-action groups like ACT UP.

Chapter Breakdown

In the following chapters (four case chapters and a conclusion), I further explore the historical and theoretical concerns that I have laid out in this introduction. Chapter 2, Mediating In/visibility: *Blacklight* Magazine and Black Gay Culture and Politics in Washington, DC historicizes and closely reads the DC-based black gay and lesbian magazine, *Blacklight*, the first widely distributed magazine of its kind in the U.S. In this chapter I explore how the magazine develops out of, as well as documents, emerging local and national black gay political movements. Though “out” black gay and lesbian activists in Washington, DC saw visibility as their dominant political strategy, the majority of DC’s black same-sex desiring men engaged in more private, “social” forms of (collective) self-making. I demonstrate how *Blacklight* magazine served as a site of

racial and sexual knowledge production that “reached out” to Washington’s black gay communities, despite varying degrees of “outness” within these communities. More specifically, I illustrate how the magazine helped to build a collective consciousness around black gay men’s shared relationship to intersecting forms of state power.

Chapter 3, Loneliness: Black Queer Longing in the Works of Essex Hemphill theorizes loneliness as a traumatic structure of feeling and as an expression of black gay men’s collective political desires in the 1980s. I trace the varied constructions of loneliness in Essex Hemphill’s work, especially in his elegies to his contemporary, black gay writer and activist, Joseph Beam, who died in silence from AIDS complications, while fighting to end the silence around black gay men’s lives. Through my attention to loneliness as both individual traumatic affect and collective political feeling, I bring to the fore the tensions between individual forms of self-making and collective processes of identity formation unaccounted for in current theories of the relationship between emotions and politics. Furthermore, I show how Hemphill’s texts embody black gay men’s collective political desires for a richer subjectivity, and their yearning for black cultural and national belonging.

Chapter 4, Post-Mortem Politics: Other Countries Collective and Black Queer Mourning, focuses on the history and cultural politics of New York-city based, black gay writers group Other Countries Collective. I argue that grief and mourning became a part of black gay men’s everyday life-worlds, as well as a generative site for cultural development and (collective) self-preservation. I draw on archival materials, close readings of published texts, and interviews with surviving group members to theorize how the traumatic impact of HIV/AIDS produced a historically and culturally specific

form of melancholic mourning, that I call “black queer mourning,” which is animated by a desire for collectivity and self-determination. I show how black queer mourning acts as a form of “post-mortem politics” that envisions a more radical black queer futurity in the face of and even after death.

Chapter 5, Geographies of the Self: Reading Racial Injury through the Queer Urban Landscape in Melvin Dixon’s *Vanishing Rooms*, I situate NYC-based black gay writer and scholar Melvin Dixon’s novel, *Vanishing Rooms* (1991), in the context of its setting in 1975 New York City. This period is imagined in queer historical memory as utopic, given the radical sexual cultural formations in the West Village at the time. But it was also a time of so called “urban crisis” in New York City that depended on pathological discourses of race and queer sexuality. I suggest that by representing voices marginal to this predominantly white gay male cultural movement, Dixon’s novel offers a revisionist history of urban gay subject formation by contextualizing it within the racial and class stratification of the city. I also demonstrate how Dixon’s novel represents queer historical landmarks associated with this movement as sites of pleasure and injury, interweaving his narrative with those created by black queer writers James Baldwin and Robert Hayden to demonstrate how histories of racialized and sexual injury shape black gay subjectivity.

Chapter 6, New Hope? Post-AIDS Black Gay Subjectivity in an Ongoing Epidemic of Violence, concludes the dissertation by reflecting on my own subjective relationship to this work, and some of the personal experiences and theoretical frameworks that have guided my research. I use this personal reflection to briefly recap some of the major ideas and questions explored in the project. I then suggest some implications of this research

for post-AIDS black (gay) subjects, by putting this body of work in conversation with more contemporary examples of black gay cultural production.

In this chapter, I have argued that the fight against epistemological, psychic, and social violence became a central, collectivizing concern of black gay movement building. I also have contended that the cultural work of reclaiming black gay images from discourses of damage became a guiding force of the outpour of literary and cultural production in this moment, and that my archive of black gay literature and culture acts as a critical site through which to theorize black gay subjectivity. Using an interdisciplinary methodology that brings queer theory and trauma theory in conversation with black gay literary and historical analysis, the following case study chapters will explore how trauma became a productive force in black gay aesthetic and cultural production, identity-formation, community building, and political mobilization. To begin this exploration, I now turn to an analysis of the DC-based, black LGBT-themed magazine, *Blacklight*, illustrating how it became a critical site of knowledge production for DC's black same-sex desiring men, especially regarding issues of state violence, within a political and cultural climate that did not allow them to participate publically in black gay politics.

Chapter 2: Mediating In/Visibility: Blacklight Magazine and Black Gay Culture and Politics in Washington, DC

First published in 1979, *Blacklight* became the first widely publicized and distributed black gay and lesbian-themed magazine in the United States. In the June 1980 issue of the magazine, titled “The Great Arrival,” editor Sidney Brinkley interviews members of what he calls “D.C.’s Emerging Black Gay Middle Class.” The title, “Great Arrival” he writes “is Afro-Brazilian in origin.”⁴¹ He goes on to describe the meaning of the term, “In Brazil it is ‘Cheganca’ and it’s a time of jubilation. The people have come from the hills to the city to seek a new life. They are arriving full of hope and excitement. They wish life could always be as happy as ‘arriving.’”⁴² Brinkley links the post-Civil Rights formation of black middle class and black gay and lesbian visibility in the city to a longer history of black diasporic struggle. In his introduction to the issue, “On Arriving,” Brinkley writes about the demographic of his readership, “Many of you are well read and well educated. You are either college graduates (or soon will be) or very artistically talented. . . I applaud you because you have not just survived, you have managed to overcome tremendous barriers, barriers placed in your path simply because you are Black. In a sense, you invented yourself. Psychologists call it self-actualization.”⁴³ Brinkley centers *race and class* in the construction of urban gay subject formation. His emphasis on survival and overcoming tremendous barriers accounts for histories of race in the United States that had heretofore prohibited the social mobility of African Americans due to their violent exclusion from the public sphere. Though the

⁴¹ Sidney Brinkley, “The Great Arrival” *Blacklight* June, 1980, p. 5

⁴² Ibid, p. 5

⁴³ Sidney Brinkley, “The Great Arrival” *Blacklight*, June, 1980, p. 4

African American middle-class began forming in the 1960s due to the gains of the Civil Rights movement, the recessions of the 1970s had eliminated many of the economic gains African Americans achieved. Thus, Brinkley's title acknowledges the significance of racial capitalism as a barrier for African Americans in their quest for full citizenship in the U.S., and offers a celebratory narrative of black gay middle-class success, especially since gender and sexual non-normativity can operate as an additional barrier to capital accumulation.

Brinkley also describes black gay middle class formation in psychological terms. He deems black lesbian and gay men's struggles for social mobility as "self-actualization." He reframes black gay middle class "arrival" not simply as political visibility and inclusion within dominant LGBT politics, but as a politics of "hope and excitement," coupled with the uncertainty of "wish[ing] life could always be happy." For Brinkley, 'arrival' does not only suggest political stagnation and middle class complacency, but also connotes a temporary celebration given the fact that racial violence, both social and psychological, has historically haunted black economic and political mobility. Moreover, this celebration can only be temporary because the majority of black people are still impoverished. Brinkley writes to his black gay middle-class readership explaining how their middle-class position is anomalous in relation to the black masses, "However, do not let your successes anesthetize you to the reality that you are still in a racist, sexist society. Money, class and position have a way of hiding that brutal truth. For every one of you that has 'made it,' there are hundreds and thousands of Black women and men who have not, and will not."⁴⁴ In acknowledging that the promises

⁴⁴ Sidney Brinkley, "The Great Arrival," *Blacklight*. June, 1980, p. 4

of liberal democracy are not and will not be available to everyone, especially racial and sexual minorities, Brinkley rejects the notion that achieving normativity is the key to progressive Black gay and lesbian politics. Yet his solutions as to what his readers can do to alleviate black poverty—give money and food or toys to needy Black families—simultaneously situates his politics within the framework of racial uplift that had dominated twentieth century black politics. Brinkley’s caution to his readership demonstrates the complexities of black LGBT politics, wherein race, class, and sexuality shape their political strategies in contradictory ways. *Blacklight* documents these complex politics from its emergence in the late 70s to the mid-1980s. *Blacklight*, and the in/visibility that the title evokes, provides a framework for understanding black gay people’s “arrival” on the gay political and cultural scene in Washington, DC, as well as on a national scale.

This chapter argues that *Blacklight* magazine served as a critical site of racial and sexual knowledge production for DC’s black same-sex desiring men. In this chapter, I first contextualize the development of *Blacklight* magazine within the emerging local and national black gay movements, paying particular attention to how cultural and political constraints prohibited the majority of black same-sex desiring men from participating in “out” black gay politics. I also situate the magazine’s development within the racist politics of the dominant gay media. Given this context, I then theorize how the magazine served as a form of outreach to DC’s black same-sex desiring men, while preserving their privacy. Countering the dominantly held notions of “out” gay leaders of this period, who saw the major of same-sex desiring men as politically apathetic, I then turn to close

readings of op-ed pieces, gossip columns, poetry sections, and advertisements to demonstrate how *Blacklight* created a counterpublic of black same-sex desiring men, organized around an awareness of their shared relationship to intersecting forms of state power, especially regarding how homophobic violence and HIV/AIDS threatened their livelihoods.⁴⁵ Ultimately, I argue that men who engaged in more private forms of (collective) self-making in male social clubs and nightclubs were not excluded from political participation.

Thus, *Blacklight* offers a unique site from which to theorize how black gay and lesbian politics emerge in DC in the way that it did. In so doing, this chapter contributes to a body of literature that considers the relationship between urban space and the formation of sexualities. As a symbolic site of national and global hegemony, Washington, DC, represents a center for institutionalized political dominance, as well as a site for contestation of this dominance. The historic marches on Washington by people of color and LBGT peoples support this point. Yet Washington, DC, remains under-theorized as a central place in the emergence of LBGT culture and politics in general and black LBGT culture and politics in particular. An examination of the development of local and national black gay and lesbian organizing centered in Washington, DC, represents a period in black and LBGT freedom struggles left out when a single-axis analysis is utilized.

⁴⁵ Michael Warner argues that “Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counterpublics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness, just as gender and sexuality are, in this culture, damaged forms of privacy.” *Publics and Counterpublics*, p. 63

Fracturing the White Gay Power Structure through Political Visibility

Sidney Brinkley began to publish *Blacklight* while still a student at Howard University. Brinkley drew from his own activist experiences, as well as the momentum developing from the Third World Gay movement. Brinkley led movements as a student at Howard University to institutionalize the first lesbian and gay organization on Howard's campus, Lambda Student Alliance. Brinkley would later serve as chairman of the DC Coalition of Black Gay and Lesbians, a local branch of the National Coalition of Black Gay and Lesbians (NCBGL). In his article on the history of the black gay movement in DC, Brinkley tracks the development of the Third World Gay Movement to local coalition building in Washington, DC, and Baltimore: "Though black gays had been involved in D.C. politics for years, it wasn't until the formation of the D.C.-Baltimore Black Gays, and its local outlet, the D.C. Coalition of Black Gays in 1978 that a group named as one of its objectives, 'To pursue political power. . . as Black lesbians and Black gay men.'" ⁴⁶ In the article, Brinkley lists A. Billy S. Jones of Washington, DC, and Louis Hughes and Delores Berry of Baltimore among the founding members. The article further describes how other black gay and lesbian activists, frustrated with white gay and lesbian organizations, left to join the DC Coalition. The organization gained momentum, branching out in its early days through creating chapters in Philadelphia, Detroit, and Chicago. The proliferation of local chapters eventually sparked the development of the umbrella organization, National Coalition of Black Gays (and Lesbians).

In his oral history narrative with DC Rainbow History Project, former executive director of the DC and National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Gil Gerald

⁴⁶ Sidney Brinkley, 'Who's Who in Black Gay Politics.' *Blacklight* 4.4, p. 12

described the complex politics of visibility in early black gay and lesbian organizing. He recalled a meeting of the DC Coalition held in 1978 in a private home, in which DC Council Member Hilda Mason attended. Gerald discussed how members of the Coalition asked that the lights be turned off when Mason came into the room, “so people could sit in the shade and not be seen.”⁴⁷ This scene speaks to the cultural and political climate in which black gay organizing emerged. Despite the dominant narrative of migration to urban territories and class mobility as providing the freedom to be gay, many of the men involved in black gay politics were from DC. Though Mason may not have been a family member, she was a representative of DC Government, and many of these men also worked in the public sector.⁴⁸ Local black gay activist Courtney Williams described the shifting cultural climate of DC between night and day, in which many same-sex desiring men were “career-oriented during the day and gay was a pastime and nighttime thing.”⁴⁹ Robert Lomax, a high-up official in the federal government and president of the Best of Washington, a prominent social club for black same-sex desiring men, believed that the overwhelming majority of black gays in DC would remain closeted for some time to come, despite Washington’s strong human rights laws. Lomax opined that laws protecting gay rights could do little to alleviate the cultural stigma for black gay

⁴⁷ Mark Meinke. Interview with Gil Gerald, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC, 2001.

⁴⁸ Federal government employment attracted many African Americans to Washington, DC in the post-Civil Rights moment, accounting partially for its role as a “chocolate,” or majority African American, city. In *Lavender Scare*, David K. Johnson also traces the long history of official barring of gays and lesbians from the federal government, beginning in 1947 during the McCarthy era to 1975. This history must have shaped black gay men’s fear of being “out” at work, and a larger cultural climate in Washington, DC, which fostered a rigid separation between work and leisure.

⁴⁹ Mark Meinke. Interview with Otis ‘Buddy’ Sutson, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC, 2001.

Washingtonians. Commenting upon DC's then recently passed ordinance to protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation in 1977, Lomax stated in an interview with the DC-based, LGBT-themed newspaper, *Washington Blade*, "Most of them come from a religious background that is not compatible with the Gay lifestyle. The law does not protect them from their families, their colleagues, and their peers" [capitalization in original].⁵⁰ Lomax's statement reveals that, although DC might have provided a place for LGBT politics to flourish given its progressive human rights laws, prominent LGBT organizations, and election of LGBT government officials, DC's notoriety as a progressive town also created the conditions of constraint for black gay activists in particular.

Despite these conditions, a few black gay and lesbian leaders like Gerald became heavily involved in local government and politics. Gerald got involved in local politics through the first mayoral election of Marion Barry in 1978. In fact, it is through their (lack of) support for Barry initially that the DC Coalition of Black Gays (DCCBG) first gained visibility in mainstream LGBT politics. In the *Blacklight* article "Who's Who in Gay in Politics," Sidney Brinkley describes DC Coalition's first foray into local politics, "During the mayoral campaigns of 1978, DCCBG made its first excursion into local politics by endorsing Sterling Tucker, instead of Marion Barry, [Barry] had courted and won the support of much of the white gay community. According to Billy Jones, it [endorsing Tucker] was an organizational and political strategy to gain recognition in the gay community."⁵¹ This political strategy garnered attention from the dominant gay

⁵⁰ Lou Chibbaro, Jr. "AIDS conference, Black conference this weekend," *Washington Blade*, Oct 7, 1983, p.1

⁵¹ Sidney Brinkley, Who's Who in Black Gay Politics, *Blacklight* 4.4, p. 13

media. DCCBG's endorsement of Tucker was partly motivated by Barry's connection to the predominantly white, established gay groups. Because of Barry's connection to white gay power structure, the DC Coalition questioned his willingness to deal with issues of racism in the gay community. Though Tucker lost the election to Barry, DC Coalition's endorsement of Tucker marked their presence on the DC political scene.

Mayor Barry met with the DC Coalition in January 1979 to discuss the groups' complaints about the alleged discrimination against Blacks and other minorities in DC's gay-friendly establishments. In an editorial of the second issue of *Blacklight*, Brinkley explains that the issue of discrimination in white-owned bar/restaurants was brought before the public when the mayor's wife, Effi Barry, was denied entrance to a popular "white" nightclub. Mrs. Barry's response positions this as a race-based concern, "It happens to me continuously. . . Once you get off your block or out of your neighborhood, you're just another nigger."⁵² However, Brinkley's editorial demonstrates how frequently this had been happening in white gay bars in particular, "As Black Gay people, we know all too well about discrimination in 'white' Gay bars."⁵³ Brinkley elaborates on how racial discrimination occurred through the act of carding. Many black gay men witnessed white patrons walk into white-owned establishments without showing ID, while black patrons were asked to show multiple pieces of ID, only to be told that the identification was unacceptable for admission. Brinkley situates this act of discrimination within a longer civil rights struggle by conjuring the names of Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King:

⁵² Sidney Brinkley "The Bottom Line," *Blacklight* 1.2, p. 2

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 2

Do you remember Rosa Parks? Rosa Parks was the Black woman who. . .was too damn tired after working all day to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. . .When will we find that something inside of us? Would it stir you to action if a sign were placed over the door of those bars that read ‘No Niggers Allowed,’ or better yet ‘Only Certain Niggers Allowed’ since some of us do manage to gain entry. Would Martin Luther King tolerate such treatment? How about Malcolm X; would he just quietly leave and do nothing?⁵⁴

This association becomes more significant in light of the fact that all bars had to serve food, and thus could not restrict admission on the basis that they were restaurants.

Discrimination at restaurants had been a highly visible part of Civil Rights struggle, with the anti-black violence at the Woolworth’s counter in Greensboro, NC in 1960 being the most renowned example. Yet this practice, though occurring often within white gay-owned establishments, received little media attention. Because black lesbians and gay men’s issues were largely invisible in the local and national LGBT politics, black lesbian and gay activists confronted the issue of carding on their own, making it a dominant part of the conversations in black lesbian and gay political circles.

A shift in public knowledge about black gay and lesbian experiences of bar discrimination occurred after Washington’s LGBT-themed newspaper published an interview with mayor Marion Barry regarding the issue. *The Washington Blade* reported in February 1979 that the mayor was surprised at the black gay community’s experiences of racial discrimination in white gay-owned establishments, “Barry, who had not previously met with Black Gay leaders, seemed surprised to hear about charges of

⁵⁴ Sidney Brinkley “The Bottom Line,” *Blacklight* 1.2, p. 2

discrimination by White Gay establishments.”⁵⁵ Barry’s surprise is indicative of his lack of consciousness about the multiple fronts on which black gays were fighting. Barry’s response, however, reveals his recognition of how he was viewed by black gay community leaders—as the friend of white gay organizations—and signaled a shift in his support for the White gay community as contingent upon their concern with racism. Barry states, “Any relationship I have with the White Gay community is predicated on an effort on the part of their leadership to fight vigorously and strongly against this kind of bullshit.”⁵⁶ Seemingly, it was the shared struggle of racism that fostered solidarity between Barry and the black gay community, forging a stronger relationship between the two parties. The relationship between Barry and black gay leaders improved, but controversy emerged again when Barry appointed Don Culver to the DC Municipal Government’s Overall Economic Development and Advising Committee. In an editorial in the October 1979 edition of *Blacklight*, the writer explains why this appointment was the cause of such controversy, “Culver is an owner of The Pier, The Way Off Broadway and The Lost and Found. Almost from the day of its opening in 1971, The Lost and Found has been cited numerous times for its alleged discrimination against women and blacks.”⁵⁷ The article reports on the DC Human Rights Commission’s hearing against the popular gay-owned nightclub, Lost and Found, and how Don Culver, who was scheduled to testify, failed to appear. Furthermore, noting the lack of black employees at The Lost and Found and The Pier, the author criticizes Barry’s decision, given that one of the tasks

⁵⁵ Ernie Acosta, “Black Gays Raise Issue in Meeting, Barry Vows Action On Bar Bias Complaints,” *Washington Blade*, Feb 7, 1979, p. 1

⁵⁶ Ernie Acosta, “Black Gays Raise Issue in Meeting, Barry Vows Action On Bar Bias Complaints,” *Washington Blade*, Feb 7, 1979, p. 1

⁵⁷ Editorial, *Blacklight*, September 1979, p.2

of the Economic Development committee was to create new employment opportunities for district residents. The journalist asks, “Does this mean white District residents only?”⁵⁸

The National Third World Conference held in Washington, DC, in October 1979 also marked a watershed moment for the Third World Gay Movement. This historic conference signaled the creation of a coalition of gay and lesbian people of color and marked their political visibility on the national scene. The National Coalition of Black Gays and the National Gay Task Force sponsored the conference, held on October 12-15, 1979 in the Harambee House Hotel in Washington, DC. The conference marked the first occasion for “Gay Asians, Indians, Chicanos, Latins and Blacks [to] assemble as a unified body.”⁵⁹ The conference focused on establishing a national network and confronting issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and heterophobia by and against Third World Gays. Mayor Barry was scheduled to address the historic Third World Gay conference, but his special assistant, Marie Dais, delivered a speech on his behalf. The momentous conference culminated in Third World Gays marching down Georgia Avenue through a predominantly African-American neighborhood to join the 1979 National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.⁶⁰ A crowd of 100 slowly assembled

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.2

⁵⁹ Editorial, *Blacklight* Vol 1.2, p. 1

⁶⁰ In *Dividends of Dissent*, Amin Ghaziani notes that organizers of the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights in 1979 proposed to have it coincide with the Third World Conference already being planned for the weekend of October 5, 1979. This was rejected due to a conflict with the National Organization of Women conference planned the same weekend in LA. A follow-up motion was made by a member of the Third World Caucus to hold the conference and the march the following weekend. Ghaziani argues that this was an attempt ‘to forge a unified identity across lines of gender and racial division,’ p. 58.

around 9:30 am in front of the Harambee Hotel to march, with the women of color lesbian group, Salsa Soul Sisters, leading the group.

Though the DC Coalition emerged as a strong presence, the group became inactive shortly after the Third World Conference. Problems arose within the chapter between men and women. Infighting in the organization caused setbacks and the decline of the local organization.⁶¹ *The Blade* reported in March 1979 that the DC Coalition changed its name from DC Coalition of Black Gays to DC Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays “in an effort to raise its feminist consciousness and outreach to Black Lesbians.”⁶² A. Billy Jones also blamed the dissolution of the Coalition on the white gay community for putting more on them than they could handle, “When the gay community as a whole realized there was a Black political and educational group everybody started pulling on us to do things that were part of their agenda. We weren’t dealing with Black issues. We were dealing with white Gay issues. For some reason the white Gay community thinks the only thing we are concerned about is bar discrimination.”⁶³ This concern is linked to the one Jones raised at the earlier forum on racism in the Black community in which he criticized the “outreach” of white gay organizations after their goals and issues had already been put in place. Including black gay leaders after the fact, rather than during the inception, was part and parcel of the pressure that black gay groups felt. Jones indicates that the Coalition had its own agenda, and it was multi-pronged,

⁶¹ Sidney Brinkley reported that issues regarding lack of training as social activists, lesbians intolerant of the group’s male-oriented attitudes, and failures to address these concerns, and deception by and subsequent lack of faith in leadership left the DC Coalition demoralized. See “Who’s Who” *Blacklight* 4.4, p. 14-15. Also see *Dividends of Dissent* for an in-depth discussion of the politics of “infighting” amongst LGBT activist organizations.

⁶² “Coalition Makes Changes” *Washington Blade*, March 15, 1979, p. 15

⁶³ DC Black Gay Group Revived, *Washington Blade*, December 19, 1980, A-6

“We are concerned with the housing problems in Washington. We are concerned with sexism in the Gay community. We are concerned with racism in the gay community. And we are concerned about the homophobia primarily in the Black community.”⁶⁴

Despite their claims to being concerned with all of these issues, their quest for political visibility emerged as their dominant concern. When the group revived itself under the leadership of Ray Melrose, a key figure in the development of the black gay arts movement in Washington, DC, one of their primary concerns was the increase in membership. The organization had 14 members in December of 1980, and Melrose hoped to boost its membership by 200 by the beginning of the upcoming year. Melrose planned to print handbills advertising the DC Coalition and include a mail-in card for people who wanted more information, “Armed with the handbills members will roam the streets passing them out to people who look Gay.”⁶⁵ Melrose professed that he could spot gay people, “I can spot about 75% of Gays on the street. We want to shock people into realizing that even though they are hiding in the closet there are those of us who know. Even if we don’t get one member we are going to get a lot of publicity out of it.”⁶⁶ Melrose’s aim for publicity demonstrates that although the primary goal of black gay political mobilization was building their membership, social constraints detracted from this goal, fostering alternative strategies based on placing key people in key positions in local government and politics.

This explains the numerous receptions sponsored by black gays for Marion Barry’s re-election. In a feature titled, “An Intimate Look at Black Gay D.C.,” Troi

⁶⁴ Ibid.,p. A-6

⁶⁵ “DC Black Gay Group Revived,” *Washington Blade*. December 19, 1980, p. A-6

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. A-6

Graves, then president of DC black lesbian organization Sapphire Sapphos, discusses the state of the black gay political involvement in Washington, DC, “White gays will put up money, and the administration will listen and do favors for them. We haven’t done that yet. We’re still at the complaining state. We have to get out there and start playing politics.”⁶⁷ Graves’s statement falls under the caption describing the formation of “The Black Lesbian and Gay Committee to Reelect Marion Barry.” Four years after the formation of the DC Coalition in 1978, this group developed with the intent of becoming a “political force in the city.” Under Graves’s statement is a picture of Marion Barry dressed up in a tuxedo at a benefit the group held for him at the infamous Clubhouse, a nightclub in the Columbia Heights district of DC, known amongst the black gay community nationwide for its house music, performances, and dance parties. The group also organized another function in support of Barry’s election at the Evans Tibbs art gallery in Northwest Washington, DC. Over 200 black gays and lesbians attended this event including representatives from the DC Coalition. In his address to the group, Barry commented upon the group’s newfound political visibility, and how “For a long time we had a lot of trouble getting black Gays and Lesbians visible to each other, much less visible politically.” Now that that was changing, Barry said, he was “glad to see many of [them] com[e] out of the closet politically.”⁶⁸ Barry cited himself as being responsible for raising the political consciousness of the black gay community. That Barry and the group understood “political consciousness” as becoming a forceful presence on the local

⁶⁷ “An Intimate Look at Black Gay DC,” *Blacklight* October 1982, p. 17

⁶⁸ Jim Marks, “Over 200 Black Gays Gather for Barry Reception at Art Gallery,” *Washington Blade*, p. 7

political scene marked visibility and inclusion as the dominant strategy of the “representative” activists of this historical moment.

If the black gay leaders of the DC Coalition saw their goals as becoming a political force in the city government and eliminating racism in white gay –owned establishments, according to Sidney Brinkley, the majority of the black gay population in DC had no such intentions or concerns. Sidney Brinkley describes DC Coalition’s political support of Barry and their attempt to eradicate discrimination in gay bars as lost on the majority of black gays, “Next, the organization attempted to tackle the issue of discrimination in gay bars. It held two forums, both of which were well attended. However, further efforts to deal with these issues garnered little more than token support from white gay organizations and almost no support from Black gays, the majority of whom had never even tried to enter the bars in question.”⁶⁹ Brinkley’s article demonstrates what he saw as a lack of political concern among the majority of black gay community. The issue of racism in white bars was irrelevant to the many black gays and lesbians who were not “out” and who either participated in closed, private events, or, if they were “out,” primarily attended black gay clubs. Brinkley goes on to suggest why publishing *Blacklight* would be so significant even in a climate where black gay politics was so visible in the mainstream political arena, “While the activists have the rhetoric and the spotlight, the social clubs have the people.”⁷⁰ Brinkley believed that the majority of black gays were only concerned with being “social,” solely participating in black queer nightlife and not concerned with mainstream gay politics. Brinkley, like many other prominent activists of the period, believed the “lack of political sophistication” was

⁶⁹ Sidney Brinkley, “Who’s Who,” *Blacklight* Vol 4.4, p. 13

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, p. 13

due to an “apathetic” black same-sex desiring community that refused to “come out” and address the public concerns of the black gay community. As I will suggest later in the chapter, participation in “social” life did not exclude this same-sex desiring community from political participation. However, Brinkley’s beliefs about the political apathy of closeted “gay” men were critical to the publication and dissemination of *Blacklight*, which he hoped would reach this community and mobilize them.

The Gay Media and Racial Politics

On November 21st, 1978, the newly formed DC Coalition of Black Gays sponsored a forum on racism in the gay community. One of the issues mentioned at the forum was racism in the white-dominated gay media. The Coalition condemned *Out* magazine, a gay entertainment magazine, for its failure to include black gay establishments. They also objected to personal, employment, and housing ads in the *Washington Blade*, the city’s leading gay-themed magazine, for allowing the inclusion of racial criteria in their classified and housing listings.⁷¹ In his article, ‘Racism in the Gay Press,’ Michael J. Smith gives the example of a ‘Help Wanted’ ad published in a gay-themed Washington newspaper, ‘GWM(Gay White Male) for 3-4 days job, help, home fix-up. . .Exp pref but not nec is good worker. Must be clean, dependable.’⁷² Smith notes twenty ads that he deemed blatantly discriminatory in their suggestion that white gay men are more employable and ‘houseable.’⁷³

⁷¹ Ernie Acosta. “Black Gays Air Complaints.” *Washington Blade*. December 4, 1978, pp. 19, 21.

⁷² Michael J. Smith, “No Blacks”—Racism in Gay Press.” Michael J. Smith, ed. *Black Men/White Men: A Gay Anthology*, p. 161.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 162

Citing the rich culture of black-centered media, Brinkley notes how the black press marginalizes black gay and lesbian subjects, “But these publications, while being of high quality, are targeted to the general Black audience. While we as Gay people can glean much information from them, there exists a need for something more, something especially for the Black Gay man and woman.”⁷⁴ Brinkley developed *Blacklight* magazine to redress the absence of (positive) representations of black gay culture and politics in the white-dominated gay media and the heterosexist black media. The *Washington Blade* reported on the necessity of *Blacklight*’s publication to the black gay community. In “Blacklight Fills a Real Need,” Dick Munn interviews Sidney Brinkley about his new publication. Brinkley comments on how racial difference shaped the emergence of the black gay cultural scene away from the public culture of bars and nightclubs, “The majority of Black social life doesn’t even touch on the bars,”⁷⁵ implying that much of DC’s black gay collective activity took place in more informal venues, such as the black male social club meetings and private parties held at peoples’ homes. Brinkley hoped to reach members of these social clubs and the guests of their events through the publication of *Blacklight*.

In his history of the significance of communication networks to gay and lesbian identity and community formation, Martin Meeker argues that most homosexuals first became ‘connected to’ knowledge that same-sex attraction meant something, that it had

⁷⁴ Sidney Brinkley, ‘The Bottom Line,’ *Blacklight* August 1979, p 2

⁷⁵ In “A Queer Capital,” (*Creating a Place*, p. 188) Genny Beemyn notes how racialized exclusion in black gay bars prohibited the collective gay consciousness imagined by historians like John D’Emilio and Lillian Faderman. She also points out how African Americans already had a collective consciousness and were politically active as Blacks, thus making the sense of community developed in bars as a source of political consciousness only applicable to a segment of white lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.

social ramifications, and that it had a name, before they ‘came out’ into the gay world or to the larger public as homosexual.⁷⁶ In his oral history narrative, activist Courtney Williams confirmed this point by remembering that his initial knowledge about homosexuality and DC gay life came through picking up a copy of the *Washington Blade*.⁷⁷ *Blacklight*, as a site of racial, sexual, and cultural knowledge production, becomes more significant in the context of the emerging political visibility of black gay Washington, DC. DC’s black gay and lesbian activists had been successful in infiltrating the local government, as well as making themselves visible in the dominant LGBT movement in Washington, DC. Regardless of the rhetoric of visibility championed by black gay political activists, the DC Coalition never held more than 14 members at a time. The leaders of the local movement stood in as representatives of a group of black gay and lesbian people that were not formally a part of any local or national coalition. Given these concerns Brinkley believed that marketing his magazine to members of the DC’s male social clubs was key to the black gay and lesbian political mobilization, “The key to what I want to do in reaching the Black Gays is the social clubs. The clubs are an extensive network with large mailing lists, whose regular affairs at the Elks Club or the Lee House draw up to 3,000 Gays. It’s an entirely different world, an entirely different kind of Gay society from the whites.”⁷⁸

In order to reach this market, Brinkley tried to tailor his magazine to the needs and desires of an insular black gay community. For example, Brinkley ensured the discretion of his subscribers by guaranteeing privacy in mailings, “Some of us are unable

⁷⁶ Martin Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, p. 2

⁷⁷ Mark Meinke. Interview with Courtney Williams, Oral History Narratives, Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC, 2001.

⁷⁸ Dick Munn, “BlackLight Fills A Real Need,” *Washington Blade*, B-1

to be as free or as open with our gayness as we would like to be. For that reason BL will arrive each month completely enclosed to assure privacy.”⁷⁹ Brinkley began distribution with 500, 4-page copies in August 1979 and quickly moved to 8 pages. He distributed the paper to the predominantly black gay bars and nightclubs in DC, such as The Clubhouse, Delta Elite, Brass Rail, La Zambra, and to a few predominantly white gay bars. The monthly issues sold for 50 cents per copy and \$6.50 for a 12-month subscription. In his interview in the *Washington Blade*, Brinkley describes his push for advertisement as neither a hustle, nor falling in his lap. However, he also mentions that the initial response to the magazine from advertisers and subscribers was positive.⁸⁰ Two years and twenty editions later, the monthly publication boasted 24 pages. The advertising was up 300 percent from the first year, and the initial press run of 300 copies now dwarfed by the 7000-copy circulation. Brinkley’s plan of reaching out to the social clubs had become a success.

Reaching “Out” to the Social Clubs

In his oral history narrative, Gil Gerald distinguished black gay social life and political activism as two separate worlds. Gerald recalled an experience dating a young black man who would dance all night then come to be with him, “His world and my activist world never mixed.” But black gay social life had its own politics. Gerald remembered the black social clubs as providing “structure in the black gay community,” and how the clubs provided a space for black same-sex desiring men to express

⁷⁹ Blacklight, Vol 1.1 August 1979, p. 2

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 2

themselves and feel comfortable.⁸¹ In his study of same-sex desire between men in Mississippi, John Howard demonstrates how identity-formation for many same-sex desiring men in the urban South took place not by traveling to the city, but through transformation of their hometowns through attachments with other like-minded men.⁸² The male social clubs in DC, despite their lack of explicit nomenclature as ‘gay,’ and precisely through their politics of discretion, created a space for many same-sex desiring black men to act on their sexual desires, despite their ties to family, community and culture in Washington, DC.

In the feature story of the December 1980 issue of *Blacklight*, titled “Cliques,” the author, who chose to remain anonymous, historicizes the development of the social clubs:

As few as ten to fifteen years ago there was no Black gay society in Washington as it exists today. Those who admitted to being Gay and had the courage to be seen in public places or Gay settings had only one or two places where this could be done without fear of being ‘discovered.’ One bar was Nob Hill, which catered to the middle class, composed of high government workers, ministers and schoolteachers. Then there was the Cozy Corner whose clientele consisted of drag queens and others who were considered ‘low lifes.’⁸³

The author identifies a stark class separation within the gay community and believes that this separation, coupled with a politics of discretion, formed the foundation of the social clubs:

⁸¹ Mark Meinke. Interview with Gil Gerald, Oral History Narratives, Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC, 2001.

⁸² See John Howard. ‘Place and Movement in Gay American History: A Case from the Post-World War II South.’ Brett Beemyn, ed. *Creating A Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Histories*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁸³ Cliques, *Blacklight*, December, 1980, p. 5

During that time it was necessary, for a number of reasons—mainly economic and social—to maintain a low profile and be as discreet as possible with Gay relationships. This condition provided the catalyst for discreet house parties, cocktails and dinners. . . From these intimate groupings emerged the social clubs—the key that opened the door to Washington’s Black Gay Society.”⁸⁴

The author designates the social clubs as the foundation of DC’s black gay community in that they provided social activities, such as parties, banquets and dances in private, intimate settings. Once public social spaces began to accept black patronage, then many of these functions were held in commercial establishments, making black gay social life more visible in the public sphere.

Moving into the public sphere resulted in more complex groupings within the black gay community. According the article, cliques began to emerge based on shared social spaces like churches, bars, neighborhoods and apartment complexes. In his edited collection of poetry and prose, Essex Hemphill mentions the “black gay ghetto” nicknamed “Homo Heights” in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of Northwest Washington, DC, next to Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park.⁸⁵ In his oral history narrative, actor and activist Michael “Micci” Saint Address recalled the “lavish parties” held at two Washington, DC, apartment complexes, The Wingate and Marlboro House, from the mid-70s to the mid-80s. According to Saint Address, appearance and what you had to offer got you access to the black gay scene. As the *Blacklight* article points out, while these “cliques” and “social clubs” provided some a “means of escape from a life of loneliness. . . many people d[id] not possess the physical, social or economic attributes

⁸⁴ Cliques, *Blacklight*, December, 1980, p. 5

⁸⁵ Essex Hemphill. “Without Comment.” *Ceremonies*, p. 74

which would permit them to exist on their own among Washington's Black gay community, for the name of the game is acceptance." The social clubs excluded people based on markers of class, leaving those deemed "low lifes" to mingle amongst their own "peer" group or participate in other, more public forms of sociality, like the white and black gay clubs or cruising for public sex.

This formation, though not exclusive to Washington, DC, did shape the social structure for those new to the city and those who were just breaking into the black gay scene. The author notes Washington, DC's "reputation for having some of the most exclusive and vicious cliques on the Eastern seaboard": "However, I have known many people who have migrated to Washington or who were new to the Gay life and have had a very rough time socially. Some lasted only a few weeks, others stayed for several months, but they were so victimized by the clique structure that they were forced to move elsewhere."⁸⁶ Though it is impossible to imagine a social structure so rigid that it would prohibit sociality altogether for newcomers, this passage demonstrates that the "clique structure" did govern sociality in black gay Washington, DC, during the period. One of the oldest social clubs, The Rounders of Washington, DC, was composed of twelve members who were all a part of DC's emerging black middle class. Due to their elite status and exclusivity, Otis "Buddy" Sutson and Bob Lomax founded the social club, Best of Washington, in the mid-1970s, with the intent of providing a venue for the African-American male same-sex desiring community, given the de facto segregation of commercial spaces in Washington, DC. The group organized house parties and social events, with some of their more popular events—such as the "all-night struts," which

⁸⁶ Cliques, *Blacklight*, December, 1980, p. 5

featured all-night dancing catalyzed by “acid punch”—being attended by as many as 500-600 people. As blacks gained more access to commercial spaces, the club eventually hosted tea dances at the popular black nightclub, The Bachelor’s Mill, black tie affairs at hotels, dances at the Elks Lodge, and group trips to other metropolitan areas such as Chicago and New York City. One of the events for which ‘The Best of Washington’ became most well known was the “Alice Awards,” an annual banquet at which the group presented awards to the “best of” in Washington, DC’s gay community. The group named the award “Alice” after Bob Lomax’s mother, who was a “godmother to the group,” according to Otis “Buddy” Sutson.⁸⁷ The Alice Awards committee petitioned nominees at local black gay clubs like Bachelor’s Mill, The Back Door, The Brass Rail, The Clubhouse, La Zambra, and Nob Hill. Categories included night spot of the year, (social) club affair of the year, party of the year, playmate of the year, congenial person, congenial couple, disc jockey, best dressed, barmaid/bartender of the year, and the best of everything to offer. In his oral history narrative, co-founder Buddy Sutson lamented The Best of Washington’s lack of public involvement in black gay activism. He expressed special regret for not being involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. He asserts that their lack of involvement, despite their access to thousands of men through their mailing list, was out of fear of what the reprisal might be for their publicity.

In her study of the Jamaican lesbian and gay-themed newsletter, *Jamaica Gaily News*, published by the activist group Gay Freedom Movement from 1978-1984, Kanika Batra offers a methodology for reading ephemeral texts like those that emerge from black lesbian and gay activist organizations in the late ‘70s and early 80s. She argues that

⁸⁷ Mark Meinke. Interview with Buddy Sutson, Oral History Narratives, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC, 2001.

theorizing gay and lesbian organizing within a transnational framework requires, “thinking through the print-mediated nature of sexual counterpublics, undoing the separation between social and political spaces, and de-emphasizing declarative sexual identity politics or outness.”⁸⁸ Though *Blacklight* magazine mainly circulated in major metropolitan areas in the United States, its representation of local, national, and international black (gay) issues deems the magazine a contributor to transnational black thought and activism.⁸⁹ Following Batra, I contend that the ‘social’ was significant to how DC’s black gay counterpublic was made, despite the varying degrees of ‘outness’ within this community. I now turn to several unlikely sites for theorizing black gay community formation: the social column, poetry section, op-ed pieces, and advertisements as sites through which this community was imagined. Through a close examination of these sites, I demonstrate the significance of “the social” for black gay political mobilization, which Brinkley envisioned as the magazine’s core concern.

⁸⁸ Kanitra Batra, ‘Our Own Gayful Rest: A Postcolonial Archive.’ *Small Axe*, 14.1 (2010): p. 54

⁸⁹ The premiere issue of *Blacklight* covered a range of political and cultural issues. The front page covered a meeting with gay community leaders and the DC Metropolitan Chief of Police regarding the police department’s commitment to LGBT rights. The leading story, “Police Chief Refuses to Make Public Statement” discussed the police chief Burtell Jefferson’s refusal to name the gay and lesbian community specifically in a public anti-discrimination statement. The front page also reported on U.S. involvement in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia, particularly the history of U.S. sympathy of white minority rule in Rhodesia, and their support for the regime of Black Prime Minister Abel Muzorewa, whose interests, the article points out, still coincided with white power and anti-black violence in the country. The article prompts Black Americans to hold the U.S. government accountable and urges them to support Black freedom struggles. The third and final article on the front page covers the National Coalition of Black Gays (NCBG) meeting with white gay activists, local government and the chief of police about racial discrimination in white-owned gay establishment. These three stories represent the multi-scalar political scope of the magazine.

'Under Grace's Hat'

In the September 1981 issue of *Blacklight*, the first society/gossip column appeared. "Under Grace's Hat" was written by an unnamed socialite named Grace who attended and described the events of black gay social life with "her" own unique flair and style. The column highlights social events held by individuals such as birthdays and by groups such as the social clubs. Grace gossips about people's recent divorces, the quality of the events "she" attends, who left the DC black gay scene and who was back on the scene, assuming the readers' knowledge of the people, places, and events being discussed. Grace's column illustrates how her readership, though described by Sidney Brinkley as "a series of circles that may touch, but rarely overlap," was in fact more overlapping and connected.

Beyond her witty reviews of the social events of the season, Grace also informed her readers about important shifts in this community. For example, Grace discussed the management change at the black gay bar Nob Hill. Nestled in a residential area of Columbia Heights neighborhood in NW Washington, DC, since 1957, Nob Hill was the oldest predominantly black gay bar in the city. Grace describes the change in management as not only about a shift in the quality of the bar's aesthetics and customer service, but about the relationship between race and capital,

Now for all of you who still don't know. THE NOB HILL has changed management. BILL and JOE are no longer there and the place has taken on a refreshing new look and more whites frequent there now. I understand that the reason is the group BWMT, Black and White Men Together, have meetings there. (I'm sure the value of the property will increase now, smile).⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Under Grace's Hat, *Blacklight*, September 1981, p. 17

Informing the patrons of this shift cannot be understood outside the context of the issues of racial discrimination in white-gay owned establishments in Washington, DC. Since 1957, primarily middle-class, black gay men patronized Nob Hill. Noting the change in management alerted readers to a possible shift in the place's role as providing one of the few, long-standing safe havens for black middle-class gay men. But Grace's next points about the bar's changing racial dynamics, due to the meetings of the political and social group, Black and White Men Together, guaranteed that the place still remained a safe haven, given this activist group's leading role in the fight to eradicate racial discrimination in gay bars. Finally, Grace's comical mention of how white patrons would increase the property values offers a commentary on the mixed feelings this increasing white patronage invoked. Racial discrimination in bars was in fact linked to "property values," in the sense that securing the space for white patronage was also about keeping out what blackness symbolized--social disorder and poverty—which would lead to property destruction or decreased profits.⁹¹ So while the increasing white patronage under the domain of Black and White Men Together meant a form of "safety," it also marked Nob Hill as a contested space. This shift in management threatened to eliminate the pride engendered in knowing that a predominantly black patronage sustained the club financially throughout the years, and the sanctuary it provided to black gay men.

In this initial column, Grace also provided an insider's perspective on the string of unsolved murders of gay men, many of whom were black, which occurred in the late 70s

⁹¹ In "How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White it Stays," Alan Berube includes "carding" as a "whitening practice" that prevented gay establishments from "turning," meaning a change of patronage from white to black and Latino. This shift in patronage was linked to a decrease in profits. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, eds. *My Desire For History*, p. 206.

and early 80s in Washington, DC. At that time, DC had some of the strongest human rights laws protecting on the basis of orientation in the nation, many of which stemmed from the infiltration of lesbians and gay men in local government and the strong presence of national LGBT organizations in the nation's capital. Yet gay men in particular were concerned for their safety given the rise in violence targeting them. The *Washington Blade* reported in September 1978 that seven gay men had been murdered since January of the same year. The men were reported to have frequented bars in Washington, DC's "hustler section near 13th and New York Ave."⁹² The men ranged in age from 25-68 years old, and four of them were black and three white. The police reported that all of the victims invited the assailant into their homes or into a car. Some of the victims were found slashed, beaten, and/or strangled. The murders continued from the late 70s to the early 1980s, and the *Blade* continued to cover the events, mostly because many of the murders remain unsolved.

John D'Emilio argues that the rise in violence in the 1980s, despite the proliferation of activism in 1970s, attests to the persistence of institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism: "Although lesbians and gay men won significant victories in the 1970s and opened up some safe social space in which to exist, we can hardly claim to have dealt a fatal blow to heterosexism and homophobia. One could even argue that the enforcement of gay oppression has merely changed locales, shifting somewhat from the state to the arena of extralegal violence in the form of increasingly open physical

⁹² Lou Romano, D.C. Police Report Increase in Murder of Gays, *Washington Blade*, July 1987, p. 5

attacks on lesbian and gay men.”⁹³ D’Emilio’s claims imply that these murders of gay men are formations of state-sanctioned violence, evidencing a backlash against gains made from LGBT movement building of the previous decade. Though D’Emilio rightly claims that the rise of anti-gay violence in this historical moment was a form of state-sanctioned violence, less attention has been paid to the racialized nature of this violence, to its significance within a longer history of anti-black violence in the U.S.

In June 1981, the *Blade* interviewed then president of the DC Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Ray Melrose, about the most recent brutal murder of a black man, Franklin Agee, a manager at a local liquor store whose body was left in the back office of his store. Melrose expressed his exhaustion with these crimes, particularly because many of the victims were black, “I’m getting tired of the same type of cases occurring over and over again, particularly with Blacks as victims. . . It’s almost like an Atlanta, except it’s being kept a secret.”⁹⁴ Melrose must have been referring to the “Atlanta child murders.” The “Atlanta child murders” is the name given to the serial murders targeting 28 children, primarily poor and African American, in Atlanta, GA, from 1979-1981. The murders received very little media coverage in the beginning and the police did not follow every lead in the investigation. This neglect caused many African Americans to question the role that race and class played in state valuation of black life. The police confirmed Melrose’s assertion that the majority of gay homicide victims in DC were indeed African American.

⁹³ John D’Emilio. “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” Ann Snitow et al, eds. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, p. 108.

⁹⁴ Lou Chibbaro, Jr., “Brutality Marks Recent Murders,” *Washington Blade*, June 12, 1981, p. A-1

Melrose's response raises questions about the convergence of race and sexuality at this site of urban violence, a mode of interrogation obscured by labeling these murders 'gay.' Indeed, Melrose thinks that these murders were being kept a "secret" because queer sexuality marked these black men as deviant, further contributing to the silence of black family and community members regarding the murders of their loved ones and neighbors. Like D'Emilio, Melrose also concludes that these murders evidence the persistence of institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism. He believes that homophobia creates the conditions for these men to engage in such "risky" sexual practices, "If society was not as hostile toward Gays, many murder victims would not have to hide their identities and be forced to seek out partners under circumstances that entail considerable risk."⁹⁵ Risk becomes a central analytic in these cases because the pursuit of hustlers might suggest that the blame for these deaths lies with the victims. This logic, I believe, informed the DC Metropolitan police's lack of a thorough investigation into these murders. In lodging a critique against institutionalized homophobia as creating the conditions for such transactional sexual encounters, Melrose attempts to free these men from blame, and to create a space for sympathy and victimhood. That both gay community members and the police blamed these men for their own deaths reveals the strange affinity between dominant state discourses that link risk to "hidden identities," and dominant LGBT discourses that privilege "coming out" as the end of state-sanctioned homophobia and heterosexism.⁹⁶ To no avail, the police

⁹⁵ Lou Chibbaro, Jr., "Brutality Marks Recent Murders," *Washington Blade*, June 12, 1981, p. A-1

⁹⁶ For an in-depth discussion of the linkages between politics of risk and the racial and spatial politics of violence, in particular violence directed toward gay men, see Christina Hanhardt, *Safe Space*.

constantly solicited the gay community for help with these murders. This was most likely due to the fact that police power was also responsible for violence towards the gay community in the form of raids on gay bars, policing of public spaces for cruising, and other modes of criminalizing same-sex desire. Despite their distrust, the gay activists petitioned the state to solve these murders, and Mayor Marion Barry enforced a crackdown on violent criminals and drug pushers in 1982, believing that increased policing and surveillance would end the spate of unsolved “gay murders.”

Grace reported in the initial column of “Under Grace’s Hat” in September 1981 that black gay activist organizations had agreed to assist the police in solving the murders, including the Lambdas from Howard University and the DC Coalition of Black Gays. Grace also notes that the police had been neglectful in the investigation of the murders, “It is also interesting to note that the police department is taking a more serious look at the problem.” By stating that the police were now “taking a more serious look,” Grace hints that they had not been seriously investigating initially. It is not clear what exactly forced the police’s hand, but activist pressure was clearly a catalyst. Grace also advised that individuals could do things to lessen the chances of becoming the victim of violent crime, “However, Grace feels that there are some things we can do individually to lessen the chances of this happening to us. For example, it was reported that in one of the recent murders one of the children picked up not one but two pieces of trade. Now in 1981 you cannot take two pieces to your house and not know either of them, no matter how good they look.”⁹⁷ Grace was most likely referring to the murder of a black male high school teacher in August 1981, who was shot to death in his home. As reported in

⁹⁷ Under Grace’s Hat, *Blacklight*, September 1981, p. 17

the *Blade*, he had been seen four hours before near the Brass Rail nightclub, in DC's 'hustler district,' with two black men. In contradiction to Melrose's institutional critique, Grace took an insider's approach to addressing her audience. By including herself through the use of the pronouns "we" and "us," Grace refuses to exempt herself from such "risky" sexual practices. However, Grace does construct a kind of hierarchy that would label taking two pieces of trade home as excessive and irresponsible, given the fact that physical violence against gay men had been a visible and frequent occurrence since at least 1978. Grace's caution represents how cultural anxieties around the threat of violence shaped black gay collective subject formation in the late 70s and early 80s. Though class and degrees of outness were key sites of difference within DC's black community, influencing which spaces and bodies one engaged for erotic fulfillment, the persistent threat of violence shaped collective consciousness across difference. Grace's column helped to form a collective consciousness around the threat of violence in DC's black male same-sex desiring community.

Materializing Grief

Black gay poet and activist Essex Hemphill was another a central figure in politicizing homophobic violence as a condition of black gay sexual subjectivity. In an interview with the *Washington Blade*, Hemphill proclaims that murder was in the forefront of his consciousness, "I'm very concerned with murder, particularly in the Gay community. I say in the Gay community because that is how I'm living—and to think I have to continue to run up against the possibility of being murdered or having a bad experience, that preoccupies me."⁹⁸ Hemphill wrote about murder in much of his poetry,

⁹⁸ Jim Marks, "Essex Hemphill, just a poet." *Washington Blade*. February 11, 1983, p. 21.

including his poem “Homicide: For Ronald Gibson,” published in the 1984 (Vol 4.4) issue of *Blacklight*. Hemphill uses as his epigraph the *Washington Blade* crime report on the homicide of Ronald Gibson, nicknamed Star, who was shot to death on a street in NW DC known as an area frequented by drag queens who solicit sex for money. In the poem Hemphill renders “Star” as a desiring subject who waits for her Prince Charming to come and performs sex work to make her living while she waits, “While I wait for my prince to come,/from every other man I demand pay/for my kisses. . .”(11-13). The poem is opened and closed with emotions of grief.

In the opening lines, “Grief is not apparel./Not like a dress, a wig/or my sister’s high-heeled shoes (1-3). In the closing lines, “It[grief] is a white dress/that covers my body./It is a wig/that does not rest gently/on my head.”(31-35). That grief is and is not apparel alludes to the contradictions of mediating these crimes through LGBT and mainstream media. While the quest for media visibility is significant for creating the multiple publics around these issues, the focus on the brutal deaths and “risky” sexual activities of the victims can serve to efface their complex subjectivity and, thus, their value as lost lives worthy of public grief. This is further supported in the fact that the metaphor of grief revolves around articles of consumption. Readers might simply consume these stories through existing narratives of individual pathology, and miss the structural issues that undergird this tragedy.

These materials—the dress, wig, and shoes—are also essential to the construction of racialized genders and sexualities, especially for the racialized poor who depend on sex work for their everyday survival. Given that the subject of the poem is a black drag

queen prostitute, narratives of black cultural pathology—particularly narratives of black gender and sexual difference-- signal why the wig does not rest easy on her/his head.

⁹⁹By stating that grief is and is not apparel, Hemphill captures how multiply determined subjects, subjects produced within the contradictions of state and capital, provide a more complex frame through which to theorize violence. The contradictions indicated in Hemphill's metaphor of grief, that it *is and is not* apparel implies that Ronald Gibson/Star's murder problematizes any easy categorization of the identities of those subject to anti-queer or anti-black violence. Rather race and sexuality converge in the production of urban violence, at least in the cases examined here.

By publishing Grace's column and Hemphill's poem, *Blacklight* challenges the notion that media representation of 'gay homicides' is solely a matter of voyeurism or consumption. Grace ends her brief mention of the issue of gay murders by suggesting that the gay social clubs should intervene in these issues, "It might be good if some of the Gay social clubs would sponsor survival techniques for the 80's. That would be a real service to the community especially since many of them charge 15 and 20 dollars per affair. This way some of the profits could be returned to the community."¹⁰⁰ Grace's comments bring to the forefront the tension between "out" black gay activists who saw the primary space of movement-building as the public sphere, and the masses of black gay men who were engaged in private forms of collective self-making. However, Grace's column and Hemphill's poem reach out to these men in the privacy of their homes to build a

⁹⁹ Roderick Ferguson begins *Aberrations in Black* with the figure of the black drag queen prostitute featured in Hemphill's performance of this poem in Marlon Riggs's 1992 documentary film, *Tongues Untied*; this demonstrates the significance of Hemphill's elegy to Ronald Gibson/Star, as Gibson's story becomes a material foundation for the institutionalization of queer of color theory in the academy.

¹⁰⁰ Under Grace's Hat, *Blacklight*, September 1981, p. 17

collective consciousness about violence as a threat faced even if one only entered into gay spaces and bars under the guise of night. *Blacklight* was instrumental in building a black gay counterpublic around issues of racism and heterosexism as cultural forces that converged to produce black gay men's increased vulnerability to violence.

The File on AIDS

In April 1983, then president of the DC and National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians, Gil Gerald, held a NCBLG meeting at his house. At the meeting, he endorsed the 20th Anniversary March on Washington, and brought attention to the fact that HIV/AIDS was disproportionately affecting African Americans. By 2001 all of the men who had attended the meeting, except two, Gil Gerald and Phil Pannell, were dead. Though cases with similar symptoms had been reported earlier, it was not until 1981 that scientists made connections between the cases and associated them with the virus that would come to be known as HIV/AIDS. Studies that have focused on the national and even global impact of AIDS, paying attention to the cultural politics that have undergirded the uneven distribution of care and state resources, have paid less attention to the local politics that have also shaped the way the virus has been understood in particular cultural communities. My focus on the early impact of HIV/AIDS in black gay communities in Washington, DC, presents one such case study. I build on the groundbreaking work of scholars such as Cathy Cohen and William Hawkeswood who have attended to the local activism and politics of HIV/AIDS in local black/queer communities.¹⁰¹ Cohen identifies the early 80s as a period of denial regarding the impact of HIV/AIDS in black communities. Though this is partly true, attention to the

¹⁰¹ See Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*; William Hawkeswood, *One of The Children*, especially his chapter, "The Epidemic Thing."

specificity of Washington, DC's black gay life nuances this narrative. When many black male members of DC's infamous nightclub, The Clubhouse, became ill in the early 80s, the black gay community responded. Thus, an attention to the local is necessary in order to understand the complex history of HIV/AIDS epidemic in black communities, and the local and national responses to it.

In 1987, the *Washington Post* reported that AIDS cases in Washington, DC, were distinct from cities like New York City in that the majority of reported cases were black homosexual and bisexual men:

In the district, half of the 693 reported cases are black, while only 3 percent are Hispanic. But unlike New York City, where the vast majority of black and Hispanic victims are intravenous drug users or their sexual partners, 70 percent of black AIDS patients in the District are homosexual or bisexual men, according to statistics compiled by city health officials.¹⁰²

This local distinction in the emergence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic also shaped the response to it, especially in black communities. As in other communities negotiating the cultural stigma of poverty, drug use, racism, and homophobia, media representations of HIV/AIDS in DC as a disease affecting white gay men shaped its reception within DC's black gay communities. As I have attempted to argue, part of the work of black gay and lesbian activism in DC in the late 70s and early 80s was about challenging the category of gay as 'white,' and making black bodies intelligible to the state as sexual minorities.

This struggle spilled over into the fight against AIDS in black communities in the early 80s. As several black gay activists remarked, many black same-sex desiring men totally dismissed the disease as one that might impact black communities because they

¹⁰² AIDS Message Misses Many Blacks, *Washington Post*, May 31, 1987

understood it as a ‘white’ disease. Furthermore, many of them understood the few cases of black same-sex desiring men who had the disease as those who slept with white men. Thus HIV/AIDS was not understood as impacting black gay communities, which is part of what Cohen identifies in the early 80s as community denial.

Part of this story stems from the fact that it was primarily administered as a public health concern, an institution that has historically been insensitive to, and even hostile to, cultural difference.¹⁰³ Due to the persistence of local gay activists, Mayor Marion Berry reported to the *Washington Blade* in 1983 that he pledged his continued support of funding for HIV/AIDS through local institutions like the department of health and the Walker Whitman Clinic. But these institutions participated in the constitution of HIV/AIDS as a white gay disease, mostly through their failure to reach out to black communities. Black gay activist James Coleman discussed in his oral history narrative how hard it was for black men who had venereal disease to find racially and sexually sensitive doctors, and that Howard University Hospital discriminated against black HIV/AIDS patients. Coleman also discussed how the Whitman Walker clinic was labeled “White Man Walker” by the local black gay community because of its lack of culturally appropriate programming and because its outreach occurred primarily in white gay ghettos.

This lack of attention to the impact of HIV/AIDS shifted between 1982-1983 when the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays and the Walker Whitman clinic noticed alarming number of black men with the disease. *Blacklight* ran a cover story on

¹⁰³ For further discussion of anti-black racism in U.S. public health, see for example, James H. Jones’s *Bad Blood*, Harriet Washington’s *Medical Apartheid*, and Joanna Schoen *Choice and Coercion*.

AIDS in 1983, evidencing the pressing nature of this issue for the black gay community. The story, titled 'The File on AIDS,' gives an overview of the disease and its impact, tackles questions through an interview with Dr. Minod R. Modi, a professor of medicine and chief of the division of infectious diseases at Howard University. The article also includes three op-ed pieces by black gay activists in the community. The overview article gives a detailed description of the history of AIDS, its effects on the body, the communities of impact, and various statistics on the demographics of the disease. The article focuses on cases in DC across racial and class lines, suggesting that editor intended to educate DC's black gay community about their susceptibility to the disease. The article states: "Here in D.C., nearly 20 cases have been reported. Like many other deadly diseases, AIDS respects no race or class lines. Of the cases reported in the U.S. 58% of the victims are white, 22% are Black, and the remaining 20% consist of minorities ranging from Hispanic to American Indian. Yet many doctors and researchers feel that the reported cases are only the tip of the iceberg."¹⁰⁴ The article further reports on the numerous fatalities associated with the disease and the lack of prospect of a cure.

In the interview with Dr. Modi, questions about race also operate to shape the intelligibility of the disease as one affecting black gay men. One of the questions asked was, 'Are black victims of AIDS more susceptible to a particular type of the disease?' The doctor answers that he has seen no difference between Black gays who have AIDS and white gays who have it. One question dealt specifically with AIDS being a 'white disease': 'AIDS appears to have shown up first among white gay males. Some Blacks consider it to be a 'white' disease at least in origin. Is that possible?' The doctor answers

¹⁰⁴ "The File on AIDS: An Overview." *Blacklight*, Vol. 4.3, p. 22

the question by referring to the scientific inquiries regarding whether or not the disease's origins were in Haiti: "Haiti still remains a major dilemma. Some of the Haitians that have AIDS are not homosexuals, drug abusers, or hemophiliacs, and yet they have AIDS. Some Haitians are very concerned that this could be used politically against them."¹⁰⁵ The high rate of infection of Haitian immigrants upon the recognition of AIDS in the U.S. in 1981 fueled speculation that the island might be the source of the illness.¹⁰⁶ That Haitian immigrants did not fit the categories of infection legible to the public health apparatus demonstrates how black bodies destabilize normative state categories, particularly in the context of the AIDS epidemic. That Haitians feared political backlash also demonstrates how narratives of cultural deviance produced the conditions for black people to remain silent and uninformed about their status. Questions of national identity and neocolonial relations further complicate these conditions for Haitian immigrants, however.

Blacklight became a forum through which black gay men could become informed about the virus from multiple perspectives. In another section of the same feature, three gay activists offer their points of view on the epidemic. Phil Nash, former coordinator of the LGBT center in Denver, Colorado, and AIDS activist, wrote a piece on gay sex in the epidemic. In 'Gay Sex in the AIDS Epidemic: Are There Safe Options?,' Nash gives bullet points for safer sex practices taken from 'Guidelines for AIDS Risk Reduction,' published by the Bay Area Physicians for Human Rights,' and 'How to Have Sex in an Epidemic,' written by Richard Berkowitz and Michael Callen, and published by Front

¹⁰⁵ "Dr. Vinod R. Modi: An Interview" *Blacklight* Vol. 4.3, p. 25

¹⁰⁶ Amitabh Avashti, "AIDS Virus Traveled to Haiti, Then U.S., Study Says. *National Geographic News*, October 29, 2007

Publication in New York. Some examples of tips that he gives are: choose partners that are in good health; insist on the use of a condom; use plenty of lubrication; avoid ‘fisting,’ ingesting feces and urine, and using other peoples’ sex toys. Based on conversations that surfaced in his discussions with gay men, ranging from grief of giving up certain sex practices to others who saw it as an opportunity to explore other sex practices, the agreed-upon claim was that ‘gay men’s sexuality, however he chooses to define it, is his own responsibility.’¹⁰⁷ The rhetoric of personal responsibility anticipates critiques in queer theory about how the AIDS epidemic, and its rearrangement of sexual desires, spaces, and practices, paved the way for the emergence of queer liberalism.¹⁰⁸ The next and radically different perspective demonstrates how *Blacklight* allowed for multiple routes of “self-actualization.”

Ron Simmons, a central figure in the creative direction of *Blacklight*, under the pseudonym ‘Butch,’ and an academic at Howard University, contributes a radically different perspective on AIDS epidemic, framing it as a government conspiracy. In ‘AIDS: A Government Conspiracy,’ Brother Ron, as he calls himself in the article, argues that the outbreak of AIDS in the U.S. is a ‘government experiment.’ He bases this claim on media accounts of histories of state bioterrorism, such as Japanese experiments with infectious disease on Chinese subjects during World War II, and the CIA’s experimental release of germs in the New York City subway in the context of the Cold War. Most significantly, he references the ‘Tuskegee Experiment’ in which the U.S. army intentionally infected black men with syphilis. Simmons emphasizes the state’s historical

¹⁰⁷ *Blacklight*, Vol. 4.3, p. 28.

¹⁰⁸ See Douglas Crimp, “How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic”; Robert-Reid-Pharr, “Clean”; Rinaldo Walcott, “Queer Returns”

investment in the eradication of black people in particular. Furthermore, he argues that Haitians started developing AIDS under U.S. state control, given their internment in concentration camps controlled by the U.S. government. He opines that the development of the disease has occurred among populations that ‘white America is least concerned about.’¹⁰⁹ Simmons also believes that the denial among black gay communities about their susceptibility to the virus stems from having been “brainwashed by the American school system and the media” and their “hold to Eurocentric definitions of ‘gay rights’ while remaining ambiguous about their relationship to the overall Black community.”¹¹⁰ He predicts that black gays will use their energies to petition the state for funding for AIDS research or fundraisers, rather than acknowledge this as part of a longer history of black struggle against state violence. Brother Ron’s radical critique of the epidemic proved too much for some readers, with one responding in the ‘Blackmail’ section of the following issue that it ‘was a bit far-fetched,’¹¹¹ while it raised questions for others about other deliberate forms of state bioterrorism.

Activist James Tinney, Ph.D., offers a third perspective on the cultural politics undergirding the dissemination of knowledge about the epidemic. Tinney formerly served as editor of the *Washington Afro-American* newspaper, as a speechwriter for several federal politicians, and professor of journalism at Howard University. He was most well known within the black community, however, for his work to reconcile black lesbians and gay men’s Pentecostalism with their homosexuality through his Pentecostal Coalition for Human Rights and the founding of Faith Temple Church in Washington,

¹⁰⁹ *Blacklight* 4.3, p. 29

¹¹⁰ *Blacklight* 4.3, p. 29

¹¹¹ *Blacklight* 4.4, p. 3

DC. In his article Tinney asks whether the dominant gay rights movement has considered why the gay community has been singled out ‘as the most important key to understanding AIDS.’¹¹² He interrogates claims by physicians and researchers who believe that understanding gay male culture in general and gay male sexual behavior in particular is the key to understanding the spread of the virus. He intimates that this might be a sign of ‘right wing times,’ given that medical experts at a recent AIDS forum that he attended in DC stressed the problem of ‘promiscuity’ among gay men, indexing the issues of morality inflected in public health and (lack of) political concern about the epidemic. Tinney foresees the effects that this moral panic will have on sex publics and institutions, suggesting that, “The repressive forces of conservatism are waiting in the wings for just such an opportunity as this to bring their weight down upon us.”¹¹³ Given this framework, Tinney concludes that the term “epidemic” might not be “useful or accurate” given the small numbers of men it affected at the time. And though this term might have become more useful in the coming years, due to the virus’s widespread impact, even taking Tinney’s life in 1988, he is ultimately concerned with futurity. Noting the stigma that the current sex panic was inciting, even within gay communities, he leaves the reader with the question, ‘If we cannot face ourselves and our future (along with our health problems), then how can we face them [the forces of conservatism]?’¹¹⁴

These differing perspectives represent the range of ideas that circulated in *Blacklight*, as a critical counterpublic space through which DC’s black gay community was made. One Philadelphia reader responded to ‘The File on AIDS’ feature in a letter to

¹¹² *Blacklight* 4.3, p. 30

¹¹³ *Blacklight* 4.3, p. 31

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31

the magazine, articulating his continued belief that AIDS is a white disease: “I am one who believes that AIDS is a white disease even though Blacks are catching it. One way Black men can cut down the risk of catching it is to stop having sex with white men.”¹¹⁵ The reader’s comment poses the problem of AIDS as a problem of affiliation, suggesting that intra-racial affiliation might be a mode of risk reduction. Black gay activist Courtney Williams also mentioned the popular belief that black men were dying of AIDS because they were “dealing with whites” in his oral history narrative to the Rainbow History Project. Interestingly, Williams locates the source of this narrative as ‘the clubs.’ The persistence of this narrative invoked two strategies by black gay activists: 1) campaigning against AIDS in black communities—through posters visualizing AIDS as a disease transferred between black bodies; 2) holding symposia and fundraisers in spaces of black queer nightlife—known primarily as spaces of *affiliation between* black men.

At the Club: Black Queer Nightlife and the Fight Against HIV/AIDS in the Black Washington, DC

In the final edition of its fourth volume, *Blacklight* advertised an “AIDS Forum For Black and Third-World Gays” to be held at The Clubhouse nightclub on September 28, 1983. The Whitman Walker Clinic and the DC Coalition of Black Gays sponsored the forum. The *Washington Blade* reported that 40 people attended the Wednesday night forum, and that concerns were raised about whether the epidemic’s impact on racial minorities was being adequately reported. The AIDS forum was the first of its kind, both in the specificity of its target audience and because of its location. The way that *Blacklight* advertised the forum was also significant. The full-page advertisement for the

¹¹⁵ *Blacklight* 4.4, p. 3

forum contained a photograph of three black men. One man is standing up with his hand on the shoulder of the man kneeling in the far right of the picture. The man kneeling has his hand on the shoulder of the third man, who is in the middle of the other two with his head nestled on the chest of the man who is standing. The caption below the picture reads, “THERE HAS TO BE A SOLUTION. BE THERE. TOGETHER, LET’S EDUCATE OURSELVES TO LIVE!” This photograph of three black men in embrace represents one of the first campaigns about HIV/AIDS featuring black men. That there are three black men in embrace also implicitly seeks to challenge the popular belief that the disease is transferred solely between black and white bodies.

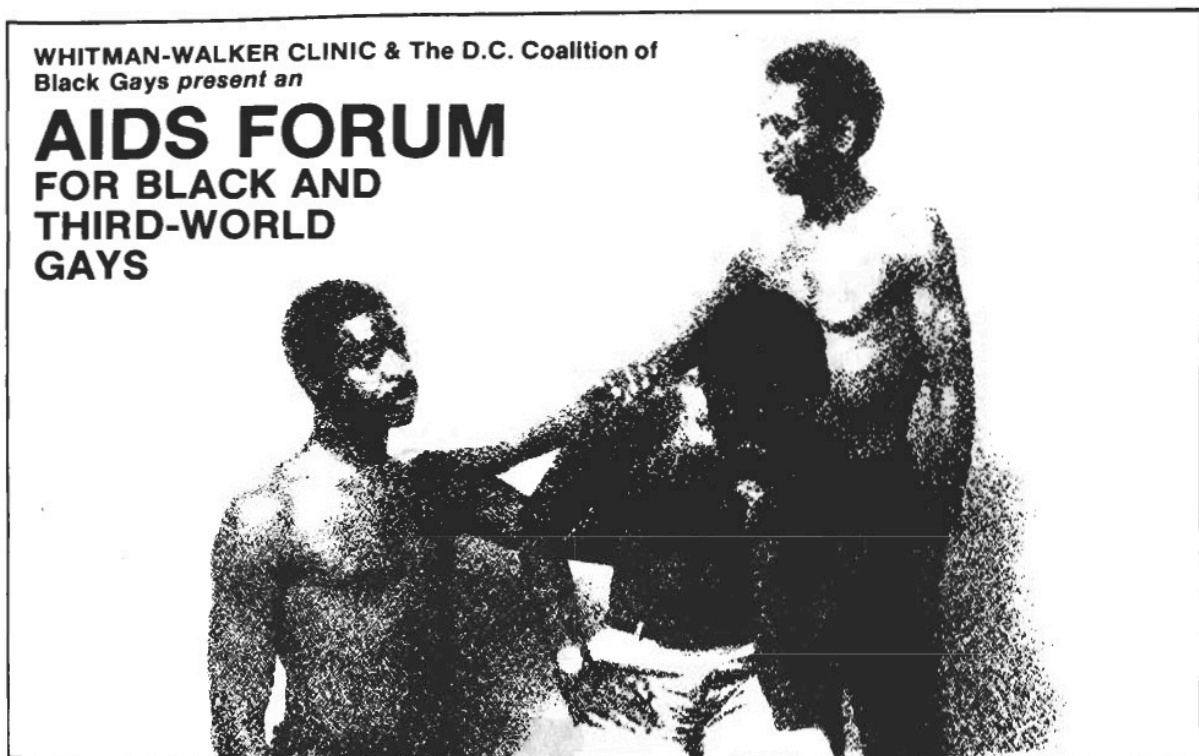


Figure 1. AIDS Forum (*Blacklight* Vol 4.4)

As DC black gay activist and performance artist Micci Saint-Andress reported in his oral history narrative to the Rainbow History Project, this campaign was the first in the country to feature black gay men. He recounts how two black lesbians who worked

for the *Washington Post* had trouble finding models for a campaign to target the black community. So he, Sidney Brinkley, and another activist, Parris Bryant posed for the campaign. This campaign becomes even more significant when considering a question posed at the AIDS forum at The Clubhouse. *The Blade* reported that during a presentation on the symptoms of Kaposi's sarcoma, a rare skin cancer associated with AIDS, one attendee pointed out that most slides depict the lesions on a white person's skin. The person 'wonder[ed] what the lesions would look like on dark skin.'¹¹⁶ The person's response demonstrated the significance of the visual in making AIDS palatable as a disease affecting black people. While the visual images of the public health apparatus reaffirmed the discourses of AIDS as a white disease, the advertisement in *Blacklight*, featuring black gay men, and recognizable figures within the black gay community, served as a counter to state forms of knowledge production about the virus. This effort from within the black community, as well as the long-standing black HIV/AIDS institutions and practices that emerged out the Clubhouse might be considered what Marlon Bailey calls 'invention.' Bailey calls for a shift in HIV/AIDS prevention studies from 'intervention' to 'invention,' 'to capture what so-called communities of risk do, based on their own knowledge and ingenuity, to contest, to reduce, and to withstand HIV in their communities.'¹¹⁷ Bailey privileges the voices of those who are understood as most at risk by the state to identify their tactics and strategies for negotiating the impact of HIV/AIDS in their community. The work of DC black gay

¹¹⁶ Lisa M. Keen. 'First-of-a-kind forum for black Gays held at Clubhouse.' *Washington Blade*. September 30, 1983, p. 17

¹¹⁷ Marlon Bailey. "Performance as Invention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, p. 259

activists in the spaces of black gay nightlife anticipates Bailey's formulation on more contemporary black queer communities.

According to the DC Rainbow History Project, the Clubhouse opened in 1975 to popular success, with people lining up for membership for months. Nestled in the residential Columbia Heights neighborhood of Northwest Washington, DC, at its peak the Clubhouse had more than 4,000 members and for fifteen years provided the central focus for African-American gay social life in DC. The Clubhouse became a key venue for practitioners of black gay and lesbian politics. In 1979, The Clubhouse helped to materialize the historic Third World Conference because the club held a special Rally Ball, and tickets supported the conference. As earlier mentioned, mayoral candidate Marion Berry held several campaign rallies at The Clubhouse in 1982. Given the de facto forms of racial segregation in social space in the District of Columbia, and the cultural stigma black lesbians and gay men experienced within their home communities in Washington, DC, the club also served an important social function as a welcoming space for black gays and lesbians. In addition to its political and social functions, the club also served an important psychic function in black gay men's lives, given the stigma attached to their bodies and identities. Jafari Allen emphasizes the importance of the dance floor in black gay subject formation. He conceptualizes the space of the dance floor as a place where you can 'get your life': "To get your life through an experience of ecstasy, or 'losing' your 'mind,' you received 'identity,' on the dance floor. To 'get your life' means to recover something you profoundly need—perhaps parts of yourself, gathered together for once. All laid down together, side by side. To find a deep and authentic

truth of existence.”¹¹⁸ The Clubhouse’s slogan, ‘dance your ass off,’ coupled with multiple narratives discussing the infamous ‘acid punch,’ rich performance cultures, world-class DJ’s, house mixes and light shows, ensures that The Clubhouse was most definitely an environment where one could ‘get [their] life.’

DC Black gay activist Rainey Cheeks, co-founder of the DC black AIDS organization, Us Helping Us, managed the Clubhouse in its early years. In his oral history narrative at the DC Rainbow History Project, Cheeks remembered how black male members of The Clubhouse began to disappear from the club in the early 80s. Noticing that some of the members had become ‘sick’ and were no longer able to attend, Cheeks decided to do something to help his community. Along with other members of the DC black gay community, Cheeks raised money from the club proceedings on Tuesday nights for people who were sick, even before the nomenclature of AIDS was used. He gave the money to individuals to help pay their rent. The club also held a date auction called ‘Slaves for Love,’ pajama parties, dance marathons, and other fundraising events to help people who were ill. Cheeks recalled picking up individuals in limousines who were too ill to come to the club, so that they could see such acts as Patti Labelle, The Weather Girls and Nona Hendricks perform. Eventually he began to organize people into buddy systems, designating people who could help ill club members with cleaning and everyday tasks.

This informal system of community care eventually developed into a formal organization, Us Helping Us, a longstanding black HIV/AIDS institution in DC. In 1986, Cheeks, trained in Yoga and Martial Arts, began a meditation group at the Clubhouse.

¹¹⁸ Jafari Allen. “For ‘the Children’ Dancing the Beloved Community.” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society*, p. 318

This meditation group eventually became a 12-week program that would develop into signature program effort of Us Helping Us. The program took a holistic approach, and focused on things like diet, cooking, meditation practices, emotional healing through nature retreats, and workshops geared towards helping people become free of the guilt and shame associated with their illness. The support group moved to Cheeks's apartment in 1991 when The Clubhouse closed in 1990, with 22 people showing up for the program. Ron Simmons, the eventual director of Us Helping Us, showed up to this first meeting. Simmons's presence in the meeting is significant, given his earlier critique published in *Blacklight*, indicting the black gay community for what he believed to be their resignation to fundraising and lobbying the state for funds for AIDS research. Simmons's participation in this programming signals its important role as a mode of *intravention*, a grassroots effort that developed endogenously within black gay communities, a mode of caretaking and a political strategy against a virus that was dramatically affecting the community, but about which the community had little knowledge.

Us Helping Us is not the only institution that emerges out of the Clubhouse to confront HIV/AIDS in black communities. The Clubhouse hosted an annual party for its staff and members known as 'The Children's Hour.' The event began in 1976 and became a national event that drew African American lesbians and gay men to the city. According to the Rainbow History Project, the party established Memorial Day weekend in DC as a national event, with the Children's Hour party on Sunday as the capstone. And in the late 80s when The Clubhouse struggled to continue, due to its declining membership (in large part because of the AIDS epidemic), the club owners capped the year with the final Children's Hour party on Memorial Day Weekend in 1990. The

following year, another long-standing LGBT-institution, Black Gay Pride, filled the empty slot left by The Children's Hour. DC's Black Gay Pride has taken place on Memorial Day Weekend ever since that weekend.¹¹⁹

DC Black Pride did not only emerge due to the decimation to AIDS, it also began as a benefit to fund HIV/AIDS prevention efforts in DC's black gay communities. Local AIDS organization Best Friends, which also developed out of the formations of community care in the early 80s in the Clubhouse, put together the first Black Gay Pride to give back to AIDS service organizations such as the Inner City AIDS Network (ICAN). Best Friends and ICAN were among the first to direct their services toward communities of color. And according to Gil Gerald, the model of cultural specificity and cultural competence developed through grassroots efforts of black lesbian and gay communities in Washington, DC, would serve as a model for the national struggle against AIDS in black communities.

As I have demonstrated, *Blacklight* emerged in the context of local and national third world gay movements for political visibility. However, the majority of black same-sex desiring men in DC were involved in more private forms of collective self-making. By turning to the poetry section, gossip column, and op-ed columns as unlikely sites of racial and sexual knowledge production, I demonstrate how the magazine was central to community building and political mobilization of black same-sex desiring men, in particular around their shared relationship to intersecting forms of state power. *Blacklight* helped to transform knowledge production by making black gay bodies intelligible as subjects of homophobic violence and HIV/AIDS, in the midst of a cultural climate that

¹¹⁹ See 'Children's Hour,' Events at the Clubhouse, The Clubhouse, 1975-1990, Rainbow History Project Exhibit. Accessed Online.

was not conducive for most black same-sex desiring men to participate in “out” black gay politics. Thus, we might turn to *Blacklight* as a mode of cultural production that marks black gay men’s increased vulnerability to violence in the late 70s and early 80s, at the same time that it documents the modes of (collective) self-actualization that emerged in and through this violence.

Furthermore, engagement in “social” activities did not preclude participation from black gay politics. On the contrary, black gay social and nightclubs emerged as critical sites for black gay political formations. In the next chapter, I extend my emphasis on the unlikely cultural sites for black gay political formation by turning to the cultural work of DC-based, black gay writer and activist, Essex Hemphill. Like *Blacklight* magazine, Hemphill’s work serves as a critical site for racial, sexual, and cultural knowledge production, and as an alternative archive of black gay men’s political feelings. More specifically, I examine how Hemphill’s affective poetics and politics imagine black gay selves and communities within a mainstream black political discourse that pathologized black gay identity, and within a social, political, and economic context that violently prohibited black gay community formation.

Chapter 3: Loneliness: Black Queer Longing in the Work of Essex Hemphill

*Do you think I could walk pleasantly
and well suited toward annihilation?
with a scrotal sack full of primordial loneliness
swinging between my legs
like solid bells? –Essex Hemphill (“Heavy Breathing”)*

Economic divestment in the 1970s and 1980s had a particularly salient impact on African American communities in many U.S. inner cities. Global economic restructuring moved jobs and capital out of inner cities, and many urban black communities suffered from poverty, dilapidated infrastructures, enduring joblessness, crime, and drugs. These structural forces were sustained by dominant cultural ideologies that marked the black urban poor as responsible for their economic and social disadvantage. Ronald Reagan’s administration capitalized on conservative white Americans’ sentiments against racial policies like affirmative action and school desegregation, and encoded anti-black racism within his political and economic strategies. This process is best exemplified in the infamous discourse of the mythical “black welfare queen,” in which the black single mother on welfare was vilified as the monstrous creation of the welfare state. Even though welfare programs mostly benefitted white women, it was black people, in particular poor black women, who were labeled as the dominant and fraudulent recipients of government resources.¹²⁰ In sum, the lived experiences of the black urban poor were exploited to propel a campaign to dismantle both the welfare state and government regulation of market activity.

¹²⁰ For further discussion of how cultural ideologies sustained the political dismantling of the welfare state, see Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: New York UP, 2004.

This economic and political climate, and its psychic and social impact on urban African American communities, sets the stage for Essex Hemphill's poem "Heavy Breathing." A black gay poet, essayist, and performer, Essex Hemphill was, arguably, the most prominent of the black gay intellectuals of 1980s and early 1990s. As described in the previous chapter, Hemphill was an outspoken opponent of homophobic violence in DC, especially against the string of murders of black gay men and drag queen prostitutes in the early 1980s. His poetry, prose, and performances address the psychological, social, and political struggles of urban black communities, and often maps the psychological and social location of black gay men onto the black urban landscape. In "Heavy Breathing," Hemphill takes the reader on a city bus ride through 1980s black Washington, DC. The speaker of the poem rides the "X2, the bus I call a slave ship," with the "majority of its riders Black," who are "pressed to journey" to "Northeast,/into voodoo ghettos." The speaker defines the "X2" as a "risky ride," with its "cargo of block boys, urban pirates" and "the timid men, scattered among/the boat crew and crack boys." The speaker goes on to describe the spectacular violence in these communities, including the rape and murder of a black woman witnessed by a crowd of onlookers, some of whom know her. He also includes "the funeral of my brothers," alluding to how the nationwide crack epidemic greatly impacted crime in cities like Washington, DC, with a homicide rate so high in the late 1980s and early 1990s, that it eventually earned DC the label of "murder capital."¹²¹

¹²¹ See Urbina, Ian. "Washington Officials Try to Ease Crime Fear. *New York Times*. July 12, 2006.

But the speaker only attends these funerals “at the end of heavy breathing,” signaling the climax of public sexual encounters with other men. It is in this same black urban environment that the speaker negotiates the dangers and pleasures of same-sex desire. If read within this context, the speaker’s “brothers” are also his gay “brothers,” and the “funerals” are also for those who have succumbed to homophobic violence and HIV/AIDS. The heightened anti-black backlash during the Reagan Era, and the amplified cultural stigma attached to homosexuality during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, marked black gay identity as doubly pathological, and the black gay male body as increasingly vulnerable to trauma and violence. Hemphill and his contemporaries openly and defiantly wrote about being black and gay in a historical moment when both of these identities were more publicly stigmatized. Black gay writers used their literary voices to imagine a black gay community in the 1980s in a political, cultural, and social context that violently prohibited the community’s formation.¹²²

Through my exploration of the work of Essex Hemphill, I argue in this chapter that life during a certain stage of neoliberal capitalism, on-going anti-black state violence, and the appearance of the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the 1980s produced *loneliness* as a shared structure of feeling for black gay men. I demonstrate how the collectivities that black gay men forged through cultural expression, their attempts to explore through writing what it meant to be openly gay black men, attempted to assuage their collective

¹²² Though these texts became visible in the mainstream (gay) press, they were often ignored in black press. Despite its critical acclaim by mainstream press, Essex Hemphill notes in his personal correspondence about his struggles to get *Brother to Brother* to be reviewed by black press, and how he tried to get the book into black homes. See Black Talk: A Personal Interview with Essex Hemphill.” *Au Courant*. July 29, 1991. Essex Hemphill/Wayson Jones Collection. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

feelings of loneliness. These collective strategies could not alleviate their pain, however, due to the decimation of the black gay community by the traumatic impact of HIV/AIDS and the rejection many black gay men continued to face by their families and communities. Though the literary communities that they formed could not prevent their deaths, nor could it alleviate the debilitating psychic and social effects of state violence and cultural stigma in the 1980s, their work lives on as under-examined bodies of social thought and cultural criticism. I suggest that the urgency of the cultural work produced in the age of AIDS, the literal race against time to produce art and theory merits putting Hemphill's work in conversation with current discussions of blackness. As many black gay intellectuals carried in their bodies the literal pathology of HIV/AIDS, and a consciousness shaped as much by everyday life as it was by black (social) death, this chapter explores Hemphill's cultural work as critical of recent theories of racial blackness lived in and as pathology, and as embodied subjectivity marked by death.

I trace constructions of loneliness in Hemphill's work as a collective political feeling that pushes against theories of blackness as abjection, registering, in addition, black gay men's yearning for a richer subjectivity.¹²³ In the epigraph that opens this

¹²³ A range of black studies scholars including Frank Wilderson, Jared Sexton, Tryon Woods, and Huey Copeland have theorized the political ontology of blackness through Orlando Patterson's conceptualization of 'social death.' They argue that the condition of social death persists in the present day through routing their theories through Saidiya Hartman's conception of 'slavery's afterlife.' Scholars in black masculinity studies such as Abdul JanMohamed and Aime Ellis have also theorized black masculine subjectivity as "death-bound." I seek to intervene in this body of scholarship by bringing queer theory to bear on theories of blackness lived in/as social death. Here I build on the work of black queer studies scholars Sharon P. Holland who has argued that blackness and queerness meet in the space of death, and Kathryn Bond Stockton and Darieck Scott who have argued that blackness and queerness meet in moments of shame, debasement, and abjection, and might give access to a form of power.

chapter, Hemphill positions ‘loneliness’ against ‘annihilation,’ and locates ‘loneliness’ in the ‘scrotal’ sack, suggesting its (re)productive potential. Annihilation suggests more than the body’s undoing, it anticipates the lack of sustained critical attention to this body of work, most of which is currently out of print. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is often ignored in chronologies of anti-black violence—usually periodized as antebellum slavery, lynching, Jim Crow, urban violence, and mass incarceration. By recovering black gay men’s literary cultures and activism during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S., I challenge the heteronormative periodization of anti-black violence that continues to produce these embodied texts as lonely. I utilize Hemphill’s cultural production as both historical ‘evidence’ of black gay men’s complex subjectivities, and as a testament to their unique contributions to black freedom struggles against intra-racial and state-based violence.¹²⁴ Loneliness as a political feeling also expresses black gay collective desires for black cultural and national belonging.

In this chapter, I first theorize what Hemphill identifies as a “functioning self,” an articulation of racial and sexual selfhood that rejects black liberationist constructions of

¹²⁴ I draw on feminist conceptualizations of state-violence by such theorists as Enoch Page and Matt Richardson (2009) and Andrea Smith (2005) who bring attention to gendered and sexualized dimensions of state forms. Page and Richardson argue that violence against gender variant subjects within black communities is symptomatic of the centrality of disciplined civility to Western state formation processes, particularly the reliance on difference to normalize compulsory heterosexist racialization that at times requires the violent enforcement of binary gender arrangements. Smith argues that the genocidal logic of the U.S. settler of the colonial nation-state produces gendered and sexualized state violence that disproportionately subjects Native women and children to sexual violence, and this violence goes unremarked because, as subordinate subjects in state-sanctioned gender hierarchies, their bodies ‘do not count.’ I include the disproportionate impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on black gay men’s bodies and lack of concern for their loss as well as the harm black gay men have experienced within black communities among the violent effects of the binary gender codes of the U.S. racial state.

black gay psychic damage, at the same time it acknowledges the psychic damages accrued as a racial and sexual minority in the Age of AIDS. I then closely read Hemphill's elegies to his black gay contemporary, Joseph Beam, who died in silence from AIDS complications, while fighting to end the silence around gay men's lives. I emphasize Beam's death to demonstrate how individual psychic pain cannot always be alleviated by collective movement activities. I then analyze an emotional speech given by Hemphill at a gay writer's conference, to illustrate how a politics of injury can emerge from private traumatic affect, rather than a rational political decision. Finally, I show how Hemphill's poetry embodies black gay men's collective longing for black family and community, while also yearning for forms of intimacy outside of the pathology that the black racial family embodies.

Writing the Functioning Self

In an interview with Don Belton, Hemphill shares his belief that the: "dangerous places black gay men are often willing to go in the name of love or desire" prepare them for radical social action.¹²⁵ He insinuates that the pleasures and dangers associated with gay cruising and public sex would prepare black gay men to intervene in a space as hostile as Louis Farrakhan's 1995 Million Man March.¹²⁶ The Million Man March was a

¹²⁵ Don Belton. "Where We Live: An Interview with Essex Hemphill and Isaac Julien." *Speak My Name*, p. 214.

¹²⁶ DC black gay activist Courtney Williams, former co-chair of the DC Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians, discussed in his oral history narrative that there was, indeed, a black gay contingent at the Million Man March. They marched down 9th St and Pennsylvania Avenue to the Carnegie Library, holding gay pride signs such as "Black Gay and Proud" and "Black Child of God." The march started with 150 people and ended with 300 people who gathered in a circle and held each other's hands and prayed. He states that most part onlookers were receptive of this display. Mark Meinke. Interview with Courtney Williams, 2001. Rainbow History Archives. Washington, DC.

massive political demonstration held by black men on Washington, DC's National Mall. The National African American Leadership Summit, a group of civil rights activists alongside members of the Nation of Islam united to 'convey to the world a vastly different picture of the black male'¹²⁷ and for self-help and self-defense against the racial and economic injustice plaguing the African American community. However, it received criticism because of its exclusion of women and sexual minorities.¹²⁸ Even though the dangers of public sex might have prepared black gay men for the possible physical dangers of activism in hostile environments, the multiple fronts upon which black gay men were fighting for racial and sexual freedom must have taken a psychic toll on them. Hemphill's interview prompts us to think about the subjectivities of black gay men during the 1980s, and to think differently about risk. In her study of emotion in AIDS activism, sociologist Deborah Gould discusses the affective states of gay and lesbian communities in the 1980s: "In the early years of the AIDS crisis, affective states circulating in lesbian and gay communities—including what in retrospect I would call gay shame, a corollary fear of intensified social rejection, and frustrated desire for some sort of reciprocal recognition—had tremendous political import."¹²⁹ Because black gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities also experienced "intensified social rejection" as racial minorities, their cultural specificity warrants further thinking about

¹²⁷ Madhubuti, Haki R. and Maulana Karenga, eds. 'Million Man March Fact Sheet.' *Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology*. Chicago: Third World Press, p. 152.

¹²⁸ See Robert Reid-Pharr, "It's Raining Men" for a discussion of gender and sexual politics undergirding the Million Man March.

¹²⁹ Deborah Gould, *Moving Politics*, p. 24.

the “affective states” that were important to black gay cultural activism. I suggest that in addition to the shame, frustrated desire, and possibly multiplied by these feelings, black gay cultural activists in the 1980s experienced loneliness as a collective political feeling.

Life during the 1980s, particularly in urban environments like Washington, DC, created the literal experience and feelings of abandonment. Black gay men and black poor people were disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic and urban violence, causing them to lose loved ones and friends en masse. Many black gay men returned home after being rejected by white gay communities, only to be rejected within black communities as well. Sexual discrimination by potential lovers who feared infection also proved to be a potential source of loneliness. Situating black gay men’s experiences of trauma and loss as stemming from lack of state protection, the absence of community and familial advocacy and support, and institutionalized sexual discrimination marks their loneliness as psychic and social, individual and collective.

As an outsider within the “imagined (black) communities”¹³⁰ of his prose and poetry, Hemphill’s “deviant” cultural expressions, particularly his affirmations of same-sex desire, operate as a form of resistance to the state and cultural forces that violently

¹³⁰ Benedict Anderson (1983) coined the term “imagined community” to demonstrate that nations are socially constructed communities imagined by people who perceive themselves to be a part of the group. I extend this to the black cultural nation, which Hemphill imagines in his poetry, but also to problematize his contradictory class location in relationship to and his construction of “the black community” in sometimes totalistic ways, particularly, as wholly shaped by urban violence and poverty. Hemphill’s traumatic experiences undoubtedly shaped his imagination of the black community. For a discussion of Hemphill’s experiences with urban violence in DC, and how it shaped his view of the black community, see Hemphill’s op-ed piece, “Why I Fear Other Black Males.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, September 7, 1990. Wayson Jones/Essex Hemphill Collection. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

exclude him. Public health and psychological discourses might associate Hemphill's public sexual activities with both self-destructive sexual behaviors of gay male culture and as a response to feelings of abandonment produced by the absences of community and familial advocacy and support. Moreover, Hemphill is writing at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. At this historical moment, U.S. popular discourses about the virus attributed the spread of the epidemic to gay men's sexual promiscuity. Douglas Crimp notes that state, media, and even discourses from within the gay community, especially the construction of "Patient Zero," labeled gay men's sexual irresponsibility as the 'cause' of the epidemic.¹³¹ Black gay men, though left out of dominant conversations about the AIDS epidemic in its early stages, had to negotiate a longer history of being labeled culturally pathological when their bodies eventually did become visible as "People With AIDS" (PWAs). Throughout U.S. history black men have been labeled as *deviant*, *pathological*, and *violent* in ways that risk foreclosing their recognition as humans capable of being affected by trauma. This has in particular elided the injuries faced by gay black men, who are often subject to punishment and harm within black communities as well. Though discourses of black cultural deviance produce a more complicated silence around black gay men's sexual practices and HIV status, Hemphill wrote and spoke candidly about his public sexual encounters, challenging the racialized and medicalized frameworks of risk and pathology through which his body had become legible.

¹³¹ "Patient Zero" is the name given to Canadian gay male flight attendant Gaetus Dugas, who was popularly constructed as the "cause" of the AIDS epidemic in North American through his extensive male-male sexual contact. For an in-depth discussion of "patient zero," see Gayle Wald, *Contagious*; Jason Tiemeyer, *Plane Queer*.

Writing explicitly about his public sexual encounters may be the cause for the lack of sustained critical attention to Hemphill's life and work in both African American and black queer/sexuality studies scholarship.¹³² This is especially salient given the explosion of HIV/AIDS in black communities in the current moment. The continuous association of black gay and bisexual male bodies with risk and infection prohibits an engagement with historical legacies like that of Hemphill's, which might confirm the labels of 'at-risk' and 'self-destructive' conferred on black queer bodies by the state. Rather than maintaining the critical silence around Hemphill's work, I suggest instead that scholars look toward Hemphill's expressions of desire as expanding our perspective of black gay bodies from their association with risk and abjection to include their passions and longings, and the role of sexuality in black queer politics. Roderick Ferguson proposes that we rethink Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic "as a social practice and a technique of the self."¹³³ Ferguson locates Lorde's work within a transnational conversation about sexuality post-1960s that saw sexuality as a site of knowledge. He argues that Lorde's work, amongst other feminist theorists, "ask[s] us to reengage the post-1960s world as one in which various movements attempted to rehabilitate sexuality as material for social practice and as a fuel for intellectual production."¹³⁴ I include Hemphill and his contemporaries within this genealogy, and count them among the 'various movements' that 'rehabilitate(d) sexuality as material for

¹³² Notable exceptions include David Bergman, "The Condition of Essex Hemphill"; Dwight McBride, "Can the Queen Speak," Robert Reid-Pharr, "A Child's Life," Thomas Glave, "Re-recalling Essex Hemphill," Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin, "'Black Gay Male' Discourse: Reading Race and Sexuality between the Lines."

¹³³ Roderick Ferguson, "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic.'" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40.3-4 (2012): 297.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 298

social practice and as fuel for intellectual production.’ More precisely, Hemphill deploys queer bodily desire to reveal how both erotic fulfillment and sexualized state violence were produced by and inseparable from the global economic and social transformations occurring during the 1980s. These transformations disproportionately affected urban black people, and produced an even more heightened vulnerability for urban black queer bodies like Hemphill’s.

Hemphill understood that his sexuality was formed in and through the urban black communities that he now envisioned as the beneficiaries of his work and activism. In an interview, Hemphill states, “I love my race enough to know that I’m a Black man first and foremost and that my sexuality falls in line after that.”¹³⁵ Hemphill’s privileging of his racial identity cannot be understood outside of the black political discourse in the post-Civil Rights era, which constructed homosexuality as a force of white supremacist domination. This discourse legitimated the marginalization of black gays and lesbians within black culture and politics, thereby forcing many black gay men to live in silence about their same-sex desires in order to belong within their families and communities. In light of the silencing and rejection many self-identified black gay men experienced within black communities, Hemphill claimed that the most important aspect of his cultural work was the creation of a “functioning self”:

I would discover that homo sex did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate my racial identity or constitute a substantive reason to be estranged from my family and Black culture. I discovered, too, that the work ahead for me included, most importantly, being able to integrate all of my identities into a functioning self, instead of accepting a

¹³⁵ Chuck Tarver. “Untied Inspiration.” *Network*. December, 1990. Accessed Online. <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/culture/black/essex/blessings.html>.

dysfunctional existence as the consequence of my
homosexual desires.¹³⁶

Hemphill's claim contradicted the dominant black political discourse at the time, in particular the work of black liberation psychiatrists who understood black male homosexuality as a psychological dysfunction rooted in white supremacy. Most prominent among these black liberation psychiatrists was DC-based practitioner Frances Cress Welsing. In this quote, Hemphill is responding to Cress Welsing's claims that black male sexual diversity was a psychological maladaptation to racist oppression, which produced, for her, a crisis of survival for the black racial family.¹³⁷ In her 1974 article, "The Politics Behind Black Male Passivity, Effeminization, Bisexuality, and Homosexuality," Cress Welsing argues that white supremacy functions to negate black manhood, which she defines as a relationship between breadwinning and true power. Under this oppressive system, black men, who are frustrated by their failure to meet their true masculine potential, engage in dysfunctional, non-satisfying, obsessive-compulsive patterns in areas like sex, in which they have greater freedom of expression. In sum, she believes that black male gender and sexual non-normativity are psychopathological symptoms of white supremacist domination. Because she maintains that fear of confronting white oppressors lies at the heart of these behaviors, she asserts that the task

¹³⁶ Essex Hemphill. "If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Frances Cress Welsing." *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*, p. 58.

¹³⁷ See Frances Cress Welsing. *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1991. See also Hemphill's response, "If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Frances Cress Welsing," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*. Berkeley: Cleis Press, 2000.

of mothers and psychiatrists is to treat and prevent these behaviors by nurturing strong black men who will risk their lives to liberate black people from white oppression.

In his 1991 essay, “If Freud Had Been A Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing,” Hemphill responds to the psychiatrist for her pathologization of black male gender and sexual diversity. Hemphill’s criticism of Cress Welsing lies primarily in her theorization of homosexuality as psychological maladaptation to racist oppression. He argues that by couching her homophobia within the discourse of black liberation, she ultimately calls for the eradication of black gays and lesbians as its byproduct. Hemphill’s quest to “integrate all of [his] identities into a functioning self” should be understood as his imperative to publicly resist narratives of psychopathology mapped onto the psyche of the black gay male, on which black nationalist’s quest for healthy black psychology depended. It should also be understood as rooted in his lived experience, as an attempt to “function” despite the psychic effects of racism and homophobia and the threat of death accrued from being a black gay male in the U.S. racial state. Given this context, I maintain that, rather than reading Hemphill’s “functioning self” as the antonym to “dysfunctional,” Hemphill’s “functioning self” should be understood as acknowledging past racial and sexual injuries and pointing to a precarious future. We might think of it in the same terms that we think of so-called functioning alcoholics, who move through everyday life, but never escape alcoholism’s debilitating effects or the dangers of relapse. Hemphill’s “functioning self” both rejects immobilizing narratives of psychopathology that would prevent his movement towards life, but does not deny the deleterious psychic and social effects of his lived experience as a black gay man infected with AIDS.

Hemphill's attempt to write the "functioning self" is better illuminated in his elegy, "Heavy Corners," written for his contemporary and friend, black gay writer and activist Joseph Beam. As the poem's title indicates, Hemphill again maps the contradictions of black gay men's psychological and sociological location onto the black urban landscape. The theme of war in the poem alludes to both the state warfare on urban black communities and gay men in the Reagan Era, and the communities' resistance to social and psychic forces that produce black urban isolation and the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS in black gay communities. Hemphill focuses on the increased psychic and social vulnerability of black people in general, and black gay men in particular, within this historical context. The poem begins with the lines:

Don't let it be loneliness
 that kills us
 If we must die
 on the front line
 let us die men
 loved by both sexes

That loneliness can kill "us" contradicts Western conceptions of feelings that construct them as the property of individuals. The "us" implies that "loneliness" is a collective feeling for black gay men. Furthermore, Hemphill imagines loneliness as having the propensity to "kill" and as experienced "on the front line." The militant imagery of the poem is juxtaposed with feelings that are deemed expressions of vulnerability. Hemphill signifies on Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay's poem, "If We Must Die," which begins, "If we must die—let it not be like hogs" (line 1). McKay wrote the poem in the historical context of the Red Summer of 1919, in which more than three-dozen riots occurred in cities across the United States. These riots started at the hands of mostly white laborers who attacked black veterans in response to the post-war competition for

jobs. Literary scholar Marcellous Blount describes McKay's poem as a "bold statement of masculine, racial strategy" and "the first attempt to represent a collective Afro-American self within the tender boundaries of the sonnet."¹³⁸ The juxtaposition between the masculine, collective militancy of the poem's rhetoric and the tender, individualistic form of the sonnet points to why Hemphill may have signified on this poem to address his contemporary experiences of racialized and sexualized state violence. Claude McKay's sonnet provides precedent for Hemphill's writing the "functioning self."¹³⁹ Hemphill's black gay poetics neither deny the vulnerability of the black gay body and psyche, nor do they allow this vulnerability to impede his articulation of a racial and sexual self. We can see in Hemphill's poetics both the debilitating psychic and social effects of violence directed toward black gay men in the eighties, and how black gay expressive culture operates as a collective strategy against state-based and intra-racial violence. Writing, as an act of ending the silence around black queer lives, of creation, of living in the face of and beyond (social) death, becomes the ultimate act of creation of Hemphill's "functioning self."

¹³⁸ Marcellous Blount. "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet." Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden, eds. *Engendering Men*, p. 237.

¹³⁹ Hemphill's militant nationalism also demonstrates his inability to fully delink black nationalism from masculinity. Hemphill's deployment of militaristic imagery also places him under the rubric of what Simon Dickel calls 'gay afro-centrism'—a political ideology held by many of the prominent cultural leaders of the black gay cultural movement of the 80s and 90s. For further discussion, see Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980's and 90s* (Michigan State UP, 2012).

Lonely in the Midst of the Movement

Hemphill took over editing the anthology, *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, after his fellow black gay cultural activist and close friend, Joseph Beam, died of complications from AIDS before completing the project. Beam's mother, Dorothy Beam, was instrumental in the completion of the project, and called upon Hemphill to fulfill and expand upon Beam's vision. Hemphill moved away from Washington, DC, into the Beam family's Philadelphia home in order to complete the project. In an interview in LGBT-themed magazine *Frontiers*, Hemphill explains how the social conditions of black men's lives prompted the creation of *Brother to Brother*. He writes that in the: "context of confronting AIDS and the death around us. It's almost like a fierce resistance that says, 'Before I die, I'm going to say these things.'" ¹⁴⁰ He describes *Brother to Brother* as "37 men who were willing to come forth, [even] posthumously. We're trying to say everything we can." ¹⁴¹ Given the political urgency of the AIDS epidemic and disproportionate amount of deaths in the black gay community, *Brother to Brother* registers as a response to the racist and heteropatriarchal state power that would usher these men to their premature deaths. However, Hemphill frames the creation of the anthology as "fierce resistance," wherein the queer vernacular term "fierce" modifies public resistance associated with blackness. Fierce usually denotes positive appraisal of one's aesthetic style. While this form of queer signifying might indicate that early black gay cultural aesthetics is solely a form of public defiance, Kevin

¹⁴⁰ Randy Boyd. "Ceremonies and Young Men: Interview with Essex Hemphill." *Frontiers*. July 3, 1992. Accessed Online. <http://randyboyd.blogspot.com/2008/08/interview-with-poet-essex-hemphill-1957.html>.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, n.pag.

Quashie argues against reading black expressive culture as exclusively public. Instead he suggests that signifying can express a “compilation of moments of consciousness” that “transcends the focus on public drama and reinforces the importance of the inner life as a part of expressiveness.”¹⁴² Quashie’s emphasis on “the importance of the inner life” applies to black gay expressive culture. Black gay writers like Hemphill openly and defiantly embodied black gay identity, yet their experiences of state-based violence and intra-racial cultural stigma produced emotional pain.

Hemphill addresses the internal struggles of being black and gay in another elegy to Joseph Beam, “When My Brother Fell.” In the beginning stanzas, Beam is imagined as a fallen soldier, leader of a band of “able brothers” (line 15). The first four stanzas celebrate the life and legacy of Beam, attempting to archive the loss experienced by those whom his life had affected. The speaker then addresses Beam directly: “It is difficult/ to stop marching, Joseph,/ impossible to stop our assault” (lines 36-39). The speaker now stands in for Beam on the “front lines”(line 14), attempting to fill a space within the imagined military formation that Beam has previously filled. The speaker states that there are continued “tributes and testimonies/in [his] honor” that “flare up like torches, ” and that “Every night/a light blazes for you/in one of our hearts” (lines 40-45)

The lines of the fifth stanza come into sharp focus in juxtaposition to the image of war carried throughout the rest of the poem:

There was no one lonelier
 Than you, Joseph.
 Perhaps you wanted love
 so desperately and pleaded

¹⁴² See Kevin Quashie (2012), *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*, p. 20.

with God for the only mercy
 that could be spared.
 Perhaps God knew
 You couldn't be given
 More than public love
 in this lifetime.

Upon first glance, it might look as though the speaker is suggesting that Beam's lack of companionship in his private life has caused him to plead with God to let him die.

However, I would like to suggest an alternative reading of Beam's loneliness, one that cannot be understood outside of the psychic and embodied contradictions of being black and gay.

Key to understanding the deployment of the term loneliness, I believe, is the speaker's criticism of the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. The AIDS Memorial Quilt project formed in June of 1987 when "a small group of strangers gathered in a San Francisco storefront to document the lives they feared history would neglect."¹⁴³ The public response to the project was immediate and the quilt project grew to include 8,288 panels and in 1989 toured North America and raised nearly a quarter of a million dollars for AIDS research. Joseph Beam's name is inscribed on a panel of the quilt.¹⁴⁴ The speaker criticizes the AIDS Memorial Quilt, whose mission is "to preserve the powerful images and stories within The Quilt" as an expression of 'public love' that, although publically listing Joseph Beam's name, could not archive his private, internal struggles.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ "The AIDS Memorial Quilt." NAMES Project Foundation Website.
<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>

¹⁴⁴ Beam's panel is red with a blue border. The inscription reads, 'Joseph Fairchild Beam; Dec. 1954-Dec. 1988; Writer-Gay Activist; Philadelphia, PA.'

¹⁴⁵ In *Tangled Memories* (1997), Marita Sturken notes how many critics argued that the AIDS quilt did little to stop an "ongoing war" that produced more deaths than

The irony of Beam's name appearing on the quilt is the veil of secrecy that he maintained during his life about his own illness. In the same interview mentioned above, Hemphill contrasts his openness about his own HIV status against Joseph Beam's "decision" to keep his status a secret until his death. When the interviewer asked him about his status, Hemphill replies, "It's something I haven't even begun to articulate yet. At the most I've come forth in public and said, 'Yes, I am too,' and I've said that because other men have come forth. Joseph [Beam] already showed us one way, and that's not the way I want to go, with the secrecy—though I don't judge him for that."¹⁴⁶ Joseph Beam's dying in silence, especially as a leader of a movement to end the silence around black gay men's lives, reveals how the public efforts of black gay artists and activists to transform their social worlds could not always alleviate their individual psychic pain.¹⁴⁷ Hemphill

Vietnam. This criticism squares firmly with the theme of war in Hemphill's poem and its criticism of the quilt. "The AIDS Memorial Quilt." NAMES Project Foundation Website. <http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>

¹⁴⁶ Randy Boyd. "Ceremonies and Young Men: Interview with Essex Hemphill." *Frontiers*. July 3, 1992. Accessed Online. <http://randyboyd.blogspot.com/2008/08/interview-with-poet-essex-hemphill-1957.html>.

¹⁴⁷ In his letter to Joseph Beam, "You Dared Us To Dream That We Are Worth Wanting Each Other," published in *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1988), Colin Robinson reveals that Beam's close friends did not know how he died, "We still don't know how you died—alone at Christmas—why you died. Suicide--cocaine overdose—AIDS—loneliness. 'All of the above'? AIDS is the official version, but I still need to know. And I am angry with you" (10). Assotto Saint also notes in his introduction to *Here to Dare: 100 Gay Black Poets* (1991) that Beam's body was discovered in an advanced stage of decomposition: "So far no one has given me a valid explanation for Beam's silence regarding his illness. (For those who may not know, his body was discovered in an advanced stage of decomposition.) What kind of indictment of his preaching on behalf of the gay black community is that, for him not to have reached out to us? What kind of indictment is that of us, especially those who were privy to his AIDS diagnosis, for not having fully reached out to him? (xxi).

uses the image of Beam's loneliness in the midst of the movement to speak to these contradictions.

Hemphill's remark about his HIV status, as something he has not even begun to articulate yet, speaks to the "crisis of truth" posed by the historical trauma of HIV/AIDS. Cathy Caruth's theorization of the 'crisis of truth' posed by historical trauma builds on poststructuralist critiques of metanarratives of 'Truth' and 'History,' but advances these theories by suggesting that the unexpected nature of such spectacular forms of violence like the HIV/AIDS epidemic impede our ability to register such events as historical 'fact.' Caruth argues that historical trauma poses a "crisis of truth" by asking how "we in this era can have access to our own history, to a history that is in its immediacy a crisis to whose truth there is not simple access" (2). This "crisis of truth" is evident in Hemphill's work, particularly as Hemphill's elegy to Beam attempts to address the anti-archival impulse of trauma:

I realize sewing quilts
will not bring you back
nor save us

It's too soon
to make monuments
for all we are losing,
for the lack of truth
as to why we are dying,
who wants us dead,
what purpose it serves?

Hemphill "cuss[es] the lack of truth" (line 58), precisely because the historical trauma of HIV/AIDS has thrown truth into crisis. The immediacy of Beam's and Hemphill's histories does not provide them with 'simple access' to the truth of their lives or deaths. Thus Hemphill is left to ask why black gay men are dying, who wants them dead, and

what purpose it serves. Memorializing Joseph Beam was an act of “public love” that could not document the internal struggle that would compel Beam to die in silence, even while he was a leader in the public mission to end the shame and silence in black gay men’s lives.

Citing Essex Hemphill’s poem “For My Own Protection” that begins with the lines, “I want to start an organization/to save my life,” (lines 1-2) Beam writes that his first edited anthology of black gay men’s writing, “*In the Life* is the beginning of that organization. The words and images here—by, for, and about Black gay men—are for us as we begin to end the silence that has surrounded our lives, as we begin creating ourselves, as we begin to come to power” (lines 17-18). However, *In the Life* did not save Beam or Hemphill’s lives, nor did it end the silence in Beam’s life. Beam even writes in his introduction that *In the Life* was meant to “speak for brothers whose silence has cost them their sanity” (18). As Hemphill’s poem reveals, Beam’s psychosocial distress shapes his desire for death, but his desire stems from a longing for black subjectivity beyond the traumas of everyday black (gay) life and (social) death. If the lived experience of blackness locks the black subject into representations of Otherness and a psychic life of social death, then Beam’s “pleading with God” for death, “the only mercy/that could be spared,” operates as a yearning for psychic stability and social freedom beyond the constraints of his abject black queer body and psyche. Sharon Holland argues similarly, “perhaps some people are ready to die because the space imagined—the place of death—is not a dead space but a living space.”¹⁴⁸ Beam’s loneliness can be read as his desire to be in a “living space,” where blackness does not

¹⁴⁸ Sharon P. Holland. *Raising the Dead*, p. 26.

equal (social) death and being black and queer does not require “silence” that will cost the subject’s “sanity.” Essex Hemphill’s abrupt inclusion of the line, “there was no one lonelier/ than you Joseph,” of his wanting “love/ so desperately” therefore registers Hemphill’s longing for a sustainable subjectivity, while it also documents the monumental loss occasioned by the death of Joseph Beam. Hemphill’s constructions of loneliness speak to the (im)possibility of being black and gay in the 1980s, as Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill’s deaths confirm, and black queer longing, as embodied in the text *Brother to Brother*. *Brother to Brother* documents this (im)possibility of being, even as it yearns for a more rich black gay subjectivity.

Essex Hemphill’s Tears

In a video recording of a 1990 speech at the OUTWRITE conference, themed “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer,” Essex Hemphill reads a draft of what will eventually become a part of the introduction of *Brother to Brother*. Hemphill’s speech garnered laughter and applause as he discussed how the infamous images of black male nudes by white gay photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, and how the site of the black male penis alone could “obtain the rapt attention withheld from him in other social and political structures of the gay community.”¹⁴⁹ Yet Hemphill looks like he is visibly filled with mixed emotions. With what looks like anger, confidence, and bit of “SNAP! Queen” performance,¹⁵⁰ Hemphill moves quickly through his speech. But as he begins to

¹⁴⁹ Essex Hemphill. “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer.” Plenary Panel. OutWrite Conference, 1990. San Francisco. Accessed Online. <http://www.frequency.com/video/outwrite-conference-1990-plenary-session/89978348>

¹⁵⁰ In “Black Macho Revisited”(1991), Marlon Riggs writes, “Within the Black Gay community, for example, the Snap! contains a multiplicity of coded meanings... The Snap! can be as emotionally and politically charged as a clenched fist; can punctuate

remark upon how baths, certain bars, bookstores and cruising zones in the 1980s “were more tolerant of black men because they enhanced the sexual ambiance,” he chokes up. He stumbles on the word “ambiance,” causing the ASL interpreter to stop and look at him. He reads more slowly after this moment, and stops periodically to wipe his tears. As he takes an unusually long pause, the audience cheers him on, encouraging him to continue. He wipes his eyes, gives a thumbs up, saying, “There is so much to say,” and continues to the end of his speech.

This speech has been debated within queer theory. Queer studies scholar John Champagne argues that Hemphill’s tears foreclosed criticism of his reading of Mapplethorpe’s photographs as perpetuating racist stereotypes of black male sexuality. Champagne, who attended the conference, labels the politics of Hemphill’s reading of Mapplethorpe, “a politics of tears, a politics that assures the validity of its produced explanation by appealing to some kind of ‘authentic,’ unique, and (thus) uninterrogatable ‘human’ emotion or experience.”¹⁵¹ In response to this claim, black queer studies scholar E. Patrick Johnson maintains, “Champagne’s own ‘bravura’ in *his* reading of Hemphill’s tears illuminates the ways many queer theorists, in their quests to move beyond the body, ground their critique in the discursive rather than the corporeal.”¹⁵²

debate and dialogue like an exclamation point, a comma, an ellipsis; or can altogether negate the need for words among those who are adept at decoding its nuanced meanings” (392). I read Hemphill’s performance as Snap! Queen performance to emphasize how it is “emotionally and politically charged.”

¹⁵¹ John Champagne. *Ethics of Marginality*, p. 59.

¹⁵² E. Patrick Johnson. “Queer Studies, Or Almost Everything I Learned About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother.” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001): p. 7.

Johnson asks about the significance of Hemphill's tears, "What about the authenticity of pain, for example, that may supersede the cognitive and emerges from the heart—not for display but despite display? What is the significance of a black *man* crying in public?"¹⁵³ Johnson's inquiries led me to think about the significance of Essex Hemphill's tears.

Hemphill's public expression of vulnerability as a black gay man both confirms and exceeds the norms of gender. His speech extends the gendered forms of racial self-fashioning evident in his prose and poetry. As Johnson remarks, Hemphill's tears seem to come "despite" the audience's audible support for his speech. Contrary to Champagne's reading of the tears as foreclosing criticism of his reading of Mapplethorpe, Hemphill has received thunderous applause and laughter for his criticism. He only reads the Mapplethorpe images in order to get the audience to understand what he terms "white gay consciousness" in the 1980s. He uses the reference to exemplify how "the post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of black gay men except as sexual objects."¹⁵⁴ Mapplethorpe's images serve as visual texts that analogize a larger white gay political vision. Hemphill's remarks about how the penis becomes the identity of the black male speaks to how black men are viewed in "the context of a gay vision." Furthermore, he remembers how black gay men approached the white gay community "in the struggle for acceptance to forge bonds of brotherhood, bonds so loftily proclaimed as *the vision* of the best gay minds of [his] generation" (my

¹⁵³ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁵⁴ Essex Hemphill. "AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer." Plenary Panel. OutWrite Conference, 1990. San Francisco. Accessed Online. <http://www.frequency.com/video/outwrite-conference-1990-plenary-session/89978348>

emphasis).¹⁵⁵ Again “vision” resurfaces to signal not only visual representations of black men as sexual objects, but also to construct linkages between these representations and black men’s role within a gay *political* vision of a more egalitarian future. Hemphill states that in the context of the 1980s, the “most significant coalitions” between white and black gay men “ha[ve] been created in the realm of sex.”¹⁵⁶ Yet from Hemphill’s lived experience, sex as a ground for interracial politics had failed.

For Hemphill, the black gay male is maintained within the dominant white gay political vision as a sexualized object, as a source of pleasure and object of desire whose sexual labor will never be enough to grant them full citizenship within the white gay community. The discourses of gendered and sexualized difference that have marked black culture as unassimilable within a larger American democratic vision have contributed to black gay men’s sexual objectification and fetishization within a white gay political vision. Hemphill’s speech reinserts the “minds and experiences” of black gay men who have endured such sexual exploitation and racial discrimination. The rejection he experienced in the 1980s by the white gay male community propels him toward a commitment to community building among black gay men and within the broader black community. But as Hemphill looks out upon the audience there are no black men.

Upon closer inspection of the video of his speech, it appears that Hemphill is largely speaking to a white audience, as well as being the only black panelist speaking at

¹⁵⁵ Essex Hemphill. “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer.” Plenary Panel. OutWrite Conference, 1990. San Francisco. Accessed Online. <http://www.frequency.com/video/outwrite-conference-1990-plenary-session/89978348>

¹⁵⁶ Essex Hemphill. “AIDS and the Responsibility of the Writer.” Plenary Panel. OutWrite Conference, 1990. San Francisco. Accessed Online. <http://www.frequency.com/video/outwrite-conference-1990-plenary-session/89978348>

this convention. But Hemphill's speech is written for a black male audience. The title of the anthology, *Brother to Brother*, and the ending of the speech, addressed to "brothers," regarding "our" communities, supports this point. That there are no "brothers" visible in the audience, at least there do not appear to be, gives added context to Hemphill's crying in public. Hemphill's tears display his loneliness in giving a speech to his "brothers" in 1990, at the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, when the black gay community had been decimated by its traumatic impact. AIDS had turned a celebration of black gay cultural production into an occasion for mourning.

Hemphill's tears serve as a proxy for the unquantifiable forms of grief that accumulate from the experience living as a racialized and sexualized subject in America.¹⁵⁷ Circumscribed by cultural stigma, which normalizes violence done to the black body, Hemphill's grief is not only due to the disappearance of his brothers, but because they disappeared without public recognition. Hemphill's tears perform public mourning for a collective grief that has not been and can never be consoled. Fred Moten similarly discusses Mamie Till Bradley's decision to publicly display her son Emmett Till's mangled body after being brutally slain in an act of racial violence. He contends that the public display was prompted by the ease with which the impact of racial violence goes unacknowledged. Moten calls this the "disappearance of the disappearance of Emmett Till," and asserts that the leaving open of the casket performs "an abundance of affirmation in abundance of the negative."¹⁵⁸ Hemphill's tears flow "despite display," to

¹⁵⁷ For further discussion of "racial grief," see Anne Anlin Cheng (2000), *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*.

¹⁵⁸ See Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," in David Eng and David Kanjanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, p. 62.

affirm a loss that can never be quantified, loss obscured by the ubiquity of discourses of black cultural pathology. His tears point us toward a past and future of racial and sexual grief that no cultural practice of memorialization can relieve. The positive critical reception of Hemphill's work, and the celebratory occasion that the OUTWRITE conference promised, failed to register the traumatic loss upon which *Brother to Brother* depended for its production and consumption.

That Hemphill's tears occur 'despite display' also challenges critiques of politics centered on injury, particularly how making injury visible, even by subaltern groups who seek to petition the state for the alleviation of their suffering, serves a liberal political agenda.¹⁵⁹ Though Mamie Till Bradley's decision to leave the casket open is understood as a political *choice* to make racial violence visible on behalf of the black collective, this reading does not account for the operations of trauma, particularly the internal struggle over maintaining one's private grief and testifying publically to an empathetic listener(s).¹⁶⁰ The conventions of black political discourse do not capture the weight of individual trauma and the impulse to tell the world what happened to her son.

¹⁵⁹ For a discussion of the politics of injury as complicit with liberal state forms and capital accumulation, see Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Princeton UP, 1995.

¹⁶⁰ In her exploration of the politics of Mamie Till Bradley's motherhood as significant to the meaning of Emmett Till's death, Ruth Feldstein demonstrates how Bradley's emotionalism secured her respectability, even as her hysteria, encoded as a feminine quality, obscured her role in the politicization of Till's murder. Feldstein calls Bradley's decision to open the casket an 'emotionally infused decision,' capturing the instability of claims that this move was solely a rational political decision to make injury visible. See Ruth Feldstein, "'I Wanted the World To See': Race, Gender, and the Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till." Joanne Meyeritz, ed. *Not June Cleaver, Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960* (1994): 261-305.

Similarly, Hemphill, though trying to keep his composure and a posture of militancy, could not control his grief over the traumatic loss of so many members of the black gay community. The enormity of trauma felt within the body seemed to erupt over and against Hemphill's desire to maintain his composure. Hemphill's tears demonstrate how making injury visible can stem as much from private traumatic affect as it does from deliberate efforts of political mobilization. Labeling injured subjects as complicit with liberal politics begs the question of whether subjects have power over that injury in the first place. Can these bodies even hold trauma without it surfacing 'despite display?' Given the deadly consequences of both silence and visibility, when do you risk silence and when do you risk visibility? Hemphill's tears push us to attend to the tension between the power of injury in black (queer) subject formation and the *instrumentality* of injury to liberalism.

Desiring Blackness

The 1991 publication of *Brother to Brother* signified an important shift in black gay politics—particularly a move towards developing coalitions *within* the black community and away from dominant white gay liberation movements. Hemphill's essay "Does Your Mama Know About Me?" serves as the introduction to the anthology. In the essay he urges black gay men to return "home" to their communities because they needed black heterosexual community members as much as these communities need them. He believed that no one else could do the work of breaking the silence around gender and sexual difference in black communities. But Hemphill sees this as only one aspect of the work black gay men returned home to do. He states that it is the urgency of racialized state violence in black communities that warrants black gay men's return:

Look around, brothers. There is rampant killing in our communities. Drug addiction and drug trafficking overwhelm us. The blood of young Black men runs curbside in a steady flow. The bodies of Black infants crave crack, not the warmth of a mother's love. The nation's prisons are reservations and shelters for Black men. An entire generation of Black youths is being destroyed before our eyes.¹⁶¹

Indeed, Hemphill's return home stems from the abysmal conditions of black urban life in the late 1980s. He writes: "Our communities are waiting for us to come home. They *need* our love, our talents and skills, and we *need* theirs (emphasis added)."¹⁶² It is this profound need for all of the community's resources that compels Hemphill to urge black gay men's return.

Hemphill also claims that black communities privately desire black gay men's return, even as black gay men desire to return to their communities: "They may not understand everything about us, but they will remain ignorant, misinformed, and *lonely for us, and we for them*, for as long as we stay away, hiding in communities that have never really welcomed us or the gifts we bring."¹⁶³ Marlon Ross discusses the historical conditions in which some black gays and lesbians moved away from black communities. Ross demonstrates how pre-Stonewall black lesbians and gays, unlike their white counterparts, had no option of moving to urban centers or to go slumming in black sectors of these urban centers that they called home. They did not have the racial or class

¹⁶¹ Essex Hemphill, "Introduction." *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, p. xx.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. xx

¹⁶³ Essex Hemphill, "Introduction." *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, p. xx

privilege to be independent from their families and communities. So it was not until late 1960s and 1970s and the advent of militant black nationalism, which defined itself against sexual Others, and gay liberation, which offered a rhetoric of racial inclusion, that “embracing European American style autonomous gay identity made *some* sense for *some* black homosexuals” [emphasis in original].¹⁶⁴ Hemphill’s labeling of some post-Stonewall black gay communities as “wandering tribe[s]” that “should not continue standing in line to be admitted in space that doesn’t want us there,” draws on this history, and marks their return home as a product of the empty rhetoric of racial inclusion of the white-dominated gay liberation movement.¹⁶⁵

Black gay men’s rejection upon their return home, however, runs contrary to Hemphill’s claim that the black community is “lonely for us.” Many black gay men needed to come back home to be cared for by their parents because they were dying from AIDS. Some families were discovering for the first time that their relatives were gay.

Hemphill describes these conditions of return:

Too often, families were discovering for the first time that the dear brother, the favorite uncle, the secretive son was a homosexual, a Black gay man, and the unfortunate victim of the killer virus, AIDS. . . For some families this shocking discovery and grief expressed itself as shame and anger; it compelled them to disown their flesh and blood, denying dying men the love and support that friends often provided as extended family. In other instances families were very understanding and bravely stood by their brethren through their final days.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ See Marlon Ross (2000), “Some Glances at the Black Fag: Race, Same Sex Desire, and Cultural Belonging,” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*. p. 203.

¹⁶⁵ Essex Hemphill, “Introduction.” *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, p. xx

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xvii

Hemphill remarks upon larger black communities' ambivalent feelings regarding the AIDS crisis, as the discovery that their family members were dying was often under the auspices of them coming out as gay, and as infected with AIDS. While their dying incited "grief," the stigma attached to their identities and to the virus meant that grief "expressed itself as shame and anger." This ambivalence signals the existence of melancholia in the black community regarding the traumatic loss of the sexual other.¹⁶⁷ In returning home, the sexual other is ingested by the black community as an object of profound resentment, shame and anger. Whereas loneliness invokes the love and nostalgia that initially characterizes the lost object, it does not address the profound resentment that would attend the lost object's return.

We might think then about Hemphill's idealized construction of loneliness for family and community as a way of engaging how Hemphill's queer desire is structured by and through blackness. If blackness is defined as "how subjects have been constituted as black through varying discourses on race" then Hemphill's intersectional identity as a black gay man constitutes him as an 'outsider within' the limits of blackness.¹⁶⁸ The dominant black political discourse of the period constructed black gay men as a type: *the*

¹⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud describes the two-fold process of melancholia in which: "erotic cathexis of his object . . . undergoes a twofold fate: part of it regresses to identification, but the other part . . . is reduced to the stage of *sadism* [*italics added*] . . ." (Freud 173). Ann Anlie Cheng (2000) further maintains: "The melancholic's relationship to the object is no longer just love or nostalgia but also profound resentment. The melancholic is not melancholic because he or she has lost something but because he or she has introjected that which he or she now reviles" (9).

¹⁶⁸ See Habiba Ibrahim, *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiculturalism*, p. xxvii.

black male homosexual. Black nationalist discourse, endorsed by such prominent literary figures as Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka and Eldridge Cleaver, deemed homosexuality a perverse sexual formation of America's internal colonialism and not indigenous to black communities.¹⁶⁹ Thus, for black gay men, freedom meant not only reconstructing their public image beyond that of stereotype, it also meant grappling with the insidious trauma of being marked as an outsider by black political discourse. Ross argues, "For the black homosexual . . . integrating same-sex desire within the self meant finding a way to remain integrated within the home community while remaining true to one's desire" (202).

Throughout Hemphill's work, he continually "returns" to the site of the black family and community through the "language of longing,"¹⁷⁰ as evidenced when he expresses that black families and communities are "lonely for us, and we for them" (42). Even when the conditions of return are structured through black (gay) communities' needs, the embrace of black homosexual is oftentimes animated by profound hostility. Hemphill restages this encounter of black gay men's return to the black racial family and community through expressions of private desire that exist in tension with public needs. In so doing Hemphill transforms the ordinary and individual affect of loneliness into black communal desire, a queer longing for blackness as a private affair, unencumbered by heteropatriarchal political mandates that black hypervisibility has instigated. Hemphill's desire to create a private subjectivity as a hyperracialized and sexualized subject was an impossible

¹⁶⁹ See, Eldridge Cleaver. *Soul on Ice*. New York. Dell, 1968. For a discussion of homophobia in black nationalist discourse, including the work of Amiri Baraka, see Ron Simmons, 'Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals.' *Brother to Brother*, pp. 211-228.

¹⁷⁰ For a discussion of the 'language of longing' in the work of black queer writer Dionne Brand, see Christina Sharpe, 'Response to Jared Sexton's Ante-Anti-Blackness.' *Lateral 2: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association*.

political project, but this did not stop him from trying to create it through his poetry and prose.

Holding Blackness at a (Queer) Distance

Many black gay men's subjectivities have been painfully shaped by their experiences in intimate black familial spaces, and by extension, the larger black community. In his poem "Commitments," Hemphill illustrates the psychic costs of being gay in black communities, of what it means for black gay men to literally and metaphorically "return home":

I will always be there.
 When the silence is exhumed.
 When the photographs are examined
 I will be pictured smiling
 Among siblings, parents,
 Nieces and nephews.
 . . .

I am the invisible son.
 In the family photos
 Nothing appears out of character.
 I smile as I serve my duty.

Through the use of the image of the family photograph in the poem, Hemphill deploys the trope of visibility to explore the silent suffering of black gay men in the home. He describes ordinary black family life captured in photographs of holidays and barbecues. He names the blood relations and expectations of marriage that position the speaker as the sexual other. The speaker poses in the photos so that "nothing appears out of character" (line 34). As a black man the speaker must mask his non-normative sexuality, which has been used as a symbol of black culture's inherent pathologies. The speaker's psychic pain is masked by the fact that he must also "smile as he serve[s] [his] duty" (line 35).

In the photos described in the poem, the speaker's "arms are empty, or around/ the shoulders of unsuspecting aunts/expecting to throw rice at [him] someday" (lines 16-18). It is implied that what is absent from the speaker's arms are the "smallest children" that "are held by their parents" in the photos (lines 14-15). That the speaker lacks offspring not only signals the lack of his fulfillment of his gender role in the kinship network, that is, to produce a progeny that will carry on the family name. The speaker's empty arms also signal his sexual difference, which is a failure to perform and affirm the mandates of compulsory heterosexuality. The speaker's longing arms reveal a private desire that is submerged under the collective political desire for black men to lead and produce the black nation, and the necessity to resist narratives of black cultural deviance that continue to mark the black racial family as non-normative.

Robert Reid-Pharr demonstrates how "the black family" and its crisis has operated as a site for the production of American racial difference, "Our eager willingness to announce the dilemma of the black family turns on. . . the fact that the black family is a key site in the production of the *very* American notion of racial difference, the lie of America."¹⁷¹ Reid-Pharr argues that the trope of the black family does the political work of neatly and visually dividing up blacks and whites "at a glance"¹⁷² Hemphill emphasizes the visual, and structures the poem around the photographic images of a black family during the holidays, suggesting that the poem "Commitments" is a meditation on American notions of racial difference. The photographs tell the lie of America in that they reproduce the fictive notion of black racial difference. This is not to

¹⁷¹ Robert Reid-Pharr. "At Home in America." *Black Gay Men: Essays*, p. 63.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 63.

say that racial blackness does not have real material effects on black bodies or shape black culture. Rather, it affirms that racial difference is still produced through the tyranny of the visual, and that the “epidermalization” of blackness, as inherently pathological, maintains racialism, and by extension, anti-black racism in its myriad formations.¹⁷³

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon famously discusses the psychosocial violence that is constitutive of black experience. In his chapter, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” Fanon describes his own encounter with a young white male child who is terrified at the sight of a black man. In the oft-cited scenario, the child exclaims to his mother, “Maman, look, a Negro! I’m scared!”¹⁷⁴ Fanon vividly portrays how this encounter shaped his own self-image: “My body was returned to me spread-eagled, disjointed, redone, draped in mourning on this white winter’s day.” The white gaze, and the black man’s internalization of this gaze in the construction of his self-image cause “the body schema, attacked in several places” to “collapse(sic), giving way to an epidermal racial schema.”¹⁷⁵ Fanon theorizes blackness as pathology, as the racial Other central to the production of Western notions of progress, civility, psychic and social normativity. The “black man” is different from Western notions of man because “he must be black in relation to the white man.”¹⁷⁶ Fanon’s theorization of how the white

¹⁷³ Frantz Fanon argues in *Black Skins, White Masks* (1967), “If there is an inferiority complex, it is the outcome of a double process: primarily economic; subsequently, the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization of this inferiority” (10).

¹⁷⁴ Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 91

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

gaze induced the arrival “of a new type of man, a new species. A Negro. . .”¹⁷⁷ has been central to black (queer) cultural studies.¹⁷⁸

I extend Fanon’s emphasis on whiteness as central to the constitution of the black self-image to the poetry of Essex Hemphill, particularly what it means for embodied subjects living their lives at the intersection of blackness and queer sexuality. Fanon writes, “I was responsible not only for my body but also for my race and my ancestors. I cast an objective gaze over myself, discovered my blackness.”¹⁷⁹ Though Fanon’s theories are specific to histories of colonization, and different from U.S. black racial struggles, his theorization of blackness as constantly “discovered” by self as pathological being resonates with Hemphill’s poem, “Commitments,” as the speaker of the poem meditates on his present absence in the photographic images of the black racial family. The speaker envisions himself as the “invisible son” in the family photographs. The term “invisible son” invokes Fanon’s claims that the black man exists in “a zone of nonbeing” and is “responsible for [his] race and [his] ancestors.”¹⁸⁰ I contend that the black male homosexual, named only as the “invisible son” in the photograph, sees himself as “being for other,” as his retention within the family as the psychosexual other bolsters black

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 95

¹⁷⁸ See for example, David Marriot *On Black Men* (2000) and *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity* (2007) and Kara Keeling *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (2007), Fred Moten “The Case of Blackness” (2008), Jared Sexton *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism* (2008), Frank Wilderson *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (2010), Darieck Scott *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Sexuality, and the African American Literary Imagination* (2010).

¹⁷⁹ Frantz Fanon. *Black Skin, White Masks*, p. 92.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. xii.

racial claims to normativity and subjective wholeness.¹⁸¹ The black male homosexual as “invisible son” in the black family serves as Other upon which racial/sexual injuries of slavery are projected. Slavery has been constantly “discovered” as the cause of the persisting pathologies of the black family, and, as Hortense Spillers argues, subjected black bodies to “gender undecidability.”¹⁸² The black male homosexual remains a sign of the history of the black bodies’ “gender undecidability,” particularly, of failed heteromascularity.

The black male homosexual also figures as a threat to the biological and political future of the black racial family, that mythic construction that, albeit, pathologized, makes black folks feel at home in America.¹⁸³ The lost object’s (the black male homosexual’s) return to the black family renders the “invisible son” visible, with all the discursive baggage that he bears. The photographic image allows the speaker to cast an “objective gaze over [himself],” discovering blackness as pathological object of the American nation, and furthermore, discover its linkage to the production of black

¹⁸¹ Ibid., p. 89

¹⁸² Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s controversial report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” (1965) popularly known as “The Moynihan Report,” argued that slavery and its legacy were central to the pathologies of the black family. Black feminist literary scholar Hortense Spillers criticizes the Moynihan Report for pathologizing the black family, particularly how it defines black pathology as symptomatic of the “black matriarchy.” Spillers argues that the history of African captivity and enslavement and the New World symbolic order opened up captive black bodies for signification outside of their “respective subject-positions of “female” and “male” and they “adhere to no symbolic integrity” (66). I argue that this “gender undecidability” becomes mapped onto the contemporary figure of the black homosexual within racial liberal and black liberationist discourses.

¹⁸³ See Robert Reid-Pharr, “At Home in America” in *Black Gay Man: Essays* (1999), in which he argues that the “bad black mother,” conjured up constantly in U.S. sociological, political, and cultural inquiry, “creates a home in America. She turns us black” (68).

queerness as the sexual other retained within the black nation. Looking at his smiling presence in the photo, the speaker sees his subjection under the black nation's quest for "masculine, whole subjectivity."¹⁸⁴ Gazing over the photographic image allows the speaker to interrogate the black racial family and the black queer subject as the phobic object of both white American and black cultural nationalisms.

The speaker's queer longing, however, enables him to rediscover his relationship to blackness through bodily desire. I would like to think about the image of "empty arms" or arms "around/the shoulders of unsuspecting aunts" as symbolic of Hemphill's black queer longing. The image suggests a metaphorical longing to embrace the black racial family, as symbolized in the "shoulders of unsuspecting aunts" that precludes the possibility of embracing a same-sex lover. In fact the speaker further proclaims that his arms are "so empty they would break/around a lover" (lines 26-27). The speaker's arms are empty in photos of Thanksgiving and Christmas, wherein the Thanksgiving turkey is "steaming the lens." Whereas the "hazy smoke of barbecue" was, in a prior stanza, "in the background of the photographs," that the turkey is now "steaming the lens" implies that the optic gaze has become blurred, rather than the object of the gaze. Under closer scrutiny the very traditions, like the turkey, that the black racial family coalesces around, reveal themselves to be clouding the speaker's gaze. In other words, whiteness, which requires black assimilation, but depends upon narratives of black pathology for its dominance, reveals itself as structuring the speaker's frame of vision.

¹⁸⁴ Amy Abugo Ongiri (1997) argues that black gay cultural activists structured their critique of the absence of the black body from a discourse of gay rights through a direct reappropriation of discourses of Black nationalism. She suggests black nationalists longed for a "masculine, whole subjectivity to compete with the physical and psychic threat of disintegration incited by acts of racist violence against the black body" (281).

The speaker's longing arms can only finally be filled by the birth of the text itself. In the introduction to *In the Life*, Joseph Beam anthropomorphizes the written text as a male child: "Together, we, the contributors gather here, have fathered a child—and it's a boy. He is strong and healthy and eager to be in the world."¹⁸⁵ The speaker can finally fill his "empty arms" with the "smallest child" as embodied in the text. By claiming the written texts as the embodied child, I am suggesting that it provides an alternative structuring for black intimacy. Hemphill's work embodies racial and sexual longing, of empty arms unfulfilled by lover's embrace, even too fragile for such an embrace, that can only be relieved as his writing "touches" others "across time."¹⁸⁶ Hemphill's poetry and prose refuse to refuse the pathology of the black racial family and community, yet yearns for forms of intimacy outside of the constrained space and time of biological life and (social) death that the black racial family embodies. Hemphill's embodied texts produce alternative forms of black intimacy across time and space in their ability to empower future readers, as a testament of these men's radical will to live in the face of death, and by allowing their visions for a richer black queer subjectivity to live on. Contemporary (black queer) readers can, finally, reach across time to wrap their arms around them.

As I have discussed, Hemphill's work illustrates how negative affect can also express political longing for more capacious conceptualizations of identity, community, and intimacy. I extend my attention to the productive power of negative affect in my next chapter on New York City-based, black gay writer's group, Other Countries Collective. However, in this chapter I focus on the politics of mourning. Given the

¹⁸⁵ Joseph Beam, "Introduction." *In the Life*, p. 16.

¹⁸⁶ Carolyn Dinshaw argues that contemporary readers and their queer ancestors can "touch across time," thereby "collapsing time through affective contact between marginalized people then and now" in order to "form communities across time" (178).

traumatic impact of the AIDS epidemic on black gay men in NYC, mourning became a quotidian, yet painful, part of black gay life. Through the example of *Other Countries*, I explore how central death and mourning were to black gay aesthetics, (collective) identity-formation, and politics. Through this historical case study, I exemplify how melancholic mourning can simultaneously be a force of subjection, and a “vital force” in black gay culture and politics.

Chapter 4: Post-Mortem Politics: Other Countries Collective and Black Queer Mourning

The late 1970s and early 80s saw the rise and widespread influence of black lesbian feminist publications. The work of Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press and single-author publications by Audre Lorde, amongst others, transformed the discourse of feminism, and gained influence among black women and men. Isaac Jackson, founder of the black gay men's writer's group Blackheart Collective, noted the strong presence and creative activity of black lesbian feminists in New York City, but regretted that nothing like this was happening for black gay men.¹⁸⁷ New York City-based, black gay men's organization, Committee of Black Gay Men, which began in the late 70s, expressed their aversion to working with women, and policed black gay men who did not align themselves with normative masculine gender presentations.¹⁸⁸ Given this context, Jackson and eleven other black gay men founded the Blackheart Collective in the summer of 1980, in hopes of building on the work of black lesbian feminists and building coalitions with them. The group included musicians, dancers, painters, and writers with a central focus on "put[ting] out writing by men who identified as being black and gay."¹⁸⁹ The result was a pamphlet-sized journal, entitled *Yemonja*, released in the spring of 1982. The collective published a second journal in 1984 titled, "Blackheart 2: The Prison Issue," which included writings on prison and the effects of the carceral state on society. According to historian Kevin McGruder, organizing the issue around this theme

¹⁸⁷ Kevin McGruder, "To Be Heard in Print: Black Gay Writers in 1980s New York" *Obsidian III 6.1* (2005): 49-67.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 52.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p.52.

demonstrated the collective's desire for a broad-based political platform while focusing on the specific concerns of the black gay community.¹⁹⁰

The collective went through a process of formal incorporation after the second journal was released, with Isaac Jackson as its president, and Audre Lorde as a member of its board of directors. Under Jackson's direction, Blackheart released a third journal in 1985, "Blackheart 3: The Telling of Us." The publication of "Blackheart 3" signaled a shift in the political desires of this collective of black gay men. Submissions for this publication developed out of a summer workshop in which black gay male writers came together regularly to share their work and further develop their craft. This workshop structure followed the direction of black lesbian feminist writers and activists in New York City. McGruder points out that the work of black lesbian feminist writers "grew out of a community of black feminist writers and activists who had a strong presence in New York City and a vibrant social network that hosted readings at area cafes, organized rallies and demonstrations."¹⁹¹ Their participation in the summer workshop and their coalitions with black lesbian feminists inspired them to create a community that would sustain them as individuals, and as writers. This desire for community became the driving force behind the development of a new black gay men's organization, Other Countries Collective.

In the June of 1986, Daniel Garrett, Colin Robin and Isaac Jackson distributed flyers advertising a new black gay men's writer's workshop called Other Countries. The name Other Countries was inspired by James Baldwin's 1962 novel *Another Country*,

¹⁹⁰ Kevin McGruder, "To Be Heard in Print: Black Gay Writers in 1980s New York." *Obsidian III*, p.53.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.52.

which was Baldwin's first novel to include a black man who expressed same-sex desire explicitly. However, Rufus, the black queer character in the novel, commits suicide early on in the text. The rest of the novel is driven by his death. Rufus's suicide demonstrates how death oftentimes haunts black queer cultural production. In the tradition of Baldwin, who influenced many of the writers of this period, death and mourning were as important to the work of Other Countries as the desire for community and political visibility. This chapter explores the significance of death and mourning to the development of black gay men's cultural production and activism at the height of the AIDS epidemic, examining the case of black gay men's writer's group, Other Countries Collective, in particular. In the context of the AIDS epidemic and its massive, yet largely unremarked, impact on black gay men in New York City, death and mourning became a part of black gay men's everyday life-worlds, as well as a generative site for cultural development and (collective) self-preservation. Death and mourning also fueled black gay men's activism. In what follows, I give an overview of the history of the organization, focusing in particular on its major components—the writers' workshop, poetry performances, and publications. Then, I read closely elegiac poems and prose from their second publication, *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993) to outline how black gay aesthetic forms are mutually imbricated in historically and culturally specific practices of mourning. Finally, I draw on interviews from surviving members of the group to discuss how mourning has been a central aspect of black gay activism, examining in particular an uprising that occurred at the funerals of one of Other Countries' most prominent members, Donald Woods.

In my focus on black queer mourning, I contribute to the scholarly discourse on what has been called “melancholic mourning.” Sigmund Freud distinguished between mourning and melancholia as “normal” and “abnormal” forms of grief, respectively.¹⁹² Literary and cultural studies scholars have revised Freud’s conceptualization of melancholia as pathological, and brought into stark relief the normalizing impulse of mourning, noting how it excludes non-normative subjects. Scholars such as Michael Moon, Jahan Rahmanazi, and José Muñoz have, instead, posited a theory of “melancholic mourning,” not as pathological, but as aesthetically, culturally, and politically productive for racial and sexual minority subjects.¹⁹³ Greg Forter argues against the recuperation of melancholia for minority politics, however, noting that these theories do not account for the lived experience of melancholia, the negative affective impact this experience has on subjects: “For those of us who have experienced the bleak and joyless deadness of depression, it is hard to see how this cultivation can be seen as politically liberating.”¹⁹⁴ I agree with Forter that these theories seem out of touch with the lived reality of melancholia. However, the case of Other Countries might suggest otherwise. For members of Other Countries, melancholia was not synonymous with the Freudian vision of melancholia, which, according to Forter, is characterized by “numbed disconnection and self-loathing whose logical conclusion is suicide.”¹⁹⁵ Rather, the perpetual deaths of friends and loved ones at the height of the AIDS epidemic, coupled with black men’s experiences of racism and homophobia in the public sphere, produced a historically and

¹⁹² Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”

¹⁹³ Jahan Rahmanazi, *Poetry of Mourning*; Michael Moon, “Memorial Rags: Emerson, Whitman, AIDS, and Mourning,” *Professions of Desire*; José Muñoz, “Photographies of Mourning,” *Disidentifications*.

¹⁹⁴ Greg Forter, “Against Melancholy,” *differences*, p. 139

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139

culturally specific form of melancholic mourning, animated by a desire for collectivity and self-determination. My historical and literary analysis intervenes in the aforementioned scholarly discourse on melancholic mourning by demonstrating its historical role as a force of subjection alongside its productive power in black gay men's everyday lives, aesthetic production, and political mobilization at the height of the AIDS epidemic in New York City.

In The Upper Room

Participants became involved with the Other Countries writing workshop in myriad ways. Allen Wright heard about Other Countries in Chicago's local gay paper before moving to New York City. After moving to New York, a friend, who knew of Wright's interest in writing, informed him about the group's formation. Wright began attending the workshop shortly thereafter. G. Winston James learned about the group during his junior year as a student at Columbia University. James found out about the writer's group after attending the meetings of Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), a local black gay organization founded in 1986, and dedicated to the empowerment of black gay men through providing opportunities for fellowship and group support. He joined the writer's collective and "quickly felt a sense of belonging and an awareness of the group's importance to [him] as a writer and the importance of belonging to a community of black gay men."¹⁹⁶ After moving from Oakland to New York City in 1988, Marvin K. White also joined the group after participating in GMAD. In my interview with him, White described learning about the group as his "first exposure to a tribe of

¹⁹⁶ Interview with G. Winston James, 2013.

people called black gay poets.”¹⁹⁷ White began workshopping poems at Other Countries writer’s workshop, and because of this, he had a poem ready when Assotto Saint issued a call for work for his groundbreaking collection, *The Road Before Us: 100 Black Gay Poets* (1991) at a later GMAD meeting.

The workshop structure varied over the decades, but early workshops featured thematic presentations by former Blackheart Collective member and Other Countries co-founder, Daniel Garrett. Garrett provided members with excerpts from the writings of Michel Foucault, Derek Walcott, Shulamith Firestone, Audre Lorde, and others in advance, which the group would read and discuss during the weekly workshops. Writers also arranged a week in advance for their work to be peer-reviewed during the upcoming workshop. Attending members gave “first impressions,” then the evening’s moderator would offer more in-depth commentary on the piece being discussed. The level of skill of those attending the workshop varied between those who had never presented work before in a public venue, and “serious” writers, whose primary aim was to improve drafts of their work with more seasoned writers. The “seriousness” of one’s writing and one’s dedication to the craft became a source of tension within the group. Allowing amateur writers to participate aligned with the group’s political aims of outreach to and fellowship with the local black gay community; but this effort clashed with the group’s interest in cultivating a black gay aesthetic and a rich body of black gay men’s literature worthy of preservation. According to Marvin K. White, the prize for paying one’s membership dues and attending the workshop regularly was to be published in an anthology or to be invited to perform with the group. But divisions within the group based on raw talent and

¹⁹⁷ Interview with Marvin K. White, 2013.

dedication to the craft of writing guaranteed that not everyone in the group was granted this prize.

Another essential part of the workshop was the afterhours fellowship. The participants fellowshipped over dinner after the workshops, either at a nearby restaurant or at a member's home. G. Winston James remarked on the feeling of the group as both social gathering and writing workshop, "There really was a sense that these men were not only fellow writers, but kindred spirits, in some cases, friends."¹⁹⁸ Allen Wright described the afterhours socials as an alternative to the more "established places" for the formation of queer publics:

The two-hour workshops gave way to more hours at dinner in a local restaurant. . .we'd go to someone's home and continue the conversations, the flirtations, there was music, a little dancing, laughter, an opening into ourselves and each other that was new and real and, yes, exciting, so different and so welcome. It was something that hadn't existed in the established places we'd been going to find each other: bars, bathhouses, parties, parks, orgies, dance clubs, tea rooms. None of those things gave us the space to share ourselves without apology, more completely, or potentially so, for even that potential was exciting.¹⁹⁹

Wright's critique of the "established places" raises questions about how sites of queer world-making in New York might produce their own forms of institutionalization and modes of disciplining sexuality.²⁰⁰ The afterhours social spaces for sharing one's self "without apology, more completely, or potentially so" fostered a form of eroticism not

¹⁹⁸ Interview with G. Winston James, 2013.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with Allen Wright, 2013.

²⁰⁰ Scholars such as Douglas Crimp, Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner have reconfigured promiscuity as a critical site of intimacy and prevention for gay men during the AIDS epidemic. Wright's critique of the established sites and modes of gay male intimacy suggests that there are some racial limits to Berlant and Warner's positing of gay male promiscuity during the AIDS epidemic as "a common language of self-cultivation, shared knowledge, and the exchange of inwardness."

organized around genital pleasure and queer bodily desire. The afterhours space opened up erotic possibilities for black gay men to be with each other for (collective) self-creation beyond sexual contact.

The poetry section of Other Countries's first published journal, *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices* (1988), begins with Donald Woods's poem, "In the Upper Room." Woods dedicates the poem to the men of Other Countries. The poem attempts to "nail down the moment/the deliberate embrace"(ll. 21-22) of black gay men's collectivity, describing it as "the smelly new/ act of love" (ll. 23-24). The "Upper Room" of the poem refers to the physical meeting space of the collective at the LGBT Community Center in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York City. According to group member Allen Wright, the first workshops took place in a room on the highest floor of the center's east wing, ironically, a former restroom decorated with art by pop artist and social activist Keith Haring. G. Winston James described the workshop's location as a "practical and community matter" because the room rental fee was cheap and it was "a fixed place to meet in a neighborhood and locale that felt relatively safe (if not empowering) for gay people." Indeed, Marvin K. White remembers how the train ride from Harlem to "The Center" was transformative, and allowed him to peel away the layers of performance necessary to negotiate the black spaces of Harlem.²⁰¹ White believes that, for him, and he imagined for others, meeting at the center operated as a mode of escape, as a space that

²⁰¹ White stated in an interview, "Because it was a gay center, it allowed us to be far more open. . . I can only imagine the first stop furthest from home you take that deep breath, by the third stop, you know no one in your neighborhood goes that far down, so you take off your jacket. Two more stops down, you take off those pants and you have on your glitter short. [laughter] You just get closer and closer to the Village and transform. By the time people got to the workshops, they were ready. They had peeled a lot of stuff away." Interview with Marvin K. White, 2013.

allowed for a diversity of gender and sexual expressions, without having to compromise one's relationship to black family and community. Kevin McGruder mentioned that the center's central location was convenient for participants, regardless of where they lived in the city, and strategic for soliciting participation from center visitors. The location in The West Village was also practical because it provided a location with multiple restaurants and bars where the group members could engage in their ritual of socializing after the workshop.

The religious imagery of the poem's title also gives the space and the act of a collectivity a sacred dimension, as the Upper Room in the Christian tradition was the site of the last supper Christ shared with his disciples before his crucifixion. Like the disciples anticipating Christ's death, White anticipated the death of this older generation of writers, all of whom were dying of AIDS. Therefore, the imagery of "The Last Supper" is fitting because the workshop was also a place where attendees watched each other die. Marvin K. White described his encounter with the more established writers of the group like Donald Woods, Bertram Hunter, Assotto Saint, and Roy Gonsalves much like "The Last Supper" alluded to in Woods's poem. He defined his experience in the group as "learning how to write while these men were learning how to die."²⁰² White recalled how Assotto Saint, preempting the members' deaths, would hand out forms and pamphlets on how to arrange and organize one's literary estate. Part of White's responsibility as a member of the group was to care for ailing members; he remembered an occasion when Assotto Saint asked him to go take some soup to Donald Woods when he had become too sick to leave his home.

²⁰² Interview with Marvin K. White, 2013.

Woods's layered spatial metaphor of sacred communion before death and the meeting location within the New York City's most infamous gay district also captures the competing aims of the workshop: to establish a private space of creative (self) expression, while asserting the presence and significance of racial difference in New York City's gay community. Their commitment to meeting at The Center attests to the latter. In 1992, Center of the Rainbow, "the first ever creative arts and community meeting center serving the lesbian and gay people of color community and general public," emerged as a new home for queer of color artists and cultural organizations.²⁰³ Other Countries's board of directors held their first meeting at the space in September of that year. Yet the writing collective committed themselves to alternating their meetings between their new home and the newly renovated "Charles Angel/People of Color Room" at The Center, dedicated to "the struggle against racism, sexism, and homophobia."²⁰⁴ Claiming their space within The Center signaled their commitment to making their presence felt within the gay community that the center symbolized.

The men of Other Countries Collective also expressed their desire for privacy, well aware of the inherent politicization of any space where black men gather for collective self-expression. Black lesbian writers and activists had deployed spatialized tropes of privacy and intimacy, such as "Kitchen Table," to assert their black feminist

²⁰³ "Letter to Ron Simmons," Black Gay Aesthetics Folder, Box 5, Ron Simmons Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

²⁰⁴ GMAD and Men of All Colors Together, a group dedicated to ending racism in the gay community, and celebrating queer interracial desire and diverse queer aesthetics, believed renovating the room would "provide a tangible focus and visibility to the often unacknowledged role of people of color in LGBT struggles. "Letter to Ron Simmons," Black Gay Aesthetics Folder, Box 5, Ron Simmons Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

politics, reconfiguring the domestic tropes that have historically confounded articulations of black womanhood, and excluded gender and sexual minorities from the boundaries of the black racial family and community. During their performance to commemorate the life of Joseph Beam, *Other Countries* articulated a desire for a space of intimacy, like their black feminist contemporaries. The dramatic performance consisted of three voices reading lines from Joseph Beam's introduction to *In the Life*:

Voice 1: We have few traditions like those of Black women.

Voice 3: No kitchen tables around which to assemble.

Voice 2: No intimate spaces in which to explore our feelings of love and friendship.

Voice 1: We gather in public places:

Voice 1: barber shops,

Voice 2: lodges,

Voice 3: fraternities,

Voice 1: and street corners,

Voice 2: places where bravado rather than intimacy [is] the rule.

Voice 1: We assemble to *do* something rather than *be* with each other.

In deploying feminized tropes of intimacy, these men enacted a refusal of the gender and sexual divide that naturalized the male dominated black public sphere. While scholars from Elliot Liebow to Melissa Harris Perry have politicized black male-centered spaces such as the street corner and barbershop, respectively, these scholars have been less attentive to quotidian spaces where black gay men have gathered to “develop understandings of their collective interests and create strategies to navigate the complex political world.”²⁰⁵ However, OC's rejection of the imperative to “do something” rather

²⁰⁵ Melissa Harris Perry, *Barbershop, Bibles, and BET*, p. 1; Elliot Liebow, *Tally's Corner*, p. 55; Perry discusses the limited notions of black manhood and the suspicion of women in the space of the barbershop, noting how narrow limits of masculinity often excluded black gay men from political participation. There is one representation of a gay

than to “be with each other” critiques notions of black male collectivity solely defined in and through resistance.²⁰⁶ Their desire to simply “*be* with each other” gestures toward a retreat from the gendered political demands of “doing something,” at least momentarily, in order to privately explore their shared experiences as black gay men, and as black men, more broadly.²⁰⁷ Exploring feelings of love and friendship between men threatens state-sanctioned gender binaries codes employed in black communities. Their yearning for the privacy of the “Upper Room” grew out of the hope that it might shield them temporarily from the insidious and overt forms of racism and homophobia that they negotiated daily, forces that converged to produce the Upper Room as a space of mourning.²⁰⁸ Their performance in commemoration of Beam expresses a longing for privacy in the face of the historical scrutiny placed on black intimacy, and a yearning for a space in which to express other ways of *being* black, and being black with each other.²⁰⁹

More than just a writer’s collective, the men of Other Countries Collective envisioned the Upper Room and the afterhours socials as spaces to collectively grieve and heal. For Daniel Garrett, at least, the workshop developed, in part, to collectively

man in *Tally’s Corner*. Calvin is described as “a frail and ailing forty-year-old alcoholic and homosexual who looked after the children [Leroy’s] in exchange for a place to live.” Liebow describes the children’s attachment to Calvin, more so than their father Leroy, and that Calvin, “when he could summon the courage,” often interceded on behalf of the children when Leroy dealt out punishment.

²⁰⁶ See Kevin Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet* for a discussion of the centrality of resistance in black culture.

²⁰⁷ This gesture can also problematically re-inscribe femininity as “being” and not “doing,” a conceit that comes dangerously close to disavowing women’s activism, by which they were heavily influenced.

²⁰⁸ In *Golden Gulag*, Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines racism as “the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”

²⁰⁹ For an in-depth discussion of the politics of privacy and intimacy in black literature and culture, see Candice Jenkins, *Private Lives, Proper Relations*.

grapple with the psychic weight of racial and sexual difference. Garrett captures this in his essay, “Other Countries: The Importance of Difference.” Garrett describes the creation of Other Countries as an effort to ameliorate, or at least collectively acknowledge, the social conditions that produced his own melancholy, a feeling he imagined to be shared among other black gay men:

It would be dishonest to pretend that my interest in beginning Other Countries was merely intellectual, as it was not. In a relatively short period of time (two years), I had been disappointed by what I perceived as my parents’ inability to grow with me past my childhood years; disappointed by two close male friends who refused to accept my sexuality (before this, I had begun to see friends as family, as life); disappointed by my failure to find a lover among the men I was meeting, men committed to the pleasure of anonymous, promiscuous sex; disappointed as well by less personal things: a young Black male landlord’s exploitive dishonesty and incompetence; the homophobia encountered during a brief stay in Harlem; being mugged twice by groups of young Black men, once at gunpoint; and, importantly, the poverty of vision and power of Black organizations. This disappointment had produced anger, pain, contempt, and fear. Fear. The workshop would be a way of re-connecting with something I thought might still be a vital force.²¹⁰

The workshop, for Garrett at least, was a way to “heal some of these wounds”²¹¹ accrued from his own subjective life, which had been impacted by his daily, oftentimes violent, negotiations of the public sphere as a racial and sexual minority. Ultimately Garrett left the organization the next year, but the workshop format opened up a space for dialogue amongst black gay men, a “re-connecting with something.” That “something” acts a place-holder, holding open the possibilities for a “vital force” to emerge from that space.

²¹⁰ Daniel Garrett, “Other Countries: The Importance of Difference,” *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, p. 19

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19

If the “Upper Room” provided a space of privacy, intimacy, sanctuary and mourning for black gay men, then their performances set out to transform the (black) public sphere that Garrett identifies as critical to the social production of black gay melancholy.

Creative Empowerment

Other Countries Collective insisted on creativity as “an indispensable element of organizing people politically. . .”²¹² However, within the political climate of gay liberation, and AIDS activism in particular, members believed that cultural and intellectual activity had become devalued aspects of the movement, “often regarded as secondary to more conventional organizing strategies, rather than the primary and powerful forms of empowerment they are in their own right.”²¹³ In light of this devaluation, Other Countries put their poetry to work, adapting the printed word for performance, so that the group could “take its work into the culture’s communal spaces—most notably the bars—and provide audiences in these spaces with rare reflections of their lives.”²¹⁴ The group dubbed their work in black gay communities “creative empowerment,” encouraging people “to think, act and express themselves autonomously.”²¹⁵ Their performances covered a range of issues relevant to black communities, and they performed at venues where the presence and solidarity of black gay men was in demand. Select group members performed in a diverse array of venues, including: national universities such as Rutgers and Yale; local and regional black gay nightclubs like Tracks in New York City and Nob Hill in Washington, DC; bookstores

²¹² “Chicago Resource Center Funding Proposal,” June 1988, Box 1, Other Countries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Cultures

²¹³ Ibid., p.5

²¹⁴ Ibid., p.5

²¹⁵ Ibid., p.1

such as Giovanni's Room in Philadelphia; and black cultural venues such as The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture and the Studio Museum, both in Harlem, New York. As early as 1988, the group had reached over 2500 men and women and entertained, educated, and affirmed audiences from 1 to 800.

Other Countries Collective achieved their goals of communicating with wide-ranging audiences by presenting literature as a legitimate form of entertainment. The group experimented with genres, once holding a weekend workshop with choreographer Ron Brown and writer Craig G. Harris that integrated movement and literature as performance art. The group did not see literary activity as separate from other forms of black gay popular culture, instead they drew on the performative aspects of literature and integrated it into popular culture expressions. One performance in particular exhibits the group's attempt to present literature as inseparable from other black gay popular cultural forms. The group held a performance entitled "Libido Lit: 101" at the Tracks nightclub in New York City. The event featured readings of erotic literature by prominent black gay writers Essex Hemphill, Samuel Delany, and Assotto Saint, and was hosted by popular black gay porn star and Robert Mapplethorpe model, Joe Simmons. The event served as a fundraiser for the group's first publication. Simmons read a poem written by OC member Steve Langley, titled "Confection": "i am/ chocolate candy/ a handful of cookies/ the goods you are/ forbidden to eat."²¹⁶ The audience expressed their disappointment during the performance because Simmons did not remove his clothes. Hemphill and Delaney attempted to speak over the audience, who were annoyed by the fact that the music had been shut off. One person shouted at Delany, "Get off the stage,

²¹⁶ Steve Langley, "Confection." *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, p. 43.

Santa Claus!” Assotto Saint shouted back at the crowd to no avail. Saint was dressed in a tight, red and black, zebra-print mini-dress, cinched at the waist with a wide, tri-clasp bodice belt and matching black pumps. He was made up, but with no wig. Tired of the crowd’s jeers, he turned around, lifted his skirt, and, defiantly, showed his ass. Allen Wright describes the event as “disastrous, but not failed.”²¹⁷ Wright notes the importance of black gay men’s erotic lives in the context of the epidemic: “Yes, there is a monster out there devouring us from the inside out, but tonight, we are alive and strong and our desire for each other is good and real, needs to be seen, told and remembered. . . ‘And tonight we dance!’ was the response from our audience.”²¹⁸ If OC understood performance as their most powerful and immediate strategy for *communicating* with new audiences, then highlighting the audience’s response demonstrates the benefits of such a model. Performance as a mode of communication allowed audiences to speak back and articulate how expressions of bodily desire and dance were equally powerful forms of “creative empowerment” in the context of the epidemic.

The group also staged a series of annual performances for World AIDS Day at the Studio Museum in Harlem. On December 1, 1989 they performed “Acquired Visions,” which they would later present at Syracuse and Yale universities. They performed “Seeing Through AIDS/Seeing AIDS Through” on December 1, 1990. And their third in this series of performances was “Behavioral Change: A Prescriptive Performance for the Second Decade of HIV,” which they also produced at SUNY-Oswego, Rutgers-New Brunswick, and at the Lesbian and Gay Community Services Center, where they held their weekly writing workshops. “Behavioral Change” featured an ensemble cast of

²¹⁷ Interview with Allen Wright, 2013.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

group members reading selected AIDS-themed poetry from writing group participants. The third and final show of the series debuted a shift in their thinking about the AIDS epidemic. The show opens with a dialogue about black gay men's sexual and emotional lives after enduring a decade of the epidemic:

Part 1.

Shoot, I'm glad men are reclaiming their bodies enough to want to fuck like crazy again. Lemme just touch it one time Mister Man!

Voice: Safely of course?

(Whips out string of condoms) Just doing my part for our boys in uniform.

Part 2.

Well if that's what we've come to, then I want no part of it. We have been doing these AIDS shows for 3 years. And let's face it, we've done terror and mourning and fear. . . So now that we're in the second decade of this shit, what's different? All that other stuff was important, but what's different—more specifically, how have *we* changed?²¹⁹

The initial conversation alludes to the discourses of safe sex that emerged during the epidemic, and how the epidemic changed gay men's sexual practices so that risk became much more of a central factor.²²⁰ The figurative voice of safety haunts the conversation, paralleling how the state apparatus and moral discourses inside and outside of the gay community are enacted in gay men's everyday sexual choices. But the second voice "want[s] no part of it." The trauma of the AIDS epidemic had produced "terror and

²¹⁹ "Behavioral Change Epilogue," Box 1, Other Countries Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

²²⁰ For discussions of how the risk associated with HIV/AIDS has shifted gay men's sexual cultures and practices, see Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *Policing Public Sex*; Simon Watney, *Policing Desire*. For a discussion of transgressive sexual cultures in the so-called "post-AIDs" moment, see Tim Dean's *Unlimited Intimacy*.

mourning and fear” as a structure of feeling for black gay men. The second voice’s inquiry, as to “what’s different?” and how the black gay community has “changed,” indicates a desire for structural transformation, to end the cultural shame and public stigma attached to the virus within the (black) public sphere. The subtitle of the performance as “prescriptive” reroutes understandings of the virus outside of medicalized and psychologized discourses so that solutions for psychic healing of the community are determined by the community itself. In this context the “behavioral change” of the title is less about transforming black gay men’s sexual practices and more about a working through of melancholic subjectivity produced in the context of the epidemic.

The members of Other Countries sought to shift the institutionalized discourse regarding HIV/AIDS, especially in regard to its psychic and social impact on black gay men’s lives. Other Countries’s performance at the Studio Museum held significance as it “gain[ed] [them] entry to one of the gatekeeping institutions of black culture.”²²¹ Discussing their invitation to perform at the Studio Museum, Colin Robinson hesitated being labeled the “voices of AIDS” within black cultural discourse, suggesting that the label threatened to confine black gay subjectivity to an abject state of suffering or as a phobic object and carrier of contagion that threatens to pathologize the black community. According to Allen Wright, who toured with the group during their performance of Behavioral Change, the performance was considered too provocative for the Studio Museum, and the group was not invited back. Their efforts to represent themselves as complex subjects must have exceeded the categories prescribed for them within the black public sphere. That the group even risked this discursive trap attests to their unwavering

²²¹ Colin Robinson, “Sojourner: An Abandon Manifest,” G. Winston James, ed. *Voice Rising*, 2007

commitment to the performative power of poetry to transform their own lives, the lives of their community, and society, more broadly.

In their epilogue to “Behavioral Change,” the group performed a call and response poem that highlights the specificity of their position as racial and sexual minorities within the fight against AIDS:

Men are writing lies

Can a poem be a demonstration

For poems

A wafer sailing through the air at St. Patrick’s

Their intentions grand

A cadaver in the street

But they can’t make change with words they are

I sit

Silent and their words lie

and want our words to change the world

about the deafening din of silence

Careful

Men can’t make change with poems

Fear pins our anger to the page

The show-up does not suffice

Sit still

Men don’t make change at all

let the words take action

but regurgitate and rehash the shit

Publish them into the world

let them go where I am afraid

Stand and give testimony

This excerpt offers a critique of the direct action protests against the HIV/AIDS epidemic by such groups as AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP)-New York. The poem expresses the group’s anxieties about the political activity of ACT UP, a group that had become infamous for protests like the “Stop the Church” campaign alluded to in the line “A wafer sailing through the air at Saint Patrick’s,” and the “political funerals” conjured

in the line “A cadaver in the street.”²²² However, mass media attention directed towards ACT UP, as a majority white organization, continually reaffirmed the subject of AIDS as white gay men, thereby erasing black gay male bodies from this symbolic field. The poem further alludes to how fear prohibited black gay men’s participation in such public demonstrations. In his reflection on his involvement in leadership in ACT UP-New York, black gay activist Allan Robinson contemplates about how things might have fared if the majority of those involved in ACT UP’s civil disobedience had been black and Latino: “I think Black and Latino men and women really have to process on becoming involved in civil disobedience. When I got arrested at Stephen Joseph’s office, I wondered how the cops would have responded to ACT UP if we had all been Black and Latino.”²²³ Robinson’s reflection reveals how the political climate, particularly the rise of the carceral state and the historical role of police power as a violent force in black men’s lives, provides the material context for understanding why blacks and Latinos must “process” their roles in public AIDS activism. This political climate produces “fear” that “pin[ned their] anger to the page.” In light of this fear, the poem relinquishes the symbolic power of “words” to “take action” and “go where [they are] afraid.” Thus, the group’s poetry performances exposed a desire for self-preservation, even as they yearned

²²² ACT UP began the “Stop the Church” campaign to express their disagreement with Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor on the Roman Catholic archdiocese’s stance against safe sex education in New York’s public schools. In December, 1989, 4500 protestors gathered outside a mass at St. Patrick’s Cathedral. A few activists entered the building and disrupted mass, and one protestor broke a communion wafer and threw it on the floor. One-hundred and eleven protestors were arrested and the latter act was widely broadcast in the media. The “political funerals” were ACT-UP’s attempts to turn private grief into something public. They held public memorial services, dumped ashes and cadavers on the White House grounds and in front of state buildings.

²²³ B. Michael Hunter. “Allan Robinson, AIDS Activist.” Other Countries, ed. *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, p. 60.

to transform the dominant cultural discourses that produced black gay men's fear and invisibility. Public performance became the central mode of expressing Other Countries' complex political subjectivity, as well as a mode of testifying to the traumatic impact of HIV/AIDS in black gay men's lives.

Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic

In his essay, "Other Countries: The Importance of Difference," Daniel Garrett titles one of the subsections, "Toward a Black Gay Aesthetic." In this section Garrett links the marginalization of black gay men in US society and Western literature to the development of black gay aesthetic forms. Garrett states that black gay literature acts as historical documentation, social validation, and expresses black gay men's cultural values. Literatures of cultural difference, for Garrett, serve as non-Western forms of historiography: "The development of Black literature, women's literature, Gay literature, and now Black Gay literature is not so much a rewriting of history as an additional writing of it; together these various literatures, like our various selves, produce history." Garrett's version of literature as polyvocal history operates in a similar vein as Elsa Barkley Brown's construction of the politics of difference in women's history. Brown uses black women's art to conceptualize histories of difference as "everybody talking at once." Contesting normative notions of history that understand the politics of difference as chaotic, and thereby opting for historical narratives from singular perspectives, she argues that, "the events and people we write about did not occur in isolation but in dialogue with a myriad of other people and events."²²⁴ As such, a black gay aesthetics must be understood as always in dialogue with dominant Western literature, women's

²²⁴ Elsa Barkley Brown, "What Has Happened Here?: The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics, *Feminist Studies*, p. 297

literature, black literature, and (white) gay literature, and the various formations that fall in between these categories, especially black lesbian literature. It is also dialogically produced through the variety of experiences *within* the black gay community, especially concerning regional, ethnic, class, and gender difference. What emerges under the rubric of a black gay aesthetic is an attention to this difference, a conversation between men who have individually struggled against multiple marginalization. Garrett states, “Because we have struggled so hard *individually*, we do not always listen to the wisdom our brother has found.”²²⁵ The feeling of privacy offered within the space of the workshop, and the values contested through the collective writing process, created a dialogue between men that became critical to black gay aesthetic formations.

The formation of a black gay aesthetic was also produced through intergenerational dialogue. As I have already mentioned, these writers drew heavily from their black lesbian feminist contemporaries. Also, in his study of black gay literature in the 1980s and 90s, Simon Dickel demonstrates how black gay literary aesthetics were heavily influenced by their black queer predecessors in the Harlem Renaissance, and especially James Baldwin in the Protest Era.²²⁶ In fact, *Other Countries* dedicated their first publication, *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices* (1987) to James Baldwin, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Bayard Rustin, who all died in the year of the book’s publication. The book celebrates the lives of this earlier generation of black gay men. In the context of the AIDS epidemic, however, the conversation shifted from an intergenerational dialogue to an intra-generational one. In his abandoned preface to the second *Other*

²²⁵ Daniel Garrett, “Other Countries: The Importance of Difference.” *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, p. 28

²²⁶ Simon Dickel, *Black/Gay*.

Countries' journal, board member Colin Robinson remarks that only five years after the publication of their first volume, ten of the men who made *Other Countries* possible were dead, and at least four others were living with or ailing from HIV.²²⁷ While OC dedicated the first volume of the journal to an earlier generation of black gay men, they dedicated the second volume, *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS* (1993) to their own generation. Robinson writes that the collection was about “the celebration of a community and communal rituals which both structure our failures in the face of HIV and fortify us to transcend this epidemic.”²²⁸ Despite the immediacy of the traumatic impact of the epidemic, Robinson states that *Sojourner* was also “grounded in a vision, captured in former *Other Countries* board member Reginald Jackson’s image of a boy in the darkness of a basement in Boupaloupa, Mississippi, reading Baldwin by flashlight.”²²⁹ Thus, *Sojourner* was equally inspired by the “challenge. . .of leaving something valuable and permanent of [their] Black Gay lives for future generations.”²³⁰

This vision of futurity, of future generations, alongside the historical context of the premature deaths of black gay men during the AIDS crisis, shaped black gay men’s aesthetic production. *Sojourner* reflects this historically informed vision in both its content and presentation. The cover of the volume features an etched drawing titled “Visionaries,” which depicts overlapping faces of black men with their eyes closed.

²²⁷ Colin Robinson, “Sojourner: An Abandoned Manifest,” G. Winston James, ed. *Voice Rising*, p. 7.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 9

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10

²³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 10

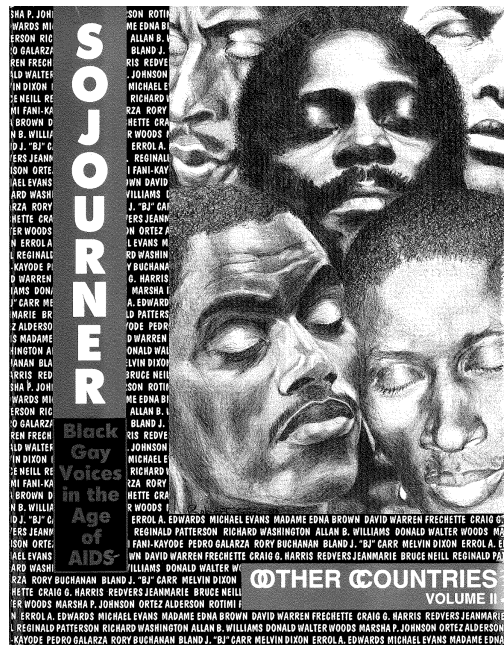


Figure 2. Robert D. Sims. “Visionaries”

The closed eyes and overlapping faces speak to the simultaneity of OC’s private reflection on their pleasures, fears, and losses, and the collective, outward-looking political vision that Other Countries embodied. This cropped image is surrounded by the names of those lost to the AIDS virus. The book also includes a page listing the names of men directly affiliated with group, with the heading “We Remember Your Names” and a three-page black insert listing hundreds of names under the heading, “Standing on the Shoulders of Ancestors.” The volume permits readers to visualize the impact of the virus on the black gay community, as well as acting as a repository of memory for a very immediate history of loss. *Sojourner* fulfilled the group’s mission of developing, disseminating and preserving the community’s diverse cultural and intellectual expressions, particularly the preservationist aspect. G. Winston James noted in his interview the distinction between black gay men writing in journals at home versus being published in an anthology “whose physical presence can be disseminated widely and

potentially permanently.”²³¹ The group concentrated their efforts on publishing the journal in order to obtain archival permanence, documenting the complexities of black gay life and death in anticipation of the journal’s discovery by future generations of black gay boys and men.

Furthermore, the list of names makes visible the relationship between their reverence for the dead and their poetics. Gloria Akasha Hull has demonstrated how black women poets such as Lucille Clifton and Dolores Kendrick have relied on “the transmission of female ancestral energy as a vital force in their lives and poetry,”²³² what she calls the “ancestral muse.” Many of the contributors to the second volume of the *Other Countries* journal also channeled the “ancestral muse” in their work. Robert Vazquez-Pacheco’s poem “Necropolis” illustrates the significance of the remembering the dead to black gay poetics. The poem begins with the line “my life is populated with the dead.” It continues with twenty-six lines describing New York City as a haunted landscape. Each line is punctuated with the name of someone who presumably has been lost to the virus. The spacing of the poem, one column of the poem’s narrative, and the other a list of names, represents the proximity between the poem’s speaker and the dead that populate his life. The speaker implies that the souls of dead men haunt him and the city in order to express their demand to be remembered:

| | |
|------------------------------------|---------|
| my life is populated with the dead | Joe |
| they follow me down streets | Jeff |
| huddle round me in elevators | Alan |
| sit behind me in movies | Stewart |
| or next to me in cabs | Daniel |
| spiritmen unquiet souls | Larry |
| they clamor for attention | Vito |

²³¹ Interview with G. Winston James, 2013.

²³² Gloria Hull, “Channeling the Ancestral Muse,” *Feminist Measure*, p.98

| | |
|----------------------------|---------|
| demanding remembrance | Anthony |
| new york necropolis | Robert |
| monuments to dead times | Darnell |
| and dead men | Don |
| i move through their city | Warren |
| their voices whispering | Jose |
| remember remember remember | Tato |

The haunted landscapes of the “new york necropolis” transform the act of memory into a negotiation between the living and the dead. For Vazchez-Pacheco, the ancestors “clamor for attention/demanding remembrance.” Whereas theories of trauma suggest that the extremity of mass violence forces the psychic repression of traumatic memory, in the poem, “the ancestral muse” forces the subject to remember. The dead themselves refuse to be forgotten, ironically becoming “the vital force” of memory.²³³ Furthermore, the constancy of death prohibits forgetting. In a personal reflection on the epidemic Allen Wright writes, “News of another death now comes with such frequency that my mourning is constant. I imagine the spirits of the departed waiting in line until they can be properly grieved.”²³⁴ Wright’s statement implies that New York is populated by “spiritmen” because they have yet to be properly grieved. The forgetting of black gay men lost to AIDS among dominant discourses of African American trauma and (white) queer trauma might explain “their voices whispering/ remember remember remember.”

In Marlon Riggs’s “Letters to the Dead,” he calls upon the ancestors as witnesses to his body’s own deterioration. Riggs calls upon the dead to witness to his body as a site of “impending catastrophe,” and to witness how his infected body has become a critical site of knowledge production. Riggs writes to his friend, LeWayne, recently lost to an

²³³ In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman argues that the will to deny trauma and the desire to tell the truth of trauma is its central dialectic.

²³⁴ “Allen Wright,” Box 1, Other Countries Paper, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

AIDS-related illness, about how his own confrontation with mortality aided in transforming his silence into speech:

Sweet LeWayne, who first lost sight, then life, to the raging virus, were you nonetheless my witness? Did you see over the ensuing months of my recuperation what happened to my kidneys, my sight, my tongue? Did you see how slowly, gradually, my kidneys once again started to work, how slowly, gradually I began to see the consequences of silence, and how as a consequence of this insight, my tongue unhinged from the roof of my mouth, dislodged from the back of my throat, slipped-free?²³⁵

LeWayne witnesses from beyond the dead to Riggs's shifting consciousness. Riggs's repetition of "slowly, gradually" syncs the slow time of his body's recovery with the development of his consciousness about the costs of silence for black gay men. The image of the tongue unhinging and slipping free demonstrates Riggs's belief in the power of the "gay voice" to preserve and sustain black gay cultural memory despite the body's undoing.²³⁶

Riggs further elaborates on silence as a form of discipline through calling on abolitionist Harriet Tubman as witness:

And don't you now see the chilling parallels between the means by which we were held captive in your time, and the methods of our enslavement today? Don't you see the chains, my Harriet, sweet Moses, the chains not so much of steel and law, but more insidious: the invisible chains, linked over centuries, of silence and shame? In this latest

²³⁵ Marlon Riggs, "Letters to the Dead." *Sojourner*, p. 21.

²³⁶ My use of the term "gay voice" derives from A.B. Christa Schwartz's conceptualization of "gay voices" to map the literary performances of dissident sexuality in her study of homosexuality in Harlem Renaissance literature and culture. I extend Schwartz's term to think about the "gay voice" as an archive of black gay cultural memory that survives the bodies lost to the trauma of AIDS. See A.B. Christa Schwartz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*.

crisis, our new master is the virus; his overseer—silence;
and his whip—shame.²³⁷

Riggs creates a continuity between the trauma of antebellum slavery and the contemporary trauma of AIDS. The link he establishes “over centuries” is “silence” and “shame,” which he believes to be captive forces for those with a seropositive status. For Riggs, silence and shame are means of continuing psychic discipline on black gay men whose bodies are already being held captive by the AIDS virus. Therefore Riggs proposes that speaking out about and thinking with the infected body offers agency to those affected by the epidemic.

Speaking out does not only occur through speech, but also through bodily performance.²³⁸ Other Countries’s poetics also explore how bodies perform in space, particularly in black spaces in which only certain performances of blackness are acknowledged and sanctioned. Marvin K. White’s poem “Last Rights” exemplifies how queer black performances can transform black sacred space. The poem narrates the story of a black gay man who has been displaced by his lover’s family during the funeral ceremony. The poem speaks to a largely unremarked struggle of (black) gay men during the AIDS epidemic, who were discriminated against by funeral homes, churches, and families that refused to funeralize the bodies of men who died of AIDS. And when

²³⁷ Marlon Riggs, “Letters to the Dead.” *Sojourner*, p. 23

²³⁸ Queer of color scholars have demonstrated the importance of bodily performance to gay men negotiating intimate relations with family, community, and state forces. In *Global Divas*, Martin Manalansan demonstrates how Filipino gay men in the diaspora perform shifting selves in the context of their situation, as they negotiate their racial, class, gender, sexual, and national identities. In *Tacit Subjects*, Carlos Decena also demonstrates how Dominican immigrant men oftentimes do not verbally “come out,” as it might rupture fragile familial and social bonds. But through their everyday performances, their identity is assumed.

churches did funeralize these men, pastors would often condemn their souls to hell. Many black churches now have HIV/AIDS ministries, but the existence of these ministries can serve to obscure this embattled past. E. Patrick Johnson has argued that black gay men have historically been “cut off from their people” when “those people—family, friends, church members—fail to provide an affirming and supportive environment in which their humanity is acknowledged, particularly during those times of bereavement.”²³⁹ In the poem the deceased’s lover recalls his performance of mourning at the funeral:

When I learned of Gregory’s death
I cried silently
But at the funeral
Giiiiirl I’m telling you
I rocked Miss Church
Hell I fell to my knees twice
Before I reached my seat
Three people had to carry me
To my pew (ll. 1-9)

The lover’s performance of what seems to be excessive grief earns him not only the attention of his lover’s biological family, but also other presumably gay men in the church, “When someone in the choir/Sang out ‘Work it girl/Woooooork it’”(ll. 26-28). Later in the poem it becomes evident that the lover’s performance earns him his “rightful place” alongside the family when he is “ushered into the waiting limo/Which sped me to his family’s house,” and it also brings affirmation to the “someone in the choir,” the space where black gay men have been historically praised for their talents, while having to remain discrete so as not to be cut off from their people. Through his performance the

²³⁹ E. Patrick Johnson, “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community.” *Callaloo*, p. 406

lover queers the sacred space of the black church and its prescribed performances, and creates a space of belonging for black gay men.²⁴⁰

Our Black Gay Stonewall

Marvin K. White's poem ends with reconciliation and incorporation, but the historical reality of this experience was much more complex. White stated in an interview that the poem was inspired by the very real threat of erasure at black gay men's funerals—that not only their bodies would be buried, but their life stories would be buried as well.²⁴¹ The “controversy” over Essex Hemphill's funeral in 1995 exemplifies this threat. At Hemphill's funeral, his family stated that he had given his life over to the Lord, and his friends and contemporaries from the black gay cultural movement understood this as a form of erasure.²⁴² Controversies like that of Hemphill's greatly impacted black gay communities, who held their own memorial services for the deceased.

In her tribute to black gay writer James Baldwin, black lesbian feminist scholar and writer Barbara Smith theorizes the significance of the funeral to black gay and lesbian politics. Smith writes about how Baldwin's blackness was affirmed by the many speeches and performances at his funeral while his gay identity was negated. This is why she suggests that “we must always bury our dead twice,” gesturing toward the separate

²⁴⁰ For an in-depth discussion of how black queer people have transformed the prescribed “places” of black performance to open up a “space” for black queer performance, see E. Patrick Johnson, “Feeling the Spirit in the Dark”

²⁴¹ Interview with Marvin K. White, 2013.

²⁴² Robert Reid-Pharr, *Black Gay Man*, p. 177; See also, *Gay and Lesbian People of Color List*, <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/www/culture/black/essex/random.html>; This erasure would be further solidified by the fact that his family would not release his papers. Though Hemphill's papers supposedly contained three unpublished manuscripts, the size of his collection pales in comparison to other writers of the period with similar prominence. The Hemphill/Wayson Jones Collection housed at the Schomburg was a gift from friend and fellow performance artist, Wayson Jones, but does not include Hemphill's unpublished manuscripts.

memorial services held by black gay communities for the deceased. Smith explains why naming Baldwin's gay identity at the funeral matters:

Not only would this news have geometrically increased the quotient of truth available from the media that day in general, it also would have helped alter, if only by an increment, perceptions in Black communities all over the world about the meaning of homosexuality, communities where those of us who survive Baldwin as Black lesbians and gay men must continue to dwell.²⁴³

Smith highlights the significance of visibility for intra-racial black politics, making black bodies intelligible as sexual minorities in black communities. Smith demonstrates how the funeral acts as a space in which the meanings of blackness and homosexuality can be contested and refashioned. This refashioning, she argues, might impact the material realities of black lesbians and gay men who must continue to negotiate the silence and melancholy produced from hegemonic understandings of homosexuality as negation and abjection in black communities.

The distinction between mourning and militancy was a source of political debate in gay communities during the AIDS crisis. Various movement sects debated whether or not public memorials were enough, or if the focus should be on political mobilization. Douglas Crimp argues that during the height of the epidemic, "mourning became militancy," given the violence of omission and silence of families who desecrated memories of the dead.²⁴⁴ The events surrounding Donald Woods's funeral attest to the blurred distinctions between mourning and militancy during this moment. Woods was a prominent figure in the black gay cultural scene, and the New York cultural arts

²⁴³ Barbara Smith, "We Must Always Bury Our Dead Twice: A Tribute to James Baldwin." *The Truth that Never Hurts*.

²⁴⁴ Douglas Crimp, "Mourning and Militancy," *October 51*, p.9.

community, more broadly. In his obituary in the *New York Times*, Woods is celebrated as the executive director of AIDS Films, a nonprofit company that produced education and prevention movies, and as public affairs director of the Brooklyn Children's Museum. The obituary lists his activity in Arts Against Apartheid, Hetrick-Martin Institute for gay and lesbian youth, and Brooklyn Arts Council. His work was also included in Marlon Riggs's "Tongues Untied" and he was featured in Riggs's documentary "No Regrets," which narrates black gay men's struggles living with AIDS. But in the obituary, his family listed the cause of his death as cardiac arrest, not mentioning his sexuality or struggle with AIDS.²⁴⁵ After experiencing the erasure of Woods's contributions to the black gay community at the funeral, Haitian-American gay writer Yves Lubin, popularly known as Assotto Saint, got up and announced that Woods was out, gay, and died of AIDS, not a heart attack.²⁴⁶ Saint incited Woods's friends, many of whom were dressed "inappropriately" in shorts, to stand in solidarity with him. In my interview with writer Marvin K. White, he described this uprising as 'Our Black Gay Stonewall,' affirming its mythic proportions in black gay cultural memory.

The erasure and subsequent uprising at Donald Woods's funeral held significance for many of the other survivors of Other Countries that I interviewed. In my interview with Allen Wright, he highlighted the loss of erotic possibilities, as traditional black funereal practices figuratively scrubbed black gay men clean of their so-called deviant desires:

²⁴⁵ "Donald W. Woods, 34, AIDS Film Executive." *The New York Times*. June 29, 1992.

²⁴⁶ Afro-Jamaican gay writer Thomas Glave published the O'Henry Award winning story, "Final Inning," (2000) which fictionalizes the controversy surrounding Donald Woods's funeral. Glave's fictional account begins just after the legendary uprising by Assoto Saint.

With Donald Woods' death, we came together to remember a beautiful man with a loving spirit who was also a brilliant poet and performer. . . Yet, at the funeral, the Pastor led a service for someone none of us recognized. We came together in a kind of joy to remember Donald, it was a reunion of poets, writers, musicians, artists, dancers, activists, all who knew, or at least appreciated each other's works that had been created over the years – all together out of a love for Donald. But the person being eulogized that day was a stranger to us, a pale and diluted version of the person we knew, admired and deeply missed. There was nothing to suggest that the man in the closed coffin had freed himself enough to have ever fallen in love with another man, shared a life with another man, planned to grow old with another man, had no shame of his loves, wrote beautifully of them, and was widely loved in return. We sat politely out of some sense of respect for his parents and other relations, for the Pastor and whatever relationship we had to (or thought we should have) to the black church. But we knew, too, that in doing so, we were acting in collusion with the lie. The truth of his life was wrapped in their shame and denial, our silence supported that terrible fiction of a life that needed to be scrubbed clean of his true loves and of us.

Wright's narrative reveals how funeral services sanitized the lives of black gay men who had devoted their artistry and activism to black gay communities. However, the black church and the black family as cultural institutions commanded the "respect" of the community who were a significant part of Woods's life, forcing them to "collu[de] with the lie." Again, shame and silence become disciplinary forces, this time perpetuating a fictive boundary between black homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as maintaining the fiction of the black family and the black church as solely heterosexual institutions. The predominance of cultural erasure occurring at black gay men's funerals during the epidemic obscures how black sexuality and black spirituality writ large have been marked as non-heteronormative, and thus unassimilable to within the dominant public sphere. Rather than embrace the queerness of blackness, black cultural institutions

participate in the false promise of racial normativity that comes from subscribing to the state's binary gender codes.

G. Winston James's narrative demonstrates how the funeral operates as a site of denial and silencing of the complex truths of black life by biological families and clergy:

In the case of Essex Hemphill, Donald Woods and perhaps many others, those moments, in my opinion, were controversial not because they were simply examples of competing memories between those of biological and chosen family members and friends, but because they were deliberate attempts on the part of biological families and clergy to deny the complex truths about the individuals who had passed—particularly the truth of sexual orientation—and to silence the voices of friends who wished to share and celebrate publicly (at funerals and memorials) the ways in which they knew and remembered the deceased.²⁴⁷

As Colin Robinson described in a follow-up interview, Black funeral practices, at least in certain Christian traditions, are about getting the loved one into heaven; they are about restoration. However, for James, restoration to the black family and to the black church meant denying the diversity of black sexuality, and silencing the voices of the sexually variant black communities to which the deceased belonged. These communities tell other stories about blackness, stories that threatened to be buried along with the dead. As the example of Hemphill's estate and Woods's obituary demonstrate, the hegemony of heteronormativity in black communities means that these are not stories to be passed on.

Colin Robinson reported that the "respectable service" that the family planned meant that Woods's "inconvenient sexuality was to be muted" and his contributions were rendered as vague, with statements such as he wrote poems "to inspire" and led a "social

²⁴⁷ Interview with G. Winston James, 2013.

justice” organization. Robinson also pointed out how the black funeral links black authenticity to notions of respectability:

In Donald’s case, two events were planned – the family planned a church service at which they sought to create the proper Donald they wanted to hold up among people of judgment and send to heaven, a Donald whose inconvenient sexuality was to be muted and did not belong at the centre of a respectable service, who wrote poems “to inspire” and led a “social justice” organization. . . I don’t know what’s Black about it other than perhaps we want to have respectable funerals and have no problem with the violence that inflicts on others.²⁴⁸

Silencing black gay cultural memory is, in Robinson’s formulation, a form of psychic violence. Robinson’s narrative points to a long history of capitulatory black politics of inclusion and respectability that have distorted memories of various genders and sexualities in black culture.²⁴⁹ Robinson’s narrative also illustrates how racial normativity has depended upon the violent excision of “other” memories, a forgetting of black gay culture and the public efforts of black LGBT people to transform the meaning of blackness and homosexuality. The space of the funeral becomes a site of mourning for the loved ones lost to AIDS, and mourning a lost history, one that is critical to black gay self-fashioning.

Regardless of their knowledge of the second service, Saint and other members of the black gay community, who rose on Saint’s request, refused to capitulate to the mandates of “respect” demanded by the family and the church at the traditional services for Woods. And Saint’s actions at the funeral horrified and embarrassed Woods’s

²⁴⁸ Interview with Colin Robinson, 2013.

²⁴⁹ For an in-depth discussion of the excision of queer sexualities from black memory, see Matt Richardson, *The Queer Limits of Black Memory*.

family.²⁵⁰ I mention this to add that this debate is not one-sided. The competing memorial claims on Woods raises questions, such as: To whom does the body (as a repository of memory) belong? How do we account for black gay men's varying degrees of black cultural belonging when determining to whom their bodies and memories belong? Multiply-determined subjects become problematic to cultural memory, when multiple constituencies make historical claims on them. White's qualification of the Stonewall rebellion, as "Our Black Gay Stonewall" attests to this point. Regardless of the presence of minority subjects at the center of the Stonewall rebellion, White's qualification points to how this history has been re-appropriated so that the primary recipients of freedom are imagined as white lesbians and gays. Black gay men must make claims to an alternative history of sexual freedom, understood as a struggle against the erasure of their histories and memories within black culture. In this alternative history, the black family is cast as the state as the primary site of regulation. More than abstract claims to memory, claims to property also arise during funerals. If the biological family has control over the deceased's estate, as was the case with Hemphill, they also determine what becomes available to the archives, and by extension, to official history. This makes Saint's training in the writer's workshop on how to execute one's literary estate all the more significant.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Though Saint's outburst at the funeral outraged Woods's biological family, the family did attend the alternative service held by members of the black gay community. According to Robinson, Woods's father also apologized for suppressing aspects of Woods's life in the obituary and the funeral.

²⁵¹ Even beyond intellectual property, it is also important to note that Woods was to be buried on a plot that Assotto Saint controlled. This speaks to a longer history of black gay men footing the bills for funerals that they were oftentimes banned from attending. In *One of the Children*, Stephen Hawkeswood discusses how black gay men often paid for the funerals of family members and friends in early years of the epidemic. Most of the

That same “something,” the “vital force” that Garrett imagined as queer possibility in “The Upper Room” compelled members of Other Countries to go to the traditional services, and let their grief be heard in that space. The uprising at Donald Woods’s funeral demonstrates how black queer mourning might disrupt the emergence of gay liberalism. Scholars such as Rinaldo Walcott and Robert Reid-Pharr have credited the mass deaths associated with the AIDS epidemic as cleansing gay men of their messy desires, thereby offering them entry into modernity as liberal gay subjects.²⁵² However, the uprising at Woods’s funeral and the power of that uprising in black gay cultural memory acts as a refusal of the discourses of respectability, and the disciplinary mechanisms of shame and silence that are necessary to the production of black gay liberalism. If black (gay) liberalism depends upon a forgetting of the queer past, and the stigma and shame of AIDS and its (ongoing) impact on black communities, then the power of remembering “Our Black Gay Stonewall” holds open a space for those to whom narratives of stigma, shame, and deviance continue to cling, as well as the possibility for a more radical present.²⁵³

Black queer mourning, in this instance, accounts for cultural loss even as it acts as a productive force. Though the traumatic impact of AIDS produced negative affects such

victims were IV drug users who were largely invisible as victims of the epidemic, as AIDS only became a national concern when it began to impact white gay men.

²⁵² In *Arranging Grief*, Dana Luciano argues that the mournful body holds the power to resist the progress of modernity. Robert Reid-Pharr, “Clean: Death and Desire in Samuel R. Delany’s *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*,” *American Literature*, p. 396; Rinaldo Walcott, “Queer Returns: Human Rights, the Anglo-Caribbean and Diaspora Politics,” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, pp. 11-14

²⁵³ In *Feeling Backwards*, Heather Love argues for dwelling on negative affect in the history of homosexuality to create a space in the present for those still relegated to the margins, unassimilable as homonormative subjects. In *If Memory Serves*, Christopher Castiglia and Christopher Reed also suggest that remembering the queer past might hold open a space for a more radical present.

as fear, shame, disappointment and grief, the negative affects associated with the traumatic impact of AIDS also became a “vital force” in the production of black gay identity formation, aesthetic and cultural production, and activism. Furthermore, grief and mourning provided a way to contest the cultural forces that sought to erase black gay men’s cultural contributions, and to enlarge the subjective and political possibilities for black gay men in the present day. Other Countries Collective offers a historical case study for thinking about what might be in between these categories of racial melancholia and political resistance. Black queer mourning as an analytic category does not seek to absolve black queer subjects from the forces of melancholia, but to explore the power of melancholic mourning in black gay self-making and black gay men’s political desires for social transformation at the height of the AIDS epidemic.

In this chapter I have argued that mourning serves a critical function in black gay self and social transformation. In the next chapter, I look at how black gay fiction reveals a persistent history of injury, even when dominant political discourse obscures this history by privileging, instead, narratives of prideful identity. More specifically, I look at how Melvin’s Dixon’s novel *Vanishing Rooms* foregrounds competing narratives of injury for its black gay, white working-class, and black female protagonists, despite the novel’s setting against the radical sexual culture of 1975 Greenwich Village. Here, I continue to look at how negative affect is productive, but this time, I demonstrate its significance within the historical context of the 1970s, where mainstream black and gay political discourses were centered on pride. I am most interested in how Dixon uses the queer urban landscape in the novel, normally associated with its pleasurable possibilities, to articulate expressions of racial and sexual injury.

Chapter 5: Geographies of the Self: Reading Racial Injury through the Queer Urban Landscape in Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms*

“Our history is each other. That is our only guide.” –James Baldwin (*Just Above My Head*)

Throughout Melvin Dixon's career as a creative writer, scholar, and translator, he explored the relationship between geography and identity. In his first published collection of poems, *Change of Territory* (1983), he details his parents' move from rural North Carolina to urban Connecticut. He also traces his literary genealogy to black writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Robert Hayden for whom black urbanity was important to their literary imagination, and other African American writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Jean Toomer, who centralized black life in the rural South. In his celebrated scholarly text, *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature* (1987), Dixon demonstrates how African American writers have used imaginative texts to make place-based claims for more positive identity constructions. In this critical text, Dixon “examines the ways in which Afro-American writers, often considered homeless, alienated from mainstream culture, and segregated in negative environments, have used language to create alternative landscapes where black culture and identity can flourish apart from any marginal, prescribed ‘place’”(2). This scholarly work can be read alongside the long tradition of black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois and E. Franklin Frazier who have theorized black identity in relationship to space. In his critically acclaimed first novel, *Trouble the Water* (1989), Dixon examines African American migration from the rural South to the urban North, and stages within one rural black family and community the struggles of African America, a cultural group still grappling with the historical traumas of slavery and its aftermath. His translations

from French of Genevieve Fabre's critical text, *Drumbeats, Masks, and Metaphor: Contemporary Afro-American Theatre* (1983) and *The Collected Poetry of Leopold Sedar Senghor* (1991) exemplify his critical engagement with transatlantic black thought and cultural production. Many of the poems in his posthumous collection of poetry, *Love's Instruments* (1995) also reference the non-Western spaces in which they are written, like Dakar, Senegal.

Dixon also struggled to balance his life as a creative writer, which he believed to be his primary identity, and his critical work as a teacher-scholar. In his personal diaries, he often mentioned how his academic career stifled his commitment to being a creative writer. Surely, no text attests to his commitment to creative writing more than his most celebrated novel, *Vanishing Rooms* (1991). Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House, originally rejected the novel. Commenting on an earlier draft of the novel, Toni Morrison states that Dixon's characters are defined by their sexuality, "Somehow sexuality is not only what they do it is what they are and that is not enough for me."²⁵⁴ Although various other presses rejected the novel in the late 1980s, it was eventually rewritten and accepted for publication by Dutton Press, a division of Penguin Books, in 1991. Dixon took approximately 15 years to complete the novel, and this work has rightly received more scholarly attention in black and queer literary studies than any of his other works.²⁵⁵ The novel still has not garnered nearly enough critical attention, however, and is currently out of print.

²⁵⁴ "Personal Diary Entry," Melvin Dixon Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

²⁵⁵ Dixon recalls in an interview in the African diaspora studies journal *Callaloo* that he began the novel in 1979 while residing in France on an academic fellowship. However,

Vanishing Rooms continues Dixon's lifelong exploration of the relationship between geography and identity. The novel is set in Greenwich Village, a neighborhood in the lower West side of Manhattan, that has been deemed the "spiritual center" of sexual experimentation of primarily white gay men in the 1970s.²⁵⁶ This time period is significant as it marks the post-Stonewall and pre-AIDS period of what has been called radical gay male sexual culture, which took place around the U.S., but has received the most sustained attention through its manifestations in the Castro district of San Francisco and the Greenwich Village neighborhood of Manhattan, NYC. In this chapter, I will explore how Dixon's novel, *Vanishing Rooms*, reimagines this urban landscape, which figures so prominently in queer historical memory. I argue that Dixon centralizes black gay, black female, and white working-class voices, all of which are marginal to representations of 1970s radical gay male sexual culture in NYC, to demonstrate how the sites and spaces imagined for urban gay sexual subject formation must be framed within the context of the racial and class stratification of the city.

Furthermore, I contend that Dixon draws upon narratives of black queer urbanity as "sites of memory" to reimagine the geographic landmarks of the queer urban landscape as structured through larger processes of racialization and spatialization.

²⁵⁷Building upon historian Pierre Nora's oft-cited theorization of "sites of memory," or

his diaries suggest that he began writing the novel, originally titled "Jesse," as early as 1976.

²⁵⁶ See Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, 2004.

²⁵⁷ In this chapter I use the term "queer" to refer to the urban landscape to account for those who participated in these sexual cultures without claiming gay identity. I also refer to James Baldwin and Melvin Dixon as black queer figures because they did not claim gay identities. Otherwise I use the nomenclature "gay," as it aligns with the language of the novel and the historical moment that the novel represents.

the interplay between memory and history whose work is “to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establishing a state of things, to materialize the immaterial,” Dixon argues that for the black writer, “memory becomes a tool to regain and reconstruct not just the past but history itself.”²⁵⁸ Dixon uses the example of Harlem, New York, wherein street signs have been renamed for famous African-Americans. He believes that the streets signs mark historical change and black folks’ active participation in making history, and that transforming these historical figures into geographic landmarks “is the only way to orient oneself today.”²⁵⁹ I argue that Dixon most prominently engages with two black queer historical “landmarks” to orient his own fictional landscape: Robert Hayden and James Baldwin. These two black queer writers and the textual worlds they create become “sites of memory” in that their work bears witness to a history of racial and sexual injury through figurations of the race-and-class stratified urban landscape.

In this chapter, I first situate the novel within the context of the 1970s, contrary to previous scholarly commentary, which has contextualized it within black gay political discourse of the 1980s. By exploring his complex depiction of New York City in the novel, I then theorize how Dixon contests sociological imaginings of “the city” that have been central to the African American literary tradition. This allows me to foreground Dixon’s focus on psychic injury, particularly the way Dixon links the interiority of his protagonists to the historical and political landscape of 1970s New York. Next, I trace these representations of injury as Dixon figures them through the black female, white

²⁵⁸ Pierre Nora. “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire.” *History and Memory in African American Culture*, pp. 284-300. Melvin Dixon, “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory.” Dwight McBride and Justin Joyce, eds. *Melvin Dixon Critical Reader*, p. 56.

²⁵⁹ Melvin Dixon, “The Black Writer’s Use of Memory.” Dwight McBride and Justin Joyce, eds. *Melvin Dixon Critical Reader*, p. 59

working-class male, and finally the black gay protagonist, the only subject still figured as injured at the end of the novel. I ultimately contend that the black gay protagonist's injury persists because he has been made to bear the burden of racial and sexual injury as both an effect of white supremacy and for the sake of the black nation's claims to normativity.

Reimagining the Urban Landscape

The novel follows the black gay protagonist, Jesse Durand, a dancer whose white lover, nicknamed Metro (Jon Michael Barthé), has been gang raped and murdered by a group of white working class teenagers who perceived Metro as a sexual threat to one of its members, Lonny. Lonny, a sixteen-year-old, working-class Italian-American, is forced to participate in the rape and murder of Metro, and this traumatic experience causes him to return to the scene of the crime, where he is found by police lying nude in the chalk outline where Metro was killed. Left to grieve Metro's death, Jesse turns to his black female dance partner, Ruella McPhee, for support. Though they have just met, Jesse nicknames her "Rooms" because she provides both psychic and physical accommodations to him during his time of need. Jesse and Ruella seem to be developing a closer relationship, but Ruella's sexual desire for Jesse and increasing discomfort with the supportive role she plays in his life, coupled with Jesse's haunting memories of Metro, cause them to eventually move in separate directions. While serving time in prison, Metro's attackers brutally gang rape Lonny for turning them in to the police. Eventually released from prison, Lonny returns to the street to become a hustler serving a male clientele in the Red Light District of Times Square. The novel ends with Ruella spotting Lonny on the street on her way to a dance choreographed by Jesse, in

commemoration of Metro. These three characters' competing stories make up the narrative structure of the novel.

Literary scholars Dwight McBride and Justin A. Joyce have questioned why Dixon chose to set the novel in 1975, though it was published some sixteen years later.²⁶⁰ Other critics of the novel have privileged the historical context of its publication, situating the novel within black gay political debates occurring in the late 1980s and early 90s, particularly the turn to intra-racial political alliances among black gay men and to black communities.²⁶¹ While I am indebted to these studies, I extend their concerns to focus on the 1970s setting of the novel. In his study of shame in the gay community, cultural critic Patrick Moore argues that contemporary gay men need to reclaim the history of radical gay male sexual culture of the mid-1970s as a “revolution, distinctly male and sexual in tone” that “would take place in a cultural rather than a political arena as gay men began to develop a distinctive lifestyle in which masculinized representations of beauty, sexual experimentation, and drugs are central.”²⁶² He likens their sexual experimentation to “art,” as a kind of sexual performance that is able to encompass “the acknowledged, romantic definition of sexuality as well as the uncontrollable, even destructive power of sex.”²⁶³ Indeed, this historical time and place is significant to the white gay historical imagination as a site of sexual freedom that has been obscured by the trauma of HIV/AIDS. Public health authorities closed bathhouses in Greenwich Village

²⁶⁰ See Dwight McBride and Justin A. Joyce, ed. “Introduction.” *A Melvin Dixon Critical Reader*.

²⁶¹ See Darieck Scott, “Jungle Fever”; Simon Dickel, “Construction of Gay Whiteness” and *Black/Gay*.

²⁶² See Patrick Moore, *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, p. 6.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

and the East Village during the AIDS crisis. The closing of bathhouses remains a symbolic site of loss for a larger gay male cultural movement centered in urban public spaces like the bathhouses, abandoned warehouses, parked trucks, parks and the streets of “The Village.”

In literary and visual representations of this movement, black gay men are depicted as white men’s objects of desire, not as “artists” of the movement. The documentary film *Gay Sex in the 70s* (2005) visualizes the radical sexual cultures on New York’s urban landscape, exploring the abundance of open sexual activity in discos, bathhouses, abandoned warehouses, and on the piers. The documentary has one black gay narrator and very few black gay bodies appear on the visual landscape that it reconstructs. Fictional accounts like Andrew Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* (1978) and Larry Kramer’s *Faggots* (1978) center Fire Island and Greenwich Village as the primary sites of gay male cultural activity. Primarily middle and upper-class white gay men occupied these sites of sexual experimentation. These texts represent men of color as friends, lovers, hookups, and trendsetters; however, white men remain central to how this radical gay male sexual culture is culturally imagined. This is not to say that black gay men have not been central to how gay New York is remembered. Historians George Chauncey and Kevin Mumford, and anthropologist William Hawkeswood have demonstrated how black gay men have been arbiters of gay culture in racial enclaves like Harlem, given the history of the race and class stratification in New York City.²⁶⁴ Literary and cultural production of the 1970s centering black gay and lesbian experiences circulated mostly

²⁶⁴ For a discussion of the racial and spatial politics of black gay male culture in New York, particularly the centrality of Harlem to black gay cultural formations, see Stephen Hawkeswood, *One of the Children*; George Chauncey *Gay New York*, Kevin Mumford, *Interzones*.

within insular black gay and lesbian spaces and communities. E. Lynn Harris states: “Although new works by the ever-prolific James Baldwin along with the innovative science fiction/fantasy stories and novels of Samuel R. Delany appeared in the 1960s and 70s, the majority of gay writing of this period was told from the perspective of pioneering white gay authors such as Andrew Holleran, Larry Kramer, and Edmund White. Black gay writing, on the other hand, was essentially unseen outside of black gay and lesbian journals and newspapers, including *Blacklight* and *Yemonja*” (xiv).²⁶⁵ That the textual landscape of black gay writing was “unseen outside” mirrors the invisibility of black gay bodies in representations of this 1970s queer urban landscape. By setting his novel in 1975 Greenwich Village, Dixon’s textual landscape historically reimagines this geographic landscape so that marginal bodies and voices are seen and heard.

In her study of black women’s geographies in the black diaspora, Katherine McKittrick argues for the importance of theorizing black life in the context of its spatial location: “space and place give black lives meaning in a world that has for the most part, incorrectly deemed black populations and their attendant geographies as ungeographic.”²⁶⁶ Black gay men’s lives and cultural contributions have been rendered “ungeographic” when considering the link between cultural representation and material space. In an interview with the gay-themed magazine, *Christopher Street*, Dixon comments on how the magazine ignored the publication of Joseph Beam’s *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986). He opines that in their failure to acknowledge the publication of Beam’s anthology, the magazine ignored the “multi-ethnic character of gay

²⁶⁵ E. Lynn Harris, “Introduction.” *Freedom in the Village: Twenty Five Years of Black Gay Men’s Writing*, xiv.

²⁶⁶ Katherine McKittrick. *Demonic Grounds*, p. xiii.

life,” which is the “reality of Christopher Street, the physical street.”²⁶⁷ Christopher Street is one of the central landmarks marking Greenwich Village as a gay district, and Dixon illuminates how dominant media representations of it perform the work of “vanishing” racial minorities from the gay community, even though people from various social locations physically share this space. Dixon writes,

The gay media has a responsibility to inform its readership and encourage its readership to think of gay culture, as it has been created and perpetuated thus far, as being multi-ethnic. Especially in an urban environment where we have the actual groundwork creation of gay culture.²⁶⁸

If the “urban environment” is central to the “groundwork creation of gay culture,” then the lack of representation of its “multi-ethnic” inhabitants erases them as arbiters of gay culture. In *Vanishing Rooms*, Dixon privileges the voices of subjects not centered in representations of the radical gay sexual movement because he understood the relationship of cultural representations to the material conditions of marginalized people’s lives. In this regard, we can read Dixon’s creative work as not only centralizing black and working-class subjects in the making of urban gay male culture in 1970s New York, but as remapping the urban terrain so that these subjects are not rendered as abject figures within this significant queer historical moment.

“The City” in Crisis

In *Vanishing Rooms*, Melvin Dixon contests the idea of “the city” that has been central to the African American literary and cultural tradition. Dixon understood his work

²⁶⁷ Clarence Bard Cole, “Other Voices, Other Rooms,” *Christopher Street 14. 1* (1991): 25.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

as challenging what he calls the “easy sociological categories” that dominate much of mid-twentieth century black protest fiction. Discussing why he believes that black women’s fiction emerged so forcefully in the 1980s, Dixon contends that contrary to writers like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, whose fictive works draw heavily on sociologies of race, black women writers “emerged with such a powerful impact to explore the uncharted terrain of psychological terror inside as well as same-sex encounters. When I say emotional, I mean visceral, imagistic, feeling experiences, rather than simply a focus on the sociological or political conflict between blacks and whites.”²⁶⁹ Furthermore, he asserts that part of James Baldwin’s influence on his work was Baldwin’s illumination of “how sexuality can open the world of emotional experience and create a new kind of writing or at least a break away from some of the traditions that seem to restrict people.”²⁷⁰ Dixon was breaking away from the realist tradition that dominated contemporary African American literature, particularly the urban novel.²⁷¹ Dixon maintains that African American novels that render “the city” in purely sociological terms miss opportunities for exploring the complexities of urban black/queer

²⁶⁹ See Cole, “Other Voices, Other Rooms,” *Christopher Street 14. 1* (1991), p. 25.

²⁷⁰ V.R. Peterson. “Melvin Dixon: Wrestling with Baldwin.” *Essence 22.4* (Aug. 1991): 42.

²⁷¹ In ‘Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness,’ Christopher S. Lewis suggests a relationship between black writers’ use of literary realism and their endorsement of sexual normativity within this genre as a strategy to combat racist discourses of black sexual depravity. He argues that Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* circumvents this strategy by successfully rendering black lesbian happiness within the Afro-American vernacular tradition. Dixon’s focus on the inner lives of his characters demonstrates his debt to black women writers, but his queering of the urban protest novel also suggests a unique black gay male tradition drawn simultaneously from masculine Afro-American literary forms.

subjectivities, by focusing on “sociological or political conflict between blacks and whites.”

Critics of the novel have echoed these sentiments in their reading of Dixon’s New York. As Vivian May argues, “Dixon explores the regulative and normative function of ‘the city’ . . . but he simultaneously disrupts such a spatially determinist view by engaging readers in a contested and contradictory narrative structure that depends on three character’s perceptions and memories, on stories told and silenced.”²⁷² Taking a “both/and” approach to his depiction of “the city” in the novel attunes us to so-called deviant social formations that accrue from its “regulative and normative function,” as well as illuminating the micro-political and inter-subjective dimensions that undergird the formation of urban sociality. Moreover, May argues that Dixon is hesitant to render “the city” through scopic regimes that have subjected black and queer people to political, sociological, state, and other forms of surveillance. Though Dixon is meticulously detailed in mapping out the city, naming particular streets, subway lines, neighborhoods and boroughs, his fantastic depictions of spaces like the bathhouses, prisons, piers and even private rooms mark his refusal to expose these sites of intimacy to further surveillance.²⁷³ Dixon’s New York is always “vanishing,” thereby making it unavailable to the forces that have come to mark black and gay urban subjects as racially and sexually deviant and/or pathological. The instability and repression of each character’s memories,

²⁷² Vivian May, “Reading Melvin Dixon’s Vanishing Rooms.” *Callaloo* 23.1, p. 368.

²⁷³ Dixon’s contradictory mapping and unmapping of urban space also falls in line with Madhu Dubey’s claim in *Signs and Cities* that African American writers that center race and class in their literary engagements with the postmodern urbanism contest claims that postmodern urbanism is discontinuous with modern urbanism. These writers, she argues, posit a more continuous relationship between postmodern urbanism, with its emphasis on cultural heterogeneity and spatial fluidity, and the modern city, given “the lingering power of modern systems of visual surveillance and spatial containment” (106).

the competing and unreliable narratives, and the role of fantasy and desire all destabilize the “easy sociological categories” that make up “the city.”

In the novel, Metro and Jesse embody the intimate relationship between urban blackness and the political discourse of “urban crisis.” The novel opens with Metro and Jesse coming out of an abandoned warehouse on the Chelsea Piers, another infamous space in which New York’s gay culture was made. Men engaging in public sexual encounters occupy this abandoned warehouse. Jesse leaves Metro outside the warehouse, and gets into a cab because he is late for dance practice. The novel implicates “the city” in Jesse and Metro’s increasing emotional distance, as a product of the demands of labor, but also influenced by “the things [they] saw each day”:

I couldn’t help thinking how in just a short time the city had separated Metro and me, first by the hours of work, our lovemaking when everyone else was taking the subway. Then by the things we saw each day: I had my lofts and mirrors and leotards and dance barres bending me one-two-three, one-two-three, opening my thighs in full pliés. Metro had the police files, the city morgue, night court, three-alarm fires, subway muggings, and obituaries (43-44).

Dixon constructs a linkage between Metro’s career as a crime reporter and the psychodynamics of his relationship with Jesse. Metro’s career as an urban journalist constantly viewing “police files, the city morgue, night court. . .subway muggings. . .” implies that Metro contributes to media representations of “the city” that would mark it as a place of so-called “urban crisis.” In describing their separate views of “the city,” Dixon invokes the power of racialized phenomenology by connecting what Metro sees everyday on his job to Jesse’s criminalized body. In another dream about Metro, Jesse remembers Metro asking, “Why grow your hair so long? Why the Afro pick in the bathroom? Why are all the criminals in the streets black? Why are we in New York.” The continuum

between Jesse's embodied blackness and the racialization of urban criminality reveals Jesse's subjection through racialized constructions of urban spatiality. Metro continues, "I'm scared, Jesse. I'm really scared. I hate taking the subways. I hate working at night. I hate their dark faces. They're just too dark, too black." (113). Metro privileges feelings of white vulnerability and positions urban blackness as a constant social threat. In sum, Dixon links Metro's increasing emotional separation from Jesse to Metro's inability to separate Jesse's blackness from popular discourses of "urban crisis."

Pathological discourses of race and sexuality were central to the production of discourses of so-called urban crisis in mid-1970s New York. In 1975, New York envisioned its economic recovery from its fiscal crisis through tourism and building a more profitable service sector economy. The city sought to change its image as a crime-ridden city full of idle and unruly black, Latino, and white ethnic populations.²⁷⁴ Linked to this image of the city in "crisis," New York also developed an image in the early seventies as a site of sexual indiscretion. Discussing the national reputation of New

²⁷⁴ In *Assassination of New York*, urban studies scholar and journalist Robert Finch, in his investigation of the 1975 "fiscal crisis," writes that state officials blamed blacks and Puerto Ricans for the city's financial woes. Fitch recalls one official implicating blacks and Puerto Ricans' overpopulation and lack of contribution as taxpayers as the cause of this urban crisis, "They use too many city services and they don't pay any taxes. New York's in trouble because it's got too many fucking blacks and Puerto Ricans." Racial and ethnic minority and poor communities were targeted for the city's "planned shrinkage" policies, which would cut the "transit, sanitation, police, and fire protection in poor neighborhoods to the levels which the tax base could support." This plan sought to drive poor people and minorities out of their neighborhoods to utilize the property for more profitable measures. The disproportionate effect of this "planned shrinkage" on racial minority communities came to public attention when sports commentator Howard Cossell famously exclaimed during the 1977 World Series broadcast from Yankees Stadium, "Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx is Burning!" This is significant because it drew attention to the state's violent neglect of places like the Bronx--which had recently become the first majority minority borough in New York City--under this "planned shrinkage."

York's infamous sex districts, Peter Braunstein argues, "New York City in the Seventies was regarded by the country at large as a latter-day Sodom teetering on the verge of ruin. . . ." ²⁷⁵ The West Village became the geographic headquarters of gay club life, with its underground sexual culture like S&M clubs, bathhouses and the infamous "fuck-trucks," a trail of parked tractor trailer trucks in which sexual orgies occurred day and night. Linking popular constructions of the city as "crime-ridden" and as a "latter-day Sodom" to the image of the city in (fiscal) "crisis" demonstrates how racial and sexual ideologies helped to map New York City's economic and political landscape within the American cultural imagination.

Jesse's intimate relationship with his black female dance partner further reveals the mutual imbrication of race and sexuality in the production of the city in crisis. After Jesse leaves dance practice, he returns home to Metro's and his shared apartment. Jesse waits for Metro to return to the apartment, but he never does. He wakes up to the police knocking at his door to tell him that Metro has been murdered. After going down to the precinct to answer questions, then to the city morgue to identify the body, Jesse returns home to his empty apartment. In his overwhelming grief, he calls Ruella, who he had just met at dance rehearsal. He asks Ruella if he could stay with her, and she complies, stating, "You come right over, honey. . . I've got plenty of room" (12). After arriving at her apartment, Ruella comforts him, takes care of his health after he becomes nauseous, and lets him sleep in her bed. And as Jesse narrates, "From then on I called her Rooms" (13). Jesse sees in Ruella a space of comfort and escape.

²⁷⁵ Peter Braunstein, "'Adults Only': The Construction of the Erotic City in New York during the 1970s." *America in the Seventies*, p. 130.

Ruella provides Jesse “other spaces to touch, other windows to look from,” but Metro “holds the key” to a locked room, a psychic space within Jesse that Ruella cannot access. Jesse and Ruella’s struggle over gender roles in their domestic arrangement, and Ruella’s increasing sexual desire for Jesse, signals the proximity between the confined space of “Rooms” and the mandates of heteronormativity. Ruella’s attempt to open up her body and psyche to Jesse falters in the face of Jesse’s desire for Metro. Metro’s present absence in novel is not only bound to a ‘locked room,’ symbolizing domesticity and desire, but reemerges in the subway metaphors and imagery throughout the novel. Thus I contend that the nickname Metro not only alludes to his ex-lover’s ghostly presence in the “locked room” of Jesse’s psyche, but also operates as a figure of the changing urban landscape. This symbolism becomes more evident in a scene in which both Ruella and Jesse are riding the subway, and “the train stopped dead” (167). Jesse describes the accident:

People shifted about nervously. I was afraid. The lights went out. Burning metal and the sharp odor of electricity rose through the car. Smoke pricked my eyes. A gravelly voice came over the loudspeaker saying something no one understood. The door wouldn’t open. The smoke got thick. (167)

That they are both riding the subways indicates that both characters are now haunted by Metro’s present absence. The “gravelly voice. . .saying something no one understood” implies an incomprehensible voice from the dead: Metro’s silenced narrative voice. Even after Dixon stages the death of whiteness as embodied in Metro, his presence forcefully emerges to haunt the urban landscape, structuring queer sociality between the black heterosexual female and black gay male character.

It is telling that they are trapped underground together, symbolizing the submersion and confinement of black sexualities in the production of the race-and-class-stratified city.²⁷⁶ The space of the black underground reveals how the so-called cultural deviance of urban black social formations has been regulated and contained to produce new narratives of “the city” within the American cultural imagination, beyond its association with crime and sexual immorality. Black female and black gay male sexualities have long figured as sites of regulation in urban political discourse. Scholars such as Hazel Carby, Erin Chapman, and Cheryl Hicks have demonstrated how, in the context of Progressive Era reform and the influx of black Southern migrants to the city, black women’s bodies became a site of disorder to be regulated, so as to maintain the social and economic order.²⁷⁷ Marlon Ross argues that urban African American culture has been associated with a greater tolerance for homosexuality since at least the early twentieth century, and illustrates how this association undergirded assumptions about post-war racial integration as a threat to the social and economic order.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁶ In the preface to *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherrie Moraga stages her meditation on the coalitional possibilities of lesbian feminism through an experience on the Boston subway, as she ruminates on the recent shooting of a teenaged black boy by a white cop, and witnesses the arrest of another black boy on the train. She wonders how the lesbian movement can help her “make some sense of the trip from Waterbury to Roxbury, from white to black.” Her use of the line, “I transfer and go underground” resonates with complexities of coalition building that Dixon stages in the underground scene between Jesse and Ruella, both characters haunted by the scene of urban violence that has taken Metro’s life.

²⁷⁷ Hazel Carby, “Policing Black Women’s Bodies in an Urban Context”; Erin Chapman, *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s*; Cheryl Hicks, *Talk to You Like A Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*.

²⁷⁸ Marlon Ross, “Some Glances at the Black Flag.” *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21.1-2 (1994): 193-219.

After Jesse and Ruella escape through the manhole, they embrace and comfort each other. Ruella tells Jesse that it will be a long time before she can take another train. Ruella's name bears a striking similarity to the character Hella in James Baldwin's 1956 novel *Giovanni's Room*. In the novel, Hella is the American woman to whom David proposes while simultaneously engaging in a same-sex affair with Giovanni. As Hella learns about David's sexual relationship with Giovanni, she comes into consciousness about the perils of womanhood, "For a woman, I think a man is always a stranger. And there's something awful about being at the mercy of a stranger" (125). When Hella learns that David has betrayed her on a number of levels, her response is, "If I stay here much longer, I'll forget what it's like to be a woman" (165). Like Hella of Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*, Ruella has become a "familiar, darkened room," a space of refuge, in which Jesse "fumbled to find the light" (121). Yet their relationship evidences a mode of uneven intimacy upon which Ruella had become dependent. Abandoning the dark space signified in the nickname "Rooms," and escaping the space of the "black underground," Ruella wrestles with prevailing public and private notions of black female sexuality. These dark spaces evoke Evelyn Hammonds's metaphor of the "holes" of black female sexuality. Hammonds elucidates how public discourses about so-called deviant black sexuality have resulted in its submersion into private spaces, and how these processes have been central to the production of whiteness. The nickname "Rooms" gestures toward this submersion and confinement, while their shared space in "the black underground" points to submerged role of black sexualities in the production of the neoliberal city. However, Ruella's escape through the manhole and subsequent refusal to

ride the train insinuates a rejection of the racialized, heteropatriarchal discourses that shuttle her body between these two spaces.

In refusing to be called “Rooms” as the novel progresses, Ruella rejects the categories created for the black female subject through the racial and sexual dominance of whiteness. Being labeled “Rooms” threatens to mark Ruella as a non-desiring and undesirable nurturer, and positions Jesse as an unattainable object of desire. Dixon’s formulation speaks to how black heterosexual women and black gay men have been contemporary allies, though simultaneously positioned against each other under the constraints of heteronormativity. Black gay men have been marked as oppositional to black female heterosexual desire because all the “available” black men are popularly imagined as either in prison (Ruella’s brother Phillip and his friend Abdul are incarcerated) or gay (Jesse). Ruella eventually begins a romantic relationship with Abdul, her brother’s friend from prison, and takes in her brother after he is released.²⁷⁹ For Dixon, Ruella can be both nurturer, with “plenty of room,” but also sexually desiring and desirable. In the moment Jesse and Ruella hold each other, Jesse finds assurance that he can leave Ruella. This scene suggests that relations between black gay men and black women need not be regulated by heteronormativity. This moment is unimaginable in constructions of “the city” that have overlooked the complex subjectivities of its inhabitants, or has imagined the urban terrain through “easy sociological categories,” and not the affective alliances across difference that have been produced in between these

²⁷⁹ Occupying the space of the prison often marks feminized male bodies as queer, while more dominant forms of masculinity are imagined as resistant to this queering space. In the novel, Phillip and Abdul’s relationship in prison seems to exceed that of friendship, yet Dixon does not pursue it beyond the prison. Abdul’s relationship with Ruella once he is released seems to resolve “criminal intimacy” with Phillip under the confines of a heterosexual relationship.

categories. Their embrace above ground signals a shift towards fashioning their own sexual subjectivities. But as Ruella breaks free, it seems that Jesse's subjectivity is still bound up with discourses of "urban crisis," signaled in his continued desire to ride the train.

Baldwin's Vanished Rooms, Or Whiteness as a Dying Sign

Dixon, like many other cultural producers, revered James Baldwin. Like his black gay contemporaries, Dixon saw his work as indebted to Baldwin's, as Baldwin's work in the 1950s and 60s created the conditions of possibility for black gay writers in the 1980s and 90s. Critics and reviewers constantly compared Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms* to Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room*.²⁸⁰ Dixon himself acknowledged that *Vanishing Rooms* was meant to grapple with Baldwin's legacy on his own terms: fiction. However, in an interview in the black literary and cultural studies journal, *Callaloo*, Dixon reveals that he understood his work as the "book that Baldwin never got around to writing."²⁸¹ He believes that Baldwin never got around to writing from a particular black gay male perspective: "I think Baldwin really wanted the centering of gay experience from his lived experience, as a black man, and it doesn't work. I think that he was afraid of that failure, all along, and when he gave in to wanting to try it, he got cold feet. . . So what I want to do is not back away from it."²⁸² As scholars have well-documented, though *Go Tell It on the Mountain* garnered Baldwin critical success, his choice to talk explicitly

²⁸⁰ See Cole, "Other Voices, Other Rooms," *Christopher Street 14. 1* (1991); Jerome de Romanet, "A Conversation with Melvin Dixon"; Dixon, "On the Writer's Responsibility To Reflect the Community's Diversity" *Gay Community News*, March 22-April 4, 1992.

²⁸¹ Jerome de Romanet, "A Conversation with Melvin Dixon" *Callaloo 23.1* (2000): p. 104

²⁸² Jerome de Romanet, "A Conversation with Melvin Dixon" *Callaloo 23.1* (2000): 104.

about homosexuality in *Giovanni's Room*, even as a white-life novel set in Europe, was met with critical disapproval upon its release.²⁸³

I am concerned with why Dixon believed that centering black gay experience “doesn’t work” for Baldwin. I contend that Dixon’s comments point out how the structure of whiteness in the early period in which Baldwin is writing *Giovanni's Room* is different from the period in which Dixon sets his novel. Indeed, Baldwin is writing in the early Civil Rights period, which is different from the post-Civil Rights period in which Dixon is writing. Dixon’s novel only becomes possible through the social movements of the previous decades. Black Power and Black Feminist movements, and the Stonewall rebellion carved out a space for Dixon to render the black gay subject visible, albeit marginally. Even though the Black Power era marks a moment of increased surveillance and stigma for black gay men, black lesbian feminists created a marginal space for black gay men’s cultural activism to emerge. Furthermore, Black Power and Black Feminist movements not only created this space by foregrounding voices in the margins, they also did so through lodging a political assault on whiteness. Therefore, I argue that Dixon grapples with Baldwin’s legacy in its formative role in unveiling how whiteness depends on policing *racial and sexual boundaries*. Though this had been articulated in earlier forms of black cultural expression, Baldwin’s early novels built on this tradition by demonstrating how whiteness also relied on heteronormativity for its maintenance. Writing about Baldwin’s work, Marlon Ross argues that he played a formative role in “the uncloseting of desire,” particularly “sexual desire” as “a necessary

²⁸³ See Yasmin DeGout, “Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Potraits of Homoerotic Love in *Giovanni's Room*”; Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman, “Simply a Menaced Boy: Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni's Room*. ”

step if Americans hoped to unwarp their imaginations from the destructive bent of racism” (34). Dixon followed the path of Baldwin, as well as women of color feminists, who had been central in articulating how white dominance depends on interlocking system of oppression, including the maintenance of gender and sexual norms.²⁸⁴

In an interview about the novel, Dixon reveals that the story of Metro’s rape and murder was loosely based on historical events. I quote his description of the event at length:

Also, I must say that the impetus for this scenario was a real gay bashing in Central Park in the late Seventies when I was living just off Central Park West. These four teenagers went through the park one twilight with baseball bats and chose which people they thought were gay and went and beat them up. It was really scandalous and the press made a big deal out of it. I was outraged by the whole thing. I was outraged by the arrogance of these kids, the presumptuousness. . . the fact that they felt they had society’s support, that’s what killed me the most, not that they were warped fuck-ups themselves, but that they felt that they had the right to do this, and that they were not going to be held accountable. And one of the guys’ mothers was interviewed and she said, “Oh my son, my poor son, he’s never had a chance.”²⁸⁵

Central Park is another area known for its sexually illicit activity in the 1970s. That this violence took place in the park reveals the role that extra-legal violence plays in state policing of public spatial relations. More to the point, Dixon believed that expressions of anti-gay violence are mobilized not so much by individual psychopathology, as signaled by his suggestion that they were not “warped fuck-ups,” but by “arrogance” structured through a feeling that they had “society’s support.” But most importantly, Dixon points

²⁸⁴ See Combahee River Collective, “A Combahee River Collective Statement.”

²⁸⁵ See Clarence Bard Cole, “Other Voices, Other Rooms,” *Christopher Street 14. 1* (1991): p. 26.

out that these teenagers were “presumptuous” and thought they would not be held accountable.

Following Baldwin’s lead, Dixon’s novel centralizes whiteness as a structure of feeling, and source of the teenagers’ presumptuousness. Through his characterization of Lonny, Dixon exhibits his desire to interrogate *whiteness* in this changing urban landscape—a landscape that produces disorientation not only for black gay subjects, but for white working class subjects as well.²⁸⁶ Dixon states that his characterization of Lonny—the sexually-confused, working-class white teenager complicit in Metro’s murder—is that of a “child of this urban environment” structured by his own disorientation “that there’s no place for him in this society whose values he defends” (27). That the white teens were arrested and subjected to public surveillance by the popular media suggests a fracturing whiteness, one dismantled in some ways by the social movements of the 1960s and early 1970s. And not only does whiteness proclaim to know the truth of sexuality, violence becomes the technology for its recognition. In other words, indiscriminate of self-identification as sexual minorities, white dominated society confers rights in its citizens to name sexual others and violently mark their exclusion from the nation. Violence as a technology constructs the sexual other as a threat to the

²⁸⁶ In *Safe Space*, Christina B. Hanhardt identifies the mid-70s as a moment in which violence in middle-class Greenwich Village was often associated with working-class white youth. Hanhardt cites numerous editorials by residents of the Village, which describe the perpetrators as the real victims. These sentiments, she suggests, “typified a highly racialized public discourse of social conflict among working-class New Yorkers during the late 1960s and 70s, which identified white ethnic communities as victims of the larger social and economic changes constitutive of the so-called postwar urban crisis,” p. 112. Dixon’s historically-based account and Hanhardt’s historical analysis suggest that Metro’s murder must be situated within a larger discourse about post-war urban crisis.

white nation, and conceals the homoerotics of recognition. Nevertheless, whiteness as a structure of feeling and as a source of support runs contrary to this changing social and political landscape. The novel asks, what does it mean to express a “will to whiteness” in a political terrain where white hegemony has in many ways faltered?²⁸⁷ What happens to individual racists when the technology of racism no longer explicitly requires their labor? These questions permit readers to view Lonny’s hysteria after participating in Metro’s murder as not only indicative of his guilt for an individual act of homophobic violence, but as produced through the alienation of laboring for whiteness, when the white worker is forced to confront their own (in)humanity.

Lonny, who is complicit in Metro’s murder is ironically the character whose past we learn the most about. Lonny continually references his father’s attrition after countless hours as a housing contractor for the upper-middle class eventually leads to his untimely death. Other kids in his neighborhood call Lonny a “sissy” because he is forced to care for his younger sister while his mom is working. He responds by donning the accouterment of masculinity (track shoes and a leather jacket) and purchasing a switchblade. Answering his mom’s query about seeking gainful employment, Lonny replies, “I’m self employed. . .I’m going to use myself.” And she responds, “you mean you are going to use yourself up.” Countering the feminization of his labor as caretaker, Lonny arms himself against the neighborhood kids who challenge his manhood. This becomes a form of labor that seeks to counteract how his gender is produced in the public

²⁸⁷ In *Against the Closet*, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman describes lynching violence not as reflecting existing power relations, but “desperately sought-after ones,” p. 52. She argues that white racial violence in the early twentieth century expressed a “will to whiteness” as much as it disavowed black humanity. I suggest that anti-gay violence in the 1970s by white working class youth was as much a will to whiteness, as it was a disavowal of gay humanity.

sphere through the cultural conditions of capitalism. Lonny's participation in the illicit economies of the street is in some ways a form of rejection of capitalism's mandates of maximum productivity and promises of the "good life" that ultimately killed his father.²⁸⁸ Explaining his decision to participate in street life, he cites the loss of his father as the ultimate reason—loss acquired while the father worked countless hours in other peoples' homes and due to his untimely death: "So I started hanging out with guys I met. Cuddles and them. I wasn't no Mama's boy. No sissy. No faggot either. I just fucking missed my old man" (153).

If Lonny's labeling of sissy is shaped by the forces of global capitalism and the gendered divisions of labor, then what must he have thought about Metro, who was both gainfully employed and gay? Lonny and Metro confront each other many times on the street throughout the novel, and Metro continually tries to talk to Lonny. Lonny, still in denial about his own same-sex desire, states that the only way he would go with Metro back to his room was to "smoke dope or listen to records" (56). For Lonny these operate as normative behaviors of male bonding, but also as markers of excess money for leisure. After Metro initially introduces himself to Lonny, Lonny curses him out and tells him to get out of his face. He walks away, leaving him standing there "looking like he just lost some money or came home to find his apartment broken into and his stereo and favorite record gone" (56). Lonny views Metro through imagining his possessions, as a figure of the white middle class status that "he never had a chance" to achieve. When Lonny runs into Metro the third time and they have a conversation, Lonny runs from his own desire

²⁸⁸ See Lauren Berlant's "Cruel Optimism" for a discussion of the "good life" as a supposed guarantee of an investment in capitalist accumulation and futurity, that surfaces as a "cruel attachment," or a "condition of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic" (94).

for Metro. He runs to the home of his friend, Cuddles, and tells him that Metro came on to him. Whether or not Metro made explicit sexual advances towards Lonny is arguable, but what is clear is the sexual power that Metro has over Lonny. Lonny describes Metro's gaze in the following passage, "But when you realized his eyes were fingers taking hold, you'd hate him even more for pulling it off, undressing you right there with his eyes and laughing at your naked ass or shriveled-up cock. You'd be mad enough to kill him" (58-59). This scene points to the homoerotics of whiteness, particularly how the white middle-class male gaze renders the white working class male subject as having a failed heterosexual masculinity. But more importantly it reveals that the perception of gay men as an incessant threat to heteromascularity is produced within racial projects that aspire towards whiteness. Therefore, I argue that acts of anti-gay violence are always already racial projects that conceal their indebtedness to the power of the white gaze.

Eric Stanley argues that the logic of the racialized gaze is useful to our understandings of anti-gay violence, because it begs the question of how only certain bodies become intelligible as gay, and how the gaze functions to correctly levy violence against gays:

After all, the racialized phenomenology of blackness under colonization that Fanon illustrates may be productive to read against and with a continuum of antiqueer violence. . . I ask why antiqueer violence, more often than not, is correctly levied against queers. In other words, the productive discourse that wishes to suggest that queer bodies are no different might miss moments of signification where queer bodies do in fact signify differently.²⁸⁹

²⁸⁹ Eric Stanley, *Near Life*, "Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text* 29.2 (2011): 2. Stanley uses the term "queer" to account for violence directed towards non-normative genders and sexualities. I use the term "gay" to account for the specificity of the language of "gay-bashing" in the novel, as well as the historical moment that it fictionalizes.

Stanley demonstrates how the race analogy in LGBT politics might be productive in our understanding of anti-gay violence. Those opposed to the race analogy often assert that non-heterosexual bodies are not visible as minorities. But Stanley believes that this argument misses how certain bodies *do* signify sexual difference. Building upon Stanley's claims, I argue that Dixon's novel reveals the racialized logics that undergird acts of anti-gay violence through his figuration of the urban landscape. After Lonny tells Cuddles about Metro's advances, they rile up their buddies in order to enact Lonny's revenge for the gendered and sexualized assault that Metro's white gaze has inflicted on him. It is Jesse who first reconstructs Metro's death within his memory, recalling, "And when Metro left the black underground of trains and screeching wheels, when he reached for air in the thick ash of night, they spotted him like found money through the stinking grates of smoke and beer" (15). Metro is "spotted" upon ascending from "the black underground," and becomes visible to his attackers under the "thick ash of night," insinuating that Metro's sexuality is mired in the racialized discourses of urban crisis. That he is spotted like "found money through the stinking grates" also demonstrates that his upward social mobility has made his difference legible to these disenfranchised youth. The teenagers' proclamation to "fuck the night" becomes a metonym for the entanglements of race and sexuality as a cultural logic undergirding the discourse of urban crisis. As "child[ren] of this urban environment" their violent sexual policing of "Metro" registers as a thwarted attempt to maintain the racialized and sexualized logics that ironically produce their own disenfranchisement.

After using Lonny to lure Metro to the scene of the crime, Cuddles holds Lonny at knifepoint as Metro is forced to orally pleasure him. The other members of the group then anally rape Metro, while Metro stimulates Lonny to climax. After seeing Maxie and Lou stab Metro, Lonny asks, “Shit man. Hold it. . . I thought we was only gonna fuck him. What the hell you guys doing?” (66). To this, Lou replies, “Fucking him good” (66). The knives become the technology to not only kill Metro, but also to kill all queer life, to induce a return to whiteness as the dominant logic of the cultural, political and economic order.²⁹⁰ After the rest of the group disappears, Lonny leaves scared and disoriented, only to return to the scene after the police have removed the body. The police find Lonny lying nude in the chalk outline where Metro has been killed. The police put Lonny in a straightjacket and take him away. Lonny’s temporary insanity signals that he has “used himself up,” as his mother foreshadows, laboring to defend white heteromascularity, the only “property” he believes he has.²⁹¹ When Metro is murdered and the group abandons Lonny, he is forced to face his own alienation. It is fitting, then, that he lies down in the white chalk outline in the street—the urban space where he has labored under the dying sign of whiteness.

²⁹⁰ In “Near Life, Queer Death,” Eric Stanley theorizes the excessive violence that pushes “queers” (which in his theory “inhabit the place of compromised personhood and the zone of death”) beyond death as “overkill,” to rid one’s self of a “threat so unimaginable that one is ‘forced,’ not simply to murder, but to push them back out of time, out of History, and into that which comes before.” I take up Stanley’s claim to think about “excessive” violence against gays as symbolic of an attempt to rid one’s self and society of the possibility of homosexuality.

²⁹¹ In “Whiteness as Property,” Cheryl Harris argues that the law has accorded “holders” of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded other types of property. I contend that as an economically disenfranchised youth, Lonny labors to defend the racial and sexual boundaries of “whiteness,” the only “property” he has.

Hayden's "Paradise Valley" and Dixon's "Paradise Baths"

At the end of the novel, Jesse is still caught up in a psychodynamic struggle over the loss of Metro. At once Jesse's identity seems to be disarticulated from the black community (in that he leaves Ruella), and articulated through his loss of Metro. The novel closes with a performance that Jesse choreographs as an elegy to Metro. Maurice Wallace argues that Jesse's grief over the loss of Metro is also for himself, as he no longer has Metro's desire to protect him from facing the fact of his blackness: "Although Jesse grieves bitterly for Metro, his grief is most certainly for himself as well. In a sudden reversal of circumstances, Metro's death leaves Jesse alone, as decidedly as Jesse had abandoned him by the river, to face the intolerable fact of blackness by himself."²⁹² Indeed, after Jesse finds out about Metro's death he recalls his own hailing on the street. He begins to wonder if the guys who killed Metro were the same ones that "spotted [him] and yelled, first one then another until [he] was trapped":

"Hey, nigger."
 "Yeah, you."
 "Naw, man he ain't no nigger. He a faggot."
 "Then he a black nigger faggot" (14-15).

This exchange had a profound psychological effect on Jesse, causing "sweat and trembling in [his] knees" that "would not go away, not even when [he] reached the door and locked [him]self in" (15). Jesse further describes this encounter as "mak[ing] acid out of every bit of safety I thought we had" (15). Being alone and disconnected from his community, Jesse must finally confront his own racialization and sexualization as a

²⁹² Maurice Wallace, "Autochoreography of an Ex Snow Queen." Eve Sedgwick, ed. *Novel Gazing*, p. 390.

“black nigger faggot.” I argue that it through the queer urban landscape, particularly the Paradise Baths that Jesse finally confronts his own racialized and sexualized injury.

Dixon draws upon the work of another injured black queer subject, poet Robert Hayden, and his elegies to his childhood landscape in early 20th century Detroit in his construction of Paradise Baths, the queer urban site to which Jesse goes to grieve. Melvin Dixon opens *Vanishing Rooms* with an epigraph from Robert Hayden’s poem, “Elegies for Paradise Valley.” Dixon draws his title from a recurring line in Hayden’s poem, “Let vanished rooms, and dead streets tell.” First published in 1977, Hayden’s poem is a mourning song for his childhood home of urban Detroit in the 1920s and 1930s. The poem recalls his urban black community in Detroit as a space “Of Death. Of loving too” (438). Hayden’s poem revisits the rich culture of Detroit’s black urban poor, demonstrating that the losses of urban renewal in the 1950s were more than just the destruction of the built environment. Hayden does not avoid the negativities of black life, socially conditioned by racism and poverty. He opens the poem by detailing how his “shared bedroom’s window/open on alley stench” of “A junkie dead in maggots there” (line 1-3). He remembers the junkie’s “body” being “shoved into a van” and the “hatred of our kind/glistening like tears/in the policemen’s eyes” (line 4-7). The speaker’s childhood memories of black social life and (social) death in inner city Detroit are constructed in and through black culture’s intimacy with state violence and anti-black racism.

The urban landscape that Hayden reconstructs through elegy is also shaped by the death of a family member in the poem. The poem describes the wake of his “murdered Uncle Crip” (line 15) and the community members who gather to remember him.

Though Hayden's landscape revolves around dying, the reader is reminded, "dying's not death" (line 60). It is through memory that he is able to reconstruct the landscape of music, dancing, and unique characters that peopled 1920s and 30s urban Detroit. Hayden indicates that the uniqueness of his childhood socialization in this impoverished urban landscape is that under those social conditions there was "No time of starched/ and ironed innocence. Godfearing/ elders, even Godless gifters, tried/as best they could to shelter/ us. Rats gnawing in their walls" (lines 8-12). These communal and spatial relations aided in constituting Hayden's subjectivity.

The elegiac form of the poem reveals that the loss of nonheteronormative blackness through urban renewal is a source of Hayden's mourning. In an acclaimed book on urban crisis in Detroit, Thomas Sugrue notes how inner-city neighborhoods like "Paradise Valley," that were associated with "blight," were targeted for urban renewal in the 1950s: "City officials expected that the eradication of 'blight' would increase city tax revenue, revitalize the decaying urban core, and improve the living conditions of the poorest slum dwellers. Overcrowded, unsanitary, and dilapidated districts like Paradise Valley and the Lower East Side would be replaced by clean, modern, high-rise housing projects, civic institutions and hospitals."²⁹³ According to Sugrue, the destruction of African American communities came with little warning and without any housing assistance, proving devastating to African Americans. Missing from this narrative are the important black cultural formations in Detroit that were also devastated by urban renewal. Elaine Moon describes Paradise Valley alternatively as:

The black downtown, Broadway, Las Vegas. A place of fun, brotherhood, and games of chance. A place known

²⁹³ Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of Urban Crisis*, p. 48

from here to Europe. In the 1930's and early 40's in Detroit a night on the town, for Black or White, was not complete without a stop at Paradise Valley. It was here that integration began – where Black and White first sat side by side for eating and entertainment. It was here that many politicians got their start – sowing seeds in Black Bottom. It was here that ball players found a haven when they were ostracized from white hotels and restaurants.²⁹⁴

Hayden's elegy mourns not only the material losses accrued, but also the immaterial forms of cultural loss that could not be quantified, and thus, claimed as grievances—especially the modes of nightlife and sociality that were conducive to other ways of being in the world.

In the final stanza of the poem, the speaker reveals his own “guilt and secret pain,” (lines 131-132) as Christian visitors from the neighborhood pray for his Uncle Crip's “unsaved” soul. The speaker remembers dancing with his Uncle Crip, but also speaking his “pieces well in Sunday school” (line 129). The negotiation between the sacred and profane that has historically animated black experience is recapitulated in the name “Paradise Valley,” where “Paradise” evokes a space of nearness to God, while the valley is of far distance from Him. As literary critic Frank Rashid argues, “[Hayden's] elegiac recollections become occasion for meditation on religion and morality as experienced in Paradise Valley.”²⁹⁵ Black religious ideology competes with other ideas of morality constructed through their social conditions. This contestation over morality, and thereby, sexual immorality is important to understanding why Hayden chooses “Paradise Valley” as a “site of memory.” Hayden's struggles with his own “deviant”

²⁹⁴ Elaine Moon, (The Past Prologue) Paradise Valley, Detroit History Vertical File, Walter P Reuther Library, Wayne State University. p. 15 Accessed Online Sept 9, 2013. <https://www.reuther.wayne.edu/node/8609>

²⁹⁵ Frank Rashid. “Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies.” *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001): 201.

sexuality are shaped in and through his experience as a black urban subject. His elegies for Paradise Valley illuminate how urban spatial relations are central to the making of black queer subjectivity. Hayden mourns the queer spaces of nightlife in Paradise Valley that were both formative to and supportive of queer socialities. I believe this is why Dixon draws his title from this poem and opens his novel with an excerpt from it. Dixon's epigraph conjures the relations between urban sociality and black queer subjectivity in excerpting the lines:

Where's taunted Christopher, sad queen of night?
 And Ray, who cursing crossed the color line?
 Where's gentle Brother Davis? Where's dopefiend Mel?
 Let vanished rooms, let dead streets tell. (lines 82-85)

Without making ethical claims, the poem elegizes people who racially passed and participated in drug culture, subjectivities that might be read as queer, in that they reside outside of racial normativity. This "sad queen of night" I would gesture is Hayden himself, who believed up until his death that his cancer was God's punishment for his sexual immorality.²⁹⁶ "Vanished rooms" and "dead streets tell" these stories, signaling a relationship between the changing urban landscape and the black queer subject.

Dixon signifies on Hayden's "Paradise Valley" in his construction of "Paradise Baths" in *Vanishing Rooms*. Jesse visits the bathhouse after Metro's death. He believed that visiting the place would bring him closer to Metro, indicating the dual role of the bathhouse in the novel as a site of pleasure and painful memories. In the novel, the Paradise Baths are located on 14th street between the village and Chelsea neighborhoods

²⁹⁶ For a discussion of Hayden's queer melancholy, see Arnold Rampersad, "Introduction," *Collected Poems*; Ponthella T. Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*; Eduardo C. Corral, Q & A: To Robert Hayden, *Poetry Magazine*, December 2011.

of New York City. Described as having seven floors, each floor of the bathhouse is associated with a particular sexual fetish, ascending up to the seventh floor, Paradise. The seventh floor is composed of rooms decorated for different sexual fantasies that proprietors can choose from until they find one that matches their own sexual interests. When Jesse arrives at the bathhouse, not knowing his way around, he is met by Clementine, described as a “tall, heavy-set black man with large popeyes.” Clementine’s character parallels the homosexual character in *Giovanni’s Room* who accosts David at the bar, warning David about his ensuing relationship with Giovanni. Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman describes the homosexual as a “figure of abjection,” as “David’s own repressed insides materialized before him.”²⁹⁷ Clementine acts in the same capacity for Jesse in Dixon’s novel. Clementine represents Jesse’s internalized struggle with the abjection of queer (interracial) desire from the black nation. Black political discourse had increasingly positioned itself against queer (interracial) desire in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in the context of the Black Power movement.²⁹⁸

Upon meeting Jesse, Clementine continually asks him whether or not he is a “snow queen,” or a black queer male who exclusively dates white men. Jesse does not know what the term means, and after Clementine explains what it means, Jesse responds “I’m a dancer.” Clementine leads Jesse through the various floors of the bathhouse, telling Jesse how the various fantasy rooms are spaces “for memory. And masturbation.” Suddenly Jesse remembers his days at Wesman College, where he and Metro first met. He recalls the moment that he told his friends at the “black table” that he wanted to be a

²⁹⁷ Aliyyah Abdur Rahman, “Simply a Menaced Boy”: Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*,” p. 484.

²⁹⁸ See Marlon Ross, “White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality.” Dwight McBride, ed. *James Baldwin Now*, 1999.

dancer. Though he tries to insert modern dance within the African American cultural tradition by naming such historical figures as Alvin Ailey and Pearl Primus, one of his peers reminds him of his gender deviance with the indictment, “You still wear tights and leotards and swish don’t you?” (99). Jesse reprimands the group and leaves the table, never to return, but months later this same group asks him to “dance something ‘political’” as part of a student organized “takeover of a classroom building” in response to the school’s refusal to host a program in memory of Malcolm X. Jesse participates in the classroom takeover, but refuses to dance for the protest.

While participating in the black social protests affirms his blackness, dancing threatens to affirm his gender and sexual difference. Jesse’s refusal to dance stems from the stigma attached to black male gender variance in the context of masculinized notions of black racial pride. In his seminal study of black masculinity, Phillip Brian Harper demonstrates the linkages between racial pride, masculinity, and African American identity: “since the dominant view holds prideful self-respect as the very essence of healthy African-American identity, it also considers such identity to be fundamentally weakened wherever masculinity appears to be compromised.”²⁹⁹ Jesse’s dance performance would render African American identity as weakened and psychologically unhealthy. Thus, Jesse’s refusal to dance allegorizes the difficulty of expressing racial injury in the context of 1970s.

Ironically, the Paradise Baths become the site where Jesse can explore his racial injuries. As Jesse continues to travel through the floors of the bathhouse, he remembers the time he performed a solo dance to black female blues singer Billie Holiday’s version

²⁹⁹ Phillip Brian Harper. *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity*, p. ix.

of “Strange Fruit,” and Metro asks him why he chose a song about lynching violence to accompany his dance. Metro accuses Jesse of acting as though only black people are oppressed, suggesting that other groups also “hurt sometimes”: “Gays, Jews. Even poor boys from the South. Don’t you think we have some weight to bear? Don’t you think we hurt sometimes?” (103). When Metro confronts him with the pain of others, Jesse is reminded of his own pain accrued from inhabiting the black body: “You’re white Metro. At a distance you blend in with the crowd. Shit, they see me coming, and in a riot they don’t stop me to ask if I’ve been to college or live in the suburbs. They start beating any black head they find” (103). Jesse’s response conjures up the black body’s resistance to any differentiation, of how the overdetermined narratives of deviance attached to the black body indiscriminately mark black people as targets of violence.³⁰⁰

After this intense memory, Jesse finally reaches the top floor of the bathhouse, known as “Paradise.” Ironically, Jesse chooses a college dorm room as his “fantasy room.” While in this room, a man enters wanting to engage in a “college boy” fantasy. Jesse curses him out and demands he leave the room. Rejecting this man’s fantasy leads him back to memories of his university days, particularly to the moment when his relationship with Metro was discovered by one of his former friends at the “black table.” Jesse begins to dream about his black Southern classmate, Vester, who tries to seduce Jesse one night to find out whether or not Jesse is gay and in a relationship with Metro. Though Jesse does not respond when Vester places Jesse’s hand on his crotch, Vester reports back to the “black table” that he indeed did find out the truth of Jesse’s sexuality

³⁰⁰ For a discussion of how “an *idea* of the black body has been and continues to be projected across actual physical bodies” and “how the recognition of individuated bodies as ‘the black body’ creates similar experiences,” see Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience*.

and was “disgusted.” Vester’s “disgust” is premised on the denial of his own sexual seduction of Jesse, and possibly his own repressed same-sex desires.

Jesse’s traumatic encounter with Vester, a representative figure of the black nation, must be contextualized within a larger discourse of black liberation. In the context of 1970s black liberation discourse, homosexuality was a marker of racial damage. In the August 1972 special issue on “The Black Male” in the popular black magazine *Ebony*, black liberation psychiatrist Alvin Pouissant wrote an article entitled, “Sex and the Black Male.” Though the central concern of the article is to challenge popular stereotypical conceptions of black male sexuality, Pouissant rekindles the discourse of racial damage, evidence of which could be found in expressions of black male homosexuality: “Nonetheless our society’s abuse of black males’ psyches has given them their share of sexual problems. Testifying to the fact that not all black men are super-studs are data showing the significant incidence of homosexuality, impotence and premature ejaculation among black men.”³⁰¹ Homosexuality is named as one more sexual dysfunction associated with the damage racism causes to the black male psyche. Despite Pouissant’s emphasis on the liberation of many black men who are “changing their self-image” and no longer “neurotically bound to prove themselves as studs” or “feel a need to suppress their sexuality,” the black male homosexuals’ psyche remains the site of racial damage. Black liberation discourse, though focused on resilience and resistance, continued to mark the gender and sexual other’s psyche as the repository for collective histories of racial damage. In exposing Jesse’s homosexuality, Vester projects the injuries of racism onto Jesse’s body and psyche. His social mobility is bolstered by

³⁰¹ Alvin Pouissant. “Sex and the Black Male.” *Ebony* August 1972, p. 117-118.

giving the lie to the black nation that Jesse, as the figure of racial injury, is its constitutive outside. As a figure of the black nation, Vester's simultaneous sexual seduction and othering of Jesse reveals the instability of any black nationalist claim to racial pride.

The coupling of seduction and disgust of this representative figure of the black nation mirrors Jesse's relationship with Metro. After Jesse dreams about his experience with Vester, he then dreams about his most painful experience with Metro, remembering his incessant questioning as to why Jesse calls him by that nickname:

“Why do you call me Metro?:
 “You were in France. Once.”
 “Why do you call me Metro?”
 “Take me, baby. Take me underground.”(113)

The continual debate over Metro's naming calls attention to its construction.

Recognizing his own exploitative desire for Metro, for his “rough hands,” and desire for Metro to take him “underground,” Jesse responds to this with a form of sexualized consolation, by embracing him in his arms, and kissing him all over his body. However, Jesse's expectations of reciprocated affection are met with Metro's moans of ecstasy after hurling the racial insult “nigger” at Jesse. Images of the urban landscape suddenly reappear as both a symbol of desire and disgust, “You wanted to ride the rough train, huh? Well, ride it, nigger” (113). He continues, “No I'm Metro, remember. You call me that. You want it low. You want me to take you there. Down under. Well down under you ain't nothing but a nigger. A coal-black nigger.” (114). As Jesse responds in anger and begins to beat Metro, he realizes that Metro is masturbating and has ejaculated in response to his rage. This moment conjures Clementine's admonition that Paradise Baths is a site “for memory. And masturbation” and a site where “desire and hurt get mixed up.” Clementine, hearing Jesse scream “nigger, nigger” while sleeping, reprimands

Jesse by saying, “That’s what you get for being a snow queen.” Similar to the way Vester had tried to sexually seduce Jesse, Clementine exhibits disgust and desire in his attempt to find out the truth of Jesse’s interracial desire, and thereby his political allegiances to the black nation. He says to Jesse, “I said roll over. Spread it. People been asking me, and I got to know” (115).

Through his encounters in the Paradise Baths, Jesse confronts that place of racial grief, the “rectal grave” of blackness, wherein memories of black self-shattering, of injury, of “desire and hurt” have been repressed.³⁰² In the dream about Metro, Jesse finally acknowledges a history of racial injury signaled in his waking up screaming, “nigger, nigger.” And through his encounter with Clementine, Jesse can no longer disavow his own forced sexualization as the anal-like cavity through which the phallic, white “Metro” continually traverses. Jesse is forced to confront his sexualized penetration by whiteness, the gendered and sexualized injuries that have been central to processes of racialization. In the end Jesse’s dream encounters with Vester, as a figure of the black nation, and Metro, as a figure of whiteness, reveal the immaterial and unquantifiable forms of racial and sexual grief that are impossible to express if we remember the 1970s solely as a moment of racial and gay pride. Knowing he will never be able to escape the racial and sexual othering that even the most radical black nationalists and gay liberationists depend on for their own identity claims, Jesse neither fully rejects nor acquiesces to the claims these discourses make on his body and psyche. Instead, Jesse refashions them to articulate his own sense of selfhood, “I wasn’t Metro’s nigger or Clementine’s. I was my own beautiful black son of a bitch” (116).

³⁰² See Lee Edelman, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” *October* 43 (1987): 197-222.

Dixon signifies on Hayden's cultural landscape of "Paradise Valley" as a "site of memory" by which to express a history of racial injury that has been central to making urban gay subjectivity. By remapping racial injury onto the queer urban landscape, Dixon demonstrates that Jesse's expressions of injury are not solely linked to bodily desire or personal loss, but to larger processes of racialization and spatialization that govern interracial intimacy. Conversely, Dixon demonstrates that urban gay subjectivity must be contextualized within the processes and practices that continually remake "the city."

If, as I have argued, urban black gay subjectivity is linked to the changing urban landscape, then how might we think about the ongoing effects of the changing political and cultural landscape on contemporary black gay subjects? In the next chapter, I discuss, more broadly, the persistence of violence within our contemporary cultural and political landscape, and how it continues to shape black gay subjectivity. I briefly discuss my own subjective relationship to this project, and recap some of the claims that I have advanced in this dissertation. Finally, I think about how the black gay cultural movement that I have examined might help shape our thinking in an ongoing epidemic of violence. I do so by putting this project's literary archive in conversation with the work of contemporary black gay cultural critics.

Chapter 6: New Hope?: “Post-AIDS” Black Gay Subjectivity in an Ongoing Epidemic of Violence

It has been almost ten years now since I first discovered *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother*. I had just begun a job directing a black culture center at the University of Florida. My job was to promote education about black culture across the university and in the larger community, as well as to support and advocate for the four thousand black students attending the university. However, as a queer black male directing a historic black cultural center, I faced homophobia by faculty, students, and staff. Similar to the ideologies held by some Civil Rights movement leaders, the social movement central to the center’s formation, many of the center’s constituents felt that heterosexual masculinity was necessary for black leadership. This experience, alongside my own personal experiences “coming out” as a black gay man, sparked my interest in these two texts. These were the texts to which I turned for affirmation of my own experience. I will never forget how I felt reading Hemphill’s poem “Commitments”: “I am the invisible son/In the family photos/Nothing appears out of character./I smile as I serve my duty” (lines 32-35). I found solace in this poem because it spoke to my own positionality, as an “outsider within” my own family, and within a larger black racial family.

As I continued to search for black gay literature that would help to sustain my existence in these tumultuous times, I also found Robert Reid-Pharr’s essay collection, *Black Gay Man*. I began to read Reid-Pharr’s prose, marveling at the fact that he could write so personally and provocatively within the ivory tower. I still credit Reid-Pharr’s work as inspiring my exodus from Florida, and my entrance into graduate school. Two essays in the collection particularly inspired me. “Living As a Lesbian,” Reid-Pharr’s meditation on the transformative role that black lesbian feminists played in his scholarly

and personal development, inspired me to “live as a lesbian” amongst a group of black queer graduate students and faculty that nurtured me and provided community during my brief tenure at the University of Florida. The friendships I developed in Florida were and continue to be essential to my investment in black feminist politics and praxis for everyday living. In the second, and now canonical article, “Tearing the Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection and the Production of A Late Twentieth Century Masculinity,” I found a theoretical supplement to Essex Hemphill’s image of the black homosexual as the “invisible son.” In the article, Reid-Pharr examines late twentieth century literary representations of black masculinity, demonstrating how black masculinity, and by extension the black community, has produced its own normativity and bid for inclusion in the liberal nation-state by violently othering the black male homosexual: “To strike the homosexual, the scapegoat, the sign of chaos and crisis, is to return the community to normality, to create boundaries around Blackness, rights that indeed white men are obliged to recognize.”³⁰³ Reid-Pharr demonstrates how “the Black,” who had been conceptualized in modern slave culture as an inchoate, irrational non-subject, has produced its psychic normality, civility, and sovereignty through violently scapegoating the black homosexual as the abject figure of blackness.

The latter essay has taken on more significance in light of my research into black gay cultural movements in the 1980s and 90s. Robert Reid-Pharr has published on his relationship with Essex Hemphill and others in the movement. I have also found in my research that Reid-Pharr was active in the National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians, and served in a leadership capacity in Other Countries Collective. More

³⁰³ Robert Reid-Pharr. “Tearing The Goat’s Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of Twentieth Century Black Masculinity.” *Black Gay Man: Essays*, p. 104.

specifically, Reid-Pharr led a workshop in *Other Countries* on crafting essays, a literary form that was critical to black gay cultural production in this moment. As a pioneering figure in what has come to be called black queer studies (though he might reject this role), Robert Reid-Pharr serves as a bridge between this artistic and activist movement and the institutionalization of black queer studies in the academy. Situating Reid-Pharr within this movement adds historical context to his theorization of the black male homosexual as a figure of abjection. The rejection many black gay men faced by black communities during the AIDS crisis attests to their historical abjection, as “the black male homosexual” was figured as a living sign of sexual chaos and crisis during the epidemic. Forgetting the trauma of AIDS and other forms of state violence directed toward black gay men during the 1980s and 90s allows black heterosexual culture to continually distance itself from the stigma attached to black sexuality, despite the virtual explosion of HIV/AIDS infection in black communities, across gender, sexual, and class boundaries.

But it was Reid-Pharr who also called for us to remember Essex Hemphill, not as a figure of abjection, but as a figure of hope. In this same essay collection, Reid-Pharr describes Hemphill as “the very center not only of an emergent black gay culture but also and importantly the center of everything that was right—and righteous—in this country. He was the personification of our hope and pride.”³⁰⁴ If Hemphill did embody a movement as “the personification of our hope and pride,” then how could he be reduced to the space of abjection, as a representational figure of abject blackness, as solely “scapegoat” for the black community’s claims to normalcy? Through my historicized

³⁰⁴ Robert Reid-Pharr, “A Child’s Life.” *Black Gay Man: Essays*, p. 178.

readings of Hemphill's work and the work of other black gay artists and activists, I have attempted to demonstrate how black gay men used cultural narratives to refashion their subjectivities in an epidemic of epistemological, psychic, and social violence. I have explored the complex ways in which black gay male voices asserted more complex narratives of black gay "being," developed collectivities in the face of state-based and intra-racial violence, and disseminated and preserved black gay cultural expression to archive their losses and victories. These men not only represented what it was like to be the "scapegoat," they also used their creative and activist work to imagine more complex narratives of (collective) selfhood beyond abjection.

In his recent article, "Reflections of a Black Queer Suicide Survivor"(2012), black queer scholar and activist Darnell Moore demonstrates that this epidemic of epistemological, psychic, and social violence has continued beyond the AIDS crisis, and that black gay men continue to negotiate a cultural climate in which they embody abjection even as they struggle to refigure themselves as signs of hope and pride. In the article, he meditates on his traumatic experience growing up as a black queer male in urban Camden, Jersey. Moore describes Camden as "one of the state's and country's most economically deprived, criminally devastated urban spaces."³⁰⁵ Further complicating his experience growing up in this "troubled urban space," Moore witnessed his mother being subjected to intimate partner violence at the hands of his father. He recalls the first time that he tried to commit suicide at eleven years old. He attempted to

³⁰⁵ Darnell Moore, "Reflections of a Black Queer Suicide Survivor," n.pag. <http://prettyqueer.tumblr.com/post/21315533500/reflections-of-a-black-queer-suicide-survivor>

“distract [his] father long enough to stop him from punching [his] mom in her face,”³⁰⁶ and thought this would cause his extended family to intervene in the violence in his home. Though Moore never named himself as “gay,” his thin frame, everyday dress in church attire and “book smarts” positioned him as the “neighborhood’s typified faggot/sissy/punk/ bitch.”³⁰⁷ As a result of this, five African American boys from the neighborhood brutally beat and attempted to burn him alive. Suicidal thoughts offered Moore a “strange comfort in knowing that the traumatic pain caused by others and life circumstances would end.”³⁰⁸ Despite his traumatic past, Moore ends his narrative with a proclamation towards life. This is a difficult proclamation, he suggests, given the ease with which society imagines the black queer as a “societal burden, statistic, and corpse.”³⁰⁹ He believes that this negation stems from “society’s attractiveness to defeated and debased and dehumanized and dead brown/black queer men of color.”³¹⁰ Sacrificing his own black queer body, seen by himself as well as others as a “living sign of difference,”³¹¹ was not only a way for Moore to eliminate his traumatic pain, but was the only thing that he believed would change the fate of his family and community. Moore’s story seems to offer a historical parallel to Reid-Pharr’s theory of black queer abjection,

³⁰⁶ Darnell Moore, “Confessions of a Black Queer Suicide Survivor.” <http://prettyqueer.tumblr.com/post/21315533500/reflections-of-a-black-queer-suicide-survivor>

³⁰⁷ Ibid., n.pag.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., n.pag.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., n.pag.

³¹⁰ Ibid., n.pag.

³¹¹ Moore’s conception of black queer males as “living sign[s] of difference” seeks to capture black queer males’ daily negotiation of their gender expressions as “an affront on black masculinity and the sanctity of their presumed heterosexuality.” I expand his conception with the premise that black males are always already “livings sign of difference,” and thus, black queer males must negotiate this designation on multiple fronts.

in which striking the black homosexual can return the community to normality. Moore's narrative pushes beyond Reid-Pharr's theory by implying that black queer subjects still struggle with the psychic weight of black boundarylessness, now seeing their own bodies and psyches as a burden to black freedom. Recent publications such as *For Colored Boys Who've Considered Suicide When The Rainbow is Still Not Enough*, or the recent documentary project, "You Are Not Alone: Stories from Black Gay Men About Their Depression" reveal that this psychic struggle is a collective struggle faced by a heterogeneous community of queer men of color.³¹²

My project seeks to situate black gay men's current struggles with deathly violence within a longer history. Though black gay men no longer face AIDS as a death sentence, they are still at high risk for infection, and face other forms of violence that usher them to their untimely deaths. The texts that I have examined in this dissertation anticipate black gay men's struggles in the current moment. The artists and activists that I study envisioned their work as a resource for future generations of black gay men. Moore speaks their names, suggesting that even after this rich cultural movement, black gay men still struggle against murderous cultural and structural forces: "Yes, even in these times—the post-Nugent, Rustin, Baldwin, Beam, Sylvester, Hemphill, Riggs days—brown/black queer men exist within ideological terrains and amidst structural conditions that literally murder us."³¹³ Moore's statement identifies the failure of 1980s

³¹² Keith Boykin et. al, eds. *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home*. Riverdale: Magnus Books, 2012; Stanley Bennett Clay, dir. "You Are Not Alone: Stories From Black Gay Men About Their Depression" (2012)

³¹³ Darnell Moore, "Confessions of a Black Queer Suicide Survivor." <http://prettyqueer.tumblr.com/post/21315533500/reflections-of-a-black-queer-suicide-survivor>

and 1990s black gay cultural movements to eliminate black gay men's struggles with deathly violence. Neither black gay men's moves toward collectivity nor their emerging cultural movement could prevent their own premature deaths, nor alleviate the threat of violence directed toward future black queer subjects. Even though heightened state-based and intra-racial violence in the 1980s and 90s occasioned a renaissance of black gay cultural production, creating a complex archive of black queer desire and political longing that exceeds death, their labor failed to constitute an 'effective' mode of resistance to state-based and intra-racial violence. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to resist the notion that black queer trauma can be neatly transformed into "social grievance" to be addressed by the state.³¹⁴

Moore advances a strategy for black gay men in the face of ongoing violence, which is the deceptively simple imperative "to live":

To live, then, we must commit to the hard work of provoking resurrections in our lives and the lives of other queer men of color. To live, we must put an end those things that would, otherwise, be cause for our own funerals. If we are to offer eulogies, let them be on behalf of those things that push us toward death.³¹⁵

Moore believes that queer men of color must engage in the labor of self and community making, a labor he believes can "resurrect" black queer subjects from (social and psychic) death. This "hard work" takes place in both the subjective life and social life, to contend with the traumatic forces that continue to "push [queer men of color] towards

³¹⁴ In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Cheng argues that "racial grief" is that which cannot be easily transformed into social grievance, or a tangible offense that one can present before the state for alleviation.

³¹⁵ Ibid., n. pag.

death.” Moore’s article exemplifies this kind of work, as it circulated amongst queer of color and feminist online communities, using his own experience and psychic struggles to raise consciousness around an otherwise unremarked upon threat of violence that continually structures the daily lives of queer men of color.

In attending to black gay men’s subjective and social lives, I insist on *the fact of living*, on black gay “being,” even in the face of violence and death. Under the sign of crisis, the dominant scholarly paradigm for understanding black masculinity, the everyday life of black men can only be framed as resistance or as wholly abject. Black men can only perform their identities as a resistance to oppression, as demonstrated by dominant theorizations of “cool pose,” or through a discourse of racial victimology that strips them of agency, pleasure, and desire.³¹⁶ The term “being” holds open the space in between totalizing narratives of victimology, and dominant theorizations of resistance, a space that I read as queer. The title of my dissertation, “Evidence of Being” not only seeks to capture how experiential narratives leave a trace of the “evidence” of this rich cultural and political movement. The term also pushes against black homosexual negation as a form of epistemological and social violence necessary to the project of black racial normativity and white supremacy. “Being” documents those complex forms of self-making that were made possible through living life in the margins. “Being” also attends to the micro-political and inter-subjective processes that are missed when the

³¹⁶ See Janet Billson and Richard Majors (1993) *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. See also Devon Carbado (1998) “Black Male Racial Victimhood” in which he discusses black men’s privileged victim status within anti-racist discourse, in which they are perceived as more vulnerable and more endangered. Though Carbado focuses on how this excludes black women’s experiences of black male aggression, he does not address how it also excludes other gay and queer black men and transgender women.

imperative is “do something.” By subordinating the processes of individual and collective self-making and self-preservation to dominant frames of political resistance, scholars miss the immaterial and unquantifiable forms of violence accrued from social damage, and the individual and collective efforts to alleviate these forms of violence. In sum, “being” offers a more complex way of thinking about the relationship between black gay subjectivity and social damage.

Is it possible for black gay men to embody hope and pride in an ongoing epidemic of epistemological, psychic, and social violence? This question brings me to a final image that has also been very influential to my thinking about this project. A photograph entitled ‘New Hope’ by Rodney K. Hurley was published in the *Other Countries* anthology, *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS (1993)*. In the photo, a sinewy black male is seated on a stool draped with cloth. In his hands he holds a lyre, which he is strumming while blindfolded. The figure’s smooth skin and dark body are only partially visible, his body fading in the shadowy, black background. Hurley’s photograph is influenced by English Victorian painter George Frederic Watts’s ‘Hope’ (1886). In Watts’s painting, the allegorical figure of hope is depicted as a white woman sitting on a globe, blindfolded, clutching a wooden lyre with only one string left intact. She sits in a hunched position, with her head leaning towards the instrument, perhaps so she can hear the faint music she can make with the sole remaining string. According to Watts, “Hope need not mean expectancy. It suggests here rather the music which can come from the remaining chord.”³¹⁷

³¹⁷ George Frederic Watts, *Hope* 1886, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, eds. *The Art of the Sublime*. January 2013. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/george-frederic-watts-hope-r1105604> Accessed March 4, 2014.



Figure 3. New Hope (1993), Rodney Hurley.



Figure 4. Hope (1886), George Frederic Watts

Hurley's photograph, "New Hope" reimagines the figure of Hope as a black man living in the 'Age of AIDS.' His lyre has a full set of strings, unlike Watts's image. His body is positioned upright, and his muscles flexed to evoke movement rather than stasis. This image has inspired my thinking about what it might mean to begin our theorizing of black, queer, and queer of color politics through this black gay cultural movement. For

the black gay artists and activists in this movement, “hope did not mean expectancy.” Black gay cultural production was much like “the music which can come from the remaining chord.” This dissertation project attempts to capture this music, to envision hope, and to reimagine the black gay body as a figure of hope, even within an ideological and structural terrain that engenders hopelessness. The photograph demonstrates the power that cultural narratives, visual and written, have for imagining new subjective and social possibilities for black gay men. The narratives that I explore in this study are not expectant, yet they express a desire and longing for new modes of embodied subjectivity. It is this distinction that I believe makes their work significant to contemporary discussions of black, queer, and queer of color politics. The black gay cultural movement that I examine in this study does not offer a counter-narrative to theories of black abjection, recuperating black subjects through frames of resistance, but rather, it queers black politics by developing new critical-conceptual frameworks for theorizing the quotidian nature and productive power of trauma in black lives.

By way of conclusion, and to gesture toward the future directions of this project, I would like to return briefly to this project’s relevance to my own subjectivity. It is uncanny how my own movements have paralleled those of artists and activists of this cultural renaissance. I moved from New York City to Washington, DC, for graduate school, much like Melvin Dixon did towards the end of his life. In the last year, I moved from Washington, DC, to Philadelphia for my current fellowship, much like Essex Hemphill did when he set out to complete *Brother to Brother* after Joseph Beam passed away. I live on the same street that Beam did in Philadelphia, and I have visited Giovanni’s Room, the bookstore where he worked. In my introduction to the

dissertation, I mentioned that the beginning of black gay aesthetics was in Philadelphia, with Adrian Stanford's 1977 book, *Black & Queer*, cast as its origins. As I further develop this project, I hope to include a chapter on Stanford's work in my study, and to find out more biographical information about his life and his premature death.

Examining the interplay between urban violence and the burgeoning of a black gay aesthetic, I hope, will build on the current critical stakes of my project. Also, I hope to explore other cultural sites in black gay Philadelphia that might enlarge the scope, and enrich the depth, of this study.

*Bibliography*Archives

Black Gay and Lesbian Archives, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library

Joseph Beam Papers
 Melvin Dixon Papers
 Essex Hemphill/Wayson Jones Collection
 Other Countries Papers
 Ron Simmons Papers

Library of Congress, Microform Collection
 The Washington Blade, 1980-

Washington, DC Rainbow History Project

Oral History Interviews

Interview of Cornelius Baker by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Kwabena Rainey Cheeks by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of James (Juicy) Coleman by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of John Eddy by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Gil Gerald by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Everett Hamilton by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of A. Billy Jones by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview Wayson Jones by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Christopher Prince by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Michael Sainte-Andress by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Ron Simmons by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Otis (Buddy) Sutson by Mark Meinke. Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Interview of Courtney Williams Oral History Program, 2001. Rainbow History Project. Washington, DC. (personal communication, Philip Clark)

Personal Archives of Author

Blacklight Magazine [August 1979-August 1983]. Copy in *possession* of the author.

Author Interviews

Kevin McGruder, Phone Interview, 2013

G. Winston James, Written Interview, 2013

Colin Robinson, Phone and Written Interviews, 2013

Marvin K. White, Phone Interview, 2013

Allen Wright, Written Interview, 2013

Secondary Sources

Abdur-Rahman, Aliyyah. *Against The Closet: Black Political Longing and the Erotics of Race*. Durham: Duke UP, 2012.

----- "‘Simply a Menaced Boy’: Analogizing Color, Undoing Dominance in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*." *African American Review* 41.3 (2007): 477-486.

Allen, Jafari. "For ‘the Children’ Dancing the Beloved Community." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* 11.3 (2009): 311-326.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1983.

Avashti, Amitabh. "AIDS Virus Traveled to Haiti, Then U.S., Study Says." *National Geographic News*. October 29, 2007

Bailey, Marlon. "Performance as Invention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit." *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture and Society* 11.3 (2009): 253-274.

Baldwin, James. *Another Country*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

----- *Giovanni’s Room*. New York: Vintage, 1992.

Batra, Kanitra. "Our Own Gayful Rest: A Postcolonial Archive." *Small Axe* 14.1 (2010): 46-59.

Beam, Joseph, ed. *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Boston: Alyson Books, 1991.

Beemyn, Brett. "A Queer Capital." Brett Beemyn, ed. *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Belton, Don. "Where We Live: An Interview with Essex Hemphill and Isaac Julien." *Speak My Name: Black Men on Masculinity and the American Dream*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1996.

Bergman, David. "The Condition of Essex Hemphill." *Lodestar Quarterly* 11 (2004).

Berlant, Lauren. "Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss and the Senses." *New Formations* (2008).

Berlant, Laurent and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry* 24.2 (1998): 547-566.

Bérubé, Alan. "How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays." John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman, eds. *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2011.

Betts, Reginald Dwayne. "Introduction." ed. Frederick Glaysher. *Collected Poems: Robert Hayden*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1985.

Billson, Janet and Richard Majors. *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*. New York: Lexington Books, 1992.

Blount, Marcellous. "Caged Birds: Race and Gender in the Sonnet." Joseph Boone and Michael Cadden, eds. *Engendering Men: The Quest of Male Feminist Criticism*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet As It's Kept: Shame, Trauma, and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999.

Boykin, Keith et. al, eds. *For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home*. New York: Magnus Books, 2012.

Braunstein, Peter. "'Adults Only': The Construction of the Erotic City in New York during the 1970s." *America in the Seventies*. Lawrence: U of Kansas P, 2004.

Brown, Elsa Barkley. "What Has Happened Here?: The Politics of Difference in Women's History and Feminist Politics." *Feminist Studies* 18.2 (1992): 295-312.

Brown, Wendy. *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1995.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limit of Sex*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Carbado, Devon. "Black Male Racial Victimhood." *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998): 337-361.

Carby, Hazel. "Policing Black Women's Bodies in an Urban Context." *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (1992): 738-755.

----- *Race Men*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2000.

Caruth, Cathy. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.

----- *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.

Champagne, John. *Ethics of Marginality: A New Approach to Gay Studies*. Minneapolis:

U of Minnesota P, 1995.

Chapman, Erin D. *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s*. New York: Oxford UP, 2012.

Chauncey, George. *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. New York: Basic Books, 1995.

Cheng, Ann Anlin. *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief*. New York: Oxford, 2001.

Clay, Stanley Bennett. Dir. "You Are Not Alone: Stories From Black Gay Men About Their Depression" (2012).

Cleaver, Eldridge. *Soul on Ice*. New York: Delta Books, 1968.

Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?" *GLQ* 3.4 (1997): 437-465.

Corral, Eduardo C. "Q&A: To Robert Hayden." *Poetry Magazine*, December 2011.

Crimp, Douglas. "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic." *October* 43 (1987): 327-271. *JSTOR*. 31 Oct. 2012.

Cvetkovich, Ann. *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. Durham: Duke U P, 2003.

D'Emilio, John. "Capitalism and Gay Identity." Abelove, Henry, Michele Barale, and David Halperin, eds. *Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993.

Daub, Lori and Shoshana Felman. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

de Romanet, Jerome. "A Conversation with Melvin Dixon." *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 84-109.

DeGout, Yasmin. "Dividing the Mind: Contradictory Portraits of Homoerotic Love in Giovanni's Room." *African American Review* 26 (1992): 425-435.

Dickel, Simon. *Black/Gay: The Harlem Renaissance, the Protest Era, and Constructions of Black Gay Identity in the 1980's and 90s*. Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2012.

----- "Construction of Gay Male Whiteness in Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston*, Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Mad Men*." Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann, eds. *Blackness and Sexualities*. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007.

- Dinshaw, Carolyn. "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ* 13. 2-3 (2007): 177-195.
- Dixon, Melvin. *Change of Territory*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1983.
- . *Love's Instruments*. Sylmar: Tia Chucha Press, 1995.
- . *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1987.
- . *Vanishing Rooms*. New York: Dutton, 1991.
- . "Somewhere Listening For My Name." Other Countries, ed. *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, 1993.
- . "The Black Writer's Use of Memory." Dwight McBride and Justin Joyce, eds. *Melvin Dixon Critical Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010.
- . *Trouble the Water*. Boulder: University of Colorado P, 1989.
- Dubey, Madhu. *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2003.
- Edelman, Lee. "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (1987): 197-222.
- Ellis, Aime. *If We Must Die: From Bigger Thomas to Biggie Smalls*. Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2011.
- Fabre, Genevieve and Robert O'Meally, eds. *History and Memory in African American Literature and Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press, 1967.
- Ruth Feldstein, "'I Wanted the World To See': Race, Gender, and the Constructions of Motherhood in the Death of Emmett Till." Joanne Meyeritz, ed. *Not June Cleaver: Women and Gender in Postwar America 1945-1960* (1994): 261-305.
- Ferguson, Roderick. *Aberrations in Black: Towards A Queer of Color Critique*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2004.
- . "Of Sensual Matters: On Audre Lorde's 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' and 'Uses of the Erotic.'" *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 40.3-4 (2012): 295-300.
- . "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion." *GLQ*

13. 2-3 (2007): 177-195.

Finch, Robert. *Assassination of New York*. London: Verso, 1996.

Flannigan-Saint Aubin, Arthur. "Black Gay Male' Discourse: Reading Race and Sexuality between the Lines." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 3.3 (1993): 468-490.

Forster, Greg. "Against Melancholia: Contemporary Mourning Theory, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and the Politics of Unfinished Grief." *differences* 14.2 (2003): 134-170.

Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia." London: Hogarth Press, 1955. 243-258. Print. Vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey et al. 24 vols. 1953-1974.

Garrett, Daniel. "Other Countries: The Importance of Difference." Other Countries, ed. *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, 1987.

Gebhard, Caroline and Barbara McCaskill, eds. *Post-Bellum, Pre-Harlem: African American Literature and Culture, 1877-1919*. New York: New York U P, 2006.

Ghaziani, Amin. *Dividends of Dissent: How Conflict and Culture Work in Lesbian and Gay Marches on Washington*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2008.

Glave, Thomas. "Re-recalling Essex Hemphill: Word to Our Now." *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 151-167.

Gould, Deborah. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight Against AIDS*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009.

Griffiths, Jennifer. *Traumatic Possessions: The Body and Memory in African American Women's Writing and Performance*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2010.

Gilmore, Ruth Wilson. *Golden Gulag: Prison, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2007.

Hancock, Ange-Marie. *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen*. New York: New York UP, 2004.

Hanhardt, Christina. *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*. Durham: Duke UP, 2013.

Hare, Julie and Nathan Hare. *The Endangered Black Family: Coping with the Unisexualization and Coming Extinction of the Black Race*. San Francisco: Black Think Tank, 1984.

Harper, Phillip Brian. *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African*

American Identity. New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

Harris, Cheryl. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review* 106.8 (1993): 1710-1791.

Harris, E. Lynn. "Introduction." E. Lynn Harris, ed. *Freedom in this Village: Twenty Five Years of Black Gay Men's Writing*. New York: Carroll and Graff, 2005.

Hartman, Geoffrey. "On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies." *New Literary History* 26.3 (1995): 537-563.

Hartman, Saidiya. *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Hawkeswood, Stephen. *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1997.

Hemphill, Essex. *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*. New York: Plume Books, 1992.

Herman, Judith. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. New York: Basic, 1997.

Hicks, Cheryl. *Talk to You Like A Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890-1935*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010.

Hine, Darlene Clark. "Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Preliminary Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance." *Signs* 14.4 (1989): 912-920.

Holland, Sharon. *Raising the Dead: Readings of Death and (Black) Subjectivity*. Durham: Duke U P, 2000.

-----, "Bill T. Jones, Tupac Shakur, and the (Queer) Art of Death." *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 384-393.

Hong, Grace and Roderick Ferguson, eds. *Strange Affinities: Gender and Sexual Politics of Comparative Racialization*. Durham: Duke UP, 2011.

Howard, John. "Place and Movement in Gay American History: A Case from the Post-World II South." Brett Beemyn, ed. *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Histories*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Hull, Gloria. "Channeling the Ancestral Muse: Lucille Clifton and Deloris Kendrick." *Feminist Measure: Soundings in Poetry and Theory*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994.

Hunter, B. Michael. "Allan Robinson, AIDS Activist." Other Countries, ed. *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, 1993.

Hussein, Aida. "‘Black Rage’ and ‘Useless Pain’: Affect, Ambivalence, and Identity after King." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 112.2 (2013): 303-318.

Ibrahim, Habiba. *Troubling the Family: The Promise of Personhood and the Rise of Multiculturalism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2012.

JanMohamed, Abdul R. *The Death-Bound-Subject: Richard Wright’s Archaeology of Death*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

Jenkins, Candice. *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2007.

Johnson, David K. *Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Johnson, E. Patrick. "Quare Studies, Or Almost Everything I Learned About Queer Studies I Learned From My Grandmother." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21.1 (2001): 1-25.

----- . "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community." *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998): 399-416.

Johnson, Erica L. "Unforgetting Trauma: Dionne Brand’s Haunted Histories." *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 2.1 (2004): 1-16.

Jones, James. *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment*. New York: Free Press, 1981.

Joyce, Justin A. and Dwight McBride, ed. "Introduction." *A Melvin Dixon Critical Reader*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2011.

Julian, Isaac and Kobena Mercer. "Race, Sex, Politics and Black Masculinity." Rowena Chapman and John Rutherford, eds. *Male Order: Unwrapping Masculinity*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987.

Keeling, Kara. *The Witch’s Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham: Duke UP, 2007.

King, Deborah Walker. *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2008.

La Capra, Dominick. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2000.

Lewis, Christopher S. "Cultivating Black Lesbian Shamelessness: Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*." *Rocky Mountain Review* 66.2 (2012): 167-184.

Leys, Ruth. *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000.

Liebow, Elliot. *Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men*. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1967.

Love, Heather. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

Luciano, Dana. *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body In Nineteenth-Century America*. New York: New York UP, 2007.

Madhubuti, Haki R. and Maulana Karenga, eds. 'Million Man March Fact Sheet.' *Million Man March/Day of Absence: A Commemorative Anthology*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1996.

Martinez, Ernesto. *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013.

Marriot, David. *Haunted Life: Visual Culture and Black Modernity*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2007.

----- *On Black Men*. New York: Columbia UP, 2000.

May, Vivian. "Reading Melvin Dixon's *Vanishing Rooms*: Experiencing 'the ordinary rope that can change in a second to a lyncher's noose or a rescue line.'" *Callaloo* 23.1 (2000): 366-381.

McBride, Dwight. "Can the Queen Speak?: Racial Essentialism, Sexuality and the Problem of Authority." *Callaloo* 21.2 (1998): 363-379.

McGruder, Kevin. "To Be Heard in Print: Black Gay Writers in 1980s New York." *Obsidian III* 6.1 (2005): 49-67.

McKittrick, Katherine. *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006.

Meeker, Martin. *Contacts Desired: Gay and Lesbian Communications and Community, 1940s-1970s*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006.

Mercer, Kobena. "Just Looking For Trouble: Robert Mapplethorpe and Fantasies of Race." Houston Baker, Manthia Diawara and Ruth H. Lindeborg, eds. *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996.

----- "Reading Racial Fetishism: The Photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe." *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*. Cornell: Cornell UP, 1993.

- Moon, Michael. "Memorial Rags: Emerson, Whitman, AIDS, and Mourning," *Professions of Desire: Lesbian and Gay Studies in Literature*. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1995.
- Moore, Darnell. "Reflections of a Black Queer Suicide Survivor." Prettyqueer.tumblr.com. <http://prettyqueer.tumblr.com/post/21315533500/reflections-of-a-black-queer-suicide-survivor>
- Moore, Patrick. *Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality*, 2004.
- Moten, Fred. "Black Mo'nin'." David Eng and David Kanjanjian, eds. *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002.
- Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action." Office of Policy Planning and Research. United States Department of Labor (1965)
- Muñoz, José. *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Mumford, Kevin. *Interzones: Black/White Sex Districts in Chicago in the Early Twentieth Century*. New York: Columbia UP, 1997.
- Nero, Charles I. "Towards a Black Gay Aesthetic: Signifying in Contemporary Black Gay Literature." Essex Hemphill, ed. *Brother to Brother: New Writings By Black Gay Men*, 1992.
- Pierre, Nora. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire." Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally, eds. *History and Memory in African American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Ongiri, Amy Abugo. "We Are Family: Black Nationalism, Black Masculinity, and the Black Gay Cultural Imagination." *College Literature* 24.1 (1997): 280-294.
- Other Countries, ed. *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, 1987.
- . *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, 1993.
- Page, Enoch and Matt Richardson. "On the Fear of Small Numbers: A 21st Century Prolegomenon of the U.S. Black Transgender Experience." Juan Battle and Sandra Barnes, eds. *Black Sexualities: Probing Powers, Passions, Practices, and Policies*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2009.
- Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1995.

Perry, Melissa Harry. *Barbershop, Bibles, and BET: Everyday Talk and Black Political Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2006.

Pouissant, Alvin. "Sex and the Black Male." *Ebony Magazine*. August 1972, p. 117-118.

Quashie, Kevin. *The Sovereignty of Quiet: Beyond Resistance in Black Culture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012.

Rahmanazi, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1994.

Rashid, Frank. "Robert Hayden's Detroit Blues Elegies." *Callaloo* 24.1 (2001): 200-226.

Reid-Pharr, Robert. "Clean: Death and Desire in Samuel R. Delany's *Stars in my Pocket Like Grains of Sand*." *American Literature* 83.2 (2011): 389-411.

------. "It's Raining Men: Notes on the Million Man March." *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York U P, 1999.

------. "Tearing The Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of Twentieth Century Black Masculinity." *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York U P, 1999.

------. "A Child's Life." *Black Gay Man: Essays*. New York: New York U P, 1999.

Rich, John. *Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Trauma and Violence in the Lives of Young Black Men*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009.

Richardson, Matt. "No More Secrets, No More Lies: African American History and Compulsory Heterosexuality." *Journal of Women's History* 15.3 (2003): 63-76.

------. *The Queer Limits of Black Memory: Black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution*. Columbus: Ohio State UP, 2013.

Riggs, Marlon. "Black Macho Revisited: Confessions of a Snap Queen." Essex Hemphill, ed. *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, 1992.

------. Dir. "Tongues Untied." Strand Releasing (2008).

------. "Letters to the Dead." Other Countries, ed. *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, 1993.

Robinson, Colin. "Sojourner: An Abandoned Manifesto." G. Winston James, ed. *Voice Rising*, 2007.

Ross, Marlon. "Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm." E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds. *Black Queer Studies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2005.

-----*Manning the Race: Reforming Black Men in the Jim Crow Era*. New York: New York UP, 2004.

-----". "Some Glances at the Black Fag: Race, Same-Sex Desire, and Cultural Belonging." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 21.1-2 (1994): 193-219.

-----". "What's Love But a Second Hand Emotion?: Man-On-Man Passion in the Contemporary Black Gay Romance Novel." *Callaloo* 36.3 (2013): 669-687.

-----". "White Fantasies of Desire: Baldwin and the Racial Identities of Sexuality." Dwight McBride, ed. *James Baldwin Now*, New York: New York UP, 1999.

Schwartz, Christa. *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003.

Schoen, Joanna. *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005.

Scott, Dariel. *Extravagant Abjection: Blackness, Power, and Sexuality in the African American Literary Imagination*. New York: NYU Press, 2010.

-----". "Jungle Fever: Black Gay Identity Politics, White Dick, and the Utopian Bedroom." *GLQ* 1.3 (1994): 299-321.

Scott, Daryl. *Contempt and Pity: Social Policy and the Image of the Damaged Black Psyche, 1880-1996*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997.

Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1990.

Sexton, Jared. *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008.

Sharpe, Christina. *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.

-----". 'Response to Jared Sexton's Ante-Anti-Blackness.' *Lateral 2: The Journal of the Cultural Studies Association* 1 (2012).

Simmons, Ron. "Some Thoughts on the Challenges Facing Black Gay Intellectuals." Essex Hemphill, ed. *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, 1992.

Smith, Andrea. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*. Cambridge:

South End Press, 2005.

Smith, Barbara. "We Must Always Bury Our Dead Twice: A Tribute to James Baldwin." *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2000.

Smith, Michael J. "No Blacks—Racism in the Gay Press." Michael J. Smith, ed. *Black Men/White Men: A Gay Anthology*. San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1983.

Spillers, Hortense. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17.2 (1987): 64-81.

Stanley, Eric. "Near Life, Queer Death: Overkill and Ontological Capture." *Social Text* 29.2 (2011): 1-19.

Stevens, Maurice. "From the Past Imperfect: Towards a Critical Trauma Theory." *Letters: The Semiannual Newsletter of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities* 17.2 (2009): 1-5.

Stockton, Kathryn Bond. *Beautiful Bottom, Beautiful Shame: Where "Black" Meets "Queer."* Durham: Duke UP, 2006.

Sugrue, Thomas. *The Origins of Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005.

Tal, Kali. *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.

Taussig, Michael. "Culture of Terror-Space of Death: Roger Casement's Putumayo Report and the Explanation of Torture." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 26 (1984): 467-88.

Tinsley, Omese'eke Natasha. "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage." *GLQ* 14. 2-3 (2008): 191-215

Urbina, Ian. "Washington Officials Try to Ease Crime Fear." *New York Times*. July 12, 2006.

Vaid, Urvashi. *Virtual Equality: The Mainstreaming of Gay and Lesbian Liberation*. New York: Doubleday, 1995.

Walcott, Rinaldo. "Queer Returns: Human Rights, the Anglo-Caribbean and Diaspora Politics." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 3 (2009): 2-19.

Wallace, Maurice. "Autochoreography of an Ex Snow Queen." Eve Sedgwick, ed. *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*. Durham: Duke UP, 1997.

Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. Cambridge: Zone Books, 2005.

Washington, Harriet. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from the Colonial Times to the Present*. New York: Doubleday, 2006.

Watney, Simon. *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media*. Minnesota: U of Minnesota P, 1997.

George Frederic Watts, *Hope* 1886, in Nigel Llewellyn and Christine Riding, eds. *The Art of the Sublime*. January 2013. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/the-sublime/george-frederic-watts-hope-r1105604>

Welsing, Frances Cress. *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1991.

Wilderson, Frank. *Red, Black, and White: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2010.

Pontheolla T. Williams, *Robert Hayden: A Critical Analysis of His Poetry*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1987.

Wynter, Sylvia. "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, The Puzzle of Conscious Experience of 'Identity' and What it's Like to be 'Black.'" *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, eds. Mercedes F. Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gómez-Moriana, 30-66. London: Routledge, 2001.

Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2010.