

Dedication

This paper is dedicated to one of the most prolific, daring, African American men to contribute to the struggle for equality of all humanity while never denying his sexuality and simultaneously suffering for it, Bayard Rustin.

For Bayard Rustin, his love, Walter Naegle, and all those unnamed “Rustins” who lie resting peacefully waiting on our freedom.

Acknowledgments

I thank my co-panelist, Dan Royles, who requested my presence on this panel before others had an opportunity to do so. I am not certain if this was an indication of his bravery or scholarship. I am beholden to the wisdom and intelligence of Mr. Charles Stephens, who would not allow me to politely decline Dr. Royles' offer to be on this panel and present what is to follow. Please appreciate, as I do, the gift of the voice and talent of Rev. Troy Sanders, who has lent his energy to make my presence in writing available today. There are many names mentioned in the following document, to most of whom I owe much of what has become of my life. In addition to my gratitude to many of them, I am always mindful of and grateful for my relationship of now over twenty years, with my husband, Dr. David J. Thurman, MPH, M.D., who is an instructor at Emory Medical School. I was heading for good things and I had an interesting life before him, but nothing to compare to having been loved and cared for by him as I have matured and as we grow into our senior years together.

Introduction

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has disproportionately affected the men of African descent living in the United States who are gay, bi-sexual, men who love men, or men occasionally sexually active with other men.¹ This disease did not care how comfortable or not we were with our sexual orientation and as such, we, African American gay and bisexually active men, suffered and continue to suffer the brunt of tremendous losses of some of our most talented and gifted brothers. My life has been no exception to this experience of loss, in addition to the inordinate deaths of gay men who I had the honor of loving and working with from the larger community of out, proud white gay men.

I begin with the specific relationship I had with one such HIV positive man, Anthony Carl (Tony) Daniels (1965-1998), because without his influence upon my artistic and socio-political life in Atlanta, I may not have been a panelist asked to contribute to this occasion. There is interconnectedness and a correlation of the establishment and convening of this conference with Daniels's life and honors named for him in his death. If there had not been the life and art of Tony Daniels, some part of what is being convened might be quite different. I will attempt to prove the historical lineage and leave the spiritual extrapolation to you, the reader.

I indicate that Charles Stephens, a co-convener of *Whose Beloved Community* and an employee of this academic institute, was the first male recipient of the Audre Lorde Scholarship awarded here in Atlanta by The ADODI Muse: A Gay Negro Ensemble, a group founded by Tony Daniels in 1995, and of which I was a part from early in its inception. The ADODI Muse, under Daniels's guiding hand, performed his choreographed and scripted poetry locally, regionally, and twice at the National Black Arts Festival, as theatrical performance poets. That

¹

Stats about HIV/AIDS

scholarship Stephens received was named “The Tony Daniels Community Ally Award” and was presented to him in 2002 during his undergraduate education.²

The women of ZAMI, an African American community-based Atlanta lesbian organization, founded the scholarship program under the leadership of Mary Ann Adams, who asked the members of The ADODI Muse to provide an award for a man. The majority of the applicants for the scholarships to out and deserving African American students were women, but men applied also, although it was not the group's initial intention to fund male students. Adams and the women of ZAMI generously allowed this departure because of the quality of applications. Adams convinced us that many out-of-the-closet lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, trans-gender and questioning (lgbtq) youth were left without financial or other forms of familial support as the consequence of not remaining closeted and/or inactive in queer liberation or education. ZAMI chose to offer the scholarships only to students who were out and working toward liberation of the (lgbtq) communities. This program could safely be termed “beloved.”

The women of ZAMI loved and cherished the man Tony Daniels, his work and that of The ADODI Muse, even after his death, and supported and hosted our performances. They were thrilled when, at the 2001 award celebration, Malik M. L. Williams announced the establishment of the Daniels scholarship from the stage, unbeknownst to Anthony Antoine, the new ADODI Muse performer at the time (having joined the group just a year prior) and myself.

Stephens was and is intellectually inclined toward his many achievements, leadership positions and the responsibility he has attained, without the modest scholarship awarded by our performance trio and the women of ZAMI. Stephens, according to his own testimony, was not denied the love and attention of his family. He and the hundred and fourteen scholarship

² ZAMI, “About ZAMI Scholarship Fund” 2004 <http://www.zami.org/scholars2002.htm> (accessed March 23, 2014). I verified the date by the website and the photo shown included fellow ZAMI scholarship recipient, Georgia State House District 58 Representative, Simone Bell, then a senior at Agnes Scott College.

recipients, however, attended college—graduate, undergraduate and associate's level—with the further affirmation of communities of African American lgbtq adults in Atlanta supporting their educational and activists endeavors.

The persons who received their scholarships, and attended the celebratory weekend provided for the recipients at no cost, were made aware of the ability of our communities to move beyond the tragic loss of Daniels, and many like him who lived with HIV/AIDS. We also furthered Daniels's work by being financially engaged in the lives of these students.

Stephens, an Atlanta native, Charles Rice-Gonzalez of the Bronx, Dale Guy Madison of Los Angeles, and the late Shelton Jackson (1978-2009) of Newark, fulfilled a dream of Daniels by publishing their work.³ By doing so these gifted playwrights and writers put the stories of Black gay contemporary lives authentically in print. The ADODI Muse members were proud to have been involved in assisting in the academic careers of the recipients, many of whom became close associates of one or all the surviving ADODI Muse members. Daniels's untimely death in an auto accident in 1998 sparked, as he would have desired, a legacy of activist, academics, theater queens, and writers connected to his art through this effort. I hope this is one answer to *Whose Beloved Community?*

This introduction serves to assist the reader as primer to my choice of writing style in an historical narrative format. The majority of what is being presented is based upon my memories. I do not claim that all the recollections are accurate, having some flaws that occur as the result of years passing by, but where possible, I have referenced historical markers to help verify information. I welcome the correction of dates, and the inclusion of significant characters

³ Farrow, Keyan Blog "RIP: Shelton Jackson" March 3, 2009, <http://kenyonfarrow.com/2009/03/03/rip-shelton-jackson/> (accessed March 24, 2014)

omitted inadvertently. I also welcome perceptions that contradict my own. Our history is worth including the diverse lived experiences of the people who were there.

Some Welcome Wagon

When my twenty-first birthday happened in Kansas City, Missouri, I was anticipating living out a fantasy I had seen on television of the 1960's and 1970's many times. After work, a man would leave his job and go to a local pub or bar and have a drink with friends. This was what men of some success did in my mind. It was completely outside the lived experience of my family.

We were working-class, but educated, and given middle-class status because of my father being a minister and a pastor. He was also a warehouseman for John Deere, Inc., for more than twenty-nine years. Both sides of my family were Black Missionary Baptist. In the church covenant, before current popular revisions, there was a clause about abstaining from alcohol.⁴ My family, like many, had alcohol present in our homes and, far worse, the disease of alcoholism on both sides of the family. As baptized believers in Jesus Christ, we would have never bragged about going to a bar or made it a routine occurrence without some sort of other excuse. I obtained my fantasy from television and movies and translated it into my life as a gay youth who would be legally able to drink. This would be my passage into adulthood, or one of them.

I chose the Dover Fox, an old established gay bar on the bus route with a well established Happy Hour. I cannot recall how I knew this, as none of my friends were there for this after-work activity. I was never told by my friends, all near my age, white, Latino and Black, that it would be the place for this rite of passage. I was not told by even the few gay men in my life where I should go. I had to navigate this on my own. I entered the bar and it was not alive with crowds; it was too early. There were just a few men sitting around the bar of wood and brass.

⁴ Galilee Missionary Baptist Church website, National Missionary Baptist Church Covenant, <http://www.galileebaptistdetroit.org/> (accessed March 24, 2014) Within the covenant shown on this page the language is similar to that of the church of my childhood in the third paragraph of the covenant references the abstaining from "intoxicating beverages."

The once-alive real Dover fox was encased in glass as you entered: how classy, all dust covered. I approached the bar and was greeted, but immediately asked for identification. I looked maybe sixteen in the right light. I was legal according to my state issued identification card, and I sat down, and the all-white assembly were men in some business wear but not like on television, more worn-looking, and one or two a bit larger than the stools they sat on. The man seated down a few stools from me looked me over and began to tell a racist joke. I sipped on my Amaretto Sour and was frozen.

I had no guide, no information, and no boyfriend at the time, no experience even in my mixed-race high school of this kind of dismissal and abuse. I remember leaving and feeling empty. That was my welcome to the official gay bar community in my own hometown, off Main Street.

Where were the advancements in civil rights that afternoon in Kansas City, Missouri? What was the joke suppose to accomplish? Was the racist white joker interested in preserving a Dover Fox where skinny Black effeminate males did not disturb his Happy Hour? I did not return for Happy Hour, or alone, ever again. I could not mention this, seeking support, at Westminster Baptist Church, where I was still a soloist. I could not bring it up in conversation about how the city operated in the lives of Black people, mostly all far from Main Street on the eastern side of the city, at a family meal. What a welcome to the segregated social life of gay culture. This happened the week of January 8, 1982, in Kansas City, Missouri. That year I would meet more hospitable and sexually interesting men, one of whom became my lover, and he often said, "You missed the party."

James Baldwin Neutered for Our Convenience

There are times when simply being observant means we we recognize painfully an action done to another that we do not want for our own life or the lives of those we deeply care about. I had such an experience when I read the tribute, as it were, for James Baldwin: noted author and, during my youth, a celebrity on television talk shows⁵. Mr. Baldwin had reached much acclaim for his literary accomplishments by the time I reached adulthood in the 1980s. He was like many noted figures in the African American community, who had been involved actively in the classic Civil Rights Struggle during the 1950s to the point of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination in 1968, and beyond for a few others. They were revered and respected for having lived through all of the horrors of non-violent social change that seemed filled with so much racial violence. I am providing enough evidence to prove that the African American media had sufficient cause to honor Baldwin on the occasion of his death, December 1, 1987.

When I chose to purchase the copy of the Johnson Publishing Company magazine, *Ebony*, that featured Baldwin's life, I anticipated a small note of recognition that he was, like me, a Black gay man. True, Baldwin may never have used that term; he was so strident in his work to wake up the United States, both white and Black hues, to the circumstances of what racism had done and was doing, that he only claimed "homosexual," I believe. It was, for God's sake, 1987, almost twenty years after the Stonewall riots that supposedly marked the beginning of the modern Gay Rights Movement for American homosexuals, who were ready to risk taking advantage of it.⁶ It was unfortunately also five years after the first recognized cases of

⁵ PBS *American Masters* series, "James Baldwin on Dick Cavett", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6WlM1dca18> (accessed March 24, 2014).

⁶ Blumenfeld, Warren J. and Diane Raymond, *Looking at Gay and Lesbian Life* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989) 275-276.

HIV/AIDS had been diagnosed in the United States.⁷ The death of a man known to be homosexual, even a literary icon, and he was an icon by the time of his death, was not marked with honor always. Because as the *New York Times* article on Baldwin claimed, he died of stomach cancer, but everyone would wonder if it were the less-than-honorable death by HIV/AIDS, even with the *New York Times* declaring otherwise.

Excuse my mislabeling. In 1987, in our communities of African American people, it was known as “the AIDS” or some other euphemism that left the survivors and families feeling hopeless, grief stricken and busy repairing the dignity of their deceased family member or friend. Some people fled from the responsibility of burying their relatives with AIDS with family honor. Many families were known for attempting to do so with a cooperative minister and understanding mortuary, who would censor the term HIV/AIDS from all official documents, programs, and obituaries.

When I read the exposé regarding Baldwin’s life—and I read it twice, I believe—I was appalled, because I could not find the words homosexual, gay, or anything to link him to my choice to be public about my sexual orientation and my intimate love relationships. And I was called “an activist” for doing so, but the truth is I was being as out as any other member of my family on either side, maternal or paternal or my close friend-cousins, who were heterosexual. They proclaimed their new or renewed love interests loudly and without any reservations.

This declaration did not seem so monumental, because no one in reasonable mental faculties would have accused me or Baldwin of passing for a typical heterosexual man. The subterfuge about sexuality was on the part of the writers and publishers, not Baldwin. To be more succinct, the Black media in print did not mention that the author of one of the best gay novels, *Giovanni’s Room*, who had died with recognitions of all sorts for his writing, was gay.

⁷ Blumenfeld, 320-321.

They carefully, in 1987, neutered Baldwin. If you read his tributes one would have surmised that he was without any form of romantic love or affection in his entire life. It was too much for the Black distributors of our stories to allow a known homosexual to be such. I propose that thousands of gay and bisexual African American men learned, once again, that it does not matter how much you have accomplished; “this thing in your life” must stay silent. Especially in this time when there might be an accusation of death by “the AIDS”. The disease that not only outed us, but our ways of physically loving each other, or just having sex.

I vowed, first to myself then slowly to others, I would live in such a way that if I ever became “somebody” —

[This is based on the young, handsome post-Dr. King, Jesse Jackson’s PUSH campaign, where you would repeat en masse, in call and response to a leader, usually Jackson himself.⁸

—“I am”—

The crowd would echo back loudly, “Somebody”. The leader would go through a litany of “...I may be Black, I may be poor, but...”

—“I am,” and the crowd would roar, “Somebody!”⁹ I inhaled this as a child. If only Jackson could have included, “I may be gay, but I am...”—]—If I ever became one of Jackson’s significant Black folks, I would live in such a manner as the *Jet Magazine* and *Ebony Magazine* articles about me would have to include my husband, because I had lived and worked in such a manner that you could not exclude him. As you would not exclude Dr. King from Mrs. Coretta Scott King’s life, or any woman of a certain age, when I was growing up, who was known

⁸ Rainbow Push Coalition website, http://rainbowpush.org/pages/brief_history (accessed March 24, 2014). This history of the PUSH activities and histories does not confirm this chant but does verify the timing of the practice.

⁹ Ask website, Humanities section, <http://www.ask.com/question/jesse-jackson-i-am-somebody-speech> (accessed March 24, 2014) Site verifies Jackson has been reciting this poem by Rev. William H. Borders since 1972.

respectfully, as Mrs. So-and-so. Unless she was unmarried or, heaven forbid, single and just partnered with a man. That was another “closeted” issue before Miss Oprah Winfrey changed the social taboo among respectable Black folks about this.

I did not want to have my life described in that journalistic fashion that shines a light so bright on one side of it, one is certain there is something in the shadow not being discussed. This is what they did to James Baldwin. I conjecture it was also the subversive message to all Black, or newly called African Americans: if you are gay do not try to make the African American community deal with, accept, or even acknowledge this aberrant form of sexuality. “Jimmy Baldwin” was worth the work to clean up his story. The rest of you, do not try it. I was furious.

I was working at the time as a part-time HIV/AIDS educator to get messages out into the gay and Black gay communities and just plain everyday Black communities about how to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. I was passing out condoms and talking to whoever would listen. I used my theatrical skills to make it interesting and fun as I could.

I was soon a part of the first African American gay and bi-sexual national consortium of men doing something about the epidemic, the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention of the National Association of Black and White Men Together (BWMT). Our more politically astute and correct chapters adopted the name Men of All Colors Together (MACT). Our Atlanta chapter was cresting at more than two hundred men associated with it on the “mailing list,” and nearly one hundred of those were members at that time. I missed the discussion with James Baldwin as the invited speaker to our Rap Group by a few months. I also missed the national convention hosted by my local chapter in the summer of my arrival in Atlanta in 1984. I did not know about either occurrence.

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