UPENDING THE “RACIAL DEATH-WISH”: BLACK GAY LIBERATION AND THE CULTURE OF BLACK HOMOPHOBIA

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ABSTRACT

Upending the “Racial Death-Wish”: Black Gay Liberation and the Culture of Black Homophobia

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This thesis analyzes the origin and impact of Black homophobia found in activist spaces of mid- to late-twentieth-century American society. Black gay Americans were subjected to intersecting forms of systemic and cultural oppression that were exceedingly hard to escape due to both the homophobia in Black spaces and the racism in gay spaces. Black gay activists and artists thus had to create their own avenues of expression where they and others could fully embrace what it meant to be Black and gay. This work utilizes a Black feminist framework to explore the roots of Black homophobia and how this type of bigotry was able to so deeply infiltrate Black activist spaces like the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party. Black homophobia originated as a response to White supremacist domination of the Black body, and was able to spread through the community for generations through paths such as hypermasculinity, the Black church, and misogynoir. The experiences and voices of Black gay activists and artists are at the forefront of this work in an effort to shine a light on a group often overlooked by Black history and LGBTQ history alike. This thesis works to fill in one of the many gaps present in the historiography pertaining to Black gay life in America, though more contributions can and should be made in order to shift the field away from its historic focus on the White gay male. An investigation of Black gay exclusion from Black and gay activist spaces offers valuable insight into how Black gay activists and artists persevered and cultivated their own spheres of inclusion within a society that fundamentally opposed virtually every part of their identities.
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To all the heroes past who never had a chance to be their true selves anywhere but in their own hearts and minds: I know you, I see you, and I love you. This is my love letter to the Black LGBTQ community, past and present.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

On February 5th, 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom posthumously pardoned civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, who was arrested on a “morals charge” in 1953 after police observed him engaging in consensual sex with another man. As part of a new clemency initiative, Newsom recognized that such laws had historically been used as “tools of oppression” in order to punish and terrorize LGBTQ individuals in America, and thanked those who rallied to right this “egregious wrong” against Rustin.¹ Rustin suffered the consequences of being both Black and gay in the twentieth-century United States, and his life was spent with a palpable distance between himself and the very movement he helped cultivate.² The Civil Rights era proved a tumultuous one for others who found themselves at this same crossroads, alienated from many aspects of society due to their race and sexual “habit,” a word used by many in the mid-twentieth century to underline their perception of the unnatural existence of homosexuality.³ Tensions came to a head when police raided the Stonewall Inn in the Greenwich Village of New York City on June 28th, 1969, sparking strife among LGBTQ communities not only in New York, but across the nation. While some scholars of gay history, such as Martin Duberman, posit Stonewall as the beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement, this conclusion does

not tell the full story. Gay rights activism existed in the United States before Stonewall, but it was characteristically exclusive of Black gay experiences. Leaving out these previous efforts to organize from a broader narrative of gay liberation ignores the Black exclusion that occurred pre-Stonewall.

In 1979, James Baldwin reflected on the racism within the Gay Rights Movement in an address to the New York chapter of what would become the National Association of Black and White Men Together, stating that White gays were “unable to eliminate [their] racism,” just like organizations of White Communists and White Socialists around the same time. Eleven years earlier, Black Panther leader Eldridge Cleaver infamously wrote in *Soul on Ice*: “Homosexuality is a sickness, just as are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors.” How were Black gay individuals meant to organize if White gays pushed them out because of their race, and Black Leftists degraded them for their sexuality? As they could not hide their Blackness, some, like Bayard Rustin, allowed themselves and others to shroud their sexuality in partial or full secrecy in order to have a chance at acceptance from or participation in a more liberal Civil Rights Movement. Black gay individuals were left hanging in the balance and

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5 “Gay” will be used most commonly throughout this work, rather than “LGBTQ.” LGBTQ issues involve transgender, genderqueer, and nonbinary individuals, and the focus of this thesis is on sexuality and race rather than gender identity. LGB transgender people exist and have always been part of the narrative of discrimination based on sexual orientation, but not all transgender people are lesbian, gay, or bisexual. The term “gay” thus functions as a signifier of same-gender attraction that does not always, but certainly can, include transgender people. “LGBTQ” will be used when referring to events, people, or phenomena that are relevant to the entire community.
turned to various methods of self-expression and identity in order to reclaim power and forge their own spaces for themselves and others to whom they could relate.

While the exclusion of Black gay people from Black activism is by no means an exclusively male issue, as seen from the narratives of influential Black lesbians such as Audre Lorde and Yvonne Flowers, masculinity is a pivotal tool crucial to any analysis of Black organization and the homophobia within activist groups. The question at the center of this project, thus, is as follows: How did masculinity play a central role in the creation and promulgation of homophobia within Black liberal and Leftist groups, such as the Civil Rights Movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Panther Party led by Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, and Eldridge Cleaver? To answer this, I must also analyze gay oppression, Black gay identity, and the emergence of a Gay Liberation Movement separate from the breadth and influence of the Civil Rights Movement.

1.1 An Introduction to Black Feminist Thought

The roots of Black homophobia exist in White supremacy. This is a notion emphasized by Black feminist scholars such as bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, and it hinges on the historical limitations placed on the Black body and expressions of Black identity at the hands of White oppressors during and after slavery. Frustration and retaliation in response to White oppression led to heightened and at-times toxic displays of masculinity and, thus, homophobia. The key to uncovering the origins and functions of Black masculinity can be found in Black feminist thought, which is the framework surrounding and uplifting much of the forthcoming analysis. In We Real Cool: Black Men

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9 While Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale are the historically recognized founders of the Black Panther Party, Eldridge Cleaver was a key leader around the time of the Party’s inception.
and Masculinity, bell hooks examines Black men’s relationships to sexuality, stating that dominant White culture sees the Black man as a “super sexual stud.” This phenomenon does not leave room for homosexuality and is often expressed through hypersexuality and sexual aggression against (particularly Black) women due to the “racialized patriarchal script” Black men are expected and conditioned to follow. hooks employs the concept of the “White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy” to define Black men as both having their social freedoms limited and attempting to limit the freedoms of others (again, particularly Black women) due to having learned “patriarchal masculinity” decades or centuries before in the schools of White men. The interaction between White supremacy and Black masculinity is at the heart of this thesis and Black feminist thinkers like bell hooks have brought it to life through their theories.

Another text crucial to this Black feminist approach is Black Feminist Thought by Patricia Hill Collins, which is a renowned staple of intersectional feminist theory despite not being commonly referenced within the field of Black LGBTQ history. Black Feminist Thought was written to empower Black women and their experiences, but the concepts within are still exceptionally pertinent to Black gay life as a whole, especially since Black liberation and gay liberation have always pertained to Black women. Within this Black feminist framework, Collins explores “Black civil society” and its own internal racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia, highlighting in particular the “other”-ness of Black lesbians at intersections of oppression. Collins posits homophobia as overlooked and

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10 bell hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity (New York: Routledge, 2004), 70-71.
11 hooks, We Real Cool, x, 2.
12 Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York: Routledge, 2009), x.
13 Collins, Black Feminist Thought, 76, 101, 125.
ignored in Black circles due to heterosexual Black men and women acknowledging their sexuality as the only arena in which they do not experience oppression and thus refusing to advocate for those who do not share the same privilege.\textsuperscript{14} Like hooks, Collins also speaks extensively to the hypermasculinity of Black men in the context of vying for a coveted position in a White, patriarchal society.\textsuperscript{15} hooks and Collins will both be fundamental in this analysis of Black masculinity in the Black leftist liberation movements that excluded and outcast Black gay activists.

This emphasis on Black masculinity and its ties to homophobia, specifically against gay men, does not exist to exclude or downplay the experiences of Black lesbians. As Barbara Smith states in her 1983 anthology \textit{Home Girls}, many Black lesbians recall the Black liberation movement as a “period of Black nationalism, power, and pride which, despite its benefits, had a stranglehold on [their] identities” and made many Black women feel rejected by the emergent “sex-biased definition of Blackness.”\textsuperscript{16} Black lesbians are just as much a part of the conversation regarding the roots of the homophobia adopted by Black liberation groups such as the Black Panther Party, and lesbians certainly are and always have been the targets of misogyny, homophobia, and strict enforcement of gender stereotypes. A deep analysis of the Black lesbian experience in the 1960s and 1970s will not be included in this thesis, and deserves attention beyond the scope of this research, even though this research does its best to elevate Black lesbian or

\textsuperscript{14} Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 125-127.  
\textsuperscript{15} Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 86-88.  
sapphic voices to the same level as the Black gay male voices that have been amplified most popularly by the historiography as of late.\textsuperscript{17}

\section*{1.2 Further State of the Field}

The remainder of the growing historiography on Black gay liberation exists largely without reference to Black feminist theory, or at least not in a way that I find it pivotal to employ. Black gay liberation transcends the boundaries of multiple historiographies, incorporating elements of Black, LGBTQ, and feminist history within the United States. While these three areas are crucial to understanding both the power held and oppression experienced by Black gay people in the mid to late twentieth century, hardly ever are they all consulted within the same work of history. During the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panther Party (BPP) in particular involved itself in both gay liberation and women’s liberation, whether for better or for worse. Although some Panthers made attempts to denounce homophobia, accept aid from the Gay Liberation Front (GLF), and respect the roles of Black women in the organization of social movements, left-wing Black liberation ideology as a whole often fell victim to both aggressive homophobia and sexism.\textsuperscript{18} The aforementioned intersection or crossroads of oppression experienced by figures like Bayard Rustin has recently become of significant interest in both Black and LGBTQ historiographies.\textsuperscript{19} After an influx of gay histories in

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{17} I use the word “sapphic” to refer to any woman or woman-aligned person who experiences same-gender attraction but does not identify with the label of “lesbian.” This includes bisexual women and nonbinary or gender non-conforming people. I may, at times, use “sapphic” in this work when the subject or subjects I am speaking of cannot be concretely defined, in their own words, as lesbian(s) for the sake of not wanting to improperly label LGBTQ individuals.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} A significant amount of works on Black and gay resistance have been published just in the last five years, including Martin Duberman, \textit{Has the Gay Movement Failed?} (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018); Emily K. Hobson, \textit{Lavender and Red: Liberation and
the early twenty-first century, Black gay histories have begun to populate bookshelves in
the past few years, especially books dedicated to openly gay writer and activist James
Baldwin. However, powerful history does exist outside of Baldwin, and many historians
have provided non-biographical, yet still social, accounts of the liberation movements of
the 1960s and 1970s.

Integral to understanding Black gay history is the development of the American
Gay Rights Movement throughout the mid to late twentieth century. Martin Duberman is
one of the pioneers of American LGBTQ history, with over 14 books published in the
field, largely pertaining to the personal lives and experiences of gay figures in twentieth-
century American history. Duberman’s most notable work is his 1993 Stonewall, which
blends six social biographies of LGBTQ people, including Black lesbian Yvonne Flowers
and Latina transgender activist Sylvia Rivera, with a historical analysis of LGBTQ
oppression and organization around the time of the raid on the Stonewall Inn and the
subsequent rebellion – or, as Duberman and many LGBTQ historians call it, riots.
Duberman positions Stonewall as “the birth of the modern gay and lesbian political
movement” due to their role in the collective organization of LGBTQ activists after

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See, for example, Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire Is upon Us: James Baldwin, William F. Buckley,
Jr., and the Debate over Race in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Marc
Dudley, *Understanding James Baldwin* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press,
2019); Quentin D. Miller, *James Baldwin in Context* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge
University Press, 2019); and Magdalena J. Zaborowska, *Me and My House: James Baldwin’s
decades of political, social, and legal oppression.\textsuperscript{21} He also credits the Gay Liberation Movement with further fueling the radical politics of the 1960s and 1970s, as many members of the GLF also partook in anti-racist, anti-war, and feminist protests.\textsuperscript{22} Duberman’s emphasis on the Stonewall raid and consequential rebellion is crucial to his position as a leading LGBTQ historian, and I find myself drawn to Stonewall as well in terms of the importance of radical grassroots organization that was inclusive of people of color from its inception. However, the origins of grassroots gay activism can be traced to pre-Stonewall times, contrary to much of Duberman’s arguments.\textsuperscript{23} Stonewall, thus, functions instead as the crucial impetus for specifically Black gay attempts at organization and activism in the twentieth century.

Duberman’s \textit{Stonewall} is an example of a text that mentions the homophobia pervasive in the Black liberation movement, but it does not allot much time to a discussion of its roots nor its impact. While narrating the experiences of Yvonne Flowers, Duberman explains her discomfort with fully engaging with Black political movements due to the “endemic homophobia” that characterized them and, specifically, the Panthers’ belief that gay and lesbian people like Flowers were “tainted.” Thus, Duberman states that Flowers was “forced to choose” among her identities of being Black, a woman, and a lesbian.\textsuperscript{24} Duberman also outlines the Black Panthers’ treatment of LGBTQ individuals as “negative” and “patronizing,” but does not analyze the role of homophobia in the

\textsuperscript{22} Duberman, \textit{Stonewall}, xxv.
\textsuperscript{23} See also Martin Duberman’s co-authored article specifically about the raid of the Stonewall Inn by the New York City Police Department: Martin Duberman and Andrew Kopkind, “The Night They Raided Stonewall,” \textit{Grand Street} 44 (1993): 120-147.
\textsuperscript{24} Duberman, \textit{Stonewall}, 111-112.
Black Panther Party or how it made its way there. This, however, is understandable to a point, as Duberman’s goal is to highlight the narratives of those who primarily operated outside or were critical of Black leftist organizations.25 Duberman’s shallow discussion of Black leftist homophobia leaves ample room for added analysis in the historiography.

I must note here the difference between framing the aftermath of the raid on the Stonewall Inn as a riot versus a rebellion. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a “riot” as a tumultuous disturbance of the public peace by three or more persons assembled together and acting with a common intent.”26 The Stonewall rebellion was undoubtedly a violent affair, but describing it as a “riot” implies that the patrons of the bar were the ones who instigated the disorder. The word “rebellion” suits the situation much better, defined more broadly as “opposition to one in authority or dominance.”27 Given that violence broke out in response to a raid, the New York Police Department was the source of the uproar. It is crucial to distance the word “riot” from minority groups where possible. The patrons of the Stonewall Inn were primarily a mix of Black, Latino, and White gay and trans people.28 Defining Stonewall as a “riot” emphasizes violence over the reason for the violence, which plays into racist stereotypes of aggression predominately prescribed to Black people. Some historians have made an attempt to distance their works of Black and LGBTQ history from this word, instead favoring terms such as protest, rebellion, or uprising.29 This work follows in the footsteps of such efforts.

25 Duberman, Stonewall, 317.
28 Duberman, Stonewall, 189.
Dr. John D’Emilio’s *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* is also a foundational text in LGBTQ history, and is one of the earliest and most-reviewed books on the subject produced in the 1980s. In this monograph, D’Emilio prefaces the gay liberation movement – or “homophile movement” – by investigating the sociopolitical situations of LGBTQ individuals before the days of Stonewall. However, unlike Duberman, D’Emilio pinpoints the 1950s as the beginning of homophile organization, spurred on by an increase in medical and legal hostility against gay men in the wake of World War II.\(^{30}\) D’Emilio thus conceptualizes gay organization as not becoming textbook activism, in a contemporary sense, until gay rights became more of a social talking point post-Stonewall. D’Emilio, a pioneer of the field, provides useful insight into gay organization before Stonewall and before the civil rights movement as a whole, leaving room to utilize his theories for a discussion of the cultivation of gay and Black gay power and agency in the United States. Additionally, like Duberman, D’Emilio chronicles gay American social and political lives, branching even further into the territory of Black gay experience than Duberman with his analysis of the great civil rights activist Bayard Rustin.\(^{31}\)

Just as there are histories of early LGBTQ organization, so exists an extensive historiography of the early, more widespread Civil Rights Movement, typically described to have been led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Taylor Branch has produced massive amounts of critically-acclaimed and widely-reviewed historical content on the King era,

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\(^{31}\) See: John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet*. 
placing himself at the forefront of civil rights history with books such as his 1989 *Parting the Waters*. Although not a biography of King, Branch outlines the foundations of the Civil Rights Movement by following King’s history, from his origins in the Baptist church to the March on Washington, providing a mostly-political narrative of events. The most significant part of Branch’s research as it pertains to this thesis is his inclusion of Bayard Rustin in *Parting the Waters*. Branch describes Rustin as advising and collaborating with King on a number of political and social matters, including the March on Washington, fundraising, and foreign and domestic relations. Rustin was not outspoken about his sexuality, but was openly gay, and his identity was “shunned as the wedge of evil” by many of King’s associates. Branch details how King would meet with Rustin in literal secrecy so as not to upset the others in the Civil Rights Movement, thereby showcasing how homophobia was a structure within Black activist organization as a whole, and not just among leftist liberation movements such as the Black Panthers.\(^{32}\)

Like early gay historians, Branch also does not give much insight into the ideological formation of Black homophobia as a concept outside of religious reasoning, but his monographs on the King era will prove fundamental to my research on identity and discrimination within Black social movements in the 1960s and 1970s.\(^{33}\)

Significant histories of LGBTQ legal rights and processes have been written, such as those penned by David A.J. Richards. In his popular 2009 monograph *The Sodomy Cases*, Richards takes a legal approach to define the historical oppression and liberation

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of LGBTQ individuals, though he also states that social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the second-wave feminist movement were “inhospitable” to ideas of gay liberation. More important to my research, however, is Richards’s 1999 *Identity and the Case for Gay Rights: Race, Gender, Religion as Analogies*, which includes a more theoretical approach to the social and legal status of homosexuality before *Lawrence v. Texas* decriminalized sodomy. In this book, Richards analyzes gay rights and their relationship to race, gender, and religion. Richards’s analogy between Blackness and homosexuality proves the most useful to this project, as it links the two identities in a way not often explored by other scholars. Richards argues that both Black and gay people are discriminated against or threatened by claims to biology, with Black people being seen as a biologically inferior “species” in the eyes of White supremacists, and gay people being seen as a third gender represented solely by stereotypes, thus stripping both groups of their agency to be their own people integrated with the rest of society. Richards’s argument hinges on similarities between Black and gay dehumanization, which I intend to utilize while examining the convergences and divergences of Black and gay activist organization, including where groups such as the BPP and the GLF ran into conflict with one another.

One element missing from this work is that of the relationship between Black gay identities and class. As George Chauncey posits in *Gay New York*, the gay scene in New York was largely working class before the Second World War. Different racial, cultural, and ethnic groups overlapped to form a singular “gay world.” As history tends to focus

first and foremost on elites, the history of prewar gay New York, which Chauncey argues existed largely within working class Black and immigrant neighborhoods, has been overlooked.\(^3\) Many of the Black gay people whose postwar experiences are chronicled within the proceeding chapters can very well be considered economically privileged or part of elite activist or artistic circles. As class is not discussed in detail beyond this point, it is imperative to note here that many of the key figures at play in this narrative belong to a class that history has always favored despite the challenges they faced as Black gay Americans. In a broader sense, this trend that emphasizes the upper echelons of gay society in postwar America has led to a gentrification of sorts of the very origins of gay liberation that Martin Duberman, but not many others, have aimed to correct. Stonewall was a distinctly working class and ethnically diverse rebellion, but gay history has been dominated by White and upper class voices ever since.\(^3\) This work emphasizes the importance of race in gay liberation history, but an analysis of class at the intersection of race and sexuality is a deeper and sorely-needed addition to the historiography that extends beyond the scope of this thesis.

This applies directly to rural-to-urban migration as well, considering that the hubs of activism for gay liberation took place in large cities like New York and San Francisco. Most of the Black gay artists and activists most prevalent in the history were born and raised in large cities or their surrounding neighborhoods and suburbs. Alvin Ailey is a notable example of a Black gay artist who left the South, having come from the tiny town of Rogers, Texas and flourishing within a career on stage in New York. The migration of


Black gay people from rural, perhaps conservative areas of the nation to urban hubs of art and activism is not discussed within this thesis, but it is a gap in the history that can and should be filled by an analysis of the lengths at which Black gay individuals had to go in order to be truly seen – physically and metaphorically – within society.

An analysis of Black gay liberation naturally must rely on histories of both Black liberation movements and gay liberation movements, but I intend to heavily incorporate Black feminist theory to expose the influence of White, patriarchal ideals on these movements and the marginalized identities that took part in them. Analyses like this are lacking in the works of Duberman, D’Emilio, Branch, and Richards, which often focus less on theory and more on social, political, or legal happenings. This work will focus on providing a more Black-inclusive view of the early years of gay liberation activism and making connections between gay involvement in the liberal Civil Rights Movement and leftist Black liberation organizations, such as the Black Panther Party. The relationship between Black and gay identities in the 1960s and 1970s is stronger than much of the historiography gives credit, and I will employ, in part, Black feminist ideology to help make more solid historical connections.

1.3 Thesis Overview

Following this introduction is Chapter 2, “Postwar Gay Life, Organization, and the Issue of Black Presence,” which provides an overview of gay oppression in the United States leading up to the Gay Liberation Movement. Chapter 2 illuminates the legal and social punishment and oppression of homosexuality that engulfed hypermasculine postwar American prior to the Civil Rights era. Painful as it may be, understanding the institutional and societal homophobia in the United States is necessary to investigate just
how pervasively Black gay voices were silenced. This chapter also focuses on gay organization in the 1950s through the 1970s, and how Black lives and voices did or did not figure into the equation.

Chapter 3, “Black Spaces, Black Exclusion,” details the homophobia espoused by civil rights leaders and the Black Panther Party. Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey P. Newton are at the center of this part of the narrative which documents Black gay exclusion from Black activist spaces. The discrimination exhibited by both liberal and radical Black organizations hints at the underlying presence of a specifically Black homophobia.

Chapter 4, “Black Homophobia and the Limits of Liberation,” explores the origins of homophobia in Black activist spaces and the broader Black community. This chapter introduces Black feminist thought as the single most important element in understanding the role of White supremacy and hypermasculinity in shaping Black homophobia. The writings of Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and other Black feminists provide insight into the inner workings of misogyny and masculinity to cultivate a culture of homophobia in Black America.

Chapter 5, “Finding the Words,” analyzes the personal liberation and agency that Black gay artists and activists sought through cultural institutions rather than political ones. This chapter showcases how Black gay individuals had to form their own spaces to express themselves and their identities due to racism in gay activist spaces and homophobia in Black activist spaces.

As Black and gay resistance history becomes more mainstream, it is imperative to involve Black feminist theory in the discussion of the roots of homophobia that kept
Black gay activists in an auxiliary position with the Civil Rights Movement and other Black organization in the 1960s and 1970s. Homophobia, specifically against Black gay men, is closely tied to images of masculinity that both trickled into and have been prescribed to the Black community. Black feminist thought must be utilized in order to fully explore these origins and how homophobia eventually came to be wielded against some of the most prolific civil rights leaders of the twentieth century. This research aims to explore both the origins of homophobia among Black activists and the ways in which Black gay activists made names and spaces for themselves outside of traditional modes of organizing, such as the masterful choreography of Alvin Ailey, the poetry of Audre Lorde, and the literary contributions of James Baldwin. Just as Baldwin described racism in the gay community as an extension of racism in “White Western” societies, the hypermasculine homophobia within the Black community during the Black liberation era is a reflection of White attitudes toward masculinity, race, and homosexuality.\(^38\)

\(^{38}\) Tinney, “Baldwin Comes Out.”
Gay America evolved and morphed into many different forms at unprecedented rates following the end of the Second World War. Gays in the United States faced increased legal, political, and social barriers to equality that drove them to come face to face with a conservative, heterosexual population seeking to find the “cure” for their orientation. In addition to legal sanctions on homosexual activity, gay people – men, in particular – were specifically targeted during the McCarthy era as threats to the nation’s security alongside suspected communists. The 1940s through the early 1960s proved tumultuous times for gay Americans as their very existence clashed with the new, postwar, consumerist visions of the ideal American family. This time also served as the inception for multiple early gay rights organizations, such as the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. Black participation in these organizations was scarce if present at all, presenting an interesting view of the limited outlets for fighting oppression against intersecting identities. This chapter first explores the lives of gay individuals in the wake of the war and the various social and systemic obstacles they faced, then moves on to an analysis of Black involvement in the budding gay rights organizations of the pre-Stonewall era.

1 George W. Crane, “The Worry Clinic,” The Daily Record (Dunn, NC), September 8, 1953.
2 The Mattachine Society, founded in 1950, was the earliest of the postwar LGBTQ organizations, but was not the first in the nation. It is preceded only by Henry Gerber’s Society for Human Rights, founded in 1924. The context in which that organization was created lies beyond the scope of this work, and thus, this analysis will begin with the Mattachine Society. For more on the Society for Human Rights’s inception, see David Shneer and Carin Aviv, “I Am That Name: American Queer Activism, Now and Then,” in American Queer, Now and Then (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers), 2006. Other notable organizations not discussed here include One, Inc. and the Janus Society, both founded in 1962.
2.1 Postwar Homophobia

In 2003, the Supreme Court of the United States ruled to decriminalize homosexual activity throughout all 50 states. In 2015, the Court ruled in favor of legalizing same-sex marriage across the land. LGBTQ oppression at an institutional level is still a pertinent issue in the 21st century, but it is one that, unfortunately, has enough history to allow the field to begin to look back on the roots of systemic homophobia in the United States. The presence of laws against “sodomy” and/or homosexual sexual activity enforced between the late eighteenth century and 2003 indicates the United States government’s hold on both the personal and public lives of LGBTQ individuals before and during significant periods of gay organization.\(^3\) Since the nation’s founding, gay Americans have never stood on equal footing with their heterosexual counterparts. While anti-sodomy laws existed in Colonial America, they were not strictly enforced until the inception of the nation proper and consistently upheld in the nation’s courts thereafter.\(^4\) The United States carried its homophobic history into the 20th century, in which masculinity and national insecurity began to play a larger role in systematic oppression following the Second World War.

While attitudes toward gay individuals have never been exceptionally favorable in the United States, the air of hypermasculinity and machismo surrounding the Second World War made systematic oppression against gay Americans more prominent than ever. Gay men were discharged from the military during the War and stripped of their

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veteran benefits if they were caught engaging in same-sex relations.⁵ Some Americans speculated that Hitler himself was “physically a marked homosexual type” prior to his marriage to Eva Braun in order to emasculate him, going so far as to attribute his fixation on young, blond-haired men to his rumored sexuality rather than his genocidal motivations.⁶ This illuminates one of the ways in which homosexuality was demonized during the War. In the 1930s and 1940s, the word “homosexuality” was actually not used all that often in public conversations and periodicals, and when it was, it took on a largely clinical or medical tone. Rather, there was a fascination with “sissyhood” during wartime, and psychologists found that many men took to heavy drinking and other reckless acts as a way to prove their masculinity, or their status as a “he-man.”⁷ Homosexuality did not fit into the brand of masculinity expected of men during wartime, and was swiftly punished at both institutional and social levels.

After the end of the Second World War, family ideology became the center of American society, with suburbanization playing a key role in the creation and maintenance of the nuclear family. This budding iteration of family was based heavily on patriarchal ideals, heteronormativity, and strict gender roles, with the husband as the chauvinistic breadwinner and the wife as the subservient caretaker. Thus, homosexuality in the postwar era posed a “threat to masculinity and therefore to the family,” as Barbara Epstein points out in her poignant gender history, “Anti-Communism, Homophobia, and

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⁵ “Something About Blue Discharges,” *The Jackson Advocate* (Jackson, MS), April 12, 1947.
the Construction of Masculinity in the Postwar U.S.”

As described by sociologist Erving Goffman, there was only “one complete unblushing male in America” at this time, which was the White, heterosexual, Protestant, married, family man. Anything that deviated from this ideal lived in the “shadow” of White heterosexual masculinity. Upon the war’s conclusion, there was a certain expectation of American society to keep on the same trajectory of White, masculine triumph that had won the nation the War in the first place. American society grew to celebrate war and veterans, but left gay men out of the veteran experience and stripped them of their eligibility to be honored and supported as such. Just as it stood out during the war, homosexuality did not fit into this narrative of patriarchal American excellence, and thus gay Americans experienced countless forms of daily and systemic homophobia that cost them their dignity, jobs, lives, and more in the decades following the war.

As tensions rose between the United States and the Soviet Union, heterosexuality became a hallmark of morality and security by speaking to this ideal American masculinity that quelled nationwide insecurities tied to Soviet relations. To be straight was to be masculine, and vice versa, and maintaining the status quo at home was one more way to keep political and societal uncertainty at bay as the United States grappled with identity and power during the Cold War. Thus, homosexuality became a threat and a plague in the same exact way as communism, particularly during the Second Red Scare ushered in by Senator Joseph McCarthy. During this Red Scare, federal officials sought

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to root out perceived communists from all aspects of American government and beyond
due to fears that such individuals would easily be susceptible to blackmail and other
forms of espionage at the hands of the Soviets. The targets of mass firings from the State
Department in 1950 were those with “loose morals” or “physical or moral [defects],”
including alcoholics, but most importantly gay men.\(^\text{11}\) Despite taking place at the height
of anti-communist sentiment and during the same year McCarthy’s Red Scare began,
many scholars of LGBTQ history, including Fred Fejes and David K. Johnson, argue that
this constituted a separate “Lavender Scare” as gay employees were a separate, specific
target.\(^\text{12}\)

The idea of an autonomous Lavender Scare that ran concurrently with the Red
Scare is also supported by journalist Louis Lautier’s May 1951 “Capital Spotlight” in the
*Arizona Sun*, in which he states that “the State Department is not only concerned with the
threat of Communist imperialism, but it also is bothered by employees who are
homosexuals.” Lautier reiterates that gay individuals in government are seen as “security
risks,” and reports that over 1,000 employees had resigned or been let go from the State
Department as of the publication of his article in 1951. Here Lautier confirms that it was
not just gay men being pushed out of their position – two of the 144 employees fired
since December 1950 were supposed lesbians.\(^\text{13}\) These prejudices, resignations, and

\(^{11}\) “Employees with Loose Morals: Kennan Urged Government Not to Be So Preoccupied with
Problem; McLeod Cited Risks of Blackmail,” *The Evening Star* (Washington, D.C.), February 23,
1954.

\(^{12}\) Fred Fejes, *Gay Rights and Moral Panic: The Origin of America’s Debate on Homosexuality*

\(^{13}\) Louis Lautier, “Capital Spotlight,” *Arizona Sun* (Flagstaff, AZ), May 4, 1951. See also James
Marlow, “The World Today,” *The Key West Citizen* (Key West, FL), April 29, 1953.
firings were commonly reported throughout the nation in the early 1950s. The theory of the concurrent Lavender and Red Scares is compelling, but it must be mentioned that the Lavender Scare likely would not have existed without the impetus of the Red Scare. This is due to national insecurity during the Cold War heightened by fears of communist infiltration that would disrupt the status quo. Since homosexuality disrupted the norms of masculinity and femininity and shattered the image of the traditional, nuclear family, it was equally unwelcome during the turbulent postwar era.

This sentiment, of course, carried itself further into the Cold War. Beginning in the 1930s, Dr. George W. Crane published countless syndicated, conservative newspaper columns largely pertaining to life and health. Crane’s “Worry Clinic” featured stories and advice about interpersonal relations, especially marriage. In the 1950s, however, many of the “Worry Clinic” columns became about identifying, defining, and preventing and/or “curing” homosexuality. In 1952, one of Crane’s columns identified homosexuality as a “hazard” and a habit that can be “broken” if handled properly and with enough motivation. Crane takes a psychological route to claim that homosexuality is “normal” in young kids aged 10-12, but “suspicious” when it persists in teenagers and adults.14 A March 1953 column states that homosexuality can be cured “if you have sufficient willpower and intelligence to do so,” and Crane recounts a student of his describing her lesbian roommate to him as “one of those ‘THINGS!’”15 Transforming a gay person into a straight person is a blunt, recurring theme in Crane’s popular print syndication, demonstrating the unabashed anti-gay sentiment that was rampant in twentieth-century America.

15 Crane, “The Worry Clinic,” The Daily Record (Dunn, NC), March 2, 1953.
Crane adopts a sterile and clinical tone when discussing the stories and remedies in his “Worry Clinic” articles. He refers to his clients or patients as case numbers, such as “Case G-342” for his patient who came to him asking how he would face his family after being discharged from the Navy for homosexuality.\(^\text{16}\) He labels another client as “Case H-384” before explaining how the man, who also stopped going to church with his parents, can “change” gradually over time by dating an attractive woman.\(^\text{17}\) Conversion was the standard practice in dealing with homosexuality – when homosexuality was addressed at all, that is – in hopes to make one “normal” like the rest of society. The emphasis on normalcy was strong after the end of the War, and sexuality was used as a way to alienate those not doing their part to uphold the nuclear, idealistic status quo that went hand in hand with the security of capitalism and consumerism in early Cold War America.

This phenomenon certainly did not end in the 1950s, and was not limited to conservative publications such as Crane’s “Worry Clinic” columns. In fact, after the McCarthy era, public attitudes toward homosexuality grew even more hostile, and brazenly so. Many members of American society viewed the issue of homosexuality as an “invasion of American political life by ‘the men of Sodom,’” and saw gay individuals as having “strange, sad needs, habits, dangers.” These sentiments lent themselves to broader theories that gay individuals were banding together as a “Homosexual International” in order to conspire against the United States government.\(^\text{18}\) Others in larger cities feared the rise in “overt” homosexuality, which they attributed to medical

\(^{16}\) Crane, “The Worry Clinic,” \textit{The Daily Record} (Dunn, NC), April 14, 1953.
\(^{17}\) Crane, “The Worry Clinic,” \textit{The Daily Record} (Dunn, NC), September 8, 1953.
and psychological diseases or perversions, and turned to the police for protection. Gay Americans were widely misunderstood, feared, mistreated, and attacked in the 1960s as a result of strengthened ideals of how Americans should behave. In addition to being incorrectly perceived by heterosexual society as a perversion often linked to pedophilia, homosexuality was both casually and institutionally demonized and outlawed in some capacity for the majority of the twentieth century.

Even when one’s homosexuality was not directly punished by police or an employer, the government still kept tabs on gay individuals and silently policed them. One of such examples is actor Rock Hudson, who had an FBI file active in the 1960s detailing only his status as a man who was known to engage in homosexual activity. While most of the content is redacted, many documents in Hudson’s file state that Hudson was not subversive or a threat to the government, but given his sexuality, they had “two mature experienced Special Agents” on hand who eventually interviewed Hudson about his personal life. There is no indication in Hudson’s FBI file that he was linked to any criminal activity other than potential sexual relationships with unnamed men in New York, and he was also not investigated as a communist. Hudson and many others in the postwar era were investigated simply because they were or were suspected

to be gay. The government had these practices in place even into the 1980s, when the
CIA still disseminated information on how to identify and interview a gay person. In a
1980 report titled “Homosexual Investigations,” the CIA advises that spotting a gay
person is like spotting a communist – “the subject has a mental or emotional problem
rather than a physical one,” and thus it is difficult, if not impossible, to correctly identify
one.22 Not only were gay Americans socially outcast by their fellow citizens, but the way
they were scrutinized and studied by the government matched the anti-communist
persecution characteristic of the Cold War.

Countless atrocities have been inflicted upon gay bodies in the United States – so
many that the issues of homophobic and transphobic hate crimes deserve far more
attention than the scope of this work can give them. In addition to oppressive sodomy
laws, paranoid FBI investigations, and blatantly homophobic calls to cure or reverse
homosexuality in American newspapers, LGBTQ individuals have been harassed,
attacked, and murdered in droves. From Kitty Genovese to Harvey Milk to Charlie
Howard to Matthew Shepard to the Pulse Nightclub shooting to the murder of over 44
transgender individuals in 2020 alone, the LGBTQ community has faced endless hostility
in a nation founded on patriarchy, hypermasculinity, and violence.23

2.2 Pre-Stonewall Gay Organization

In the face of systemic oppression in the 1950s and ’60s, many gay Americans
began seeking alliances and organization with others who shared similar life experiences.

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22 United States Central Intelligence Agency, “Homosexual Investigations,” report, c. April 21,
1980.
23 “Fatal Violence against the Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Community in 2020,”
Several gay organizations were formed from 1950 onward, including the Mattachine Society (1950) and the Daughters of Bilitis (1955). Martin Duberman’s popular take on gay organization in the twentieth century is that the raid on the Stonewall Inn and the subsequent rebellion, collectively known in history and culture as “Stonewall,” marked the “birth of the modern gay and lesbian political movement.” While Stonewall is undoubtedly a pivotal event in modern LGBTQ history, especially in terms of revolutionary and radical protests, pre-Stonewall organization is often overlooked or featured fleetingly in histories of gay liberation. The most thorough account of early gay organization can be found in Lillian Faderman’s 2015 *The Gay Revolution*, in which she spends ample time weaving the origins of the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis into the national narrative of gay struggle. As Stonewall did not occur until after the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panthers were well-established, it is necessary to explore these pre-Stonewall organizations, as their existence and beliefs, including the presence or lack thereof of Black people, are just as crucial to the narrative of gay and Black gay liberation.

The Mattachine Society was founded in 1950 by Harry Hay, a member of the Communist Party. Hay recognized a need for gay men to be able to meet covertly due to the air of secrecy tied to and expected of homosexuality as a result of oppression and discrimination. As the Communist Party was unwelcoming to gay people, Hay had to choose between his two alliances, with the Mattachine Society winning out not long after its founding. Hay was the first person to state that gay people were “an oppressed cultural minority,” providing a sense of tangibility to many gay Americans who ran in his circles.

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and confirming that their experiences were real and held weight.\textsuperscript{26} The Mattachine Society started as a radical cluster of gay men and a few women in Los Angeles. One of the first formal meetings consisted of 16 White gay men, two White gay women, and one gay Black man. This composition, in terms of gender and race, became commonplace throughout early gay organization, with the exception of the Daughters of Bilitis, a lesbian organization.\textsuperscript{27} Most of the organization’s early work included providing legal fees to persons arrested for homosexual activity and advocating a fight for the civil rights of gay people, which had also hardly ever been suggested before.

Civil rights were seldom ever conceptualized to include gay Americans, but the Mattachine Society made an effort to push social and legal rhetoric that distanced homosexuality from the “lasciviousness” they were often punished for. Instead of accepting defeat and automatically paying fines when arrested, gay men in or acquainted with the Society began seeking legal counsel, like when founder Dale Jennings was arrested for lewd conduct as a result of coercion and entrapment by the Los Angeles Police Department.\textsuperscript{28} The Mattachine Society set out with a strong, radical mission which eventually led to its demise – at least, the demise of the Society that Hay had intended to create.

While they met occasional legal success in the early years, the overlap with the Society and the Second Red Scare did not bode well for the largely-communist homophile group. As the Society grew to have more branches across the nation, liberal members attempted to steer the direction of the organization toward reasoning and

\textsuperscript{27} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 56-59.
\textsuperscript{28} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 65.
acceptance rather than the radical upheaval of oppressive systems. One of the liberal methods used by the Society was encouraging members to out themselves in an attempt to prove that gay Americans are just like everyone else.\textsuperscript{29} By 1956, the Society ended up adopting a policy of conservative assimilation – that is, promoting the assimilation of gay individuals into straight society – which deeply unsettled Harry Hay, who advocated for gay radicalism for the rest of his life.\textsuperscript{30} The short, frustrating history of the Mattachine Society provides insight into the struggle between liberal and radical gay politics in the 1950s.

Whereas the Mattachine Society was run mostly by and for gay men, the Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), founded in San Francisco in 1955, was an outlet for gay women to organize secretly in private to avoid outing themselves or being subject to police raids of local gay bars. For the first decade and a half of its existence, many members of the DOB used fake names and shied away from public organization or protest due to their status in the closet.\textsuperscript{31} The DOB did not start out as radical as the Mattachine Society, and primarily served as a means to educate and empower closeted lesbians of both blue- and white-collar lifestyles. Many members dropped out of the organization when president Del Martin spoke of creating a newsletter or partnering with the Mattachine Society, fearing any avenue for their sexuality to become public knowledge. After five of the eight founding members of the DOB exited the group, remaining co-founders Del Martin and Phyllis Lyons attempted to draw members in by

\textsuperscript{29} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 68-70.
focusing on helping “the individual lesbian overcome isolation and fear.” But it was too late – the Daughters of Bilitis, as well as the Mattachine Society, were already under investigation by the FBI.\textsuperscript{32}

The DOB was the subject of a “secret” FBI investigation that came up with no conclusive evidence that the organization was a threat to democracy or national security, especially since the group’s founders made it clear that the DOB was not tied to the Left or any political group in any way. This was a recurring theme during and after the Red and Lavender Scares – the FBI often had files on gay people and groups just because of their sexuality, like the case of Rock Hudson.\textsuperscript{33} The DOB was considered a sister organization to the Mattachine Society due to their occasional collaboration on publications and their liberal rather than radical tendencies, but there was a fundamental difference between the two, apart from them catering to lesbians and gay men, respectively. Two of the eight founders of the DOB were women of color: Rosalie Bamberger, a Filipina woman whose idea it was to have a lesbian organization in the first place, and a Chicana woman still known only as “Mary,” which was likely an alias.\textsuperscript{34} The Mattachine Society serviced a largely White population, and while the DOB’s members were a majority White as well, the fact that there were two women of color involved in and vocal about the organization’s founding sets it apart from most gay organizations of the 1950s and ‘60s, and shows that gay people of color were beginning to organize and act with relation to and despite the intersection of their oppressed identities in the pre-Stonewall era.

\textsuperscript{32} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 77-79.
\textsuperscript{33} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 80-81.
\textsuperscript{34} Faderman, \textit{The Gay Revolution}, 76-80.
Where, then, does that leave the Black gay voice pre-Stonewall? Apart from the one Black gay man noted to be present at the early meetings of the Mattachine Society, it is not abundantly apparent where and how Black gay individuals organized during this time. This is partially due to the attempted secrecy of certain organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis, as many of its members were not open about their sexuality, especially since many Black gay Americans were “deeply closeted.” However, James Baldwin would later make it clear that anti-Blackness was prominent in both early gay organizations as well as the Communist Party, as neither group was able to “eliminate [their] racism.” This created a tense crossroads of identity. On the one hand, Black gay people were less visible in gay organizations due to the inherent covert nature of homosexuality in general. On the other, Black gay people were less visible because of their exclusion from or discomfort in joining such organizations due to White majorities and rampant anti-Blackness. Despite these challenges keeping Black voices out of gay spaces, there is one key figure who made waves in the 1960s: Ernestine Eckstein.

Ernestine Eckstein, born 1941, was a Black lesbian activist who took part in several organizations, demonstrations, and protests from the 1960s onward. She was the first out Black lesbian to grace the cover of The Ladder, the FBI-tracked publication produced by the Daughters of Bilitis, which was also the first appearance by a Black lesbian on the face of any magazine in the United States (Figure 2). Eckstein’s narrative

35 Fejes, Gay Rights and Moral Panic, 130.
36 Tinney, “Baldwin Comes Out.”
37 It is difficult to locate Black gay people who wrote about their response to such organizations around the 1950s. However, a tradition of Black gay people as outsiders can be gleaned from the fact that James Baldwin’s speech to Black and White Men Together in 1982 was still considered something of a first, as institutional or social camaraderie between Black and White gay men was a rarity even in the 1980s. Furthermore, to have a Black gay man address such a group was outright “unprecedented.” See: Mumford, Not Straight, Not White… 1-2.
Figure 1. Ernestine Eckstein in a picket line (Source: New York Public Library Digital Collections).

Figure 2. Ernestine Eckstein on the cover of The Ladder, 1966.
is largely missing from gay American history, though she is briefly mentioned on one page of The Gay Revolution where Faderman cites her unprecedented cover appearance.\(^{38}\) Most of what there is to be known about Eckstein can only be gleaned from photographs and one eight-page interview found in that June 1966 edition of The Ladder, but Eckstein’s presence as a Black woman in pre-Stonewall gay organization is monumental, and speaks to the risks she endured as an out Black woman.

Upon moving to New York at the age of 22 and beginning to identify as a lesbian, Eckstein immediately sought out gay organizations, as she “assumed there was such a movement, or should be.” According to Eckstein, this desire to join a gay social movement was influenced by her interest and participation in the Civil Rights Movement, and she longed for an increased participation among Black Americans in the “homophile” movement, stating: “I keep looking for them, but they’re not there. And I think there should be more, I really do.”\(^{39}\) Eckstein’s expectation for gay organizations to already be in operation upon her move to New York is logical by today’s standards, but remarkable from the perspective of the early 1960s, especially for a Black woman, who was among the most marginalized in American society. Despite the challenges facing Eckstein, she went on to become vice president then president of the DOB, and fell in line with its more liberal views, claiming that “homosexuals need heterosexuals” in order to advance the status of gay Americans. She also stated that the gay movement was not yet ready for civil disobedience in the same way the Civil Rights Movement was, as the gay rights movement did not have enough support or traction. Eckstein was the only Black woman present at a protest against the firing of gay government employees in Washington, D.C.


\(^{39}\) “Interview with Ernestine,” The Ladder 10, no. 9 (June 1966), 4-6.
in 1965 (Figure 1). In protests such as these, Eckstein brought to life her strong belief in picketing and protesting as a way to call attention to homophobic oppression, though she did not see it as a means to an end.  

Ernestine Eckstein did not know any other Black lesbians at the height of her activism, as stated in her 1966 interview, though she described her “perfect situation” as one in which she could be in contact with another Black lesbian such as herself.  

Eckstein was also given “no other choice” but to join the NAACP while at Indiana University, as there were no other Black interest groups or organizations on campus. Likewise, the Daughters of Bilitis was the only active lesbian organization when she moved to New York, and Eckstein capitalized on this and became its only Black member for many years in the 1960s. Despite the relative conservatism of the NAACP and the overwhelming whiteness of the Daughters of Bilitis, Ernestine Eckstein made space for herself and brought to life an activist reality which she believed all Black gay people deserved the chance to experience.  

While her politics may not have been radical, Eckstein was one of the only activists at the time who acknowledged the link between the Civil Rights Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement and welcomed interaction between the two fronts, a phenomenon that was rare even as more radical Black power and gay liberation movements begin to crop up. Eckstein serves as a reminder to the historiography that Black gay organization did exist pre-Stonewall regardless of whether or not it turned the tide of gay liberation for decades to come. However, the fact that the few sources

40 “Interview with Ernestine,” 8-9.  
41 “Interview with Ernestine,” 6.  
42 “Interview with Ernestine,” 6-7.
available on Eckstein comprise the most detailed collection of Black participation in the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis highlights how these organizations existed and operated primarily without the Black gay experience in mind. As the historiography points toward Stonewall as the true beginning of the Gay Liberation Movement, the last section of this chapter analyzes the Gay Liberation Front’s activity before and after Stonewall, as well as how Black activism did or did not play a role in militant gay activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

2.3 The Gay Liberation Front and Black Presence

The emphasis of this chapter is on gay life and organization between 1945 and 1969, but a glimpse into gay organization shortly before as well as post-Stonewall is necessary in order to fully illuminate just how much life changed, or had the potential to change, for gay Americans in and after 1969. Radical organization of gay students increased throughout the late 1960s, filling in the gaps of gay organization left by too-conservative pre-Stonewall organizations as discussed earlier. These organizations, and the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) created in the wake of Stonewall, provided more room for Black involvement in the Gay Liberation Movement. In his 1999 *Identity and the Case for Gay Rights*, David A.J. Richards draws a parallel between the Black and gay experiences in America, linking them by way of their backgrounds of medical and biological discrimination. Richards also identifies a certain “sexual dehumanization” applied to both Black Americans and the gay population, providing a theoretical basis for bonding and collaboration between the two groups, especially with regard to those who were both Black and gay. It seems as though the lead-up to Stonewall as well as the

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rebellion itself was the radical impetus for many Leftist gay activist groups to exist, expand, and collaborate with Black power ideology in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Gay Liberation Front was the name for a joint or collaborative gay rights movement centered around themes of gay power and social liberation. However, Stonewall was not the first or only factor in the collective emergence of left-leaning or Leftist gay activism nationwide, despite playing a crucial role. Between 1967 and 1969, many college campuses had small scale gay organizations run by young radicals that would eventually grow in size and either change their names to or ally themselves with the GLF. One example of this is a student group at Cornell University that changed its name to the Gay Liberation Front before Stonewall after being inspired by a Black power organization on campus that took over the school’s administration building as an act of protest. The gay students allied themselves with Black power organization tactics, but it is unknown whether or not they allied themselves with the Black students themselves.

The Berkeley Barb was an underground Leftist publication produced by students in northern California, and featured a small number of articles about gay liberation before the Stonewall rebellion. Within these articles were iterations of gay pride rhetoric, with one March 1969 article proclaiming that “[gays] have to get rid of their double life and proclaim to the world they are homosexuals, and proud of it.” This was a stark contrast from the assimilation rhetoric and quest for liberation via due process of the law as purveyed by the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis. Just a few weeks later, the Barb reported on “gay militants” taking to the streets in San Francisco as part of the Committee for Homosexual Freedom’s (later the GLF) opposition to the Society for

Individual Rights (SIR), a more liberal organization that had fired radical gay activist Leo Laurence as the editor of its publication, *Vector*. The SIR became known as the “Gay Establishment” by Laurence and readers of the *Barb* due to its opposition to radical politics and methods, and Laurence referred to SIR as being run by “bitchy old queens” out of touch with new, Leftist ambitions. The article also credits the Black power movement for gay liberation tactics, stating that the phrase “black is beautiful” was the inspiration for the radical gay liberation slogan “gay is good.” Once again, there is no indication that any Black gay activists took part in this gay militancy, but the *Barb* affirmed that gay activists took inspiration from Black activists just as Ernestine Eckstein had called for years prior, though this practice was used for radical instead of liberal means.

Immediately following the rebellion in June of 1969, the Gay Liberation Front formed (in a more official sense) as a collection of gay activists and groups across the nation, first concentrated in New York City. The first publication of the GLF’s “Come Out!,” advertised as “a newspaper by and for the gay community,” already exhibited a tonal shift from the more conservative organizations of the early 1960s. On the front page, the publication announces that the newspaper “dedicates itself to the joy, the humor, and the dignity of the homosexual male and female” and the “methods and actions necessary [sic] to end [their] oppression.” The publication explicitly stated that it was time for gay activists to make straight society see their worth “as human beings” rather than fitting their gay identities and experiences into boxes acceptable and comprehensible to straight society.47 In the wake of the Stonewall rebellion and on the

tails of nationwide collegiate gay activism, this rhetoric flipped the gay organization narrative on its head, radically advocating for an acceptance and purveyance of gay power at the same time that the Black Power movement was taking place.

The Gay Liberation Front’s interactions with the Black power movement—specifically the Black Panther Party—would prove to be controversial in post-Stonewall America. The GLF’s proposal to financially support the Black Panthers in late 1969 and 1970 cost them many members who were outraged at the Panthers’ “virulent” homophobia, something that will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 3.\textsuperscript{48} Though the GLF relied on tactics and rhetoric first used by the Black power movement, the relationship between the GLF and Black activists was elusive and at-times turbulent. There is no indication that the GLF made an effort to include or promote Black gay voices or experiences in their quest for freedom from systemic gay oppression after Stonewall despite the direct involvement of Black gay and trans activists in the rebellion in New York.\textsuperscript{49} David F. Greenberg argues in \textit{The Construction of Homosexuality} that this period of young, collegiate gay activism was characterized by organizations composed of students with middle- and upper-class backgrounds who “had never known scarcity” and thus did not fear economic or career-based repercussions for protesting systemic homophobia.\textsuperscript{50} The socioeconomic implications of this analysis suggest that the GLF and associated radical movements were predominantly White, which highlights the

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\item\textsuperscript{49} Duberman, \textit{Stonewall}, 231-234.
\item\textsuperscript{50} David F. Greenberg, \textit{The Construction of Homosexuality} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 458-460.
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continued struggle of Black gay activists to find acceptance and outlets for their voices and experiences.

Homophobia has existed at institutional and social levels since the inception of the United States. Wartime and postwar expectations to have and uphold a patriarchal family structure rooted in masculinity and consumerism affected gay individuals and subjected them to discrimination that extended past the sodomy laws that held their bodies hostage for decades. Gay men and women, or those suspected to be gay, lost their jobs, their privacy, their friends, their family, and their dignity. This came to a head during the so-called Lavender Scare in which supposed homosexuals were rooted out of government positions the same way that supposed communists had been at the hands of a paranoid State during the Cold War. The insecurities of the United States government and its population brought the morality and sanity of gay Americans into question, and scrutinized their every move both publicly in the press and privately via FBI investigations. Gay Americans were alienated, persecuted, and murdered for their sexuality for nearly two centuries before radical activism changed the tide of gay America in the 1960s.

Stonewall is directly linked to the beginning of the radical Gay Liberation Movement. This is undeniable. However, significant liberal organization and militant activism existed prior to Stonewall, and is equally important to the development of a holistic view of gay American history. This is especially true with regard to the search for Black voices in gay organization. The origins of gay organization were overwhelmingly white and mostly unaffiliated with Black thought and Black politics, with few exceptions such as Ernestine Eckstein. The early gay or homophile organizations of the 1950s and
early 1960s were molded into a conservative shape by rampant and lingering anticommunism ushered in by Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s. Radical activism and social acceptance proved an impossible marriage for gay Americans to achieve during the Second Red Scare. It took the Black power movement of the 1960s to showcase what (relative) successful radical militant activism looked like, and the Gay Liberation Movement, spearheaded by the Gay Liberation Front, soon began to emulate its tactics and rhetoric despite a lack of direct collaboration with Black activists. Chapter 3 will examine the ways in which these Black gay Americans were also pushed out of Black activist spaces, further showcasing the way many people’s intersection of oppressed identities left them hanging in the balance when it came to organization and liberation.
CHAPTER 3
BLACK SPACES, BLACK EXCLUSION

There were multiple spaces for Black liberal and leftist organization in the 1960s and beyond, from the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) to the Black Student Movement to the Black Liberation Army. However, the culture fostered by these organizations and the Civil Rights Movement in general forced Black gay Americans out of Black activist spaces, or forced them to hide parts of themselves in order to participate in Black activism. In these instances, Blackness typically won over gayness, as in the case of Bayard Rustin who kept his sexuality in his back pocket as he rose through the ranks of civil rights organization. This can also be seen in the case of Yvonne Flowers, a Black lesbian poet and close friend of Audre Lorde, who often felt pressured to choose which of her intersecting, oppressed identities would take precedent in order to fit in with certain groups or movements.\(^1\) This chapter explores the ways in which Black gay individuals were excluded from Black liberal activism such as the Civil Rights Movement and Black leftist activism such as the Black Panther Party, or made to choose between their Black and gay identities.

It must be stated up front that homophobia and a lack of support for gay rights were not the only reasons certain organizations were unsuitable for the politics and/or experiences of Black gay people. This is evidenced by James Baldwin, who did not involve himself with most, if not any, major liberal or leftist organizations in the 1960s. As evidenced by his letters and writings highlighted in the 2016 documentary *I Am Not Your Negro*, Baldwin did not become a Black Panther or side with Malcolm X and the

\(^1\) Duberman, *Stonewall*, xix.
Black Muslims because he “did not believe that all white people were devils.” He also
distanced himself from the NAACP because the organization’s northern operations were
“fatally entangled with black class distinctions, or illusions of the same, which repelled a
shoe-shine boy like [himself].” On one hand, the Black Panthers went too far with their
anti-White rhetoric for Baldwin’s philosophies, and on the other, the NAACP’s practices
in the North were too liberal and did not represent lower class Black people like Baldwin.
It does not appear that Baldwin’s sexuality had anything to do with his opposition to
joining either group, at least on the surface. However, in the same breath, Baldwin also
stated that he was “not a member of any Christian congregation” as he did not see these
congregations as believing in or practicing the commandment: “love one another as I love
you.” Baldwin’s aversion to Black religious congregations offers insight into one of the
ways in which he specifically was affected by homophobia in Black spaces.

Where there was homophobia in Black activist circles, there was also anti-
Blackness or Black exclusion in gay activist circles. As discussed at the end of Chapter 2,
the GLF relied heavily on structures and strategies used and promoted by the Black
power movement, causing the lack of Black gay participation in the GLF to come as a bit
of a surprise. Though the GLF was formed years after the Civil Rights Movement began
and the Black Panther Party was formed, it is imperative to note exactly, yet briefly, how
Black gay exclusion functioned within these gay spaces. The beginning of this chapter
will offer insight into the contradictory existence of the GLF and the Black gay groups

[2] I Am Not Your Negro, directed by Raoul Peck (Velvet Film, 2016),
that emerged because of it, such as the Salsa Soul Sisters, before moving onto the matter
of Black gay exclusion from or silencing within Black activist spaces.

3.1 Black Politics and Gay Liberation

In a 1984 interview with journalist Richard Goldstein, James Baldwin
philosophized that “there’s nothing in me that is not in everybody else, and nothing in
everybody else that is not in me” when discussing homosexuality. To Baldwin, the Black
experience and the gay experience theoretically had natural social overlap on the bases of
“shared suffering, shared perceptions, shared hopes.”

Though it infrequently manifested in the real world, Baldwin’s view paralleled that of Ernestine Eckstein with regard to the belief that Black and gay collaboration was possible, though Eckstein was much more outspoken with her encouragement of this relationship.

As amenable as these philosophies were, the 1960s and early 1970s featured more division than unity between Black and gay activist spaces. One instance of this is evidence by the formation of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA) in 1969.

The prospect of the Gay Liberation Front donating $500 to the Black Panther
Party in 1969 proved to be the breaking point for many White gay activists in the late
1960s, though the GLF had only been active nationwide for a few months. GLF co-
founder John O’Brien stated in an interview with historian Lillian Faderman that at the
time of the debate over the donation, he had proclaimed: “We wouldn’t even be here if it weren’t for the black civil rights movement. We owe it to them!”

Several original members of the New York chapter of the GLF – most or all White – backed O’Brien,

5 Baldwin, “Go the Way Your Blood Beats.”
6 “Interview with Ernestine,” The Ladder.
such as lifetime activist Bob Kohler, who worked with the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) for many years. However, Kohler stepped away from CORE when it “became clear that it was time for black people to handle the race battle themselves.”

Though Kohler focused his attention away from Black spaces, this was done for a completely different reason that those members of the GLF who opposed funding the Black Panther Party. Kohler fully supported Black militancy and the BPP, whereas Jim Owles saw the BPP as “viciously antihomosexual” and went on to join the Gay Activists Alliance, which sought to remove radical politics from the Gay Rights Movement.

Mere months after the Stonewall Rebellion, it was already apparent that certain gay rights activists did not see the liberation of Black lives as synonymous with the liberation of gay lives.

Over a year after the Stonewall Rebellion, Black Panther Party founder Huey P. Newton finally issued a statement regarding his changed stance on homosexuality, which may have been a window into deeper collaboration between the GLF and BPP. In his August 1970 letter, Newton acknowledges the common instinct of many Black militants to “hit a homosexual in the mouth,” then states that “homosexuals are not given freedom and liberty by anyone in the society. Maybe they might be the most oppressed people.”

However, Newton’s recognition of the plight of gay Americans and his call to unite Black and gay activists in social and political revolution did not win over many members of the GLF, and interaction between the two groups remained largely unchanged.

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GLF’s position on radical politics did not alter, though, and the organization still stood in solidarity with the BPP though not directly engaging with them in activist spaces. The Black Panthers’ stance on homosexuality did not budge much, either. Dr. Lisa Corrigan mentions that Newton’s reading of his 1970 letter at the Revolutionary’s People Convention “marked the moment” when gay activists “showed up” to support Black radicals, as many gay activists and organizers were in attendance and supported Newton’s speech. However, outside of Newton’s letter – which is, at best, a passive recognition of the gay struggle rather than a call for true, active solidarity – there is no instance in which Black radicals “showed up” for gay liberation activists in the same way.12 *The Black Panther* printed Newton’s letter in its pages twice, but never again mentioned the gay or Black gay struggle, as the newsletter prioritized the writings of Party leaders and articles about police brutality against and imprisonment of its members. Huey Newton believed that “a newspaper is the voice of a party, the voice of the Panther must be heard throughout the land.” However, this “voice of the Panther” did not proclaim consistent support and protection of gay radicals who backed the Panthers.13

How, then, were Black gay activists meant to organize in a way that prioritized neither Blackness nor gayness? This proved challenging for many, such as Black lesbian writers and activists Yvonne Flowers and Audre Lorde. When interviewed by Martin Duberman, Flowers detailed how she felt out of place in Black organizations, as gays in the Black church were “denied or denounced,” and the Black political movement was plagued by “endemic homophobia” in the 1960s and ‘70s.14 With regard to gay

12 Corrigan, “Queering the Panthers,” 18.
13 *The Black Panther* 5, no. 10 (September 5, 1970), 19.
14 Duberman, *Stonewall*, 111.
organization, in a 1984 video interview by author Jewel Gomez, Audre Lorde expressed that the relationship between Black lesbians and White lesbians was that “you recognize each other but you didn’t hang too close” due to differences of both identity and culture. Lorde and Flowers joked about the White lesbians’ dainty food and drink and the way that they would sit around and talk as opposed to the music and dancing featured at Black lesbian parties. Furthermore, Flowers asserted that at many lesbian gatherings, she was typically “the token, second token, or third token” Black lesbian of the group. Flowers’ and Lorde’s experiences highlight how even when Black gay individuals were included in gay organization, they felt out of place, as the Gay Rights Movement was not necessarily created or maintained with Black gays in mind.

Thus, the Salsa Soul Sisters were born. Not quite at home with the White lesbian organizations they were allowed to be a part of, Black and Latina lesbians came together to form the Salsa Soul Sisters in 1974 with Yvonne Flowers as a founding member. For the first time, at least in New York, there existed a space for Black and other lesbians of color to congregate outside of predominantly White spaces as well as gay bars that were frequently subject to police raids. No longer “forced to choose” between identities, the Salsa Soul Sisters provided sapphic women of color a space to fully embrace their race and their sexuality at the same time. The Salsa Soul Sisters later changed its name to the African Ancestral Lesbians United for Social Change (AALUSC) in order to accommodate for other racial and ethnic identities included in the African diaspora.

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16 Duberman, Stonewall, 331.
17 Duberman, Stonewall, 112.
18 Vicki Lynn Eaklor, Queer America: A GLBT History of the 20th Century (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2008), 151.
This is, unfortunately, one of the few instances of activism and organization dedicated specifically to Black people of color in the years following Stonewall. Others emerging in the 1980s include Men of All Colors Together (Boston, 1981), Adodi (Philadelphia, 1983), and Gay Men of African Descent (New York, 1986).

Although the GLF backed and controversially contributed funds to the Black Power movement and radical Black endeavors in general, the Gay Rights Movement in the wake of Stonewall was still overwhelmingly White. In 1979, James Baldwin reflected on the early Gay Rights Movement by stating that White gays were “unable to eliminate their racism,” which, thus, made it difficult for Black lesbians like Audre Lorde and Yvonne Flowers to find their place in any organization that wasn’t dedicatedly Black and gay.¹⁹ Racism among White gays is likely one of the central reasons why James Baldwin never allied himself with a gay rights organization despite being one of the only openly gay prominent figures of the Civil Rights Movement.²⁰ It is curious, then, how the GLF could draw so much upon the tactics and structure of the Black Power movement while making no effort to accommodate for Black gay bodies and experiences. Just as Yvonne Flowers could not find home in most Black organizations due to rampant homophobia, perhaps Black gay radicals of the late 1960s and early 1970s saw just what Baldwin did – a culture and community of racist and Black exclusionary White gays.

3.2 Homophobia in the Civil Rights Movement

While the GLF was founded on structures and strategies originally put in place by the Black Panthers, the Panthers were founded on principles that cultivated and fostered

¹⁹ Tinney, “Baldwin Comes Out.”
²⁰ James Baldwin did not use the term “gay” for himself when interviewed by Goldstein in 1984. Baldwin expressed no association or familiarity with that word, and no desire to definitively or actively use a label for his homosexuality.
homophobia. However, before discussing the theoretical, systemic, and historical roots of homophobia within the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, these instances and patterns of homophobia in the 1960s must first be uncovered. The remainder of this chapter will focus on Black gay exclusion from Black activist spaces, with Bayard Rustin’s shunning from the Civil Rights Movement and the homophobic rhetoric of the Black Panther Party apparent at the forefront.

In his 1997 article, “The Policed,” George Chauncey notes a historical trend in which gay men of the past are made out to be self-loathing and closeted just because the dominant culture wanted or wants them to be that way. But growing up with his grandparents in Pennsylvania, Bayard Rustin was never made out to feel guilty for his sexuality. Having confided in his grandmother, Rustin revealed later in life that while his teenage confession was not met with support by any means, it was also not met with hostility or rejection. This tepid acceptance would later affect the way Rustin viewed his activism, his relationship with Martin Luther King, Jr., and his exclusion from the Civil Rights Movement. Homophobia – in all its forms – was not the only obstacle Rustin faced in his career as an activist and organizer. Rustin joined the Young Communist League (YCL) in 1938, drawn in by their unyielding support for Black victims of racial injustice, though he left the organization and the Communist Party altogether a few years after and turned toward socialism instead. Rustin also registered himself as a

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conscientious objector to the Second World War in late 1940. All of these elements worked against Rustin in some capacity later in his career working alongside King, but the role of Rustin’s sexuality within the Black activist spaces in which he participated and organized should not be discounted.

Historian Taylor Branch characterizes Bayard Rustin as “very much a closeted homosexual” in his analysis of Rustin’s role in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and organizing the March on Washington. This is not entirely true, and needs to be addressed before Rustin’s sexuality with relation to the Civil Rights Movement is analyzed more fully. Rustin was not “in the closet” in the traditional sense of the phrase nor in his own words. The caveat to this is that Rustin was publicly outed against his will, most likely when he was apprehended on a “morals charge” in 1953 for having sex in a car with two men. However, after this incident, Rustin did not actively attempt to hide or deny his sexuality, and was out to those who knew him. Because Rustin grew up in an environment in which he was not made to feel shame or guilt regarding his sexuality, Rustin experienced homophobia primarily at the hands of those surrounding him in activist circles. Thus, Rustin’s privacy regarding his sexuality was strategic in an effort to quietly appease civil rights leaders and the broader United States society, though this strategy was ultimately cultivated by the homophobia influencing his public life.

The Civil Rights Movement was covertly and overtly hostile to and exclusive of Bayard Rustin throughout his tenure as an activist and organizer within it. These

24 Branch, Parting the Waters, 316.
instances of homophobia represented larger patterns of bigotry and oppression that seem most apparent in the case of Rustin because he was a major asset to King’s organization and the facilitation of events such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the March on Washington. Rustin had a significant role in both of these affairs, and gave the concluding remarks at the March on Washington after King’s famous “I Have a Dream” speech.²⁶ There was much debate over whether Rustin should have even been involved in organizing these events, though, as murmurs spread throughout King’s circles that catastrophe could be on the horizon if the public found out one of King’s right-hand men was gay. During the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which Rustin had helped plan, a Black reporter from Birmingham spoke with other members of the leadership and warned them that “white people were sure to find out about him” and would use Rustin’s sexuality against the Civil Rights Movement as a whole. After all, Rustin was “unemployed, a bastard, a Negro, an ex-Communist, an ex-con, and a homosexual.”²⁷ Civil rights leaders made efforts to get the White population on their side, but since homophobia transcended race in the 1950s and 1960s, publicly associating with gay people was a step in the wrong direction for many Black activists. In the early days of his involvement with King, Rustin was already marked and framed as a threat to the structure of the Civil Rights Movement and its appeals to the White population.

King felt immense pressure to exclude Rustin from his advisory and organizational committees as, echoed by many of his peers, Rustin would “always be a liability” due to his sexuality and other factors of identity that would have made him

²⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 870.
²⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 173, 179.
seem unfavorable to the general public, Black or White.28 In the interview he gave with the *Village Voice* just months before his passing, Rustin singled out Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) director Andrew Young and Rev. Jesse Jackson as two close advisors to King who actively “wanted to get rid of” him.29 Given that two of Rustin’s most outspoken (at least directly to King) critics were and are still tied to notable religious positions, the Black church is of interest in analyzing the roots of their homophobia, especially as many preachers regarded gay people as “the wedge of evil.”30 This will be discussed further in Chapter 4. King was influenced from many different directions leading up to his removal of Rustin from any sort of leadership position after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but these should not take away from the fact that King held and acted on homophobic prejudices of his own, despite Rustin being one of his closest friends and confidants.

King’s decision to step away from Rustin and keep him out of his advisory circle was not sudden or out of the blue. Leading up to the 1955-1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, King did everything in his power to keep Rustin’s involvement a secret. One instance of this is when King had Rustin fly into Birmingham instead of Montgomery to avoid attention, and then keep his head down in the back seat of a car the entire drive to Montgomery thereafter. King also made an effort not to bring up Rustin’s name around the preachers with which he conferred on civil rights and SCLC matters.31 King’s breaking point with Rustin came when pastor and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. threatened to expose a fabricated homosexual relationship between King and Rustin

28 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 329.
29 Rustin, “Time on Two Crosses.”
30 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 196-197.
31 Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 197, 265.
unless King and his organizers ceased their plan to protest the 1960 Democratic Convention. The firing did not come as a surprise to either party, but still wounded Rustin, who did not even get to hear the news face to face from his friend and colleague.\(^{32}\) King finally succumbed to the homophobic pressures that had been directed at him throughout the entirety of his working relationship with Rustin.

In 1963, King decided to bring Rustin back into a more direct leadership position in planning for the March on Washington. King’s own homophobia, though, had not dissipated in the years since the Boycott. Weeks before the March, King and an associate discussed Rustin in a private conversation picked up by an FBI wiretap. “I hope Bayard don’t take a drink before the march,” said King’s colleague. “Yes. And grab one little brother. ‘Cause he will grab one when he has a drink,” King joked.\(^{33}\) What may have been an innocuous joke between friends comes off as a condescending dig at Rustin’s sexuality that feeds back into the rhetoric of the homosexual as a pervert, which permeated American society for decades before and after the Second World War. Rustin subtly attested to this ignorance, too, later stating that King likely never knew a gay person before he met Rustin, and thus did not have any “real sympathy or understanding.”\(^{34}\) Despite King’s persistent ignorance, Rustin never harbored much animosity toward him. Even in the 1980s, when Rustin’s attention turned more toward gay issues, he believed that the Gay Rights Movement should be more about overcoming fear, self-hate, and self-denial than making the rest of the country “love” gay people.\(^{35}\) In

\(^{32}\) Rustin, “Black and Gay.”

\(^{33}\) August 1963 FBI memorandum cited in Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 861.

\(^{34}\) Rustin, “Black and Gay.”

addition to being hidden by those around him in the Civil Rights Movement, Rustin’s philosophy regarding his sexuality was largely based on hiding a certain part of himself to help advance the acceptance of another.

In 1987, Rustin stated: “I found that people in the civil rights movement were perfectly willing to accept me so long as I didn’t declare that I was gay.” He was not remorseful when he said this – rather, Rustin preferred to keep his sexuality private as he found it in the best interest of the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Despite Rustin’s willingness to keep his sexuality under wraps apart from those who knew him closely, he was not the only person who faced this dilemma, and it impacted others even more than it did Rustin. Rustin’s act of essentially choosing between Black activism and his sexuality is similar to the circumstances of Audre Lorde and Yvonne Flowers mentioned earlier in this chapter. Lorde and Flowers felt the need to choose between their Blackness and their gayness, as being Black and gay was uncomfortable for them in both Black spaces and gay spaces. These women went on, then, to found and participate in a specifically Black gay organization – the Salsa Soul Sisters – whereas Rustin’s career was almost entirely devoted to the Civil Rights Movement and the social advancement of Black Americans, not engaging with gay rights activism until the 1980s. While Rustin may have been content with having to conceal his sexuality, the homophobic figures and culture of the Civil Rights Movement left him with no choice. And even when Rustin prioritized Black issues and his own Black identity over everything else, he was still ridiculed and shunned for his sexuality, his “liability.”

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36 Rustin, “Black and Gay.”
37 Branch, Parting the Waters, 173.
3.3 Homophobia in the Black Panther Party

As unwelcoming to Black gay activists as it was, the Civil Rights Movement headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. was not at the extreme end of anti-gay bigotry within Black organizations in the 1960s. This is not to say that the homophobia of the Civil Rights Movement was not that bad or had no impact on the 20th century Black gay experience, but the anti-gay sentiment found in the Black Panther Party from its inception was significantly more hostile and at-times violent. Only after the Stonewall rebellion did certain prominent figures such as Huey P. Newton change their stance on homosexuality, but even then, as evidenced earlier in this chapter, gay rights activists were still displeased with the Panthers’ longstanding history of blatant homophobia. If Black gay activists could not be themselves in more liberal civil rights arenas, they certainly could not do so in the Black Panthers. The BPP is a stark example of yet another area of Black organization in the 1960s where activists had to suppress or subdue all or most other elements of their identity in order to wholly devote themselves to the cause of Black liberation.

Before the formation of the Black Panther Party, eventual founding member Eldridge Cleaver wrote extensively about his hatred and distrust of gay men in his memoir *Soul on Ice*, published in 1968 but written primarily in 1965. The most shocking revelations within the memoir center on Cleaver’s acts of rape, but the homophobia detailed is another upsetting facet of Cleaver’s reflections on his life and the state of Black masculinity. Cleaver’s attacks and the Party’s silence following the publication of the memoir were the basis for some GLF members’ rejection of supporting the Black Panthers after the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969. Within *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver famously
stated that “homosexuality is a sickness, just are baby-rape or wanting to become the head of General Motors,” marrying his homophobic and anticapitalist beliefs in one breath. Cleaver also claimed that homosexuality was the product of a “civilization alienated from its biology,” harkening back to popular and longstanding 20th century ideas about the connection between sexuality and so-called human nature or biology. Cleaver relied on his own view of history and biology to assert gay men as inferior to the “strong, sturdy, heart,” fertile, and masculine heterosexual throughout his memoir. Cleaver’s and the Black Panther Party’s ideology was founded on the basis of militancy and taking up arms, which have frequently been believed to be a man’s duty – and a masculine man at that. Cleaver’s boisterous opinions about homosexuality were no less venomous or harmful than the physical, psychological, and institutional attacks on gay Americans that characterized the dominant society of the United States in the twentieth century. However, where Cleaver departs from this already-dangerous rhetoric is in his fixation on Black gay homosexuality, specifically with regard to James Baldwin.

Cleaver refers to Black gay men as “acquiescing in this racial death-wish,” meaning that by embracing homosexuality, they surrendered their Blackness, as the two identities were not compatible in a revolutionary Black society according to Cleaver. The basis of Cleaver’s attack on Baldwin, one of the only out Black gay men in the public eye at the time, was Cleaver’s belief that homosexuality represented a lack of masculinity, and a lack of masculinity represented subservience to White society. The Black gay man, in the words of Cleaver, “focuses on ‘whiteness’ all the love in his pent up soul and turns

39 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 207.
the razor edge of hatred against ‘blackness’ – upon himself, what he is, and all those who look like him, remind him of himself.” Given what is known about Bayard Rustin and his dedication to the Civil Rights Movement for the progress of Black Americans, Cleaver’s philosophy is obviously untrue in reality in addition to being absurd and offensive in theory. However, this likely made little difference to Cleaver. *Soul on Ice* includes discussions and reviews of Baldwin’s books, including *Another Country*, which he states is so fixated on homosexuality that Baldwin is unable to write compellingly about race. In this way, according to Cleaver, Baldwin and others who reject Cleaver’s view of Black masculinity are doomed to become “a white man in a black body” as their identities do not service Black liberation the way Cleaver believes they should. Homophobia in the Black community served as both an appeal to White society and a condemnation of it, depending on who was wielding such bigotry. This paradox will be addressed further in the proceeding chapter.

Some members of the Gay Rights Movement went so far as to defend Cleaver upon his memoir’s publication out of prevailing need to support Black liberation. However, one such activist, co-founder of the GLF Jim Fouratt, eventually expressed great dismay at his past defense of Cleaver, stating that he had let “his enthusiasm for the black struggle blot out the realities of black homophobia.” Inadvertently, Fouratt had done precisely what Cleaver wished of Black gay men – he had chosen Black activism over defense of his own sexuality, his own rights. Cleaver’s memoir proved troublesome among the gay community before it became a concern of the Black Panthers. Gay

41 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 127-129.
42 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 135.
43 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 128.
activists took the Panthers’ silence on Cleaver’s blatant homophobia and their outright “unwillingness” to discuss the matter with the GLF as reasoning to refuse to support the Black Panthers.\(^{45}\) It was not until after Huey Newton’s 1970 release from prison that someone in a leadership position within the BPP made a formal statement regarding the gay struggle, as discussed above. Even still, Newton’s recognition of the Gay Rights Movement as a valid struggle did not usher in any significant collaboration between the BPP and the GLF, and no members of the Panthers were known to have been openly gay. The two organizations continued to operate very much separate of one another at a national level.

As evidenced by the GLF’s adoption of organization tactics used by the Black Panthers, the overlap between these two groups only manifested, for the most part, after Stonewall. The one stipulation to the tumultuous and occasionally strained relationship between the BPP and the gay community, as documented by historian Jared Leighton, was that gay activists in the San Francisco Bay Area allied themselves with the Panthers a few months prior to Stonewall, a unique association that has not been adopted among gay organizations elsewhere in the nation. However, this was not because the BPP promoted themselves as supporting the gay cause just yet. Rather, the Committee for Homosexual Freedom (CHF), which would eventually bleed into the San Francisco chapter of the GLF, saw a common bond with the Black Panthers as both the Black community and the gay community – and, though not a primary concern, the Black gay community – were targets of police brutality in and around San Francisco.\(^{46}\) The CHF

\(^{45}\) Duberman, Stonewall, 318-319.
was largely met with indifference when attending BPP events in the spring and early summer of 1969, but the neutral acceptance of the gay activists on behalf of the BPP was a significant step forward pre-Stonewall, and came as a refreshing reprieve from the slew of young, White leftist activists in the Bay Area who found Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice* “cool” and representative of similar anti-establishment ideals that they themselves held.\(^{47}\) At this time, before Stonewall, the Panthers in the Bay Area were not outwardly or inwardly pro-gay, but they accepted the anti-police brutality agenda of the CHF.

Despite Newton’s speech on homosexuality and gay rights in 1970, the internal operations of the Black Panthers did not suddenly, if at all, shift toward adopting an agenda to incorporate the goals or experiences of gay activists. Just as the CHF took the Bay Area Panthers’ shared experiences and general neutrality toward gay people as a sign to strengthen the alliance, Newton’s words served as a signal for some gay leftists to closer ally themselves with the activities and teachings of the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party did not return the enthusiasm, and struggled with widespread implementation of Newton’s newfound belief in the positivity of the quest for gay liberation.\(^{48}\)

The Black gay response to Newton’s speech is difficult to pinpoint as the headlines and history are populated with the reactions from White gays, but two months prior, two Black gay revolutionary men interviewed by the *Berkeley Tribe* – Tony Blake and John Mosher – expressed that their alliances to the Black Panthers and to gay


\(^{48}\) Leighton, “All of Us,” 867-869. Many White gay activists gave up on allying themselves with the Panthers during this time because of this reason, most notably Leo Laurence, who had a hand in founding the CHF in the Bay Area. See: “Leo Bids Farewell to All This,” *Berkeley Barb*, Oct. 30 – Nov. 5, 1970.
liberation were different and varied in level of importance to them, but they still identified themselves as Black gay revolutionaries. Both Blake and Mosher identified first and foremost as gay, but Mosher pointed out that the BPP’s ten-point program wasn’t “for homosexuals,” therefore the Black gay relationship to the BPP would automatically be different than the straight one. Mosher stated that the Black Panthers “ignored the idea” of gay activism “completely.” ⁴⁹ To both Blake and Mosher, gay liberation was the priority in the overwhelming and seemingly unchanging American society, though they both expressed reluctance at feeling the need to choose their sexual identity over their Blackness.

Black gay activism was virtually unheard of in the 1950s and 1960s, and did not come about until the aftermath of the Stonewall Rebellion. This is largely due to racism and/or Black exclusion in the GLF, as well as the homophobia exhibited by both the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party that made it dangerous or against the organization’s best interest for Black gay activists to speak up. Bayard Rustin was one of the most influential players in the Civil Rights Movement, and while later in life he did not lament the time he spent hiding his sexuality from the public, the fact that he had to choose between his Black and gay identities when participating in the movement speaks to how unwelcoming King and his close advisors were to the idea of homosexuality. Rustin was one of King’s closest advisors and friends, yet King made disparaging comments on Rustin’s sexuality to others close to him and eventually pushed Rustin away from the movement for years due to homophobic pressure from both Black and

White society. The homophobia of the Civil Rights Movement was acted upon primarily in order to appease religious Black activists and liberal White America.

Even though the Black Panther Party was more radical and militant than King and the Civil Rights Movement, homophobia still infiltrated its ranks and generated outrage in gay communities throughout the United States. Eldridge Cleaver was at the center of the main controversy, as his inflammatory remarks attacking James Baldwin and gay men in general in *Soul on Ice* alienated Black gay people from the Black liberation movement. The BPP’s silence on Cleaver’s homophobia in the years following *Soul on Ice*’s publication did not make matters any better and caused Black gay radicals themselves to conceptualize their racial and sexual identities as different from one another, leaving no space for the existence and organization of a distinctly Black gay identity. In *Soul on Ice*, Cleaver mentions that Baldwin has effectively sold himself out by being gay, as he has surrendered his Blackness and his masculinity – which is, in his view, incompatible with homosexuality – in exchange for acceptance by the dominant White society. However, White America did not want to claim Baldwin, either, as homophobia on par with that of Cleaver’s was also a popular element of the dominant society. What sets Cleaver’s homophobia and the homophobia expressed and unaddressed by the Black Panther Party apart from White homophobia is the concept of Black masculinity. The origins of Black masculinity and its influence on homophobia must be explored in order to illuminate the struggle for identity had by Black gay activists in the 1960s and 1970s.

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*Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 127-129.*
CHAPTER 4

BLACK HOMOPHOBIA AND THE LIMITS OF LIBERATION

Homophobia has permeated the United States since its inception, and still exists as a plague on the extremely heterogeneous composition of the nation. However, within that blanket of institutional homophobia, there came to be a sense of a distinctly Black homophobia cultivated within, or perhaps even prior to, the twentieth century. It is one thing to name this form of oppression, but it is crucial to identify the causes of it in order to understand the power taken away from Black gay individuals that then had to be reclaimed and dispersed back amongst themselves through art and other forms of expression, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. To accomplish this, Black homophobia must be examined through a lens of Black masculinity, which means exploring concepts of sexism and racism, especially with regard to White supremacy. This chapter relies primarily on Black feminist scholarship to craft an understanding of Black masculinity as a specifically Black concept and experience, though influenced by White supremacy and White patriarchal ideals, that then informed the homophobia that kept many Black gay activists out of leftist, and especially militant, organizational spaces.

A Black feminist approach is crucial to understanding the roots and influence of Black masculinity with regard to Black homophobia and the exclusion of Black gay individuals from Black liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s. As previously discussed, homophobia polluted both the Civil Rights Movement as well as radical organizations such as the Black Panther Party, fostering an unwelcoming environment for Black gay activists and oftentimes forcing them to prioritize their race over their own sexuality. This chapter focuses primarily on the Black Panther Party as part of the Black
Power movement, as the expression of toxic Black masculinity is perhaps most extreme and visible among its membership. Black feminist thought is underrepresented in the historiography of gay liberation, but the insight of writers and scholars such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, and Michele Wallace are valuable in their exploration of gender and racial issues as they relate to Black masculinity and homophobia. Because homophobia is linked to misogyny, as will be explored within this chapter, the perspectives of Black women – some of which are Black lesbians – are integral to a holistic understanding of the rejection of femininity as a pillar of Black homophobia.

It is important to note a misconception propagated about the Black community that many Black scholars, theorists, and writers have picked up on with regard to homophobia. In an interview conducted by Pierre Orelus for his book *The Agony of Masculinity*, a 25-year-old Black bisexual man named Ben remarked that Black homophobia is connected to racism and masculinity in part because Black people are seen as more homophobic than other races despite that not necessarily being true. bell hooks also addresses this phenomenon in her chapter “Homophobia in Black Communities” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. She states that there are caveats to homophobia in the Black community and that it is far from being the only prejudice some Black people hold, but also that homophobia in the hands of White people is more institutionally dangerous. To hooks, White people are the ones with the most systemic power on their side that can be used in the oppression of Black gay

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1 Pierre W. Orelus, *The Agony of Masculinity: Race, Gender, and Education in the Age of “New” Racism and Patriarchy* (Bern: Peter Lang Inc., 2009), 103-104.
people. The question of which race or ethnicity is “most” homophobic is not pertinent to this research, nor most queries of gay history in general, but what is notable is the fact that this belief has infiltrated Black spaces so much that several people have had to address it. Homophobia exists in every group of people, regardless of whether they are grouped by race, gender, religion, ability, or any other identifier, including LGBTQ identities themselves. What is under investigation at the present moment is the specific kind of homophobia found in Black activist spaces during or around the time of the Civil Rights Movement.

This chapter analyzes the origins and spread of Black homophobia found in Black liberal and leftist organizational spaces through a theoretical discussion of topics such as misogyny, masculinity, and racism. The construction of Black masculinity is at the heart of Black homophobia, and has contributed extensively to the oppression and exclusion of Black gay people. However, as stated previously, homophobia is a broader systemic issue and the burden of its resolution does not lie solely on the shoulders the Black community. Thus, this chapter posits Black homophobia as a specifically Black issue, but with

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connections to White supremacy and the lasting impact of slavery. Utilizing articles, memoirs, and other works produced by Black activists and writers, an image of toxic Black masculinity comes into view that can then be analyzed in the context of the treatment of both Black women and Black gay people. The Black lesbian experience is not dissected to the fullest extent here – a more thorough analysis would require a deeper discussion of gender expression, gender roles, and Black women’s sexuality within Black leftist activism. For the sake of this research, this chapter limits itself primarily to the experiences of Black gay men when looking at homophobia as the intersections of sexuality, race, and masculinity are most apparent there.

4.1 The Black Church and Constraints on Black Sexuality

The role of Christianity in homophobia in the United States as a whole cannot be overstated, and the same is true on the smaller scale of the Black church and Black homophobia. Despite having gay members among its clergy and congregation, the Black church played and continues to play a large role in the facilitation of Black homophobic thought and toxic masculinity. Patricia Hill Collins and minister Jacquelyn Grant both identify the Black church as an institution “whose centrality to Black community development may have come at the expense of many of the African-American women who constitute the bulk of its membership.” The same is true for the Black gay community, though the quantification of that group as “the bulk” is unverifiable and most likely not accurate. Nevertheless, many regard the teachings of the Black church in the mid to late twentieth century as detrimental to broader acceptance of gay people within

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5 hooks, *Talking Back*, 123.
6 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 87; Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Women and the Church,” in Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, but Some of Us are Brave* (New York: Feminist Press, 1982), 141-143.
the Black community. The reliance on literal interpretations of the Bible, which many Black Americans turned to while enslaved, is the source for some of this homophobia, and many Black pastors shied away from more progressive interpretations due to the ties to White churches.⁷

Though not monolithic by any means, the Black church has historically been understood as the collective institution of seven Protestant denominations derived directly from slavery. Additionally, the Black community is often regarded as the most religious racial or ethnic group in the nation, thus making it difficult to separate notions of Black homophobia as a cultural phenomenon from the specific forms of homophobia rooted within the Black church.⁸ Some Black denominations remained silent on issues of homosexuality as a way to ignore and overlook it; pastors of other denominations openly used homophobic slurs and referred to gay people as “abominations” in their sermons.⁹ There was nuance among different groups within what is known as the Black church, with some denominations more liberal than others. However, all roads pointed back to homophobic interpretations of the scripture that caused many Black gay people to question the religious institution they grew up in, leading to further displacement within the Black community as a whole.¹⁰

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¹⁰ Quinn et al., “The Role of the Black Church,” 529.
The role of the Black church in constructing Black homophobia is complicated by the theory of homophobia as a “strategy of domination…both in U.S. society and within its black subculture.”\textsuperscript{11} While homophobia within the Black church was undoubtedly linked to literal interpretations of the Bible meant to set Black Christianity apart from its White counterpart, it was also tied to a strategy of determining the use and purpose of the Black body, specifically with regard to sexuality and masculinity. Elijah Ward identifies this as not only a strategy to define what it means to be gay, but also what it means to be a Black man.\textsuperscript{12} The church is one of the many influences responsible for the Black hypermasculinity seen throughout the twentieth century, as will be discussed further in this chapter. Since the church was perhaps the most integral institution to the Black community as a whole, the promoting of homophobic ideology within the church was and is an incredibly effective tactic to reach as many members of the Black community as possible. Why, then, was it so important to instill homophobic values within an entire group of people?

The answer, at least in part, lies in the historical control of Black sexuality on the part of the White oppressor. Just as the Black church was cultivated in response to White Christianity, Black expectations of sexuality and sexual expression were formed in response to the centuries-long White supremacist hold on the Black body. Patricia Hill Collins postulates that “White supremacy requires Black subordination,” and, based on the historical oppression of gay people in America, being gay often automatically relegated one to a subordinate role in society.\textsuperscript{13} Slavery hinged on White domination,

\textsuperscript{11} Ward, “Homophobia,” 497.
\textsuperscript{12} Ward, “Homophobia,” 497-499.
\textsuperscript{13} Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism} (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2004), 185.
which reached every aspect of Black life, including sexuality, family, and relationships. White captors could not fully manipulate the interpersonal relationships of the enslaved, so they twisted the narrative of Black sexuality in their favor, framing it as “deviant” and promiscuous in order to assert dominance over that which they could not fully control.14 As seen in Chapter 2, homosexuality also has historical ties to notions of deviance and perversion, and these concepts were pushed further with the inception of the Black church. Thus, associating with or accepting homosexuality would have made it harder for Black people to rise above the White supremacist limitations and stereotypes placed on their sexuality. Supporting or even acknowledging gay people, who were also systemically oppressed, did nothing in the way of separating the Black body from the concept of deviant sexuality.15 Thus, Black homophobia, whether originated within or outside of the black church, can be seen as partly strategic in nature in order to reclaim Black sexuality without being hindered by the already-negative perceptions of homosexuality that plagued the nation as a whole.

The Black church as an institution is situated at a fascinating intersection of race, culture, and shared generational trauma, the latter of which also extends to the realm of sexuality and sexual liberation. Many historical and cultural elements influenced the church’s homophobia, and the church’s homophobia affected and influenced Black people from all walks of life, whether or not they attended church or practiced religion. Due to the complexities of the Black church that are unrelated to gay life, a deeper investigation of this institution is not included in this chapter or this thesis as a whole.

14 C. Riley Snorton, Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 47.
15 Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 106, 110.
That being said, mentions of the Black church are still found within, and should be regarded as references to homophobic interpretations of the Bible that were commonplace for Black Christians during the historical era at hand. During this time, the Black church played a significant role in the maintenance of homophobic ideals within a subset of an already-homophobic American society, but this is not the focus of the dissection of Black radical homophobia that will unfold in this chapter.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{4.2 Implications of Panther Misogynoir}

“SISTERS UNITE,” reads an article in the May 25, 1967 edition of \textit{The Black Panther}, “The Black Panther Party is where the BLACK MEN are.”\textsuperscript{17} One of the central issues within the Black Panther Party was the misogyny of its male members, and thus the misogyny woven into the roots of its very principles. The Black Panther Party was founded on ideals of Black masculinity that placed Black women on the sidelines from the get go. Black women were expected to support and assist the men of the BPP, but were not featured as or allowed to be prominent, leading members of the militant struggle for Black liberation. Another article from an early edition of \textit{The Black Panther} stated that Black women, as the “backbone” of the Party, must let their male partners know that they were “behind him in spirit and in mind,” and that there were many important secretarial and fiscal duties to be taken care of to support the men of the Party.\textsuperscript{18} Black

\textsuperscript{16} For a more thorough explanation of the relationship between homophobia and the Black church’s teaching of the Scripture, see also EL Kornegay, Jr., “Queering Black Homophobia: Black Theology as a Sexual Discourse of Transformation,” \textit{Theology & Sexuality} 11, no. 1 (2004): 29-51.

\textsuperscript{17} Barbara Auther, “Sisters’ Section,” \textit{The Black Panther} 1, no. 2 (May 25, 1967), 6.

\textsuperscript{18} “Support the Revolution,” \textit{The Black Panther} 1, no. 4 (July 20, 1967): 2.
women were almost always relegated to a secondary position within the Black Panther Party, emphasizing the physical and social superiority of the Black men around them. Dr. Moya Bailey coined the term “misogynoir” in a 2010 blog post to *The Crunk Feminist Collective* website to label the “particular brand of hatred” aimed at Black women in media and popular culture, including the depiction of Black women as hypersexualized, often-exotic, heterosexual “hoes.” Though this is a twenty-first-century term, it functions as a useful descriptor of the unique marriage of misogyny and racism faced by Black women in both past and present eras, just as the term “Black homophobia” is used throughout this work to define a specific form of discrimination experienced by Black gay people. Bailey originated the word for use in discussions of racism and sexism in film, music, and other media – typically that produced by White people – but “misogynoir” has since evolved into a broader term used by many Black feminist writers as well as scholars of Black history, women’s history, and cultural studies. In the foreword to a recent edition of Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Super-Woman*, writer Jamilah Lemieux states that misogynoir can also come “from those who are black, who were raised by black women and profess to love black

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19 Few women had notable, high authority roles within the Party. One example of such is Kathleen Cleaver, Eldridge Cleaver’s wife who was active in the Party and was supported by the Panthers in her campaign for California’s 18th State Assembly District after the incumbent, Willie Brown, refused to make a statement on the brutality inflicted upon members of the BPP. However, Kathleen Cleaver’s role in the Party was still primarily secretarial, as she organized events and meetings as her primary duty. See: *The Black Panther* 2, no. 3 (May 18, 1968), 18.


people.” Dr. Bailey’s terminology allows for deeper analysis of Black women’s relationships to Black men through a specific, intersectional lens that considers the state of Black womanhood as distinct from that of general womanhood and Blackness.

The misogynoir employed by the Black Panther Party with regard to women both inside and outside of its circles is directly related to the institution of Black masculinity. To understand this masculinity, one must first understand Black Panther attitudes toward women and femininity, which range from the sidelining of women within BPP chapter operations to instances of violence and rape targeted specifically at Black women, such as those revealed by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*. Women were not encouraged to take up guns and were instead expected to fulfill domestic and clerical duties for the men of the Party, bringing traditional gender roles to full realization even within the radical, anti-establishment Black Panther Party. Black women were often viewed as tough enough to support their men, but not so tough that they could efficiently participate in the armed upheaval of capitalist White society. However, Dr. Robyn Spencer argues that Black women already had a standing “tradition of using weapons to protect their homes, communities, and selves,” meaning that in certain instances, specifically in the Oakland chapter of the BPP, women were not necessarily expected to be nonviolent. Additionally, Dr. Spencer hones in on the integration of women and men within Panther structural hierarchies, as opposed to the separation between “Panthers” and “Pantherettes” that existed prior to 1968, as evidence as a more harmonious relationship between genders.

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23 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 33.
Men and women indubitably worked together within the Black Panther Party, and women were offered opportunities for administrative and political authority, but the issue still remains that women were not included in the narrative of proactive, anti-establishment militancy.

To the men of the Black Panther Party, Black women were something to be protected. The police were a threat to Black people as a whole, but the Party saw its women as a particularly vulnerable group that “must be protected from the indiscriminate use of force by the pigs who infest [their] community.” This promotes a view of feminine fragility that can be strengthened by the presence and protection afforded by the hypermasculine. In addition to being seen as weak and fragile, former Party Chairwoman Elaine Brown expressed that the Panthers found women to be “irrelevant,” and accused women Panthers who sought power within the Party of allying themselves with “counter-revolutionary, man-hating lesbian, feminist white bitches.” Black women in the Party were oftentimes thought to be speaking and acting out of line, and their mere presence was, at times, viewed as a symbol of the emasculation of Black men. Along with Kathleen Cleaver, Elaine Brown is an example of a women who rose to some prominence within the party, but this prominence was still shrouded in layers of misogyny. Most women who joined the Panthers were rank-and-file members who performed menial and clerical tasks, or assisted in the editing of the newsletter, as was the duty of Linda Boston beginning in late 1968. Even *The Black Panther* itself showcased elements of these

gender roles, with men penning the majority of the newsletter’s manifestos and calls to arms while women wrote more about politics and current events. Early issues of the newsletter feature the iconic photograph of Huey Newton in the wicker chair, gun and spear at the ready, a perfect image of the militant, revolutionary, and explicitly masculine protection offered by the Black Panther Party (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Huey P. Newton (Source: The Black Panther)
The sexism of the Black Panther Party mirrored the sexism of the broader United States society that the Panthers so often rallied against. The Panthers employed a patriarchal structure that valued masculine men over all else, and those who least fit that bill had more menial tasks within the Party or were excluded altogether. The reasoning behind Cleaver’s violence toward women in particular will be discussed later in the chapter, but it is at once important to note that no member of the Black Panther Party publicly condemned or critiqued any part of *Soul on Ice* around the time of its publication. Though Cleaver stated within this memoir that he had reformed his ways after raping Black women, his accounts still contain sexist and, as discussed in the previous chapter, homophobic language that was never called into question by other members of the Party in a documented manner. Unchecked misogyny and homophobia served as pillars of the notions of masculinity upheld by the Black Panther Party. It is now imperative to understand the links between anti-women and anti-gay sentiment in order to trace a connection to patriarchal, hypermasculine identities and ideals promoted by Black radicals.

### 4.3 Misogyny and Homophobia

Misogyny and homophobia are both tied to the favoring of traditionally masculine traits and experiences among men, which are held in higher regard than traditionally feminine traits and experiences among women. Even when performing their gender as culturally expected of them, women are still relegated to a secondary position within modern society. While homophobia has everything to do with uninformed views of biology and strict adherence to traditional social and cultural relationship norms as a

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29 Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, 34.
means to discriminate, misogyny also has a hand in discrimination against gay men and women. The subsequent section of this chapter will explore how, exactly, this pertains to Black people in the mid to late twentieth century and the formation of Black homophobia, but a bridge must first be constructed between misogyny and homophobia in order to fully understand the extent to which Black Panther misogyny and Black masculinity affected gay experiences during this time. Misogyny informs homophobia in ways that make both women, gay men, and lesbians the targets of hypermasculine discrimination, whether that discrimination comes from straight men themselves or society as a whole.

There are images and expectations for what men and women should look like, how they should carry themselves, how they should talk. But gender roles are also ingrained in what is unseen. Sexual orientation is gendered when considering a traditional, heteronormative lens: to be a woman is to love a man, and to love a man is to be a woman, for example. These heterosexual relations between men and women are often viewed as operating within a gendered or patriarchal hierarchy that hinges on subordination, and because of this, some radical feminists like Catherine MacKinnon argue that gender is innately tied to heterosexuality – that is to say that gender only matters and is fully actualized within heterosexual relations, while everyone else grapples with a sense of genderlessness. However, other prominent feminist theorists such as Judith Butler have advocated for a step away from this ideology, arguing instead that gender and sexuality can and do exist completely separate from one another and come with their own sets of punishments for breaking with tradition or expectation in either
category. While this is an increasingly widespread understanding in the twenty-first century, the presumed correlation between gender (or sex) and sexuality is the reason why gay people were seen as a “third sex” in the 1960s and 1970s, and why homophobia was defined as a form of “sexism” rather than orientation or sexuality-based discrimination in that time as well.

What happens, then, when a man loves a man? What implication does that have on the way his gender is viewed by both himself and the world around him? Though “gender” may not have been the word used by most during the Black Power era, the status of men in that time revolved around their performance of masculinity or femininity, which Judith Butler evaluates as a part of the process of having a gender. Part of the theater of masculinity for men was the act of being heterosexual – of loving women. The love of women is what also caused (and still causes) lesbians to be represented as masculine, and negatively masculine at that due to the deviance from norms of gender and sexuality. Because of the militant nature of the Black Panthers, and the links between masculinity and militancy and aggression, Black gay men – whose love of men was considered feminine and therefore inferior – knew that the core principles of the Black Panther Party did not exist to represent them, and that they did not exist to represent the Black Panther Party. When a man loved a man, he was reduced to the feminine, and to be reduced to the feminine was to be made a second-class member of society.

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30 Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2004), 53-55.
It is difficult, if not impossible, to untangle homophobia from misogyny, and an attempt to do so will not be made within this work. Instead, the demonization of femininity and perceived femininity is the focus as this analysis shifts toward revealing the roots of the stifling nature of Black masculinity. Gay men are not inherently feminine in the same way that women are not inherently feminine – both have had femininity prescribed to them as a means to promote the superiority of “masculine” (straight) men. Black masculinity acts as fuel to the flame of Black homophobia, providing an avenue for Black straight men to pave their own gendered narrative apart from White supremacy while still engaging with or paralleling dominant White institutions of sexist and homophobic oppression.

4.4 Black Masculinity, Black Homophobia

Very rarely have the musings of Black feminists such as bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, Barbara Smith, and Michele Wallace been utilized as a means to dissect Black homophobia during the mid to late twentieth century. Black feminist scholars and writers provide valuable insight to the concept of Black masculinity, offering up theory from the perspective of those subjected to sexism, exclusion, and violence at the hands of Black men and Black patriarchal organizations. Likewise, in many of the few histories and studies of Black masculinity or masculinities, homophobia does not often crop up as part of the conversation. It is here that these concepts are all combined. Masculinity, homophobia, and race all need to be present in conversation with

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one another in order to construct a holistic image of how Black homophobia developed and spread during the civil rights and Black Power era. The underrepresented writings of Black feminists guide this interpretation of Black masculinity.

Michele Wallace introduces the concept of the “Black macho” in her 1979 *Black Macho & the Myth of the Super-Woman*, which closely analyzes the strained relationship between Black men and women in the decades prior. Wallace addresses Eldridge Cleaver’s sexism and approach to violence, stating that “Cleaver was macho and the sixties were years in which macho heroism was…taken seriously by many people…People yearned for the smell of blood on a page and Cleaver provided it.” Wallace also argues that Cleaver’s homophobia was rooted in aggression toward the White man, whom he saw as having a hand in corrupting Black gay men and making them “counter-revolutionary.” Wallace denounces this notion as nonsensical and hypocritical, as Black gay men were no more involved with White men than were Black straight women.35 This concept of Black gay men being “counter-revolutionary” operated upon the same rhetoric that Elaine Brown used when describing the Panthers’ attitudes toward Black women.36 Black masculinity or Black machismo was identified by name as early as the late 1970s, in which the Black Panther Party was still an active, though dwindling, organization. Though Wallace herself does not offer any attention to Black homophobia outside of addressing Cleaver’s hypocrisy, her theories in *Black Macho* help construct, in part, a broader view of what it meant to be a masculine man in the 1960s.

According to Wallace, “in ’67, black was angry,” and “anywhere from vaguely to militantly anti-white,” but it was more socially acceptable and even expected for this

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aggression to be exhibited by Black men rather than Black women. Wallace traces this fulfilled role of the angry Black man to slavery, in which the Black man was “not permitted to fulfill his traditional role as a man” due to having rights and family stripped away from him by White slaveowners.\(^\text{37}\) During and after the time of slavery, White society developed a view of the Black man as sexually “depraved” and a threat to, specifically, White women.\(^\text{38}\) This sexual depravation is centered around a view of Black men as hypermasculine predators, which Cleaver seems to proudly tote in *Soul on Ice* as he unabashedly proclaims his rape of Black women in preparation for his raping of White women. bell hooks describes Cleaver, thus, as recklessly embodying “the brutal black beast of white racist imaginations,” though in Cleaver’s mind, he was doing the opposite.\(^\text{39}\) Cleaver and other Black men’s aggressive displays of sexuality function, then, as a sort of reclamation of the sexuality of which White men once stripped them or their ancestors. This take on sexuality feeds into toxic Black masculinity and traditional notions of men as sexual beings; Black men had something to prove after centuries of systemic emasculation, and this reclamation relegated Black women to the same, secondary positions of wife and child-bearer that they had held for the same amount of time.\(^\text{40}\)

\(^{38}\) Wallace, *Black Macho*, 27.
\(^{39}\) bell hooks, *We Real Cool*, 48-49.
The formation and impact of the Black church, as well as its homophobia, can also be traced to slavery and influences of White supremacy and Eurocentrism. The Black church was born out of an era in which many Black people longed for a way to unite their African identities with their recent conversion to Christianity during slavery. The Black church is a testament to the existence of distinct slave culture and early Black culture that had a deeper function beyond just “mimicking mainstream white culture.” Homophobia in the Black church originated most clearly from the “literalist theological views” taught by Black denominations that stem directly from the comfort and liberation many slaves once found in the “literalness of Scripture.” Dr. Elijah Ward also identifies two other origins of homophobia within the Black church: 1) a desire to retaliate against the racist stereotype of Black sexual promiscuity vis a vis condemning nontraditional sexualities or sexual arrangements, and 2) the concept of “race survival consciousness” which seeks to construct and preserve Black masculinity as a defensive response to attempted domination by the White race. The Black church was both a deviation from and a response to the oppressive nature of ubiquitous White culture during and after enslavement, promoting a distinct Black community based on shared spiritual and cultural elements.

The Black church is often regarded as “the most important black institution in the United States.” It emerged as an anchor of Black culture that allowed the Black enslaved (or formerly enslaved) population to see their lives as belonging to God rather than to the White man. The Black church, functioning as a distinctly non-White

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43 Gadzekpo, “The Black Church,” 95.
institution, served as a cultural center for disenfranchised and oppressed people to form an identifiable Black community that met the needs of Black people. A similar pro-Black sentiment is echoed in the values of the Black Panther Party, though religion was not at all a factor of the Panthers’ ten key demands or beliefs. Founded just over a century after the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment, the Black Panther Party demanded “an end to the robbery by the white man of our black community” and believed that Black people could not be free until they were “able to determine” their own destiny.  

The Black church and the Black Panthers, though serving different purposes in the Black community, both fostered cultures of homophobia through their reactions to White culture or White domination. In an attempt to distance their theology from that of White Christianity, the literalness of Black interpretations of Scripture paved the way for rampant homophobia, just as the Black Panthers exhibited their homophobia by way of promoting Black masculinity in response to the emasculation of Black bodies by White people.

Much of the formation of modern Black masculinity – and, eventually, Black homophobia – thus can be attributed to a reaction to the White supremacist hold on the Black body. Angela Davis points out the myth surrounding Black sexuality and the sexual violence committed by Black men, calling it “the myth of the Black rapist.” Davis posits the concept of Black sexual aggression as a construction of White society because White people are quick to frame Black men as rapists and predators in order to provide grounds for lynching or otherwise killing them, such as in the case of Emmett Till.  

While some, like Cleaver, live out the aggression attributed to Black men by White

people, Davis argues that this sexual violence, specifically against White women, is largely – but not wholly – mythical. Black men were thus punished and demonized for their behavior and their existence whether or not they exhibited sexual aggression the way White people believed they all did.

Drawing on dozens of case studies of Black men, Pierre Orelus’s *The Agony of Masculinity* showcases similar beliefs held by Black men in the LGBTQ community themselves, though these perspectives are not as focused on the 1960s and 1970s as those brought to the discussion by Black feminists. One man interviewed by Orelus – “Dr. Joe,” a Black straight trans man – stated that Black men’s masculinity is a product of how they have been oppressed by others. Another man, a Black gay man named Thomas, expressed that his masculinity could not be separated from his Blackness – Blackness is built from masculinity and super-masculine images promoted by both Black and White societies. Dr. Joe commented that there is a need among Black men to “regain” the masculinity and sexuality that had been stripped from them by colonizers.46 A certain anger and need for correction has therefore been bred by the emasculation of Black men by their White oppressors. Black men were simultaneously feminized by White men and viewed as sexually aggressive toward White women, leaving little to no room for Black men to have any healthy connection to masculinity, especially masculinity as it was conceived by White society for their White men.47

Attention must turn, then, to what this complex relationship to masculinity meant for the Black gay people in the 1950s and beyond. Quite simply, as Audre Lorde theorized, Black gay men and women were not “being given the tools by which to deal”

with the racist, homophobic society in which they lived. There was, essentially, no way to win – no way to attain a leg up in society for those who were both Black and gay.

Being a gay man was viewed as a feminine thing, and the opposite of what Black men seemed to be trying to prove themselves to be. Black gay men of the Black Power era had grown up in households where they were told to “be a man,” which meant to hide vulnerability – and they did so willingly in order to not have their sexualities questioned. Performing heterosexuality became just as much an event as performing maleness, so much so that being a man meant being straight. Ben – the Black bisexual man interviewed by Pierre Orelus – admitted to talking about women with very sexist language during his teenage and early adult years in an effort to “provide maleness” to the family and society around him that expected it from him.

Homosexuality was viewed by the Black radical community as yet another perversion of the Black body, this time from within, and was frowned upon in favor of the maintenance of traditional masculinity and masculine sexuality. Eldridge Cleaver went so far as to say that White men, as “Omnipotent Administrators,” were the ones who prescribed or forced homosexuality onto the Black man, or the “Supermasculine Menial,” in order to keep Black men in line with their White supremacist views of the order of society. As bell hooks postulates in We Real Cool: “Deprived of a blueprint for healthy black male sexuality, most black males follow the racialized patriarchal script.”

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49 Black lesbians were “so far under cover that they were basically invisible” during the 1950s and 1960s, making it difficult to pinpoint their relationship to Black masculinity and femininity within this context. See Lorde, “I am Black,” 50.
This notion of racialized patriarchy helps inform Black homophobia as a distinctly Black issue despite having its origins in structures born out of White supremacy. The White, dominant society set up patriarchal rules prior to the twentieth century that it expected everybody of every color to follow. The racist view of Black men as sexual aggressors cultivated a society in which Black men were damned if they fit that mold and feminized if they didn’t. On a journey to find a place in a mobilizing, increasingly activist society, Black liberation culture excluded and even condemned Black gay men from its ranks, seeing their sexuality as a weakness that would set the movement backward due to the broader social stigma surrounding homosexuality.

Black gay men existed at a crossroads of oppression in which they were discriminated against by White society for being both Black and gay, but also pushed out of Black circles because of their sexuality. The reason being is that gay people can mask or deny the fact that they are gay, but Black people cannot hide their blackness. This should not discount, however, the pain and misery that comes along with remaining closeted. Black gay men existed under constant oppression by White society, but would only face homophobic discrimination if they let their sexuality be known. Bayard Rustin likely found so much success in the Civil Rights Movement because of his philosophy of prioritizing the Black struggle over his sexuality, though he was not in the closet and did face ample discrimination because of this. Likewise, Angela Davis did not come out as a lesbian until the 1990s, having spent the majority of the 1970s promoting Black Panther and Black Communist rhetoric and running from the FBI rather than identifying with the Stonewall Rebellion and outcast Black lesbians such as Audre Lorde.

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53 hooks, *We Real Cool*, 70-71.
and Yvonne Flowers.\textsuperscript{55} Black gay radicals had a choice to make during the Black Power era: be Black and join the struggle, or be gay and find alternative paths to liberation.

Patricia Hill Collins illuminates the fact that many Black militants embraced the stereotype of Black hypermasculinity in order to provide themselves with some sort of advantage in a society which afforded them none on its own. The reclamation of Black manhood and the expressions of institutional and violent sexism against Black women were a gateway for Black men to enter the arena of patriarchal supremacy.\textsuperscript{56} Black women and Black gay men were expected to “bend” for Black straight men, give up their own power and strength in order to allow Black straight men to carry out a role which they had previously not been “allowed to fulfill.”\textsuperscript{57} In an effort to liberate themselves and all Black people, Black radical men engaged in sexist and homophobic thought and actions that rivaled the bigotry and discrimination of the broader White society that they sought to uproot. The culture of Black masculinity drove a wedge between Black and gay identities, causing men like poet Essex Hemphill to take years or decades to discover that their existence as Black gay men “did not constitute a whole life nor did it negate [their] racial identity or constitute a substantive reason to be estranged from…Black culture.”\textsuperscript{58}

The anti-establishment beliefs and actions of the Black Panthers did not extend to the

\textsuperscript{55} This is not to say that Davis’s delay in coming out held any political weight. The process of coming out is incredibly personal and should not be reduced to a weaponized identity. It is important to note, however, that Davis not being out in the 1970s provided a contrast between Black lesbians who were – and those Black lesbians were typically the ones fighting for Black gay liberation rather than the Black Panther Party. See Sara Miles, “Angela at Our Table,” \textit{OUT Magazine}, February 1998, quoted in Amy Sueyoshi and Lisbet Tellefsen, “Angela Davis: Outspoken,” 2018, \url{https://www.glbthistory.org/angela-davis-info}.

\textsuperscript{56} Collins, \textit{Black Feminist Thought}, 88, 153.

\textsuperscript{57} Audre Lorde, \textit{Sister Outsider} (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 61.

\textsuperscript{58} Essex Hemphill, “If Freud Had Been a Neurotic Colored Woman: Reading Dr. Frances Cress Welsing,” in \textit{Ceremonies} (New York: Plume, 1992), 52-53.
patriarchal establishment of social, cultural, and institutional homophobia, and there was no effort nor desire on the part of Black militants to make room for Black gay voices on the path to liberation.

Homophobia within Black radical spaces in and around the 1960s was the product of the cultivation of toxic Black masculinity. This masculinity was crafted primarily as a response to White supremacist notions of masculinity, especially as they pertain to the stereotypes and confines placed on the Black body. Black men were caught in a situation in which they could not win, in which they were both feminized and hypersexualized by White society during and after enslavement. Thus, Black masculinity functioned as the primary way Black men expressed themselves in a manner that both liberated themselves and vehemently opposed the rigid, suffocating nature of White masculinity and the White, “racialized patriarchy.”

However, despite attempting to separate themselves from White supremacy, an overcompensation of traditional and militant masculinity led Black straight men to engage in sexist and homophobic thinking and actions that mirrored the bigotry of the dominant White society. As gay men were largely seen as feminine for most if not all of the twentieth century, a rejection and subordination of femininity on the part of those who performed the Black machismo theorized by the likes of Michele Wallace led to both subtle and violent oppression of Black gay men within spaces of Black activist organization. Just as Black masculinity was formed in response to discrimination forged by White masculinity, Black gay people, including radical activists and creatives, had to form their own spaces and project their own voices in the face of oppression from other Black people in the 1960s and 1970s.

59 hooks, *We Real Cool*, 70-71.
Excluded from and shunned by mainstream and underground activist organizations alike, many Black gay people from the 1950s on took to artistic spaces to amplify their voices with what little tools their intersecting identities afforded them. Often, this meant pioneering lonely roads for the simple sake of expressing oneself, as in the case of writer James Baldwin. Black gay artists were frequently left with nobody but each other, or even themselves, to turn to for solidarity and comfort in both their ideas and their existences. Black gay spaces of activism and art were characteristically small, tight-knit, and sometimes hard to locate, but they served an essential function for many Black gay individuals in the 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. Organizing and existing around others with similar identities was something many Black gay Americans did not have the luxury of experiencing. The post-Stonewall era in particular empowered many Black gay artists and activists like Yvonne Flowers, Audre Lorde, and Alvin Ailey to find avenues to express themselves in ways that dedicatedly Black activist spaces did not allow. This chapter explores Black gay liberation pre- and post-Stonewall, which primarily manifested as the liberation of one’s individual mind and body through art due to the constant oppression enacted by White and Black heterosexual society.

Though many were not tied directly to any Black political movement, the work produced by Black gay artists was still inherently political and, more often than not, revolutionary in its mere existence. Being Black or gay was one thing, Black and gay another, but being Black and gay in a public way was political, and these political acts clashed with the agendas of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party.
alike.¹ Both movements promoted ideals of somewhat monolithic Blackness and Black masculinity which, as evidenced in Chapter 4, were closely intertwined with homophobia. This disdain for homosexuality within Black political movements was directly challenged by Black gay fiction, poetry, and other forms of art. Ideas and events were prioritized over art and abstract expression in these movements, but Black gay artists wove their own ideas and experiences within their art, creating a highly personal alternative to mainstream Black activism despite all being fairly disconnected from one another. Individual Black gay liberation emerged ahead of collective activism in this sense.

The importance of Black gay artistic expression hinges on the subversion of traditional views of Blackness. Not only did Black gay artists subvert expectations of Blackness from a Black perspective, but they subverted broader American ideals of heterosexuality and strict gender norms as well, challenging the eyes and minds of Black and White audiences alike. Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* was not read only by Black Americans, nor were the politically charged and culturally significant dances of Alvin Ailey performed only for Black audiences.² In fact, Black gay artists tended to have a better connection to the masses than their activist counterparts, due mostly to the subtle nature of gay themes and content in their work. Listening to the jazz stylings of Gertrude “Ma” Rainey or reading James Baldwin’s novels was more palatable to than turning the

¹ This argument is based, in part, on feminist thinker Carol Hanisch’s notion of the personal as political. See: Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” February 1969, http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html.

² Nor were Baldwin’s works solely read by American audiences. Baldwin spent many years in Europe and found more support for his publications there than at home. However, as Baldwin describes, Europe was where he “became an American” as he continuously realized the importance of promoting and aiding in the Black struggle at home. See: Fern Marja Eckman, *The Furious Passage of James Baldwin* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1966), 122.
pages of *The Black Panther*, which was frequently riddled with violent images depicting attacks on White policemen, or acquiescing to the political demands of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the rest of those involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Black gay people were certainly not afforded any type of liberation by the BPP or the Civil Rights Movement, which propelled them to act within the margins of society to seek their own means of personal freedom on the basis of the intersection of their race and sexuality.

**5.1 Early Black Gay Artists**

The personal liberation of Black gay people through art is not a phenomenon born solely out of the mid to late twentieth century, of course. Blues legend Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, who was known to have women lovers throughout her career, crooned in 1928: “Wear my clothes just like a fan / Talk to gals just like any old man,” alluding to her same-gender attraction in the song “Prove It on Me Blues.”\(^3\) Angela Davis describes this song of Rainey’s as a “cultural precursor to the lesbian cultural movement of the 1970s,” as Rainey was unapologetic and “affirming” about her sexuality neither in her personal life nor on her records, many of which featured lyrics of sexual liberation if not clear attraction to women. Jazz singing was also a form of expression for LGB artists like Bessie Smith and Alberta Hunter, though Smith was more overt in her lyrics and Hunter remained closeted until later in life.\(^4\) Jazz and blues music played pivotal roles in the Harlem Renaissance of the early twentieth century, which also included authors, activists, and poets like Langston Hughes.

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\(^3\) Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, “Prove It on Me Blues,” Paramount 12668, June 1928, quoted in Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Random House, 1998), 39-40. Rainey’s sexuality was never expressed with a label in her own words, so it is unknown if she would have identified as a lesbian or bisexual, though the latter was not a commonly used term at the time.

Hughes wrote many poems with possible homoerotic connotations such as his 1926 “Young Sailor” and 1928 “Boy,” which both emphasized other men’s looks and prowess – their “strength” and “virile length” – in ways poems by other men of the same era did not. Speculation on Hughes’s sexuality has been an ongoing debacle for decades among those interested in Black literature and history, but Harvard’s Dr. Andrew Donnelly puts the matter most poignantly: “If we begin with the question, Has there ever been a gay Langston Hughes? We can only answer: We don’t know, but there has certainly been a closeted one.” Even those at the philosophical heart of the movement were gay but somewhat or fully closeted, such as in the case of writer and Harlem Renaissance pioneer Alain Locke. Whether or not every artist of the Harlem Renaissance was open about their confirmed or disputed gayness, it was a period of artistic displays of Black sexuality and sexual freedom, which fostered a culture of homoerotic expression among many musicians and writers.

As the postwar era of patriarchal, extensively oppressive masculinity dawned on the United States, it became even more dangerous to be outwardly gay, especially for those in the public spheres of the arts and activism. Black gay people looking to enter activist spaces typically either had to adhere to the shapes and constraints of White gay organizations or hide their sexuality to be accepted into Black organizations, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Before the creation of specifically Black gay spaces in the 1970s and

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5 Langston Hughes, “Young Sailor,” 1926, and Langston Hughes, “Boy,” 1928, quoted in A.B. Christa Schwartz, *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 80. Hughes’s 1926 “Port Town” was also potentially written from the perspective of a woman – but potentially not – giving a hint of taboo ambiguity to the lines “Hello, sailor boy, / In from the sea! / Hello, sailor, / Come with me!” as Hughes was blurring the lines of either gender or sexual expression. Schwartz, *Gay Voices*, 81.


1980s, art and writing once again became avenues for the expression of Black gay thought. One such example is the work of James Baldwin, who published *Giovanni’s Room* in 1956, which artists and scholars alike began giving more attention in later decades. *Giovanni’s Room* explores themes of homosexuality, bisexuality, shame, and social alienation through its protagonist David, titular character Giovanni, and others such as Joey and “The Flaming Princess,” the latter of whom David meets in a Parisian gay bar. Writing from David’s perspective recounting his first sexual experience with a man, Baldwin pens, “It seemed, then, that a lifetime would not be long enough for me to act with Joey the act of love.”8 Tender, frazzled, and aching depictions of same-gender experiences exist throughout the novel, and were enough for Baldwin’s agent to suggest he burn his manuscript, as he did not believe the book could be published anywhere due to these themes.9

Baldwin also received notoriety for his later novel *Another Country*, which was aggressively criticized by Eldridge Cleaver throughout his 1968 memoir *Soul on Ice* for its depictions of Black bisexuality which, to Cleaver, called into question and made a mockery of Black masculinity. Unlike *Giovanni’s Room, Another Country* explores, in part, same-gender experiences of a Black character: spiraling musician Rufus Scott, who commits suicide partway throughout the story, leaving his circle of friends and acquaintances to grapple with the loss. The novel intertwines race with sexuality, with Baldwin writing of one of Rufus’s male lovers: “Somewhere in his heart, Vivaldo hated and feared Rufus because he was black.”10 Both *Giovanni’s Room* and *Another Country*

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hold great significance, as after the end of the Harlem Renaissance, there were very few gay American writers who authored books with gay or bisexual characters, and none of them – the authors nor the characters – were Black.\footnote{See, for example, Truman Capote, Other Voices, Other Rooms (New York: Random House, 1948); Gore Vidal, The City and the Pillar (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1948); and Gale Wilhelm, Torchlight to Valhalla (New York: Random House, 1938). Baldwin’s earlier Go Tell It on the Mountain also features homosexual undertones, though they are not as prominent as the exploration of religion and the Black family, and did not cause as many issues with publication and reception as the next two novels. James Baldwin, Go Tell It on the Mountain (New York: Knopf, 1953).} Baldwin’s authoring of these two novels is, in and of itself, revolutionary and groundbreaking, as he was the first Black gay author to write novels with gay characters and plots, and he did so during a time of immense oppression of homosexuality in the United States. Giovanni’s Room was published just three years after the arrest that outed Bayard Rustin, and the climate of the United States was abundantly dangerous for those who were Black, gay, and Black and gay.

Despite his courageous leaps in his career as a writer, James Baldwin did not associate himself closely with any organizations based on race or sexuality as they began to gain traction in the 1960s. In conversation with Richard Goldstein in the 1980s, upon being asked about gay life, “which is so group-oriented, so tribal,” Baldwin expressed that he was “not that kind of person at all.” What can be identified as the emergent gay community and more group-minded thinking among gay people “came along much after [he] was formed,” indicating a sense of forced isolation from others in his early adulthood that translated into willing isolation in his later years when resources, outlets, and spaces for gay and Black gay individuals became more widely available.\footnote{Baldwin, “Go the Way Your Blood Beats,” 60-61.} Baldwin grew up in and did much of his writing in a time where none of that existed for him, and
his feelings of alienation that began as a teenager – much of which were tied to his sexuality – had a hand in his lack of comfort in joining or motivation to join any social or political organizational space. Baldwin did not conceptualize himself as existing within the Black activist world, regardless of whether this alienation was intentional or a product of decades of shame and discrimination that Baldwin faced growing up and into his adulthood. Baldwin was also, of course, an artist, which is often an isolating career in and of itself. He chose writing as the outlet for his identity because the nation around him was so inhospitable to both his race and his sexuality that he had to go overseas to find any type of meaningful support for his art.\(^\text{13}\) James Baldwin was an intrepid pioneer of Black gay fiction not because he intended to be, but because – in order to remain true to himself and his craft – he imbued his characters with an unapologetic reality that had never been seen before from the pen of a Black American.

5.2 Art and Activism into the 1960s, 1970s, and Beyond

The newly revived spirit of Black gay writing, at least on the level of public acknowledgment which met most of Baldwin’s works, also touched the life and career of Black lesbian Audre Lorde. Lorde primarily wrote poetry, but also authored the 1982 “biomythography” *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, which blends a biography of Lorde’s life with fictional elements but still depicts Lorde’s relationships – platonic, romantic, and sexual – with other lesbians.\(^\text{14}\) Politically, socially, and artistically active at the time of the Stonewall Rebellion, Lorde did not publicly come out as a lesbian until the publication of her 1970 poem “Martha.” The titular Martha acts as both seemingly tangible and intangible to Lorde, who writes, “we have loved each other and yes I hope /


we still can / no Martha I do not know if we shall ever / sleep in each other’s arms again.”  

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Lorde was unabashed about her sexuality, but it came after a period of intense isolation experienced by many Black gay people. At one point in her life, Lorde genuinely thought she was the “only” Black lesbian living in Greenwich Village despite the area being a hub of gay nightlife and organization. Most of those forming circles and communities in the Village were White gays, and Lorde thus felt excluded and alienated a fair amount before Stonewall.

The gender roles present in the Black Panther Party would have been particularly off-putting to Black lesbians looking for spaces to organize. As discussed in previous chapters, the Panthers relegated women to supportive and administrative roles within the Party and prioritized the voices of its male members. Men and women in the Party were framed as couples, as “the black man and his woman,” and a 1967 article in *The Black Panther* described Black women as being “magnetically” attracted to Black men because of the fighting they did for the Black community as a whole. What was a Black lesbian to make of this? Acting as an accessory to Black men, as most Panther women were expected to do, would have been wholly unappealing to Lorde, who came out just a few years into the Black Panthers’ tenure. Lorde expressed in the 1980s that she had always been looking for a community of Black lesbians where her racial and sexual identities could be shared and celebrated. This was found neither in the Black Panther Party nor the

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predominantly lesbian scene in 1960s New York, which was predominantly White and, thus, culturally alienating.¹⁸

Audre Lorde and Black lesbians in pre-Stonewall New York were “so far under cover” that they may as well have been invisible, making it difficult to form bonds in a time in which White gay radical organizing itself was still dangerous, and the Black Panther Party was largely inhospitable to gay radicals.¹⁹ After being emboldened by Stonewall, Audre Lorde began publishing more and more poems, essays, and a novel with overt themes and subjects that handle the intersection of race and sexuality. Lorde did not just write lesbian poems and essays, she wrote distinctly Black lesbian poems and essays after years of being unable to find any sort of Black gay community within which she could place herself and her identity as an artist and activist. Even after Stonewall, the lesbian scene in the Village was still heavily White, but instead of feeling downtrodden and out of place as she did in the 1950s and 1960s, Lorde joined together with other Black lesbians like Yvonne Flowers to cultivate spaces specifically for Black gay people to congregate and share ideas and art, such as within the Salsa Soul Sisters organization.²⁰

Lorde was a close friend of Yvonne Flowers, who sometimes went by the more masculine “Vonne” at the gay bars she ventured into wherever her studies and travels took her.²¹ Flowers was not a writer in the professional sense, but she was involved in the art and nightlife scenes of 1960s Harlem, which still heavily revolved around jazz music, much as they did decades prior during the Renaissance. Raised by a Communist mother, Flowers always had a bold edge to her personality and was drawn to nightlife scenes after

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¹⁸ Flowers and Lorde, interview by Jewel Gomez.
¹⁹ Lorde, “I am Black,” 50.
²⁰ Flowers and Lorde, interview by Jewel Gomez.
²¹ Duberman, Stonewall, 52-53.
she went off to college on the West Coast. However, just as Audre Lorde had found and as James Baldwin had once verbalized, the White gays there were not as warm and welcoming to young Black lesbians like Flowers, largely due to persistent racism and the inability to unite White gay ambitions with Black gay situations.\textsuperscript{22} Flowers commonly ended up as the token Black lesbian invited to middle or upper-middle class White lesbian gatherings in Seattle, San Francisco, or after her relocation to New York. Clashes between the subcultures of White and Black lesbians in New York persisted into the 1970s, and Yvonne Flowers was one of the few who decided it was time to give Black lesbians a space of their own away from White gay realms of exclusion and Black radical arenas of homophobia and misogyny.\textsuperscript{23}

Little is known about the Salsa Soul Sisters, and even less about Yvonne Flowers or most of the other co-founders of the organization. Martin Duberman’s \textit{Stonewall}, which weaves anecdotes from and interviews with Flowers herself with other LGBTQ activists of the Stonewall era, provides the only thorough account of Flowers’s life in the existing historical record, but Duberman does not give any detail as to the forming of the group or its operations. A 2012 interview revealed that according to original member Aida Rentas, the organization was originally set to be called the “Soul Sisters,” but Rentas, a Latina, wanted to join forces with her Black lesbian friends, thus adding the “Salsa” to the mix.\textsuperscript{24} A collection of information exists on the Salsa Soul Sisters, who

\textsuperscript{22} Duberman, \textit{Stonewall}, 54; Tinney, “Baldwin Comes Out.”
\textsuperscript{23} Duberman, \textit{Stonewall}, 347. The Black Panthers and the Black Power movement as a whole were also beginning to decline in support at this time, providing another reason why Black gay people looking to organize after Stonewall did not turn to their ranks.
were most active in the 1970s, throughout university archives in Manhattan and Brooklyn, but these records were unavailable at the time of this research.\textsuperscript{25} However, the precursors to the formation of the Salsa Soul Sisters as experienced by members like Flowers and Lorde highlight the need for a space for lesbians of color – some Latina, but primarily Black – to organize and embrace non-White lesbianism. Decades of isolation from other Black gay people like that endured by James Baldwin made this need even more apparent in the wake of the Stonewall Rebellion.

In addition to writing and activism, dance also became a world to which Black gay men fled in order to express themselves. Dance served as an outlet for artistic and personal freedom that could often not otherwise be had due to the hypermasculine expectations placed upon Black men by both the Black and White societies around them. Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) was one of the most celebrated dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century. A Black gay man of the rural South, Ailey skyrocketed to fame in New York with dances representing the beauty of Black life and activism in America set to songs inspired by the Harlem jazz sound of decades prior.\textsuperscript{26} Ailey’s success on the stage was undoubtedly complicated and perhaps fueled by his torrid relationship with his family regarding his sexuality and masculinity. Though homosexuality was “simply a fact of life” at the Horton studio in which he trained, Ailey kept his relationships with men private from his mother, who knew about yet did not accept his sexuality, and hit him hard across the face the first time she saw him in makeup for a performance.\textsuperscript{27} The dance

\textsuperscript{25} These records are kept physically at Brooklyn College and City University of New York, and were inaccessible due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
\textsuperscript{27} Dunning, \textit{Alvin Ailey}, 54-57, 75.
world of New York celebrated Ailey’s Blackness and gayness rather than punishing it, allowing Ailey to flourish in a realm of acceptance he had never once found before, especially with regard to displays of masculinity and femininity. Ailey took solace in the true freedom of expression he found on stage that was afforded to him neither by the masculine constraints of Black society nor the exclusivity of White gay New York.

Black gay thinkers, writers, activists and performers took to different corners of the public sphere to carve out a space for themselves in spite of racist and homophobic prejudice within the United States and racial apathy and exclusion within White gay circles. James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, Yvonne Flowers, Alvin Ailey, and many more took courageous steps necessary to put Black gay success in public view in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. However, Black gay discrimination and exclusion existed after the contributions and legacies of such pioneers, and Black gay artists continued to take to writing and other forms of art to express their feelings of placelessness. Essex Hemphill (1957-1995) was a poet and activist whose poems explored the heartbreaking realities of the Black gay community in the 1980s and 1990s. It was important for Hemphill to “integrate all of [his] identities into a functioning self,” these identities being his Blackness and his gayness, but also, later in life, his identity as a person dying of AIDS and witnessing his friends succumb to the same disease.28 These identities intersect in Hemphill’s poetry through feelings of loneliness and longing as a Black gay man.

In one poem, “Heavy Corners,” Hemphill writes: “Don’t let it be the loneliness / that kills us / If we must die / on the front line / let us die men / loved by both sexes.”29

28 Hemphill, “If Freud Had Been,” 58.
Hemphill speaks of a collective “us” in this poem, indicating that he is representing Black gay men like himself who were also confronted with the persistent threat of death that came from the AIDS crisis during the late twentieth century. Dr. Darius Bost traces similarly heartbreaking feelings of emptiness and loneliness to other poems of Hemphill’s, many of which were elegies for other Black gay men such as “When My Brother Fell.” Through Hemphill’s poems, Black gay trauma can be observed as an incredibly isolating situation that once again found itself put on display in Black gay circles rather than White gay ones. Neither heterosexual nor White gay society heard Hemphill’s agonizing pleas for belonging near the ends of his and his friend’s lives – to Hemphill, White gays had no non-sexual interest in Black gay men in the 1980s.

Knowing that Black gay men had essentially been left to care for, strengthen, and uplift one another, Hemphill spent years capturing and immortalizing Black gay feeling, even at its most tormented.

5.3 Limitations of Visibility

Of the few places where Black radical activists and revolutionary thinkers and artists could possibly share their ideas and their crafts, The Black Panther was not one of them. In its early years – 1967 and 1968 – the BPP’s newsletter constantly featured (in

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32 For further reading on the Black gay experience as it relates to the AIDS crisis, which extends past the scope of this research, see Jonathan Bell, ed., Beyond the Politics of the Closet: Gay Rights and the American State since the 1970s (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Kevin J. Mumford, “In the Life of Joseph Beam,” in Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 125-146; and Frank León Roberts and Marvin K. White, eds., If We Have to Take Tomorrow: HIV, Black Men & Same Sex Desire (Los Angeles: Institute for Gay Men’s Health, 2006).
addition to news) art, comics, photographs, and revolutionary manifestos that invigorated Black radicals week to week. Think pieces like “Pig Mythology of Christianity” and “No Jive Revolution” denounced both Black and White institutions of religion and liberal activism that were deemed harmful to the radical Panther agenda by its members. Ideas that challenged or did not align flush with militant Black Panther ideals were not given a spotlight or even a spot in the back pages of *The Black Panther*, no matter how radical they were. As described in Chapter 4, militant hypermasculinity, misogyny, and homophobia coursed through the veins of the Black Panther Party as well as its newsletter, which was one of its largest avenues of spreading Panther ideals. The Black Panthers limited the scope of their newsletter to the Panther brand of radicalism, alienating other experiences and ideas of radical Black existence and forcing expressions of such existence to manifest elsewhere. There was no room for the Black artistic voice in *The Black Panther* – especially if that voice was gay.

Black gay activists and artists who did not align with the Panthers were also not known to share their thoughts in more mainstream Black newspapers, either. In fact, James Baldwin’s novel *Giovanni’s Room* was criticized and mocked in circulations such as *The Crisis* despite the fact that Baldwin had previously received praise from many Black newspapers for his writing ability in the early 1950s. *The Crisis* was founded as the original newspaper for the NAACP, and in 1957, it featured a review of *Giovanni’s Room* penned by critic James Ivy. This review ridiculed Baldwin’s portrayal of love between two men, stating that the homosexual romance within the book is “crudely

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comic rather than tragic,” and that it was a shame that Baldwin had wasted his skills on such an unfulfilling and taboo subject.\textsuperscript{35} Black newspapers were inhospitable for Black gay content due to rampant homophobia and masculine expectations that were promoted and circulated by publications across the nation. Black gay artists, writers, and activists thus had to create and organize within their own circles as they continued to find themselves cast out from Black heterosexual and White gay societies and organizations.

Despite facing pre- and post-Stonewall institutions and communities that had been founded without their interests or experiences in mind, many Black gay writers, artists, and activists found slivers of personal liberation in twentieth-century America. This did not always come in the form of a new gay organization such as Yvonne Flowers’s Salsa Soul Sisters, though tight-knit Black gay circles were an optimistic element of the era after Black gay individuals existed on the fringes of White gay society for years. James Baldwin never aligned himself with any Black or gay organization but still fulfilled his own visions for his art as a Black gay man, producing new and groundbreaking characters and stories that represented Black gay realities like America had hardly – if ever – seen on a page before. Alvin Ailey and Essex Hemphill also determined the parameters of their own liberation, finding solace in dance and poetry, respectively, to grapple with the at-times crushing weight of what it meant to be Black and gay in a broader society that cared neither for the Black man nor the gay man. The twentieth century was largely not a time for institutional progress for Black gay Americans. However, the efforts of individuals to uplift and share their own voices and feelings

\textsuperscript{35} James W. Ivy, “Faerie Queens,” \textit{The Crisis} 64, no. 2 (1957), 123.
through art and activism fostered a culture of Black gay liberation attained by personal means and experiences rather than one singular movement.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The mid- to late twentieth century proved to be a volatile time for all gay Americans, but to be Black and gay meant being subjected to oppression by Black and White society alike, and this hostility boiled down to neither racism nor homophobia alone. Black gay Americans existed at a unique crossroads of marginalized identities, and frequently felt the need to choose between being Black and being gay – only one of which they could visibly hide. Of course, Black gayness was not something that could be so easily separated into two, neat halves. Even for those who outwardly prioritized the Black struggle during the Civil Rights era, such as Bayard Rustin and James Baldwin, there was not a dedicated attempt to stifle one’s sexuality. It was simply more dangerous to be gay while Black, to be Black while gay. The choice for some was not merely between their race and their sexuality, but rather between activist spaces that aimed to improve the Black American condition and a life of inserting oneself into the margins of a society that legally and culturally shamed and persecuted the gay “habit.”¹ The majority of the twentieth-century United States was inhospitable and suffocating for Black gay people.

Black gay spaces and Black gay art were, thus, born out of necessity. Black masculinity and, subsequently, Black homophobia were cultivated by notions and institutions of White supremacy. As Black gay people could turn to neither the White gay community, which harbored racist prejudices, and the Black straight community, which fostered a culture of at-times violent homophobia, they had no choice but to turn inward

¹ Crane, “The Worry Clinic,” April 14, 1953.
and generate their own avenues of expression and organization. This trend did not stop with the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 nor the landmark *Lawrence v. Texas* and *Obergefell v. Hodges* decisions. To this very day, gay artists face discrimination at the hands of the masses due to the negativity that surrounds the Black gay identity. Twenty-first-century hip hop artists like Frank Ocean, Kevin Abstract, and Lil Nas X have been criticized by other Black artists in the hip hop, rap, and R&B genres for their public acknowledgments of their LGBTQ identities and the inclusion of such content in their lyrics.

Coming out in 2012 closed certain doors for Ocean, with whom some rappers or R&B musicians refused to work after his album *Channel Orange* made multiple references to his love of men.\(^2\) In the 2017 Brockhampton song “JUNKY,” Kevin Abstract takes on the voice of hip hop audiences when he bitterly asks himself, “Why you always rap about being gay?”\(^3\) And, in March 2021, Lil Nas X shook up more than just the hip hop community with his single “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name),” an unapologetically gay song accompanied by a music video depicting many religious figures and concepts, all of which have sparked significant controversy among religious Americans in particular.\(^4\) The act of being Black and gay in such a public way is still a highly scrutinized phenomenon due to the prejudices and constructs discussed within this work.

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\(^4\) Montero Lamar Hill, “MONTERO (Call Me By Your Name),” single, Columbia, 2021.
Homophobic backlash in response to modern music and artists such as the examples listed above is at the root of why many recent studies of Black masculinity have been written through the framework of media and popular culture. However, these studies are not always historical nor always focused on homosexuality and/or homophobia. There is still a gap in the historiography where Black gay voices fall through the cracks, and this thesis is only intended and able to take a small step toward rectifying the lack of literature on constructions and impacts of Black gay homophobia. The Black lesbian or otherwise sapphic perspective is even more scant, as Black men were the primary leaders of activist efforts and artistic frontiers before, during, and for a little while after the Civil Rights era, causing Black lesbian experiences to slip further and further from the forefront of Black gay studies. The reality is that lesbians and bisexual women are just as affected by Black homophobia and the “racialized patriarchy” as gay and bisexual men are, but more work must be done within the historiography to represent this truth.

Though Black homophobia grew out of institutions of White domination, this does not make the Black gay experience any less distinctly Black. Black homophobia was not cultivated as a mirror of White supremacy or White homophobia, but rather as a reaction to the dominant, racist system of oppression. Not only does this illuminate the centuries-long hold on Black bodies at the hands of White people, it also demonstrates

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6 hooks, We Real Cool, 70.
the role Black Americans had in the creation of their own toxic, patriarchal societal structure within the broader American society. Notable Black activist spaces and the teachings of the Black church alike evidence the way in which the fight for Black liberation was only intended for some Black people. Black gay individuals were sidelined and left to cope with their social and cultural alienation largely by themselves due to an overwhelming fear present in many Black organizations that giving up traditional norms of masculinity meant giving up the strength of the Black community. The words, thoughts, feelings, and actions of Black gay Americans born out of this pain, this isolation, are what we must turn our attention toward in order to provide a clear view of what it meant to be Black, gay, and Black and gay during the twentieth century.
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