CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Striving for Place: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People

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When I picketed for Welfare Mother's Rights, and against the enforced sterilization of young Black girls, when I fought institutionalized racism in the New York City schools, I was a Black Lesbian. But you did not know it because we did not identify ourselves, so now you can say that Black Lesbians and Gay men have nothing to do with the struggles of the Black Nation. And I am not alone. When you read the words of Langston Hughes you are reading the words of a Black Gay man. When you read the words of Alice Dunbar-Nelson and Angelina Weld Grimke', poets of the Harlem Renaissance, you are reading the words of Black Lesbians. When you listen to the life-affirming voices of Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey, you are hearing Black Lesbian women. When you see the plays and read the words of Lorraine Hansberry, you are reading the words of a woman who loved women deeply . . . ! (*Lorde, I Am Your Sister* 1986)

Missing! Marginal! Misrepresented! Until the early 1990s, scholarly inquiries into the diversity of Black[1] experiences seemed to proceed much as it had in prior decades, paying little or no attention to how questions of same-sex sexuality might alter or significantly inform the perspectives and interpretations of the research itself. But that has begun to change, albeit slowly.

Several factors, together, have made the issue of same-sex sexuality – despite its being denigrated as a "White thing" by cultural nationalists or altogether ignored by mainstream scholars – directly relevant to the historical and contemporary realities of Blacks: in particular, the devastating impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic within Black communities, and the increased visibility of Black lesbians and gays on questions of racial and sexual justice.

Within academia, this long overdue attention has begun to occur in two areas. Black feminist theorists, who advance an intersectional approach (that is, race, class, and gender) to understanding Black women's experiences, have taken note of normative sexuality as a part of that matrix of oppression (Collins 1990). New generations of scholars in sexuality studies, including those who use "queer theory," have increasingly probed how sexual identities are raced, gendered, and classed; and

have begun to extend this theoretical framework to areas and groups previously unexamined through these analytic lenses.

Outside of academia, but by no means devoid from interactions with it, there is an established (and growing) body of non-fictional writings by and about gays and lesbians of African descent. These writings provide critical and incisive analyses of the relationships between sexuality and Black racial identities, as well as a broad theoretical framework that (ought to) inform and generate in-depth empirical studies on the topic. The mainstream lesbian and gay movement has also been important, providing the political and discursive space for critiquing homophobia, addressing anti-gay violence, and consequently opening up possibilities for discussing the incestuous relationship between homophobia and racism.

In delineating the experiences of Black gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals, this chapter draws on various bodies of scholarship – historical, social scientific, and literary – to reveal the multiple and intersecting social forces that have shaped their place, or lack thereof, in US society. Notably, we also pay attention to how gays, lesbians, and bisexuals themselves have resisted and questioned dominant notions of place, based on the racial and sexual hierarchy. As such, we also discuss the individual and collective strategies that have been used to articulate different visions of racial collectivity, as well as critical interpretations of same-sex sexuality in the context of Black racial identity, both of which – the strategies and the interpretations – have challenged but also enriched Black Studies.

Although throughout this chapter we present separately results from the fields of social science research and cultural production research, we by no means imply that these areas of intellectual development are mutually exclusive. We are clear that they are symbiotic. Presenting them separately – cultural production and the social science research – respects their inherent uniqueness, evolutions, and contributions. Further, it allows for a clearer narrative as we discuss each.

This chapter is by no means definitive of the history, contributions, and knowledge about Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people. As a matter of fact, discussions of transgender persons here will be limited, since it is a relatively new category in gender and sexuality studies. Like the categories "gay", "lesbian," and, "bisexual," we do not apply the term "transgender" uncritically across historical contexts, since the use and meaning of these terms changed dramatically during the twentieth century, most notably from defining deviant behavior to defining identity. Although there were (and are) Black men and women who crossed gender boundaries – living and identifying as another gender – the historical evidence that we review is insufficient for us to provide a meaningful discussion here.

This chapter aims to document what we currently know and, in doing so, to identify areas that need further in-depth research. In short, the "place" of Black gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons is not singular nor fixed, and nor is it entirely determined by any single factor such as "culture." Rather, as we show through the following discussion, "place" is always negotiated within the myriad constraints presented by historical context, and articulated through various notions of class, gender, and region. Thus, we look to understand not what is "the" place of Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender persons *per se*, but rather, how is "place" constituted by broader social forces and how it is contingent on social and cultural change.

Piecing Together Place: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender Persons in *Black* History

Talking about lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons in the context of Black history inevitably raises questions about identity and disclosure: How can we tell/know who they were? Did they identify themselves as such? Certainly, it bears repeating here that sexual identities like "gay," "lesbian," and the like are relatively modern constructions, and therefore, cannot be projected backward onto histories and identities. Such terms and identities did not have the same meaning – perhaps had no meaning – for those who participated in and created sexual subcultures well before the watershed moment of the Stonewall uprisings. Nonetheless, since same-sex erotic attraction is transhistorical and transcultural (Peplau 2001), an important question to consider is how scholars' own taxonomy of identities has enabled or constrained the recognition of Black men and women who share same-sex sexuality and, as a result, to what extent they appear as actors in Black historiography.

Reconstructing gay and lesbian Black history of the twentieth century is still in its initial stages, inhibited both by the suspect nature of the subject and the small number of individuals willing and able to pursue the sources that would shed light on the topic. In large part, historians of sexuality occupy centerstage in this venture. And while they have not always asked research questions that directly focused on Black lesbians and gays, their scholarship offers important insight into the social lives of individual gays and lesbians, the communities they participated in, and the institutions they helped to create. As new historical sources become available, or as new questions are being asked of the established scholarship, undoubtedly new inquiries will ensue.

A good example of the nature of new inquiries is Farah Griffin's *Beloved Sisters and Loving Friends* (1999). This edited collection of letters that were exchanged between Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown in the late nineteenth century offers a rare glimpse into the intimate lives of Black women, and particularly the ways in which Black women's emotional and erotic relationships with each other were expressed. The letters also show that love, desire, and relationships are structured by social differences as well as by social similarities. Such expressions of same-sex desire are time-specific and historically bound, sometimes bearing little resemblance to the categories that we currently use to analyze sexuality. Nonetheless, the letters provide concrete evidence of the romantic relationship between these two women. It was being expressed in the context of their commitment to Black equality and "racial uplift," and enables us to "move beyond the silence" about sexuality in Black historiography.

While we await a full-length historical study of Black lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, useful insights can be found in the recent studies on lesbian and gay social history, particularly in New York. In his critical study of the thriving gay male culture in New York from 1890 to 1940, historian George Chauncey (1994) points out that the "closet" was not always *the* defining aspect of men's social interactions with each other and the broader society. Rather, men's abilities to enter and interact with "homosexual society" or "the gay world" were shaped by social hierarchies based on race and class. To the extent that Black gay men participated in the "gay world" they did so in ways limited by their place in the racial order of things.

Similarly, Eric Garber's 1989 research on the lesbian and gay subculture of early twentieth-century Harlem, particularly during the Harlem Renaissance in the period 1920–35, points to the ways African American gays, lesbians, and bisexuals appropriated social and intellectual spaces for their own use and, within these settings, made a palpable mark on African American culture. Indeed, it is arguable whether there would have been a Renaissance at all without the participation of Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. Henry Louis Gates, Jr observes that the Harlem Renaissance was "surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these" (quoted in Wirth 2002: 31). Many of the persons who have attained iconic stature in Black history actively participated in the lesbian and gay subculture of Harlem, whether or not they addressed issues of same-sex sexuality in their writings of the day. These figures include some who are generally known, and others who are less well known: Angelina Weld Grimke, Alice Dunbar-Nelson, Alaine Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Lorraine Hansberry, Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Bruce Nugent.

Much ink has been devoted to the literature and politics of this era, which we will not rehash here. Most significant is that the work of these intellectuals has not been thoroughly analyzed within the context of Black lesbian and gay intellectual life. A corrective to this appears in the 2002 anthology *Black Like Us: A Century of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Black Fiction*, edited by Devon Carbado, Dwight McBride, and Donald Weise. Their work highlights the tremendous variations in the intellectual lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual Black cultural producers. Further, they argue that lesbian and bisexual authors like Grimke and Dunbar-Nelson did not deal with same-sex subject matter at all, nor would they necessarily have identified their sexual orientation as "lesbian" or "bisexual" (cf. Hull 1983).

Other figures, such as Richard Bruce Nugent, did exactly the opposite. In 1926, Nugent – who helped to create the legendary Renaissance publication *FIRE!!* – published an essay entitled "Smoke, lilies and jade" in the first (and only) issue. Deemed by literary scholars to be the "first-known overtly homosexual work published by a Black," the essay was the first of many such works by Nugent, who fully embraced both his racial and sexual identities, and wrote from a "self-declared homosexual perspective." In the edited volume of Richard Nugent's work, friend and colleague Thomas Wirth points out that "little that was printed in *FIRE!!* would have appeared in *Crisis*," the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). *The Crisis* featured the work of Black writers and artists, but its audience was decidedly middle-class and would have been quite offended at the content (Wirth 2002: 14). However, his artwork, with some stylized sexual undertones, was featured on the cover of the National Urban League's *Opportunity* in March 1926 (no. 66). Through his subject matter and his wide social networks, which crossed the racial and geographic boundaries of New York City, "Bruce Nugent linked the black world of the Harlem Renaissance with the gay world of bohemian New York" (Wirth 2002: xii). Nugent's talent was supported from very early on by luminaries like Angelina Grimke, one of his high-school teachers, and by some of the foremost intellectuals at the time, such as Alain Locke, but did not attract the approval or admiration of others, notably W. E. B. Du Bois. Nugent's exploration of male same-sex desire in writings and drawings also predates – by three decades – James Baldwin's novel *Giovanni's*

Room (1956), another definitive work that explores what it means to be both Black and gay.

The debates around sexual morality and respectability among Blacks at that time, though these debates set the terms of much homophobic discourse later on, do not seem to have resulted in same-sex sexuality being precluded. Rather, the question was about how homoerotic sentiment would be expressed. Many writers and scholars, in the process of questioning how the "Black self" was to be represented, and whether each person could adequately represent the race as a whole, toyed with social conventions of the "open secret" about their same-sex sexuality. At the same time that they invented characters who openly expressed homoerotic sentiments, they did not always follow suit in their public lives, avoiding the stigma of being seen as "fairies" (Wirth 2002: 50). In a similar vein, Gloria Joseph argues that, during the 1920s and 1930s, Black male homosexuality simply did not capture the ire of the broader community in the way that it would after the 1950s. She argues that "the male homosexual was not categorically ostracized, nor did he become totally invisible. [Rather], the extent of derision and/or acceptance depended to a great extent how much he manifested his homosexuality" (Joseph 1981: 191, 188).

George Chauncey offers a more extensive analysis, arguing that in the early twentieth century, fine lines were drawn between "queers/fairies" and "men" on the basis of gender status. In the late twentieth century, lines in American culture would be drawn between "heterosexual" and "homosexual" on the basis of sexual object choice. Chauncey argues that it was only around the middle of the century that homosexual behavior became the primary basis for the labeling and self-identification of men as "queer." Previously, his study shows, they were only so labeled if they assumed sexual or other cultural roles ascribed to women, that is, if they took on effeminate traits rather than abide by masculine gender conventions. This distinction between "heterosexual" and "homosexual," the former as the marker of a "real" man, the latter of the debased anti-man, does not become part of the cultural lexicon of Black gender identity until well after the Second World War. This finding would explain, in part, why this early period as captured by the Harlem Renaissance was such a watershed moment for Black gay and bisexual men (less so for lesbians), and how sexual identity appeared to be far more fluid in its expression than in later decades.

For women, the gendered politics of respectability within Black communities seemed to have a significant impact on their sexual expression. This led many, if not most, women writers of the day to hide their same-sex relationships under the guise of heterosexuality and to refrain from participating in the sexual freedom and openness that seemed possible and available to men. This "culturally imposed self-silencing" has had the effect of preventing subsequent scholars from recognizing the specific contributions that Black women made to discourses about race and sexuality during that period (Smith 1979; Keating 2002).

Homoerotic socializing was a major feature of Harlem life in the 1920s and 1930s. It was also the setting for rent parties and buffet flats – all-night events for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and sexually adventurous persons that were held in private homes and featured food, drink, gambling, sex, and/or any combination thereof. Gay male and lesbian revues and cabarets were also frequent, as were drag balls – what Langston Hughes called "Spectacles in Color" – which were attended by large

numbers of Black gay men and lesbians, where both men and women could dress as they desired and dance with whomever they pleased. Gay-friendly speakeasies also provided the setting for blues singers like Bessie Smith, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Jackie "Moms" Mabley, and Lucille Bogan to reflect themes and sensibilities about Black women's sexuality in their music (Garber 1989; Davis 1998). These settings also provided important sources of economic support, especially for lesbians who worked as entertainers, and who generally had fewer options for work, especially if they sought to live non-traditional lifestyles. Gladys Bentley, Josephine Baker, and Ethel Waters were among the Black lesbians and bisexual women of this period who carved out an economic niche in show business for themselves.

Oral history accounts and other personal narratives provide important insight into the challenges faced by Black gays and lesbians during this period. For example, through the memories and reconstruction of her own life, Mabel Hampton, a Black lesbian, points out that high rents and housing shortages made privacy a much sought-after luxury for lesbians and gays. State repression increasingly became a feature of Harlem life, as migrant women from the South, especially those who did not live traditional lifestyles, were often mistaken for prostitutes and were often arrested and harassed by the police (Garber 1989). Nonetheless, for Hampton, show business offered a much needed economic respite, while allowing her to socialize within a predominantly Black female world. Mabel Hampton was committed to the preservation of Black lesbian history – she donated her papers and artifacts to the Lesbian Herstory Archives in 1976 and helped to index them. She was also a key source of knowledge about Black lesbian and gay life in the pre-Stonewall era, and was featured in the historic documentary film *Before Stonewall*, which explored the lives, relationships, and communities of self-identified gays and lesbians between the 1920s and the 1960s. She continued to be active in lesbian communities until her death in 1989. As Carbado, McBride, and Weisse note in *Black Like Us* (2002), not all Black lesbians and gays were able or desired to live their entire lives as sexual nonconformists. In later years, Gladys Bentley re-invented herself as a more traditional woman, which, they argue, bespoke the pressure towards "normalcy" and the changing perceptions of lesbians and gays as "dangerous" in the Depression Era as chronicled by Chauncey and others.

Historians of sexuality have drawn more systematically on oral histories to reconstruct the lives of lesbians and gays. Such strategies are only now being used by Blacks to do the same thing. In their 1993 study of the working-class lesbian community of the 1930s to the 1950s in Buffalo, New York, Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline Davis used an "ethno-historical approach" – combining ethnography, oral histories, and archival research methodology – to analyze the role of public spaces like bars in the development of lesbian communities and identities. Their extensive research showed that, far from the single lesbian identity or politics they expected to find, the racial segregation and economic inequality in the growing industrialized city had helped to generate (at least) two separate lesbian communities – one Black and the other White.

Kennedy and Davis argue that the bold, new participation of groups of Black lesbians in White lesbian bar spaces in the 1950s helped to usher in "changes in lesbian culture and consciousness" in Buffalo. However, that change was neither far-reaching nor long-lasting. On one hand, it is notable that Black lesbians' efforts

in the 1950s to challenge their exclusion from public space in Buffalo and to rene-gotiate the terms of lesbian community and identity were taking place at the same time that other Black men and women were desegregating public lunch counters in southern states. On the other hand, Black lesbians were possibly further stigmatized and largely rejected by White women, and found themselves dealing face to face with racist attitudes of White lesbians in the intimate setting of the bars (Kennedy and Davis 1993: 116–19). Outside of Black social contexts, interracial lesbian and gay couples were seen as suspect, subject to harassment from police and from White gays and lesbians, primarily because of the presence of a Black person (D'Emilio 1983: 88; Kennedy and Davis 1993: 119).

Kennedy and Davis provide mixed evidence for how Black women responded to this new backlash; while some returned to socializing primarily within Black homosocial environments, others became involved in disassembling the barriers to Black women's full participation in Buffalo's social life, including in the lesbian bar scene. What appears to have been the typical response was to continue going to bars that were generally perceived as supportive and relatively devoid of racist hostility, while participating fully in the distinct cultural scene offered by "house parties."

Black lesbian culture emerged in Buffalo (and in other places, like Cleveland, Detroit, and New York City) around private, secluded events such as house parties, partly as a response to exclusion from the public lesbian life of White working-class and elite bars. Another reason why these private social events flourished as hubs of Black lesbian life was precisely because they existed *within* the racially segregated neighborhoods where Black lesbians lived, rather than outside them. The significance of house parties and their role in creating community among Black lesbians (and gays) is often repeated in accounts of gay and lesbian life in the early twentieth century. For example, the late Ruth Ellis, who was the oldest *known* lesbian-identified Black woman – 100 years old – lived in Detroit until her death in October 2001.

Through Ellis's narrative, as featured in the documentary film *Living With Pride*, we recognize that her sexual identity as a lesbian was intricately tied to her being born into and living in the violence of racial apartheid in Springfield, Illinois, and Detroit, Michigan. Among Ellis's many achievements was opening her house as "The Spot," one of the few social spaces available to Black gay men and lesbians in Detroit, where they could temporarily escape the vagaries of living in a racist, class-segregated, heterosexist society. Such house parties remained institutions in Detroit's Black lesbian and gay community, and became a significant resource for Ellis well into her later years. They provided access to social networks, resources, and support, and especially an extended family of affinity that few Black elderly persons – especially women – in her circumstances would ordinarily have access to.

The tradition of house parties during this period affirmed Black same-sex sexuality in a collective sense. Certainly, it predated (as well as set the stage for) the emer-gence of Black lesbian and gay organizations in the 1970s and 1980s that replicated and extended the social and political functions of those events. It is also clear that house parties and the like also afforded Black lesbians some protection from racist attacks that public Black gay bars could attract. Nonetheless, there has been little substantive research on these institutions and the people who organized and sus-tained them. One notable exception is a section of *Gay Rebel of the Harlem Renaissance* (Wirth 2002) entitled "Harlem Renaissance personalities." It provides vignettes of

several persons – for example, A'Lelia Walker a.k.a. "Mahogany Millionaire" and Mr Winston a.k.a. "Miss Gloria Swanson" – who ought to be the subject of future historical studies.

We also learn something about various individuals in key positions within the early lesbian and gay movement, who do not show up in the historical spotlights as exceptional persons. For example, in his study of the emergence of the modern gay and lesbian civil rights movement, John D'Emilio discusses the significance of Ernestine Eckstein, a Black woman who was elected in 1965 to run the New York chapter of the national homophile organization, Daughters of Bilitis. Her activism in the Black civil rights movement shaped her radical politics, which emphasized direct, political engagement with "the powers that be," especially against the State (D'Emilio 1983: 172–3). The backlash she faced from the "old guard," who were more interested in creating a "social service group, protective of women" than participat-ing in a political movement for civil rights, eventually led to her resignation in 1966. Eckstein was also one of few Blacks who visibly participated in the homophile movement, and the only Black to participate in the 1965 protest in Washington, DC against federal employment discrimination (Carbado, McBride, and Weise 2002).

Black lesbians and gays participated in the major Black social movements in US history, as indicated in the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter, but they have not always been fully welcomed or acknowledged. Among the reasons for this were fears of the "fairy" and "mannish woman," which increasingly became pre-occupations in the Depression era. These fears were replaced by a virulent homophobia that soon became a leitmotif in American politics, as in the McCarthyite anti-Communist era of the 1950s. Clearly, Blacks – whether in the civil rights and literary movements, or gays and lesbians – were not immune to this.

During this period, several Black male authors explored gay themes in their work – including Owen Dodson's *Boy at the Window* (1951), Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), and Chester Himes' *Cast the First Stone* (1952). They did so probably with full awareness of the consequences for themselves, should they be viewed as suspect under the repressive social climate that penalized gay sex as criminal, and assigned guilt by association to others. As such, it is nearly impossible to decipher the historical record of contributions made by Black lesbians, gays, and bisexuals during that period, as many seem to have been driven underground and into the closet, and even worse, alienated from each other (Lorde 1984).

The oral historical record does show that community building remained a key part of Black gay and lesbian life, regardless of where they lived. In this era, house parties and other private events probably took on a more urgent meaning, representing both a symbolic and literal lifeline for many. Nonetheless, two self-identified gay figures emerge as important in this period. Despite being located in different arenas, both inadvertently disturbed the prevailing political discourses about the inherent tension between race and sexual orientation. One was James Baldwin, who emerged as an important Black writer in this period, offering incisive analyses of Black experi-ences. He engaged the intersections of race and sexuality by critiquing the hetero-sexism in Black cultural and political projects. For this, he attracted the ire of many who believed that he was a race traitor.

Bayard Rustin's life, his contributions to the Black Civil Rights Movement, his thoughts on the gay and lesbian liberation movement, and his involvement in

international struggles until his death in 1987, have been the subject of five full-length studies and a documentary film. Perhaps best known for his role in orchestrating the March on Washington in 1963, Rustin was a Black gay man whose political and social life was embedded in, and strongly shaped by, his participation in the social movements of the day. These movements challenged the orthodoxy of social hierarchies that deprived American citizens of basic freedoms.

As a self-identified radical in a time of intense cultural repression, Rustin found his sexual orientation being placed at the center of ideological power struggles within the Black Civil Rights movement. He stated that "my being gay was not a problem for . . . [Martin Luther] King but it was a problem for the movement" (Redvers 1988: 3). Central to the concerns of movement leaders, about whether his homosexuality would be used to discredit the movement in the face of its opponents, was the lingering notion that homosexuals are unstable, untrustworthy, and an indelible stain on the moral fabric of the Black America they were trying to validate. This idea returned again and again to the forefront of political discourse in the Black Nationalist Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and served as a lightning rod for criticisms by many Black feminists, lesbians, and gays who were being vilified and pushed out of the movement. As this particular strain of homophobia seemed to become permanently enshrined in the movement for Black Liberation, many gays and lesbians were forced to carve out autonomous spaces that were more inclusive, and which directly addressed the intersections of oppression based on race, gender, and sexual orientation that informed their social experiences.

Our review of the historical scholarship demonstrates that black gays and lesbians were – and are – no more likely to be "in the closet" than their white counterparts. Still, the notion that black gays and lesbians have a particular affinity and interest in masking their non-heterosexual identities continues to reverberate through both scholarly and popular discourse. But, as scholars of modern American sexuality have shown, the "closet" itself is a historical and political construction. On the one hand, it is useful, since it provides both a visual image of the way homosexuality has been criminalized and stigmatized, and also the basis for a shared identity that has persisted over several decades. On the other hand, the "closet" has taken on epistemic significance in the post-Stonewall period, such that most inquiries into same-sex sexuality have focused on "coming out" (Butler 1991; Sedgwick 1993). Framing questions of sexual identity in this way largely ignores the way sexual identities are also defined by race, class, and nationality. The historiography of the "closet" in post-war America has given little attention to the salience of racism in shaping gay and lesbian identities – for whites and blacks alike (cf. Sommerville 2000). That was true even of the path-breaking work by George Chauncey and Esther Newton, published in the 1990s and much cited.

More recent work has begun to address these important gaps. Reimonenq (2002) argues that in the early part of the twentieth century the "closet" functioned as a protective shield for black gays and lesbians, who used the privacy to form gendered networks and coalitions of like-minded intellectuals and as a bridge to the mainstream, while also keeping individual discrimination at bay. These "protective" effects would have been particularly salient for black gays and lesbians in the period immediately after the Second World War. Coincidentally, this is also the period that we know the least about. And, if this was a period of great upheaval and change for

blacks in general – with continued migration from rural to urban areas, growing economic insecurity and class inequality, establishment of new housing developments and neighborhoods, and the emergence of a distinct urban political culture – then certainly gays and lesbians participated in, and were affected by, these new conditions.

Rochella Thorpe's work (1996) offers some insight into these questions by inquiring into the ways in which black lesbians in post-war Detroit responded to their marginality within a material context defined by increasing economic inequality and racial segregation, and whose effects had, and continue to have, different implications for black women than for men. Thorpe's analysis begins to jettison the notion that Black urban public culture is, by default, masculine and heterosexual, and points to the various ways that black lesbians used gender-, class-, and race-based resources to counter their isolation from each other, and to provide economic avenues that were sustainable for a period of time. But this analysis also extends questions first raised by Black lesbian feminist scholars like Barbara Smith, and which still need to be explored in depth. Such questions include: How have the sexual identities of black gays and lesbians been shaped by the intersections of racism, class inequality, sexism, and heterosexism? And where and how do gender, class, and nationality figure in the ways in which black lesbians and gays have responded to marginalization and invisibility within black families and community contexts?

What is also clear from this review of the evidence is that social and cultural constructions of gender within Black communities presented different options and constraints for men and women. The scholarship shows, although not always by intention, that while Black men and women shared the material conditions of segregated, economically deprived, and politically disenfranchised communities, their experiences and outlooks as lesbians and gay men seem to have been strongly bifurcated along gender lines. When we learn about men's social worlds, women seem to disappear, and vice versa. Within the historiography, Black gay men are the subject of analysis and commentary – both academic and popular – far more frequently than are lesbians. Here, the efforts of Black feminists to systematically inquire into the nature of Black sexual politics have contributed to a more careful leveling of the historical playing field, and still do so (White 2001).

Re-Visioning Place: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, and Transgender Persons in Black Culture

Black cultural discourses shifted to emphasize racial pride and protest in the 1970s and the 1980s. The mandate that all energies – creative, political, sexual – be directed toward the redemption of Black identity (read: heterosexual masculinity) presented gays and lesbians with a significant obstacle to claiming racial authenticity. A new Black gay and lesbian identity and politics emerged in this era, one that has scarcely registered in Black scholarship, but which has continued to breathe life and direction into the work of activists and scholars alike.

What was this new politics, and how might we identify it? First, it emerged in a particular cultural context, out of the nexus of the feminist, gay, and Black Civil Rights movements. Disaffection with the lack of attention to race and sexuality in these movements prompted many Black lesbians and gays to find new mechanisms through which to express their political sensibilities. They continued to participate in

Black and (predominantly White) gay and lesbian organizations, embodying dual, warring identities, even as they helped to make civil rights a concrete reality for each group. Increasingly however, their voices were channeled through grassroots organizations that they developed, and through literary and critical writings read primarily by other lesbians and gays.

For example, in 1973, Black feminists organized the National Black Feminist Organization from which splintered the Combahee River Collective, a group of lesbian feminists that included renowned scholar and activist Barbara Smith. The Collective argued that Black feminist work ought to be guided by an intersectional theory of oppression, emphasizing the interconnected nature of racism, economic exploitation, sexism, and heterosexism in Black women's lives. Further, the Collective authored a statement that is a foundation document in Black feminism today (Combahee River Collective 1974). This was one of the first times that same-sex sexuality was explicitly placed on the political agenda of a Black organization. By calling for a more inclusive and radical movement framework for social justice, the literary productions of Black lesbians propelled this criticism onward, and issued a challenge to White mainstream feminism, Black Nationalism, and the gay liberation movement. Although this call never really found an echo in these camps, and resonated more in later years, it continued to be heard and sustained in the writings of Black lesbians.

In this way, the new politics had a decidedly cultural turn and was also distinctly gendered. Much of the political writing produced in this time came from Black lesbians like Cheryl Clarke and Barbara Smith, who were radicalized by participation in the feminist, Black Nationalist, and Black Arts Movements. They also joined key debates and articulated radical ideas that challenged monolithic constructions of Blackness and womanhood. Their political writings were remarkably prescient and continue to offer insight into debates about Black identities and politics. Literary writings were an especially important "catalytic agent" of the Women's Movement, and women's collectives and publications sprung up in major cities, offering numerous venues for Black lesbians to publish their work. It is in this period that the first Black unambiguously lesbian novel is published – Ann Allen Shockley's *Loving Her* (1974) – and the now-oldest Black lesbian organization was founded – Salsa Soul Sisters, now African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change (1974). Years later, the National Coalition of Black Gays (later renamed National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays) emerged, and had a key role to play in the first March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, in 1979.

The autobiographical and fictional work of Audre Lorde, the poetry of Pat Parker, and the journalistic writings of Anita Cornwell together formed the foundation for the Black Lesbian Renaissance of the 1970s. Notwithstanding the differences in their positions relative to feminism and the Black Civil Rights Movement for social justice, all articulated and identified with Black Lesbian Feminism, and focused their work on exploring the myriad social aspects of Black lesbians' lives. In the process, they offered scathing critiques on racism in the women's movement, Black men's sexism, homophobia in Black communities, cultural nationalism, and racial identity – to name only a few issues – that rarely left anyone unprovoked.

During this period, Black lesbians' writings projected new and different visions of inclusive communities, and voices of protest, as well as an ethics of caring that was

otherwise unavailable in the political discourse of the day. They also offered ways to understand erotic attraction as more than simply a source of oppression: the erotic was also a source of inspiration and connection to others, the basis of community in the context of marginalization from traditional "home" communities. Through their literary writings, Black lesbians – and later gay men – were able to express values, images, and visions of racial-sexual identities that differed significantly from those being constructed in either mainstream or specifically Black contexts (Keating 2002).

Black gay men's literary and political engagement fully emerged in the early 1980s, and drew heavily on the work and traditions of Black lesbians. The onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic gave their writings and activism a certain urgency, still present today. At the same time that Black gay men sought to develop and define affirmative sexual identities, they were subject to a particularly virulent form of homophobia. While they were contending with the impact of the disease on a community that was still in formation, they also had to challenge effectively the homophobia in Black political and cultural discourse, which had seeped into most institutions and fueled the widespread denial and negligence towards the HIV/AIDS epidemic (Harper 1996; Cohen 1999).

Whether found in the works of cultural nationalists like Molefe Asante's *Afrocentricity* (1988) or in the new field of "Black Psychology," notably in Nathan and Julia Hare's *The Endangered Black Family* (1984) and Frances Cress Welsing's *The Isis Papers: The Keys to the Colors* (1990), whether in the pulpits or on the streets, the conservative sexual politics and anti-gay rhetoric of the 1980s presented a formidable opponent to the individual and collective well-being of Black gay men. This period also represented a distinct shift in the tenor of "sexual conservatism," to use a term borrowed from Carbado et al. The writings and the activism – of both men and women, but moreso men's – that emerged in this phase took on the challenge of debunking these assumptions and exposing the problems underlying them, notably the assumption of a mythological past that guaranteed men's social superiority and made misogynist and homophobic notions appear entirely natural and unproblematic (White 2001; Ransby 2000).

Since the 1980s, the shift in the visibility of Black gay men and lesbians has been provoked by the impact of multiple social movements that sought to broaden access to civil and social rights, and to destabilize White male hegemony. One consequence of these social movements was the construction of new identities, ones that marginalized groups could use to demand fuller inclusion into society. The emergence of gay, largely White, institutions and infrastructure in the urban centers of the US – neighborhoods, political organizations, and academic programs, for example – helped to open up social discourse about sexual identity. At the same time, Black gays and lesbians tended to create their own spaces to explore questions of racial and sexual identity. Not surprisingly, the organizations (whether social, political, and/or cultural in nature) that emerged during this period embraced a hybrid social identity (Black *and* Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender), further institutionalizing the validity of these identities for those oppressed by virtue of their membership in these stigmatized groups.[2] In the process, these organizations offered an opportunity to define a collective identity around which people could be mobilized for greater access to resources, as well as to engage in the broader struggle for civil rights.

Homophobia may be the "last acceptable prejudice;" nonetheless, Black lesbians, gays, and bisexuals – and, increasingly, transgender persons – have not readily conceded this fight. Challenging their social and political marginalization by their racial group and the broader society has occurred in a number of ways. The critical analyses of Black feminists such as Barbara Smith, Cheryl Clarke, Evelyn Hammonds, and Cathy Cohen, and the emergence of Black gay political leaders like Keith Boykin, Mandy Carter, and Phill Wilson have consistently challenged the notion that same-sex sexuality is "at odds" with Black racial identity.

Black lesbians and gays have also responded to the triple dose of silence, indifference, and marginality within both the Black and LGBT communities by developing organizations that reflect the intersection of their racial and sexual identities, while also emphasizing the racial difference from their White LGBT counterparts. Through the development of organizations, marginalized groups have created institutional alternatives that also legitimize their resistance to dominant ideas. In general, organizations serve to represent collective group interests to the public, and illustrate their symbolic ties to the broader group's history and culture through the names they give themselves.

Organizations like Gay Men of African Descent, African Ancestral Lesbians, United Lesbians of African Heritage, SiSTAHS, Black and White Men Together (now Men Of All Colors Together), National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, People of Color in Crisis, NIA Collective, Zami, ADODI, Unity Fellowship Church, Griot Circle, and the New York State Black Gay Network, have – and continue to be – important sites for affirming same-sex sexual identities of Black people. Equally importantly, these spaces – whether religious/spiritual or secular, gender- or age-specific, issue-oriented or general support – are also critical to defining oppositional discourses about same-sex desire that directly challenge normative ideas about Black sexualities.

As a way of foregrounding and championing an intersectional approach to sexual identity and racial politics, many of these organizations use symbols and language that draw on cultural nationalist ideals, with a twist. Such strategies include incorporating the red/black/green nationalist flag and African-inspired images into organizations' logos and promotional materials. They also include creating alternative systems of naming – for example, using the term "same gender loving (SGL)" and eschewing the terms "gay," "lesbian," and "queer," as well as incorporating Black cultural celebrations such as Kwanzaa, and African rituals such as the pouring of libations at meetings and events. Many of these organizations serve as political advocates for Black LGBTs, and bring a critical, race-centered analysis to debates about sexual orientation and civil rights.

Since the 1990s, these organizations have helped to sustain Black LGBT counterpublics – that is, arenas that stand in opposition to the racism and homophobia of White mainstream and the Black public sphere. These counterpublics have resisted, and continue to resist, easy uncritical identification with either "camp" and they promote images and understandings of race, gender, and sexuality that support and legitimize *Black* LGBT identities. Functioning in this capacity, these organizations have supported the tremendous groundswell of visibility and activism of Black LGBTs, and rightly, constitute the core elements of a vibrant urban Black LGBT culture in this decade.

If invisibility was the leitmotif of the 1980s, then the 1990s looked remarkably different for Black LGBTs. For one thing, various renditions of LGBT Black Experience began to appear in the mass media and particularly, although not exclusively, among all-Black casts. Television programs featuring butch–femme lesbian relationships in *The Women of Brewster Place*, the highly effeminized finger-snapping gay men on *In Living Color*, and the witty, gay staff assistant on *Spin City*, for the moment, seemed to fill the vacuum of images. So too, did major motion pictures like *Set It Off* (1996) and now-discontinued programs like *Courthouse* (CBS 1995), *Roc* (Fox 1991), and *Linc's* (Showtime 1998), which offer glimpses of lives hanging in the social chasm between "black" and "gay/lesbian." More recently, *Soul Food* (Showtime 2000) and *The Wire* (HBO 2003) feature Black lesbian characters as regular and central to the story lines.

Several documentaries were also released during this time, exploring varied aspects of the Black LGBT identities, albeit to different ends – from Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* (1991) and *Black Is, Black Ain't* (1996) to Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996). Using the narrative format of a documentary, Black (primarily) gay and lesbian subject identities were put on display (sometimes in very problematic ways) for the first time, to a national, rather than a specialized (read: minority) audience. This "broader exposure" phenomenon is best exemplified in the cross-over popularity of Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning* (1990) and Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989). The political significance of these two films in the broader discourse about race, gender, and sexuality has been treated extensively elsewhere (see, for example, Mercer 1993, Harper 1995, and Munoz 1999).

A hostile political climate informed by President Bill Clinton's "Don't ask, don't tell" policies and generalized right-wing backlash against sexual minorities also informed the formation of Black LGBT identities in the 1990s. This backlash ranged from state-level ballot initiatives to repealing existing constitutional protections for lesbians and gays, to challenging the introduction of the Rainbow Curriculum into New York City's public schools, to outcries against the use of public funds via the National Endowment for the Arts to support gay-themed art. Such protest was especially vigorous with regard to works engaging Black gay and lesbian sexuality, or which overtly challenged – or at least raised questions about – normative constructions of race, sexuality, and gender identity, in relation to Black men and women. The films by Marlon Riggs and Cheryl Dunye were a focus of these debates and censorship efforts.

The virtual explosion of (White) gay and lesbian political activism around HIV/AIDS and sexual orientation-based discrimination during this period occurred in tandem with the steadily rising incidence of HIV/AIDS infections, and the increasing discord within Black communities about whether and how to address this problem. The increasing visibility of LGBT persons in American life was accompanied by a new social problem – homophobic violence or "gay bashing" – as well as the development of organizational infrastructure and discourses, such as hate crimes legislation, to document the problem. Nonetheless, the violence that LGBT Blacks face both inside and outside of Black communities rarely appears in these official statistics, on account that the other problem – of "Black homophobia" – is seen as the cause, and as a local, isolated concern.

Urban centers of Black life in the 1990s were also the nerve centers of Black LGBT culture. Drag balls offered young Black men (and to a lesser extent women) opportunities to create art forms and self-styled subjective identities that they used to navigate the strictures of masculinity, poverty, joblessness, and outsider status in their economically depressed, racially segregated communities. The emerging literati composed of college-educated Black gay men created underground magazine and journal outlets such as _Pomo Afro Homos_ and _Other Countries_ for cultural and political expression. Through their writings, with varied success in mainstream and gay and lesbian markets, they have perceptibly altered the perceptions of Black gay men, making them a little more familiar, while not completely removing that tell-tale shroud of distrust in the age of AIDS. For example, the popular best-selling novels of E. Lynn Harris and James Earl Hardy, which explore Black gay men's multifaceted lives and identities, also introduce the latest figment of the collective Black (hetero-sexual) nightmare – the presumably straight man who has sex with other men and is therefore on the "Down Low."

Black lesbians also created and sustained "wimmin-centered" spaces, which affirm women's sexual identities, primarily by emphasizing the interconnections between spirituality, sexuality, and mental wellbeing. For both Black men and women, rethinking and creating alternative visions of sexual expression were part of this renewal, especially given the impact of HIV/AIDS on the meaning and expression of sexual attraction. Embracing the erotic as a source of personal and collective power, as noted by the late Audre Lorde (1984), clearly spurred the emergence of women's erotic clubs and creative expression, as demonstrated in magazines and edited volumes of fictional and non-fictional writings dedicated to the topic. These provide the most tangible source of insight into the development of Black lesbian identities. Catherine McKinley and L. Joyce Delaney published _Afrekete: An Anthology of Black Lesbian Writing_ in 1995, while Lisa C. Moore began a publishing press, RedBone Press, featuring the work of Black lesbians, and has since published _Does Your Mama Know?: An Anthology of Lesbian Coming Out Stories_ in 1997, as well as the _Bull Jean Stories_ by Sharon Bridgforth in 1998.

For Black gay and bisexual men in the age of AIDS, no respite from the demonization of "gay sex" could be found in public discourse in either White or Black communities. Increasingly, public discussions about same-sex sexuality in the 1990s constructed the issue in terms of a turf war between "Blacks" and "Gays" (Hutchinson 2000; Brandt 1999). Similarly, Black cultural nationalist discourses that associate "gayness" with "whiteness" have expanded to emphasize protecting The Black Family through restoring proper (read: straight) Black masculinity, as the Million Man March in 1995 demonstrated. And while individual gay men did participate, Black gay men continue to be excluded from participation in critical aspects of Black communities, and to be seen as liabilities. For example, many resources and much energy have been expended by organizations like the Balm in Gilead in New York City, which is dedicated to mobilizing Black congregations and religious organizations to respond proactively to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Nonetheless, many mainstream Black organizations are still hesitant to become involved on account that, even in this stage of the disease pandemic, they still see Black gay men as a scourge on the race, to be considered separate from the larger Black community (Cohen 1999).

Given these repressive social constraints, LGBT Blacks continue to create safe social spaces where the possibilities for sexual agency can be realized, without men and women feeling forced to choose from pre-existing categories, like "being out," "gay," "lesbian," and so on. Black Pride events offer these kinds of social spaces. Billed as multi-day social events organized by Black LGBT groups and individuals, Black Pride events are held in cities that have large, concentrated Black populations. These include Philadelphia, Chicago, Houston, Milwaukee, Detroit, Los Angeles, Washington, DC, New York City and, Atlanta. The first Black Pride event was held in Washington, DC in 1991, and this now consists of workshops and political/educational activities. Some cities also host day-long Black Pride festivals, which feature staged entertainment, vendors selling jewelry and myriad cultural articles, and organizations distributing materials (brochures, key chains, bags, magazines, and the like) that advertise the health, social, political, and spiritual resources they can offer to this captive audience. These events are modeled after Gay Pride events, which are a celebration of LGBT identity, and usually occur in the summer months to celebrate the Stonewall Riots of 1969. However, Black Pride events tend to be more about the celebration of Black LGBT identity; thus, they are both political and social in nature. The number of locations hosting Black Pride events continues to grow. Currently, more than two dozen cities in various states in the USA as well as in various countries around the world host Black Pride events.

In a parallel vein, new identity categories emerged within Black LGBT urban culture, which rejected the overly behavioral notions of "men who have sex with men" (MSM) coined by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and which are defined in the context of everyday experiences of homophobia in Black communities. Reflecting the current shifting landscape of sexuality, even within Black communities, many Black men and women, regardless of age, identify as being "on the down low" or "D.L." with regard to their same-sex sexual orientation. Juxtaposed against the normative standard of "being out, loud and proud" that has been championed by Black and white LGBT organizations alike, being "on the D.L." suggests something shady, secret, to be ashamed of. Yet, "D.L." in current parlance can be understood as an identity, and one that is fluid and subject to change. As a subculture, "D.L." has been most closely identified with a specifically gay, Black, hip-hop culture (Jamison 2001).

Nonetheless, rather than understanding "D.L." as a new and different way of asserting sexual identities, Black media and community leaders – as well as main-stream media, such as the _New York Times_, that have long scrutinized Black urban culture – have repeatedly sought to demonize this "new" population in public discourse, by drawing attention to the "risky" sexual behaviors that men "on the D.L." are presumed to participate in. Such men become, by implication, contaminants of an already imperiled community, and conduits for HIV to the "innocent" Black women that they go home to. It may be that "D.L." is the _nom du jour_ to describe variations of sexual expression across the spectrum of human existence. Nonetheless, this new stigmatization seems to imply concern, or something more, with those who live "on the D.L." What is left unexamined – what we believe future attention should be devoted to – is the tenuous position that young Black gay and lesbians find themselves in at this historical moment, given the hegemonic constructions of Black racial identity that still preclude affirmation of non-heterosexuality.

Moreover, how does being on the "D.L." help or hinder both men and women in negotiating the multiple social worlds and constraints they encounter on a daily basis? To answer this question requires attention to the broader context that defines the place of LGBT Blacks, and the effects of the multiple social structural forces on their physical, mental, and social wellbeing. Therefore, a survey of the literature in the social sciences provides valuable insight.

Social Science Research

While Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and now transgender persons have strenuously fought for the recognition of their humanity and to be seen as subjects and agents of social change, that struggle did not always register on intellectual agendas of the late twentieth century. Indeed, the same problems that plagued the movements that gave rise to Women's, Black, and LGBT Studies can also be found in the academic disciplines themselves, though to varying degrees. The problem – that is, the interconnections between race, gender, and sexuality as structures of oppression that shape lived experiences and cannot be analyzed separately from each other – has been addressed more thoroughly in Women's Studies and LGBT Studies, and less so within Black Studies, or even in traditional disciplines like Sociology which feed these bodies of knowledge. The notion of "place" for LGBT Blacks in academic discourse is heavily informed by the ideological constructions of Black racial identity (particularly from the early 1970s), which emphasized heterosexuality and a "politics of respectability."

We do not wish to suggest that such a place is stagnant and fixed across time and space. As this chapter aims to show, LGBT Blacks have not (and perhaps never) accepted the "place" designated by heterosexism in African American studies and discourse. Rather, we argue, implicitly, that defining the "place" of LGBT blacks is an intellectual and political process, one that emphasizes the constructed, contested, and shifting boundaries of Black identities. That process of definition is more fully articulated in the dominant questions and categories within social science disciplines like Sociology. Critical social theorists argue that Sociology has always had a problem with "difference." As Seidman argues, "Sociology has refused difference, at times, by assimilating or repressing difference or approaching it as a transient condition or evolutionary phase to be superseded" (Seidman 1997: 102). Patricia Hill Collins makes a similar argument with regard to how the "place" of Black within social science has been defined by the extant categories, which have been resistant to change.

Within Sociology, difference is unreflexively seen as "Other," deviant or dangerous in relationship to its foundational categories of "race," "women," "gay," "lesbian," "immigration," and so on. Thus, despite the call by many sociologists to pay attention to intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation, studies of race or same-sex sexuality tend to follow the conventions of the discipline, and to rank social relations in order to preserve conceptual integrity of the "gay" or "Black" subjectivity. To no one's surprise then, research on LGBT populations within Black communities has not focused on the very issues that emerged in the intertwined social movements for Black, women's, and gay liberation, and remain salient for this group.

In the following section we trace the development of the body of knowledge on LGBT Blacks by following the same general historical trajectory within which this

knowledge was produced. Along the way, we identify the core issues that were addressed in each phase (and to some degree, earlier in this text), and how the questions asked were largely shaped by the social and historical context. In doing so, we show how research questions have become more refined, moving from a notion of same-sex sexuality as pathological to exploring how healthy Black LGBT identities are constructed and reinforced.

Homophobia and Heterosexism

On the question of homophobia, early work in the field adopted a decidedly homophobic stance, viewing same-sex sexuality as a mental illness or as a Euro-American strategy for destroying the "Black race." More recent work has taken a critical look at homophobia itself, arguing that this system of meaning is the real problem, and that it has destructive consequences for Blacks.

Until 1973, homosexuality was considered a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). This blatant homophobia was realized at new heights in research on gay and lesbian Blacks. Such research tended to adopt cultural nationalist interpretations found in Afrocentric thinking that homosexuality, as a practice, was unknown in Africa and was forced onto peoples of the African diaspora through colonial contact with Europeans. Thus, in an article first published in 1974 entitled "The politics behind black male passivity, effeminization, bisexuality, and homosexuality," Frances Cress Welsing argued that homosexuality was a "strategy for destroying Black people" (Welsing 1990: 91). Haki Madhubuti also argued that Black men were convinced by Whites to practice homosexuality in order to "disrupt Black families and neutralize black men" (quoted in Conerly 2001). The history of the argument that homosexuality is a weapon of mass destruction that was spread in the Black community by Western capitalist influences has been extensively discussed and critiqued (Potgieter 1997; Wekker 1994; Ransby 2000). Supported by the APA's later declaration that homophobia, not homosexuality, is the truly abnormal condition, researchers have begun to look at homophobia as the real cancer in Black communities, although the earlier view has certainly not disappeared.

Even after the gay liberation movement successfully argued that homosexuals, like people of color and women, constitute an official "minority" group (Barron 1975; D'Emilio 1983), research has shown that Blacks retain negative attitudes toward homosexuals (Lorde 1978; Staples 1981; Gates 1993b; Herek and Capitanio 1995). Several sources have been named as the cause/source for homophobia among Blacks. The most often cited is probably Black religious institutions (Bonilla and Porter 1990); however, other research has shown no such relationship (Seltzer 1992). The institutionalization of Black cultural nationalism (Harper 1996) runs a close second in the "blame game." Yet another related and popular explanation in Black contexts resides in the sexual politics of women's relationships to men. This perspective identifies heterosexual Black women as one of the progenitors of the problem (Ernst et al. 1991). According to this perspective, heterosexual women see (male) same-sex sexuality as exacerbating the shortage of available male sexual partners, and contributing to the demise of marriage among Blacks. As such, they reject male same-sex sexuality because it conflicts with their interests. This perspective has not been supported in the research (Tucker and Mitchell-Kernan 1995). Nor does it account

for homophobia directed at Black women. Unfortunately, higher levels of education are not an antidote to homophobic attitudes – Blacks with higher education still tend to have more homophobic attitudes than their White counterparts (Chang and Moore 1991).

The effects of culturally sanctioned homophobia are also the focus of study. Black youth engaging in homosexual behavior perceive that their friends and neighbors are not supportive (Siegel and Epstein 1996; Stokes et al. 1996b). They are then often reluctant to disclose their sexuality, even within settings where they can receive appropriate counseling or other supportive services. As such, they are also at higher risk from abuse, suicide, and HIV infection (Cochran and Mays 1988a; Mays 1989; Savin-Williams 1994). Similar results were found when examining older Black gay populations (Adams and Kimmel 1997).

Homophobic attitudes in Black contexts have far-reaching impact. Such attitudes have been linked with mishandling sexual abuse cases by professionals working with racial and sexual minorities (Fontes 1995), to the explosion of HIV/AIDS among Blacks (Stokes and Peterson 1998; Cohen 1999). Not surprisingly, the impact of such attitudes is also palpable among researchers who study Black populations, shaping the questions they are willing to ask, whether because they see same-sex sexuality as unimportant and irrelevant, or because they fear being rejected by their subjects (Bennett and Battle 2001).

A major flaw in much of the thinking and research on homophobia and Blacks has to do with the way questions have been asked. Until now, researchers and laypersons alike have implied that the attitudes, behaviors, and ideologies that we call "homophobic" are unique to Blacks as a group. Put another way, the implication is that Blacks have a monopoly over homophobia. The popularity of this way of thinking is embedded in the now-historic divisions drawn between Black civil rights and gay liberation movements, and has figured significantly in public discourse about HIV/AIDS (Cohen 1999).

However, to simply claim that Blacks are "more" homophobic than Whites or any other racial-ethnic group entirely misses the point, and produces a skewed analysis, which further demonizes Blacks as having the "wrong" values or failing to keep pace in a rapidly changing society. Given the institutional barriers that have been developed and maintained in the USA to marginalize same-sex sexuality, and to limit the full participation and rights of LGBT persons, it becomes evident that homophobia is embedded in the national culture, rather than originating from a specific racial-ethnic group. Recognition of this critical point has led researchers to inquire into the nature of homophobia and how its expression in Black cultural contexts is informed by the intersection of racial and other forms of inequality in broader societal institutions like family, religion, and politics (Cohen 1999). On a related note, researchers also need to pay attention to how heterosexism – the notion that heterosexuality is good, natural, right, and superior – is implicated in and still informs racial group identity in the contemporary United States.

Black Lesbians

Some of the earliest research concerning Black lesbians came from Black feminists in the 1970s (for examples, see Lorde 1978; Smith 1979). Although historically

some researchers saw lesbianism as a "choice" in response to the shortage of Black men (Staples 1978), current research recognizes the limits of such a perspective. Research on Black lesbians addresses the multiple manifestations and contexts of same-sex sexuality among Black women. Wekker (1994), for example, suggests that Black mati-ism – the Sranan Tongo word for women who have sexual relationships with women – provides an Afrocentric and working-class alternative to notions of Black lesbianism, which is seen to be more middle-class and Eurocentric in nature.

The experiences of Black lesbians have been explored in various settings – workplaces, healthcare, Black and other communities (Eversley 1981; Cochran and Mays 1988b; Stevens 1998). The largest body of research concerns the negative impact of perceived discrimination on the mental health, health status outcomes, and intimate relationships of Black lesbians. This research began in 1986 with the pioneering work of Vickie Mays and Susan Cochran's Black Women's Relationship Project (Cochran and Mays 1988a). Since then, the majority of the scholarship on Black lesbians has been psychological in nature. For example, researchers have examined the psychological toll of this particular matrix of domination (Collins 1990) and its many implications for Black lesbians (for a discussion, see Greene and Boyd-Franklin 1996). Others have examined the relationships between sexual identity and risk behaviors as well as the role of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in the development of Black lesbians' and bisexual women's sexual identities (Greene 2000; Saewyc 1999). Others have focused on more sociological outcomes, and particularly the effects of inequalities on Black lesbians' life chances.

In a recent study examining health status and outcomes among women of color, sexual minority status emerged as a key variable in exacerbating the impact of racial, gender, and class-based inequalities on Black women's life chances. Mays, Yancey, Cochran, Weber, and Fielding (2002) found that self-identified Black lesbians and bisexuals in Los Angeles County faced greater health risks and worse health status than Black heterosexual women, on indicators such as being overweight, participating in risky behaviors (such as tobacco use and heavy alcohol consumption), access to health insurance, and a regular source of health care. Notably, the authors surmise that both employment and marital status are keys to improved access to quality healthcare for women. That is, while Black lesbian and bisexual women had higher rates of full-time employment, their non-married status limited their access to health insurance through a spouse or relationship partner. Other research has begun to inquire into the ways that Black lesbians counter the effects of discrimination, by exploring the benefits of developing "community" with lesbians of other racial and class backgrounds (Hall and Rose 1996).

Family studies have long shown that race and social class have a strong, persistent effect on patterns of family formation practices among Blacks. Black women are much more likely to parent alone than say, White women. Mays et al. (1998) found that this pattern holds regardless of sexual orientation. In their study, one in four Black lesbians lived with a child for whom she had child-rearing responsibilities, and one in three reported having at least one child. And according to analysis of 1990 census data, Black lesbian couples were more likely than White couples to report having given birth to a child (Ettlebrick et al. 2001). These findings suggest an especially fruitful area for in-depth research on Black lesbians, and the effects of race,

social class, sexual orientation, and community support on the well-being of Black lesbian families.

Mental Health Outcomes among Gay and Bisexual Men

Marginalized status based on sexual orientation, as well as fear of disclosure and ostracism, have led many researchers to explore the impact of same-sex sexual orientation on mental health outcomes. Not surprisingly, the preponderance of evidence found that LGBT Blacks have higher levels of negative mental health outcomes than their White counterparts (Siegel and Epstein 1996). A major source of anxiety for non-heterosexual Blacks is fear of disclosure. In a small sample of Black and White gay men, Ostrow et al. (1991) found that their Black respondents were less likely to be open about their sexuality and that they had less affirmative social support than their White counterparts. Stokes et al. (1996a) used a much larger sample of men, and found that among bisexually active men, Blacks were much less likely to disclose their sexual orientation to their female partners than were Whites. Despite this reticence, when Black men do disclose their same-sex sexual orientation, it is usually to women first (Mays et al. 1998). Mays and her colleagues went on to find that two major predictors of disclosure for Black men were current age and age at initial engagement in homosexual behavior. Older and more experienced men were more willing to disclose their sexuality.

Despite the stress surrounding disclosure, some researchers have found that openly gay Black men have developed positive self-esteem and sexual identities. Edwards (1996) examined four areas of social psychological functioning among a sample of Black gay adolescents: self-identity, family relation, school/work relations, and social adjustment. He found that even in the presence of homophobia and racism, his subjects possessed positive social psychological attitudes and survival skills. Peterson et al. (1996) studied a larger sample of Black gay, bisexual, and heterosexual men, examining the relationship between depressive mood, social psychological stressors, psychosocial resources, and coping strategies. They found no significant difference in depression among the three groups. Research has consistently found that Black men of same-sex sexual orientation have significant difficulties in dealing with their sexual orientation (Cochran and Mays 1994). Richardson et al. (1997) who studied 311 HIV-negative Black men, found that gay/bisexual orientation was a primary predictor of anxiety disorder.

Like the question of homophobia, interpreting the causal mechanisms for poor mental health outcomes among LGBT Blacks is easily tainted by problematic notions that it is same-sex sexuality, rather than context-specific interactions and responses, that produces poor coping skills, higher levels of depression, suicide ideation, and so on. Such a perspective completely ignores the possibility that LGBT Blacks do develop affirmative social identities, and can be psychologically well adjusted. The question then becomes, what are the factors and contexts that produce the disparities in mental health outcomes among men? How are these related to economic status, social support, strength of family ties, region, education, and occupational attainment, to name just a few factors? And more importantly, exactly how does sexual orientation *status* contribute to the answer? Far from assuming a pathological model of same-sex sexuality, new research on gay men in general points

to the effects of structural discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation on men's social and psychological well-being. Such work ought to be expanded to examine the specific barriers and conditions that Black gay and bisexual men face, that hinder the development of healthy racial and sexual identities.

HIV/AIDS

Without question, the AIDS epidemic in the United States has been instrumental in forcing society in general, and Blacks as a group specifically, to address issues of same-sex sexuality (Cohen 1999). Since the 1980s, Black gay men have been particularly affected by the epidemic, making them the natural choice for research on the social causes and effects of HIV/AIDS, as well as understanding the context-specific nature of prevention efforts.

Black gay men have a significantly higher rate of infection than both their heterosexual and White counterparts (Koblin et al. 1996; Sullivan et al. 1997; Williams et al. 1996). In a recent study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in six major US cities – Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, and Seattle – the researchers found that more than one-third of young Black gay men were infected with the HIV virus (Centers for Disease Control 2001). The epidemic is growing especially rapidly among Black gay youth in economically depressed urban communities, a problem scholars believe is exacerbated by poverty, violence, lack of social support, lack of resources in families, health, and educational systems, and lack of support from religious institutions.

The body of research on Black gay men (less so for lesbians) is now fairly large, covering various regions (Sullivan et al. 1997; Williams et al. 1996; Lichtenstein 2000). However, the bulk of this research has been conducted in New York City (Koblin et al. 1996; Quimby and Friedman 1989) and San Francisco (Peterson et al. 1996), where there are significant gay male populations, as well as established research institutions and infrastructure for managing the information. Regardless of the region or number of cases in a sample, researchers have concluded that there is an urgent need for culturally sensitive programs that are targeted at gay and bisexual Black men, and which stress prevention and avoidance of risky behaviors (Peterson et al. 1996; Rotheram-Borus, Hunter and Rosario 1994; Myrick 1999). As the epidemic grows, and the body of research stressing the medical model also grows along with it, researchers have begun to emphasize the social and economic, rather than behavioral, factors that contribute to the epidemic, and which should be taken into consideration in prevention programs (Icard, Schilling and El-Bassel 1992; Peterson 1997). What they argue is that individual, interpersonal, and contextual factors, together, help to inform the participation of gay and bisexually-active Black men in "high-risk" behaviors. Arguably, Cathy Cohen's full-length 1999 study of the Black community's response to HIV/AIDS is the best and most comprehensive treatment of this issue.

Still others continue to lay much of the responsibility for the epidemic on the reluctance of Black churches to engage in HIV/AIDS activism. These scholars argue that socially conservative religious ideologies help to legitimize homophobia and an AIDS panic within the Black community, fragmenting both the community politics and retarding an effective response to the epidemic (Blaxton 1998; Fullilove 1999).

Comparisons between Homosexual and Heterosexual Populations

Despite the fact that studies of HIV/AIDS have dominated the social science research agenda on LGBT Blacks, researchers have sought to explore broader comparisons among Blacks of different sexual orientations. Researchers have found that, like the larger heterosexual population, LGBT Blacks are more likely to be distrustful of health care providers (Cochran and Mays 1988b; Siegel and Raveis 1997) and are generally suspicious of social workers (Icard 1985; Icard and Traunstein 1987). In examining the experiences of older Black gay men, research has shown not only diversity within that population, but similarities between them and older Black heterosexual men (Adams and Kimmel 1997).

Beyond the similarities, however, research has discovered some clear differences in life course experiences. Though extremely underutilized in academic scholarship, there is a rich body of work produced by lesbian and gay Black activists and cultural workers who have explored many dimensions of the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Baldwin 1956; Beam 1986; Boykin 1996; Hemphill 1991; Lorde 1982; Smith 1983). Recently, more traditional researchers have entered in the discussion. The work of Peplau et al. (1997), for example, highlighted unique dimensions to the intimate relationships of homosexual Blacks. They found that homosexual Blacks were more likely to engage in interracial dating than were their heterosexual counterparts; and that lesbian and gay Blacks were highly satisfied in their relationships – regardless of the race of the other partner. Crow et al. (1998) conducted a controlled study where they examined biases in hiring against women, Blacks, and homosexuals. They found that Black gay men were most likely to be discriminated against. Doll et al. (1992) conducted interviews with over 1,000 adults in Chicago, Denver, and San Francisco to study patterns of sexual abuse in the life histories of adults; they found higher rates of abuse within the population of Black gay men. Similarly, the findings about suicide ideation and alcoholism among Blacks (Gibbs 1997; Icard and Traunstein 1987) have shown that gay men are at much higher risks for these. As a result of these findings in the empirical research, mental health workers are beginning to develop models that are designed to address minority lesbian and gay populations (Greene 1997).

Arguably, one of the most comprehensive research projects ever conducted on Black LGBT populations is the Black Pride Survey 2000 (Battle et al. 2002). In an effort to gather more information on this understudied population, a group of researchers and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Policy Institute developed one of the largest and most important research documents on Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations in the United States. The study was conducted in nine cities during the summer of 2000 and the sample represents possibly the largest national, multi-city sample of Black LGBT people ever gathered. Over 2,600 Black LGBTs across the country were sampled. The self-administered survey consisted of various questions focusing on basic demographic information, experiences with discrimination, policy priorities, and political behavior, as well as the attitudes of Black LGBT individuals towards both gay and straight organizations that are either predominantly Black or predominantly White. Major findings from this study have been thoroughly explored elsewhere (Battle et al. 2002; Battle et al. 2003).

Re-configuring Place: Future Directions in Black LGBT Studies

Given what research has been and is being done, where should scholarly research on Black LGBT populations next delve? Currently, the social constructionist perspective shapes much of current thinking about identities based on race and sexuality (Howard 2000). This perspective emphasizes how the meanings of categories and the shape of identities are conditioned by the social and historical contexts in which they emerge and, as such, are not fixed, but change over time. From this perspective, a new body of research is emerging demonstrating that social identities are fluid, mobile, and contingent, rather than assigned or derivative of the social structure. As noted above, despite the distinct shift towards an intersectional approach to race, gender, class, and sexuality, inquiry about Black identities has not always given attention to how sexual identities are constitutive of and help to shape racial identities.

The work of critical race theorists and cultural studies scholars has been extremely important in addressing this problem. For example, they argue and show through careful reading of historical evidence, that racial boundaries in the USA have frequently been constructed and maintained along sexual lines (Gilman 1985; Davis 1981; Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1990 and 1994; Cohen 1999; Sommerville 2000; Nagel 2003). Not only are racial categories and identities already sexualized, but sexuality is central to understanding how race categories are formed, defined, and change over time. In a way, this approach has come full circle, reflecting the critical insights from writers like James Baldwin. This area – Black Queer Studies – represents the "cutting edge" of research, and further defines Black sexuality studies as fertile territory for research.

Based on our review of the bodies of scholarship that have explored various aspects of Black LGBT experiences, we note that the research has covered a great deal of ground over the last quarter-century. However, there are a few gaps that ought to be addressed in the next phase of research, and guided by analytic perspectives that emphasize change, fluidity, and context. For example, there is clearly room for research that is focused not so much on how problems of the past continue to haunt Black LGBT – from oppression and its negative effects to HIV/AIDS – but on how these groups participate in contesting and shaping the here and now. Drawing on the themes that emerged from our literature review, we suggest a few fruitful areas of research for the next quarter-century, including family structure, sexual behavior and identity, political issues and attitudes, religion, and immigration and ethnicity.

Family Structure

Despite the growing attention to family issues and sexual orientation, little is known about the family structures and parenting experiences of Black LGBTs (Battle et al. 2003). Documenting the existence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents is important, inasmuch as they reflect the diversity of family arrangements, and provide greater insight into the ways in which social policies and structures affect families on the micro-level. They also show how families, by their very practices, help to engender macro-level social change. Yet family and same-sex sexuality appear as mutually exclusive categories in most treatments of Black family structure and

change. However, LGBT people indeed have siblings, care for elderly parents, raise children, and develop mutually beneficial romantic relationships. In short, they develop families of their own, though not always in circumstances of their own choosing.

Why is this important? There is evidence to suggest that lesbian and bisexual women report higher incidences of adolescent pregnancy than their straight counterparts (Saewyc 1999). If Black lesbian couples were more likely than White lesbian couples to be parenting, then that suggests that the "lesbian baby boom," much touted in the media in the late 1990s, really began much earlier, and may well not be a notable phenomenon among Black women. Most importantly, what are the psychological, social, and political ramifications of Black lesbians parenting in communities and contexts that provide far less support than to heterosexual women? One might ask similar questions about Black gay men in families, and particularly how men negotiate gender identities in family contexts that require men to "father" children, if not to actually raise them. Also, how are gay men and lesbians similar to or different from each other, or from their heterosexual counterparts, in the way they build relationships with blood relations and kin, and how they participate in family networks? The life of Ruth Ellis raises some key questions about how Black lesbians (and gay men) create families and communities of affinity, and the challenges and limits of doing so.

Sexual Behavior and Identity

Identity is important as it helps to build and solidify feelings of pride and purpose among the individual and group members. It is important to determine, particularly for Black LGBT people, what terms like "gay," "lesbian," "queer," and "same gender loving," among the many other labels, mean to both the individual and the group. How does identifying as one or the other reflect or shape one's relationships to sexual or racial-ethnic communities, and politics? For whom are these identity categories meaningful, and why? How do social class, age, generation, and political ideology shape how people identify themselves? Does identifying as "queer" suggest that one is more likely to be more politically active in one's community or to work more closely with White LGBT communities? On the other hand, does identifying as "same gender loving" mean that one is more likely to see their sexual orientation and their lives through Afrocentric lenses?

Scholars need to explore further how different identities shape experience, and vice versa. As made evident by the BPS2000 sample (Battle et al. 2002) and the work of Black feminists and theorists (Collins 1990; Davis 1981, Reid-Pharr 2001; Smith 1983), race, gender, class, and sexual orientation are important valences through which identities are forged. They shift in importance and rank, depending on broader political and cultural contexts in which individuals and groups find themselves. In other words, these identities are not separable as they each help define the unique experience of Black LGBT populations. Researching the intersection of these structures of inequality and the identities that emerge can tell us much about the relative replays in oppressing and empowering individuals and communities. Such research findings can then inform research on physical health, mental health, political participation, and a whole host of other life course outcomes.

Political Issues and Attitudes

There are clearly different as well as shared political priorities between the Black LGBT community and the mainstream Black community. What is less clear is how intersecting identities affect how one thinks about politics. More research is needed to determine how being Black and lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender shapes one's attitudes toward politics, as well as the level and type of political participation. Are Black men more politically concerned about HIV/AIDS than are other Blacks? If so, how do they effect change around this issue? Similarly, are Black transgender people more concerned about discrimination in jobs or in housing? What strategies do they use to make their views and experiences heard? Such questions can only be meaningfully answered through systematic research, whose goal is also to address and alleviate marginalization of LGBT Blacks from the political process.

Religion

Religious institutions have always played a prominent role in Black communities, offering opportunities for leadership, status attainment, comfort, and support that were largely unavailable outside this community. The religious ideologies embodied in many Black churches have played a strong role in the subordination of gays and lesbians. For many, religiosity and affirmative same-sex sexual identity are seen as polar opposites. However, there is also mounting evidence that gays and lesbians participate in and engage religious structures for the purpose of challenging doctrinal hegemony, as well as to affirm their sexual identities. In the years since the AIDS crisis emerged, Black LGBTs have organized themselves into congregations and formal churches to respond to their spiritual, health, and political needs, especially with regard to people with AIDS, who had largely been abandoned by mainstream Black churches.

Black LGBT churches provide much more than formal ministry to the spiritually needy. They also constitute an alternative institutional context that validates LGBT families and communities, and nurtures and mobilizes new forms of identities. Important questions to examine include: what is the role of religion in the lives of Black LGBTs? If they are excluded from traditional religious venues, what are the psychosocial implications of this rejection, and where do Black LGBT people go? Furthermore, what are the political implications of establishing largely LGBT congregations for religious and political empowerment in a culture that encourages separation of church and state? As the larger society moves toward a more liberal stance on (homo)sexuality, how have traditional Black churches coped with, and responded to, this profound cultural change? Far from assuming that Black religious institutions are monolithic, and are in the vanguard of social change, these questions ask for closer and more deeply historical examinations of how, on the question of sexuality, Black churches have been both empowering and oppressive institutions.

Immigration and Ethnicity

Black immigrants – Afro-Caribbean and African – also face distinct challenges that limit their participation in and access to social networks, support, and political resources within Black LGBT organizations. For many Black LGBT immigrants, the

terms of participation place limitations on how they can identify themselves racially and ethnically, as well as the meaning of their participation in Black LGBT communities and politics. This is a familiar, yet curious bind in which Black immigrants find themselves, as ethnicity becomes the primary lens through which they understand the dynamics of racial, gender, and sexual politics in the US context. How immigrant men and women negotiate these dynamics ought to be the focus of future studies.

Special attention should also focus on historical as well as current manifestations of Black LGBT in the African continent. One of the most comprehensive volumes to do so is Murray and Roscoe's *Boy-Wives and Female Husbands: Studies in African Homosexualities*. Across 15 thoroughly presented studies, and while tracing discussion about sexual orientation in Africa back to Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1781), Murray and Roscoe conclude that "[t]he colonialists did not introduce homosexuality to Africa but rather intolerance of it – and systems of surveillance and regulations for suppressing it" (Murray and Roscoe 1998: xvi).

Research into the lives of LGBT Blacks has come a long way. As questions of sexuality move to the forefront of several academic disciplines – including Sociology, Black Studies, Political Science, and History – and as LGBT Blacks become more visible as both researchers and subjects, the knowledge base from which we understand the complexities of Black experience must continue to expand. In time, we may no longer need to search for the place of LGBT Blacks in history and society.

NOTES

1. Throughout this text, we will use the term "Black" to refer to people of African Diaspora, and to such populations that reside within the United States. To some, African Americans are a subgroup within the larger Black community. Since our discussion purposely includes those who may be first-generation immigrants or who, for whatever reason, do not identify as African American, we employ the term "Black." Furthermore, we capitalize it to distinguish the racial category and related identity from the color: similarly, we capitalize "White" when referring to race.

2. The increased visibility of transgender persons in the mainstream lesbian and gay movement has not always been received well, and has prompted a series of debates about the inclusiveness of the broader social movement. Within Black LGBT communities, recognition of transgender persons has occurred sporadically, primarily through the development of specific support groups, targeted outreach for HIV prevention efforts, and within Black LGBT urban culture. Since the late 1990s, social science researchers have begun to include transgender populations into their research questions and analyses. As a way of recognizing this shift in the terms and debates, and its importance in understanding the various manifestations of Black sexual identities and politics, we include the term, and much of what it implies, in our subsequent discussion.

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