



African Americans

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African Americans who engage in same-sex sexual practices and/or who lead cross-gendered lives have always been a part of black and glbtq communities. However, at times their presence in both groups has either gone unrecognized or been highly contested. The creation of black glbtq communities beginning in the mid-nineteenth century has provided African Americans who are "in the life" with greater opportunities to be themselves without having to fear rejection or marginalization.



Bayard Rustin at a news briefing on the March on Washington in the Statler Hotel in 1963. Photograph by Warren K. Leffler, courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

African Societies

Although early white Christian missionaries and anthropologists and contemporary anti-glbtc black critics have contended that same-sex sexuality did not exist in Africa prior to European contact, the accounts of explorers and colonizers suggest otherwise. Not only did white people not impose same-sex sexual practices upon the continent, but some African societies allowed for a wider range of sexual activities and gender possibilities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than did many European countries.

For example, same-sex sexual behavior and relationships among young men and women were often an accepted and institutionalized practice in African cultures, especially in societies that were highly sex-segregated. A number of African societies also recognized cross-gender roles, such as the Kongo and Ndonga kingdoms in what is today Angola.

The Slavery Era

Some free and enslaved Africans in the New World continued to engage in same-sex sexual practices. The high male-to-female sex ratio among people of African descent in many of the American colonies likely made same-sex relations more prevalent. Among the five men executed for sodomy in the colonies from the early seventeenth century to the mid-eighteenth century was Jan Creoli, a "negro" in the New Netherland Colony. Convicted of a second sodomy offense in 1646, he was choked to death and his body tied to a stake and burned.

In addition to consensual same-sex sexual relationships, enslaved African-American men were also raped and subjected to other acts of sexual violence by white men. For example, in her 1861 slave narrative, Harriet Jacobs mentions a white male slaveholder who forced one of his male slaves to submit to "the strangest freaks of despotism," which Jacobs finds to be "of a nature too filthy to be repeated."

For some free African Americans, as for members of the dominant society, the ideology and practice of separate spheres for women and men fostered the development of romantic and sometimes erotic same-sex friendships in the mid- and late nineteenth century.

A rare glimpse of such a relationship in the black community is provided by the correspondence between two Connecticut freeborn women, domestic servant Addie Brown and schoolteacher Rebecca Primus, in the

1860s. Brown's preserved letters describe an intensely emotional friendship that involved at the very least the caressing of breasts. The nature of their relationship was recognized and even appreciated by their families, but to maintain social respectability, they were still expected to marry, and both women reluctantly did so.

Emancipation and Continued Subjugation

African Americans in the South were able to gain control over their own bodies with the legal abolition of slavery, but they continued to have severe limits placed on their sexual and gender expression.

The narrow cultural space available to same-gender loving and gender non-conforming freedwomen and men is demonstrated by the experiences of Frances Thompson. A former slave, Thompson was raped by a group of white men during the Memphis riots of 1866. But while such a crime would have been ignored or dismissed in the antebellum South, she testified to a congressional committee investigating the riots, helping to call attention to the ongoing sexual exploitation of black women by white men. However, her testimony and that of other black women who had been raped in the riots were later discredited when it was discovered that Thompson had been born male-bodied.

Outside the former slaveholding South, same-gender loving and gender non-conforming African Americans began to organize and attend drag events in the mid- to late nineteenth century. The masquerade ball of Harlem's Hamilton Lodge, which became the largest annual gathering of glbtq people in New York, was first held in 1869. By the 1890s, drag balls were popular in the black communities of many other northern and mid-Atlantic cities.

But African Americans faced arrest if they publicly cross-dressed beyond licensed masquerade balls. For example, "Miss Maud," a 30-year-old black drag queen, was arrested for vagrancy following a New Year's Eve drag gathering in Washington, D.C. in 1885. Although the judge "admired his stylish appearance," he nevertheless received a three-month jail sentence.

The Great Migration and Harlem Renaissance

Like hundreds of thousands of other African Americans, black people in the rural South who were attracted to others of the same sex and/or who led transgendered lives migrated to northern cities in the early twentieth century, hoping to escape racial persecution and to find a better livelihood. They also took part in the Great Migration because large urban areas afforded the opportunity to meet and socialize relatively anonymously with many other glbtq people. By the 1920s, black glbtq communities had developed in a number of northern and mid-Atlantic cities.

Harlem became the center of both black and black glbtq culture. The 1920s witnessed a boom in the number of literary and artistic works produced by African Americans, particularly by the younger generation of African Americans who had migrated to Harlem.

Many of the leading figures of what became known as the Harlem Renaissance were glbtq, including writers Wallace Thurman, Richard Bruce Nugent, Angelina Weld Grimké, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and possibly Langston Hughes; blues singers Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Alberta Hunter, Ethel Waters, and Gladys Bentley; and patrons Alain Locke and A'Lelia Walker.

Many historians have considered how a renewed sense of race consciousness contributed to the development of the Harlem Renaissance, but less discussed is the significance for many of the writers and artists of being glbtq and being involved in the flourishing black glbtq culture. Whether including glbtq characters in their fiction and poetry, describing Harlem's glbtq nightlife, or singing about their attraction to others of the same sex, their work was firmly rooted in being both African American and glbtq.

The Growth of Black Gbltq Cultures

The Depression largely ended the Renaissance and slowed the northern migration of African Americans, but black gbltq communities did not disappear. On the contrary, Harlem's drag balls became more popular and more explicitly gay during the 1930s, as New York City was swept up in a "pansy craze."

Drag balls in Baltimore, Chicago, New Orleans, and other major cities also attracted large crowds and significant public attention from the 1930s through the 1950s, with mostly favorable coverage in black newspapers and, toward the end of the period, in the new black magazines *Ebony* and *Jet*.

Despite the visibility of drag events, gbltq African Americans socialized primarily in private homes rather than in bars, clubs, and restaurants in the early and mid-twentieth century. This preference was in part a response to being excluded from most public institutions outside of black neighborhoods because of legalized segregation in the South and the prevalence of racism in the North.

But the practice also reflected the longstanding black community tradition of holding rent parties. A small cover charge would enable attendees to drink cheap liquor, eat homemade food, dance, and socialize openly without fearing police harassment or their sexuality being revealed to family members and co-workers. Even when more bars began to cater to black gbltq people in the 1940s and 1950s, African Americans who were in the life continued to frequent private house parties.

The Civil Rights and Black Power Movements

Many gbltq African Americans participated in the civil rights movement, but they usually could not be open about their sexual and gender identities.

The best known example of this phenomenon is Bayard Rustin. He organized the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, one of the crucial events of the movement, and served as a principal advisor to Martin Luther King, Jr., teaching him about protest tactics and non-violent forms of resistance. Because Rustin was known to be gay, he was often forced to work behind the scenes and did not receive significant credit at the time for his critical role in the civil rights struggle.

James Baldwin, in contrast, was widely recognized for his involvement in the civil rights movement. His writing, particularly *The Fire Next Time* (1963), provided a scathing critique of the effects of racism on both blacks and whites and served as a call to action to prevent a racial apocalypse. But Eldridge Cleaver and other male leaders of the Black Power movement dismissed Baldwin, arguing that by engaging in same-sex sexual relationships, he had been emasculated and corrupted by whites.

Not all Black Power advocates, however, equated black male militancy with homophobia and misogyny. Huey Newton, one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, issued a statement in 1970 calling for members of the party to form coalitions with the gay liberation and women's liberation movements, based on shared experiences of oppression and common revolutionary goals. A number of gbltq activists subsequently attended the Black Panther's Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention.

The Gbltq Rights Movement

Some gbltq African Americans were also involved in the homophile movement during the 1950s and 1960s. But they often did not feel welcome in the predominantly white gbltq organizations, which rarely addressed members' racism and which focused exclusively on gbltq rights, ignoring the multiple struggles of black gbltq people.

One of the few African-American women in the movement, Cleo "Glenn" (Bonner), served as president of the Daughters of Bilitis, the national lesbian organization, from 1963 to 1966. Another leading homophile

activist was "Ernestine Eckstein," a black woman in her mid-twenties who participated in some of the first pickets for glbtq rights and who became vice-president of the New York City chapter of the Daughters of Bilitis in the mid-1960s.

The more confrontational glbtq organizations that formed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), were also primarily white, but they had relatively more African-American members than many homophile groups.

Both GLF and GAA formed affiliated groups specifically for people of color. The New York City GAA chapter, for example, established a Black Lesbian Caucus in 1971; known today as African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change, it is reportedly the oldest continuing black glbtq organization in the United States.

Black Glbtq Organizations and Events

Disillusioned by glbtq organizations that were dominated by whites and that frequently failed to address the multiple ways in which glbtq people of color are oppressed, many glbtq African Americans began to organize independent groups in the 1970s.

The Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based black feminist support and activist organization that included a number of out lesbians, was founded in 1974. The group's influential "Black Feminist Statement" demonstrated the importance of addressing the simultaneous, interlocking systems of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism.

A national glbtq movement began in 1978 with the formation of the National Coalition of Black Gays (subsequently renamed the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays). The coalition greatly increased its membership following the first National Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference, held in conjunction with the First National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, in 1979. By the mid-1980s, chapters existed in cities across the country, including groups in Chicago, Minneapolis, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. However, many chapters could not sustain themselves and folded by the 1990s.

The National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum, begun in Los Angeles in 1988, briefly became a national voice for glbtq African Americans, but it too could not garner enough support to last.

More successful have been annual black pride events. The first Black Lesbian and Gay Pride celebration was organized in Washington, D. C. in 1991. As of 2006, black glbtq pride activities are held in more than thirty cities across the United States and in London, England, and Toronto, Canada.

Another important organizing effort in the last few years has been the development of glbtq African-American or glbtq people of color student groups at more than twenty colleges and universities. These organizations are similar to primarily white glbtq student groups in that they provide support, offer social opportunities, and sponsor educational programs, but their activities address the specific racial and cultural needs of glbtq students of color. The schools with active glbtq African-American/people of color organizations tend to be large universities and progressive liberal arts colleges, such as Carleton College, Michigan State University, New York University, the University of California-San Diego, and Swarthmore College.

Conclusion

Although glbtq African Americans often continue to experience racism in predominantly white glbtq organizations and homophobia in ostensibly heterosexual black organizations, some of these groups have begun to acknowledge and take steps to address the multiple oppressions faced by black glbtq people.

The creation of black glbtq groups and events over the last thirty years has also made it easier for many African Americans to develop a positive sense of self that combines their racial identity with their sexual and gender identities. They can see themselves as "complete people," even if the public social, cultural, and political spaces in which they can be wholly themselves remain limited.

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About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.