

The Lives of the Black LGBT Community

The Lives of the Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community.

Imani A. Smith

Oakland University

Abstract

The research performed in this annotated bibliography highlights the black LGBT community and the secrets of the individuals living in this society. The annotated bibliography also will be about the way the black lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community are treated and viewed when it comes to opening up about their sexuality. I will discuss why homosexuality is such a taboo in the black community and why don't we talk about it? Also why is it hushed and why when it is discussed it is so much shame behind it? Last but not least this paper will briefly discuss the evolution of the black LGBT community since the 90s.

Keywords: homosexuality, "unmarriageable," nonheteronormative behavior, gender presentation.

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Green, A. I. (2007). On The Horns of a Dilemma: Institutional Dimensions of the Sexual Career in a sample of Middle-Class, Urban, Black, Gay Men. *Journal of Black Studies*, 37(5), 753-774.

Adam Isaiah Green conducts a study among 30 black, gay-identified men living in the big city of Manhattan, the subjects of the study range from the ages of 21 to 49 years old. They all had some type of college education, 60% even completed a four year degree putting them in a nice social status (minus the fact they were all gay-identified.) This study objective was to test men that were gay-identified to see how they deal with their careers and the institutions that may or may not support them. A lot of the study found that these men were most likely to be excluded from their black communities, churches and families. Green found also throughout his study that the men were most likely to be pushed out of the black communities but accepted with open arms in the urban, white gay institutions of downtown Manhattan.

Green made a point to gather information from all 30 subjects life history, having to do with their youth up until their “adult homosexual identity,” (Green, 2007) The data was gathered from what was called “push and pull phases,” throughout their sexual career and institutions that were triggering throughout their history. With two different institutions being brought to the audience under one roof “Black Gay Youth Pushed To The Margins Of Black Communities.” The first institution introduced was “kinship ties and church,” the second was “Black Homosexual Men Pulled into Urban Gay Centers,” and the study went on to examine the influences of many more institutions.

The family structure has a lot to do with how children are raised and the morals they seem to grow into. Religion plays a huge roll as well, even though children are supported overall throughout their shaping but when homosexual desires are expressed there is a resistance among the family and others. Homosexuality to black people is a sin, even though like Green stated, black communities support and/or endorse gay rights throughout civil rights history it’s still not so much accepted in their personal lives.

“The men found that the very **intergenerational familial systems** that fostered a healthy racial self-concept at the same time excluded their emerging homosexual attractions,” (Green, 2007) It’s hard to say what each of the 30 men went through when coming out as gay BLACK men but the dialogue overall suggested these men had it hard. Brad in his mid 30s for instance grew up in a household that viewed homosexuality as an abomination “Homosexuality was a white man’s disease that weak black men could catch,” was a statement provided by Brad when discussing his childhood sexual career.

The conclusion to this study is that often throughout their experiences, the men faced hardships, abandonment and shame. Sometimes the same church that called their desires acts of sin were the same churches that thought they could cure their “disease.” Green concludes with the study by making point that black gay men are most likely forced to adapt to cisgender desires or go outside their communities for support and repair of their self-esteem, outlook and etc.

**Holmes, K. (2015). What's the tea. *Radical History Review*, (122), 55-69.
doi:10.1215/01636545-2849531**

“*What’s the Tea,*” by Kwame Holmes touches on the radical history of the black gay social movement. Holmes points out some terms we have heard of numerous times, terms like patriarchy, homosexuality, male-white privilege and just white privilege in general. These terms are used to describe the way black gay identified individuals go through far more than the white gay identified. It’s not that one suffers more, it’s just that it’s more support, institutions and acceptance when it comes the white LGBT community. Black homosexuality was not highlighted during certain eras like Stonewall and the Lavender Scare, black homosexuals were more likely to be focused on poverty and violence and blamed homosexual desires on bad social structures. No support was provided for the black LGBT community because it was hidden and many more things out shadowed this “issue,” like worrying about where to rest their heads.

Some examples Holmes gave in his journal was about an older black gay identified male in his forties named Calvin, who was on and off when it came to his sexual desires. Calvin in this experience, once upon a time went back to being cisgender and married a woman and had a child but his conditions (being below the poverty line,) forced Calvin to go out and “turn tricks” (Holmes 2015,) in order to support his family. A lot of thought in this journal, is that women and men that decided towards same sex relationships did so because of the stresses of being black and broke, turning this into an urban crisis if anything. I can’t say I don’t agree.

“The HIV/AIDS epidemic also encouraged greater numbers of black queer people to identify with gay liberalism, believing it to be their duty to direct funding for HIV/AIDS resources to underserved black communities,” (Holmes) Black homosexual, queer and lesbian identified wanted to work behind the scenes in developing their own strategies of survival against this epidemic.

Holmes mentions something important, Ron Simmons a radical black gay nationalist, 1983 essay that states “the public discourse on AIDS only seemed to confirm that the disease was designed to eliminate unwanted populations at home and abroad.” “The type of people most likely to contract AIDS were identified as ‘drug addicts, Haitians and gays.’ That seemed to bring a whole other problem to the table and in the 90s it brought a serious awareness to the political table, demanding a need for funding for clinics and safe spaces for black urban gay, lesbian identified individuals.

Unfortunately black LGBT are still targeted all over the world especially right here in the city of Detroit, many murders happen against the black transgender community and a lot of stories are left out the media. Black lives seem to not matter, especially when it comes to homosexuals...it’s hushed and swept under the rug waiting for a “cure.” We have to figure out a strategy as a community to be able to protect all people no matter your sexual preferences. If we keep pushing the black LGBT to one section of the neighborhood (Palmer Park,) then we will continue to avoid the problem and not provide the support that the community needs. This article was full of important historical information especially during the 90s and in the political State of Washington.

Lewis, G. B. (2003). Black-White differences in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay rights. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 67(1), 59-78

Gregory B. Lewis does an intense survey of over seven thousand black people and forty-three thousand whites since the 70s. Lewis highlights the similarities and differences between black and white views on homosexuality and lesbianism. Asking a major question of where does the root for the way the two view homosexuality come from? And is the African American community more homophobic than the white community?.Lewis also goes over why differences matter (social classes and etc,) and how they play a major role in the LGBT community. According to the article, when coming out to those around them and society, African American LGBT people face more ridicule amongst each other.

Finally moving on to homophobia in the black communities. This is a big issue that needs to be addressed, it oppresses every single homosexual, lesbian, queer and transgender individual and puts their lives in jeopardy. Institutions such as churches support the homophobic attitude calling it a sin and “punishing,” gay identified men/women to hell. This keeps a lot of homosexuals in the closet and scared to express their true sexual desires which results in depression, suicide, self-esteem and sexual identity issues.

Understanding that when it comes to support a lot of black LGBT individuals they don't get the support they need from their peers either, they even express racism within LGBT community according to Lewis. Separation is alive in these group because social structures still exist, so one group feels their oppression and privilege is greater than the others. Even when you look at black youth they are more likely not to accept homosexuality (morals are passed down from generation to generation,) unlike white youth who are more accepting of the lifestyle because they have been exposed to it more in my opinion. Both white and black LGBT fight against gay discrimination even if they don't see eye to eye, both want to free to express themselves.

Last but not least, the AIDS/HIV epidemic caused the great Coretta Scott King to call for a “national campaign against homophobia in the black community,” leading people to stand up and take action against the underlying problem....the way homosexuality is viewed and dealt with. The way to curb homophobia in all communities needs to be examined more before a serious call of action can be taken, the underlying issues needs to be addressed and that is why is homosexuality look at as such a sin? Why don't we as a society just let people live their authentic selves rather than wanting them to suffer under our structures and institutions?

Leonard, K. A. (2011). Containing "Perversion": African americans and same-sex desire in cold war los angeles. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 20(3), 545-567.

Leonard covered how African Americans were supportive of the gay civil rights movement. He discussed how the middle and lower class within the community had different views when it came to homosexuality before the movement took place. Leonard goes over something very interesting - the migration of African Americans to Los Angeles in the 1900s. This era brought on the increase of spaces that allowed people to experiment with same sex behavior and the acceptance of homosexuality. A lot of history is discussed on relatable topics and one was the drag balls in the 1940s and how the media never covered these events until it was time to criticize the participants.

Leonard also went over the history of how the government after World War II wanted to eradicate all forms of homoexuality from the government and from the military. John D'Emilio who is a professor of history and women gender studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago said in the article that social change brought about space for individuals to express their same sex desires, by creating bars and clubs that supported homosexuality. Soon after the war though, it all ended and the police began to harass and hunt down anyone engaging in such activity.

Same sex relationships were at an all time high in the mid 1930s, many women and men were openly gay and lesbian which resulted in arrest for same sex crimes being at an all time high as well (1940s.) The punishment when caught and put on trial often resulted in ten to twenty years in prison for sodomy.

A lot of gay identified women and men before 1969 did not identify as homosexual but instead thought it was safer and wiser to create their own communities that accepted them and allowed them to openly engage in same sex desires. Leonard highlights a very important gay liberation movement which was the public drag balls in Los Angeles in the late 1940s, these balls were a way for all race of people to come together and have a safe and enjoyable time as LGBT. One of the balls that help bridge “racial ideologies,” and “emerging gay identities,” was the *Knights of the Clock* organization. The organization was able to survive during the war in Harlem and other urban neighborhoods, which was very shocking seeing that the government was trying to shut down any type of homosexuality activity taking place.

Thaddeus Russell observes in his studies that “working-class African Americans were more accepting of homosexuality and other nonheteronormative behavior than were middle-class African Americans in the years before the growth of the civil rights movement in the mid-1950s,” (Russell.) The drag balls brought about a lot of people in the African American community and even more shocking it attracted black media platforms like *Jets* magazine and *Ebony*. Something changed and the middle class African American communities, police and government started to no longer look past drag shows and open homosexuality, they wanted it to end. Russell called it a movement to basically end the black working class freedom and self esteem. The middle class brought about a lot of bashing towards homosexual acts and created the beliefs about normality while creating separation between cisgender and homosexuality. Same sex desire became a thing of disgust among the middle class and wanted to be sure that everyone thought it was a mental disorder.

This article was also very informative because I got to take a look inside of the LGBT community during and after the war. We see a lot of the reasons why homosexuality is viewed in the black communities the way it is. Middle class people were more likely to attend churches and created this separation from what they read in the bible, the way homosexuality is one of the ultimate sins in Christianity. Newspapers went from going to drag balls to cover the event in a more “positive” note to going to the balls in order to spread a lot of negativity about the participants, the promoters and etc. A lot of the newspapers that would write about the drag shows called the participants “‘a group of degenerates and sexual perverts,’ (Leon H. Washington, Jr. the publisher of *Sentinel*.) This is just interesting that we create these standards based off what we personally would or would not accept not understanding that it is not our place as a society to choose the lover of someone else.

Moore, M. R. (2006). Lipstick or timberlands? Meanings of Gender Presentation in Black Lesbian Communities. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, 32(1), 113-139.

I love this article from Mignon Moore, it took a look into the life of the average, corporate and working class black lesbian. It took their opinions and made very important points that I did not know about gender presentation. Moore mentioned that the way you carry yourself as a lesbian woman kind of determines your actually likening in a partner, if you're more of a feminine lesbian than nine times of ten you will partner with a less feminine partner.

“This article critically examines the existence and meanings of gender presentation among black lesbians in New York.” (Moore, 2006.) Rather lesbians in the black community want to admit that there are certain type of women that they are physically attracted to, there are.

Unfortunately there weren't a lot of black lesbian women involved in the lesbian-feminist liberation movement. Just like in any gay liberation movement, black women and men were left out to find their own liberation so a lot of the black gay liberation movements were underground. Black lesbians weren't so big on eliminating butch and femme identities but really just wanted to freely express themselves. Though labels were still created such as the one still widely used in the black community, “stud” - a lesbian with nonfeminine style and mannerisms, this label is offensive to most lesbians in the community but since the lesbian community was so distant from the movement they weren't aware of labels like these being harmful.

Moore studied the black gay lesbian communities in New York over a 30 month period, she reached out the black lesbians in certain groups (lesbian, transgressive women gender blenders, gay, bisexual, in “the life,” or women loving women who are forming families,) in order to gather data that showed the lives of actual black lesbians. “Black gay women use specific modes of gender expression to organize their social relationships,” - “People’s style of clothing lets others in the community know right away how they choose to represent their gender, as well as the type of physical representation they are attracted to: more feminine-looking women tend to partner with women who do not look as feminine,” (Moore 2006)

This lets us know that class, gender presentations, gendered categories and etc play a major role in how black lesbians display their desires. Moore intensive study under many categories express that a lot of black lesbians don’t like to call themselves or their partners any labels that we are used to hearing but they are more comfortable with just dressing in a way that expresses who they are. If the woman in the relationship is more of a masculine type she is not a stud she is “aggressive (transgressive.)”

I learned a lot, she went in great details about actual women living this lifestyle and I really enjoyed hearing their perspectives of how they live their daily lives. We sometimes assume what other groups of individuals should or should not be doing without actually asking them, this causes a lot of misinformation that keeps us lagging behind as a society. I like their her studies were accurate and very simple to understand, rather than using a lot of different terms I didn’t understand. Moore also talked about how black lesbians in the more middle/upper class communities felt about labels...again they didn’t like them and wanted to be defined by what they chose, they found that it made their work lives more bearable. We as black women already have it tough, when lesbianism is involved that’s another knock down towards the totem pole. Overall I believe this article was informative with information that can help understand the black lesbian community structure.

References

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