

Black Queer Activism During the AIDS Epidemic

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During the 1980s, the United States was at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Thousands of Americans were suffering the egregious effects of the disease, and the communities that were plagued the most were America's gay and transgender populations. Discrimination, disguised as fear and panic of the disease, was rampant and the vast number of gay and transgender Americans facing constant bigotry in all mediums, from misinformation in the media to politics, where anti-LGBTQ+ legislation was introduced and even passed in response to the rising numbers of AIDS diagnoses. Several organizations were formed to raise funds that would subsequently help those most affected by the epidemic and to raise awareness of this growing prejudice. AIDS activism also emerged during the Reagan administration (1980-1988) as President Reagan was disinclined to do or say anything that did not align with the homophobic ideology of the Moral Majority and his voter base. Uniting gay and transgender Americans was crucial in saving lives and creating a country where there was no intolerance towards sexual preference. This paper utilizes several newspaper articles and advertisements from the 1980s that enlisted help for Black LGBTQ+ Americans that were affected by AIDS epidemic. These publications brought together these same communities to foster tightness and solidarity, and fight for equality. Through a careful analysis of these sources, I argue that despite the notable contributions of Black gay and transgender Americans, the LGBTQ+ community actually contributed to anti-blackness, which sparked a rise in LGBTQ+ activism for people of color. This activism would eventually help to bridge the gap between White Americans and people of color on issues of race and sexual orientation.

Although activism for the queer community was increasingly mobilized, it did not include everyone. People of color, more specifically, gay and transgender Black and Latino Americans,

were disproportionately affected by the AIDS epidemic. These communities were in desperate need of assistance, as cases were much higher than among gay Whites. The epidemic cost “blacks 0.42 years in life expectancy between 1980 and 1990, where the corresponding setback for whites was only 0.15 years.”¹ If the AIDS virus effected gay and transgender Americans at a higher rate in general, then it is not especially surprising that Black gay and transgender people suffered more throughout the epidemic than their White counterparts. LGBTQ+ people of color were met with the same discrimination that had been a part of American culture for decades.

In the context of modern-day politics, the LGBTQ+ and the African-American communities share similar values in that they both seek to eliminate bigotry-based discrimination from American society. However, the demonization of Black people is deeply rooted in United States culture independent of the queer movement. Elena Kiesling explains this phenomenon in their text “The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance.” Kiesling writes, “While the black body is increasingly violated in the U.S., the queer body is gradually welcomed into full citizenship.”² Even though gay and lesbian Americans faced just as much discrimination throughout United States history, White LGBT members have garnered more support for their identity than people of color. Kiesling writes that “the separation between queer organizations and Black organizations, despite the intersection of both communities and movements, thus follows a cruel logic of anti-blackness that has been all too familiar in U.S. history.”³ The anti-black sentiment in U.S culture runs so deep that it even plagues the liberation movements of other oppressed groups.

Queer history is often solely viewed through the lens of White gay and lesbian Americans, meaning that a separate history of LGBTQ+ African-Americans is often not studied or considered. For example, in *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the*

AIDS Crisis, Kevin J. Mumford argues that the AIDS crisis more heavily affected people of color, with Black people making up 45.2 percent of AIDS cases in Philadelphia during the latter half of the 1980s.⁴ Unfortunately, despite the clear statistics, the same amount of care and outreach to White gay and transgender Americans affected by the AIDS epidemic was not given to Black people, especially Black gay men. As Mumford explains, while “white activists argued that homophobia was color blind, questions of health, drugs, and policy remained interconnected with race and resources.”⁵ After recognizing these disparities, Black gay men took the initiative and created organizations that would help their community support those in a time of adversity. Institutions such as the Philadelphia Black Leadership Council, Burning Bush, and IMPACT are vital examples of Black people raising awareness for the LGBTQ+ community.⁶

In addition, this activism from Black gay men also abetted the fight against racism by uniting Black and White Americans for a cause. Conservatives spewed harmful rhetoric about the Gay community being “plague carriers” and blocked laws aiming to fight discrimination against gay Americans.⁷ During the height of this activism, groups like Black and White Men Together (BWMT) made it a primary goal to bring Black and White gay men together in solidarity.⁸ The intentions of these groups were met with much skepticism from many gay and lesbian Blacks at the time due to questionable the stereotypes placed upon both groups. However, the organization made vital efforts to expose and end racism in the queer community. For instance, the group sought to change the clear White gay bias inherent in the *Philadelphia Gay News* by pressuring its chief editor into changing its overt neglect of Black gay and lesbian stories and advertisements.⁹ Even more pivotal were tactics utilized by the BWMT to expose the racism practiced by gay bars in Philadelphia, where Black couples were more frequently denied entry.¹⁰ These bars were designed

to be safe places for the queer community, but people of color were often denied access to this solidarity, which defeats the purpose of such spaces.

Kiesling offers an informative explanation and context to this ideology. At the same time, Mumford does an excellent job detailing experiences and the history of discrimination and activism from Black queer people during the height of the AIDS epidemic. It is evident that Black queer Americans were facing a very prejudicial time, but their zeal for equality managed to bring separate identities together. This newfound understanding was imperative in their efforts fight back against demonization by more dominant groups.

LGBTQ+ newspaper articles and advertisements during the 1980s, coming from the west coast, consisted of several campaigns and advertisements to raise awareness for Black queer individuals, often by Black queer individuals themselves. These news stories, especially ones about the AIDS epidemic, were transparent about the disparities faced amongst Black people. Scholars need to inquire as to why these advertisements were printed. Why did Black queer Americans feel inclined to form these organizations, to begin with? Why were there foundations founded to assist people of color with AIDS specifically? These publications offer an exciting insight into the LGBTQ+ culture that often lacks in-depth historiography.

For example, in an advertisement from the beginning of the 1980s in Los Angeles with the headline “National Conference of Blacks Called for February,” the National Coalition of Black Gays and Lesbians partnered with BWMT/LA to host a meeting where Black queer individuals could gather.¹¹ In the advertisement, conference organizer Phil Wilson says, “Only through unity can [Black queer Americans] rightfully demand our place in the struggle for human rights and equality of opportunity without regard to race, gender or sexual orientation.”¹² By placing this ad, the Black LGBTQ+ community raised awareness to combat not only homophobia but also racism.

Their activism provides valuable resources and recognition to problems that may otherwise be ignored, which was vital during the Reagan administration. Richard Labonte, a prominent writer of LGBT literature, reports, “Speakers and workshop participants will include national political and civil rights leaders and representatives from local and other organizations in the Black Gay and Lesbian community.”¹³ The conference focused on building a voice for Black Americans as a part of the LGBTQ+ community, which was important as these identities did not have many recognized movements and formal gatherings centered around them. The activism was far-reaching. Having this article printed in local LGBTQ+ publications would allow subordinate members, queer people of color, and dominant members, White queer readers, of the community to view it, thus raising awareness and possibly garnering support.

Furthermore, in another announcement, the “Valentines Luncheon: Boost for Black Leader Confab,” author Richard Labonte discusses the purposes of organizing this event and references conversations that elaborate on its importance. The event's primary purpose was to benefit the National Minority AIDS Council, NMAC, which sought to raise awareness and provide help to the communities who have been impacted by the disease the most, which were people of color.¹⁴ When referencing a conversation with Phil Wilson again, Labonte writes, “Our community faces the challenges of the AIDS epidemic, racism and sexism from the outside and, too often, homophobia within the Black community.... Unity is our strength.”¹⁵ During this time, several people would assume that creating events like the luncheon or establishing organizations like NAMC or BWMT/LA would be pointless or cause further division based on race and sexual orientation. However, hundreds of Black queer activists would argue that this movement was necessary. They have gone through lived experiences that reveal the prejudice that bedevils the LGBTQ+ community and other minority communities.

Later in the article, Labonte lists some of the workshop topics discussed at the conference. Some of the workshop focus areas included “Black Gay and Lesbian Enterprises and Financial Stability, The Quality of Life and Relationships (Including Spirituality), Building Stronger Political Voice for Black Lesbians and Gays...”¹⁶ In addition, the workshop topics focused on community building and engagement, which indicates the anti-black ideology that was very prevalent during this time. Of course, workshops like these would not exist if the Black queer community did not feel they were necessary. However, these events were advertised for all of the west coast to see, illuminating the passion and dedication to this activism.

In another article titled “Aim Taken at Minorities,” author Richard Labonte reported on the Southern California CARES team that launched a campaign in 1987 to provide better education about the AIDS epidemic to communities of color.¹⁷ Providing adequate education on AIDS, which seriously plagued the United States and created heavy amounts of paranoia, was imperative to these communities. The push for this type of campaign would lead us to assume that AIDS education was not given to these populations, so it was up to the community leaders to take the initiative to help prevent the spread. When referencing a conversation with Veronica Thompson, AIDS Project Los Angeles’ community outreach coordinator, Labonte writes, “the perception left earlier ad campaigns was that only white, and usually white Gay, males were dying of AIDS - when in fact more than half the women in America diagnosed AIDS are Black.”¹⁸ Again, there was a clear bias toward White LGBTQ+ community members in the media during this time, and how they were only interested in raising awareness for themselves. This did not take away from their experience, as it was evident that AIDS negatively impacted all LGBTQ+ people during this time. However, it is essential to be transparent about prejudice. Publications like these show that not only Black queer people but other organizations outside of these circles were cognizant of

these ongoing themes and sought to correct this issue. The activism of Black queer Americans was able to solicit help from dominant groups, thus demonstrating the value of their efforts.

When looking at the history of the civil rights of Black Americans, it is easy to overlook the struggle of Black queer people and their battles within the LGBTQ+ community. Very few consider touching upon Black queer history and the critical themes and outcomes of activism that were prevalent. In the 1980s, Black queer individuals went through excessive hardships fighting against racism from a group they would generally find solidarity with considering the harmful effects of AIDS. However, with persistent activism through a plethora of national conferences and support groups and by challenging anti-black sentiment in queer media and spaces, Black queer Americans played a pivotal role in the unification of Americans on issues of race and sexual orientation. The discrimination placed upon Black queer individuals by the LGBTQ+ community and politics furthered the political whiteness that runs deep in queer culture and historiography. As Kiesling writes, “A queer political movement follows the logic of political whiteness and positions itself as a stable concept that is only sustainable when race, class, and gender are rejected as social formations.”¹⁹ The publications calling for Black queer unanimity and the stories written by Labonte in a predominantly White queer media space illustrate the necessity of the activism that should be recognized.

¹ José Manuel Aburto, Frederikke Frehr Kristensen, and Paul Sharp, *Black-White Disparities During an Epidemic: Life Expectancy and Lifespan Disparity in the US, 1980–2000* (Economics and Human Biology 40) (2021): 100937–100937

² Elena Kiesling, “The Missing Colors of the Rainbow: Black Queer Resistance,” *European Journal of American Studies* 11, no. 3 (2017): 48–.

³ Ibid.

⁴ K. J. Mumford *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* (Durham, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 172.

⁵ Mumford, 172.

⁶ Mumford, 185.

⁷ Doug Rossinow *The Reagan Era: A History of the 1980s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 213.

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- ⁸ Mumford, 174.
- ⁹ Mumford, 177.
- ¹⁰ Mumford, 178.
- ¹¹ “*National Conference of Blacks Called for February* December 9, 1987.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Richard Labonte, “*Aim Taken at Minorities*” May 7, 1987
- ¹⁴ Richard Labonte, “*Valentines Luncheon: Boost for Black Leader Confab*” January 20, 1988 .
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ “*National Conference of Blacks Called for February*”
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Kiesling, 10.