

ARTICULATING A POLITICS OF (MULTIPLE) IDENTITIES

LGBT Sexuality and Inclusion in Black Community Life¹

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Abstract

This work examines the strategies Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people use in Black environments to proclaim a gay identity that is simultaneous with a Black identity. It identifies three distinctive features of LGBT protest in Black communities. Black gay² protest takes on a particular form when individuals are also trying to maintain solidarity with the racial group despite the threat of distancing that occurs as a result of their sexual minority status. Black sexual minorities who see their self-interests as linked to those of other Blacks use cultural references to connect their struggles to historical efforts for Black equality and draw from nationalist symbols and language to frame their political work. They believe that increasing their visibility in Black spaces will promote a greater understanding of gay sexuality as an identity status that can exist alongside, rather than in competition with, race. The findings of this research have implications for larger discussions of identity, protest, and gay sexuality in intraracial contexts.

Keywords: Intraracial Conflict, LGBT, Gay Sexuality, Linked Fate, Cross-Cutting Issues, Racial Group Consciousness, Gay Rights, African American Politics

INTRODUCTION

A recent representation of gay rights issues in the public imagination has centered around the analysis of voting patterns on Proposition 8, a proposal on the November 2008 California state ballot that would eliminate the right of same-sex couples to marry. The proposition was approved by a fifty-two to forty-eight percent margin, and the first exit polls reported that seventy percent of Black voters backed the measure to overturn the California Supreme Court's earlier decision to legalize same-sex marriage (Grad 2008). As the media began to report the high proportion of yes votes from African Americans on this matter, some White LGBT-rights activists

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and others used this information to initiate a virulent assault on Blacks for not supporting what gay activists had only recently come to categorize as “their” Civil Rights issue.³ Subsequent calculations and more careful estimates later suggested that the proportion of Blacks voting yes was more modest than first assumed.⁴

There are several noteworthy observations on the public discourse around this question. Among them is the inference made *both* by leaders of the gay movement and Black religious and political leaders that gay rights issues are not significant to the lives of Black people. White LGBT activists defining same-sex marriage as “our Civil Rights issue” have chastised African Americans for not helping “them” achieve equality. Likewise, some Black religious leaders have portrayed gay rights issues as concerns that are more important for others outside of the racial group than for members of Black communities. Moreover, prior to the 2008 election even some of the more prominent Black gay activists in California were also lukewarm in their support of same-sex marriage as an issue relevant to the racial community.

From television advertisements prior to the vote, to post-election discussions, most of the rhetoric around gay rights legislation has framed these issues as representing the interests of a segment of gay America that seems very distant from Black communities: upper-income White people who enact a gay sexuality in a particular way, and who rarely spend time in areas where the majority of Blacks live. Invisible in these depictions, debates, and understandings has been the impact of gay rights legislation on the lives of non-White LGBT people. This invisibility has made it difficult for some Black heterosexuals to recognize the simultaneity and meaning of Black racial group membership and gay sexuality, and the consequences of that membership for relations between gays and heterosexuals within the racial community.⁵

This paper draws from ethnographic data on Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people in Los Angeles who spend time in African American communities to ask how this group understands and negotiates multiple identity statuses based in race and sexuality. The paper also asks the characteristics of LGBT political activity and protest that are initiated by Black gays in response to homophobic attitudes in Black social environments. It looks at the public debates over same-sex marriage as a representation of the move from private to public expressions of sexuality that are not just taking place in national and international arenas, but are also affecting life in the local public and private spaces of church pulpits, coffee shops, bars, dinner tables, living room couches, and various other social environments across America. It analyzes some of the tactics Black LGBT people use when negotiating multiple identity statuses based in race and sexuality to create a sense of belonging in Black environments.

BACKGROUND

Black and Gay in Los Angeles

Fourteen percent of all unmarried same-sex partner households identified on the 2000 Census were African American, and this is roughly the same proportion of Blacks that are in the larger U.S. population (Dang and Frazer, 2004). Census and other representative survey data show that the majority of Black same-sex couples reside in cities, towns, and rural areas that are predominantly African American. They are more likely to live with other Blacks in minority communities than to live with White homosexuals in cities and neighborhoods with high percentages of same-sex couples (Dang and Frazer, 2004; Gates et al., 2006).

The state of California ranks third in the United States for the number of Blacks who live as same-sex couples (after New York and Georgia), and the geographic distribution of non-White same-sex couples in the state also mirrors the respective distribution of racial/ethnic minorities generally (Gates et al., 2006). Within Los Angeles County, four percent of African American adults identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual, compared to 5.1% of Whites, 2.8% of Latino/as and 3.7% among all adults.⁶ Seventy-one percent of Black LGB⁷ people live in the South (thirty-eight percent) or South Bay (thirty-three percent) areas of the county, communities with heavy concentrations of African Americans and Latinos. Less than one percent of gay Blacks live on the west side of Los Angeles, which includes West Hollywood, an area known for its gay social life.⁸

Black gay people are not a visible group in Los Angeles' historic Black communities (Moore 2010). There are very few institutions in these environments that openly cater to Black gay populations.⁹ When in Black social spaces, many gay people do not express a public gay identity. Instead, they seek to minimize what they believe is a stigmatized status by practicing "covering," defined by Goffman in 1963 and more recently elaborated by law professor Kenji Yoshino (2006). Covering is the process of making efforts to prevent a stigmatized or disfavored identity from looming large in order to reduce tension and deflect attention from the stigma. It is related to, but distinct from, the concept of passing. With passing, one changes one's status or pretends to be something different. With covering, Yoshino says, one "tones down" the stigmatized identity in order to fit in with the larger group. Despite their intimate geographic connections with Black neighborhoods, prior to the preparations for the 2008 presidential election there had been little public discussion between gay and heterosexual residents about what it meant to be a gay person of color living and participating in Black community life.

Black Attitudes towards Homosexuality

While the data are not conclusive on the dimensions of homophobia on which Blacks and other racial/ethnic groups diverge, the most recent research suggests that as a whole, Blacks express disapproval of homosexuality more strongly than Whites (Egan and Sherrill, 2009; Herek and Capitanio, 1995; Lewis 2003). For example, Gallop Poll data from 2006 to 2008 found that Black Democrats were much less likely than non-Black Democrats to find homosexual relations morally acceptable (Newport 2008). Much of the racial differences in expression of attitudes are attributed to the older age, lower levels of education, and greater religiosity of Blacks in research samples. However, Blacks of the same religion and with similar levels of education as Whites were still more likely to express negative attitudes towards homosexuality (Egan and Sherrill, 2009; Lewis 2003). Relative to Whites, Black homosexuals perceive themselves as facing more disapproval from their families and from heterosexual Blacks, and have greater difficulty finding alternative sources of acceptance and support through predominantly White LGBT-oriented social groups (David and Knight, 2008; Jones and Hill, 1996; Moore 2008; Stokes and Peterson, 1998).

The social science research examining the relationships African American lesbians and gay men have to their racial communities has grown over the past ten years.¹⁰ A 2009 report released by the Human Rights Commission found that the majority of LGBT people of color surveyed believe that their racial and ethnic communities are disapproving of the open practice of homosexuality. This disapproval, however, does not always equal rejection. Black LGBT people have long histories of living and

socializing in Black environments (Beemyn 1997; Gameson 2005; Garber 1989; Hawkeswood 1996; Thorpe 1996). Nevertheless, these feelings of disapproval have encouraged the practice of “covering” one’s gay sexuality.

The contradictions within African American spaces between disapproving attitudes towards same-sex desire and support for civil rights for everyone, including gay people (Lewis 2003), are having a particular impact on the lives of sexual minorities who also define themselves by their membership in this racial category, and who are increasingly insisting on having others in the racial group recognize and respect their sexual preference. The inconsistencies, confusion, and larger sense of disapproval of openly gay sexuality by some in the racial community are causing a response from those Black LGBT people who see race as critical to determining the outcomes of their own lives. Theoretical frameworks by Dawson (1994, 2009) and Cohen (1999) shed light on the negotiation of Black spaces faced by African-American sexual minorities who see their own self-interests as linked to those of the racial group, despite the disapproval of some over their sexual preference.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The Simultaneity of Black Race Consciousness and Gay Sexuality

The ambiguous reception in Black communities for individuals with same-sex desire is a critical issue for Black LGBT people who live and socialize in predominantly Black environments, and who have a strong sense of linked fate with the racial community. Michael Dawson (1994) uses the concept of linked fate to operationalize or proxy a measure of racial identity, describing linked fate as a belief that what happens to Blacks as a whole affects one’s own life chances. African Americans with a strong sense of linked fate see their futures as importantly shaped by the position of Blacks in the larger social structure. Race and experiences that result from being Black are understood as one critical determinant not only for the future of Blacks as a group but for their own individual futures. Dawson (2009) argues that “Blacks make political and social decisions at a cognitive level as if they were assessing what was ‘good for the race’ as a proxy for what was good for them and/or their family” (pp. 197–198). Many black sexual minorities who live and spend time socially in Black communities do so because they have strong, cemented identities around race (Battle and Bennett, 2005; Boykin 1996; Moore 2006), and this sense of linked fate can be at odds with a sexual identity status that is a source of division and disagreement within the community.

When taken together, the persistent sense of disapproval of gay sexuality in Black communities, combined with on-going geographic and personal ties to networks of Black people, make the open practice of homosexuality a cross-cutting issue for gay African Americans. Cathy Cohen (1999) has argued that African American communities are in a changing political environment, such that the level of group consensus on dominant political issues has decreased over time and particularly since 1980. This increased fragmentation is expressed in the development of public issues that she calls “cross-cutting issues,” which are “rooted in or built on the often hidden differences, cleavages, or fault lines of marginal communities” (p. 9). These issues are perceived as disproportionately affecting identifiable subgroups in Black communities, especially those segments which are the least empowered and whose vulnerability is tied to a particular area of morality or questionable respectability. Cohen would argue that the increased division or diversity in public opinion within Black commu-

nity contexts over the current cross-cutting issue of same-sex marriage threatens the perceived unity and shared identity of group members.

Together, Goffman and Yoshino's discussions of covering, Dawson's concept of linked fate, and Cohen's analysis of the diversity of public opinion in Black communities around certain issues, together lay the foundation for an analysis of LGBT identities in Black environments at the start of the twenty-first Century. This research analyzes the ways Black gay people who feel a sense of solidarity with the racial group experience the cross-cutting issue of openly expressing a gay sexuality in Black community contexts. It asks what are the political strategies used by Black gay people to incorporate sexuality as a valid identity status that co-exists with race in environments that view it is a source of stigma. Past research has not defined well the characteristics of LGBT protest within Black social contexts, and this ethnographic study begins to fill that gap.

METHODS

The larger project from which the data for this paper was collected comes from the Black Los Angeles Project, a research study examining neighborhoods, religious life, political participation, cultural production, and social justice in South Los Angeles (Hunt 2010). My research consists of approximately thirty months of qualitative data collection in Los Angeles from September 2007 to February 2010. My study was designed to examine the relationships that Black people in Los Angeles who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have with their racial communities, the types of kin arrangements they participate in, the role religion plays in their lives, and the particular health and social support concerns faced by the older and aging segments of this population. Those questions were particularly important to research in the context of a major California city because of the same-sex marriage legislation on the 2008 election ballot, and the lack of information on racialized sexual minorities more generally.

The foundation of this fieldwork includes in-depth, in-person semi-structured interviews with twenty-five self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered African Americans who live and/or work in predominantly Black or Black and Latino neighborhoods in South Los Angeles.¹¹ The interview data are supplemented by ethnographic fieldwork conducted in a variety of social spaces where Black LGBT people spend time. I visited churches and spiritual centers with predominantly Black parishioners, and attended more than two dozen cultural activities such as spoken word performances, art exhibits, and plays written or created by and about African American LGBT people in Los Angeles. I engaged with Black LGBT Angelinos in on-line discussions, attended and/or participated in community forums on Proposition 8, and attended the organizing, planning, and execution meetings for the Black LGBT contingent marching in the 2009 and 2010 Martin Luther King Day parades.

During this period I also attended gay pride, Black gay pride, and similar regional events catering to African American LGBT people in Southern California. I spent time at fifty-five backyard barbecues, birthday parties, and other private activities in people's homes, and forty-eight similar types of events in predominantly heterosexual African American public social spaces like bars, church basements, hotel ballrooms, public parks, and other recreational areas. I attended three pre-wedding and wedding celebrations for African American lesbian couples. In addition, each month between February 2008 and February 2010, I hosted a monthly social event at various hotels

in Los Angeles. These events catered primarily to African American lesbians ages thirty to sixty (although some Black gay men and non-Black gay women also attended), and grew to attract close to 300 guests each month. Hosting these events allowed me to witness interactions among Black LGBT women and men, talk with community members about their feelings and experiences in lesbian and gay communities, and very importantly helped me develop the social networks necessary to study a population with no geographic boundaries that does not meet in one location on a regular basis.

I also followed the political activity of the Here to Stay Coalition, a protest organization that was formed by Black LGBT people in response to the passing of Proposition 8. This paper relies significantly on the field notes and interviews with the leaders and participants in the coalition from November 2008 to February 2010 to identify and analyze the features of LGBT protest in Black communities.

FINDINGS

Black LGBT People and Racial Group Connectedness

Elsewhere I have argued that national public debates over the legalization of same-sex marriage and other related issues have brought the topic of gay sexuality more directly into the public life of Black communities (Moore 2010; forthcoming). This has created a space for family members and neighbors to be more upfront in their feelings and opinions about LGBT people's visible enactment of same-sex desire, expressed through such public pronouncements as weddings and gay-partner adoptions. The process of incorporating homosexual behavior into everyday experiences and encouraging others to acknowledge it as an identity is what historians refer to as having a "modern gay identity" (D'Emilio 1983). Differences are apparent among African American lesbians and gay men in their willingness to enact a modern gay identity, and these differences are rooted in age cohort.

My research finds that Black lesbians and gay men in Los Angeles born before 1954 tend to conceptualize Black group membership as an identity status that must remain primary for the continued advancement of the race. These women and men were raised with parents who migrated from small towns and rural areas in Mississippi, Texas, and other places in the South to build Black communities in the West. They were subjected to discriminatory practices in employment and housing that helped them cohere around a group identity (Johnson and Campbell, 1981; Tolnay and Eichenlaub, 2007). For example, James Thurman,¹² a single, retired gay man born in South Carolina in 1943, talks about the expectations his family and the larger Black community had for how he should carry himself, and the unequal treatment he might receive in society. He says:

We were always taught to be proud of ourselves as Black people and to carry ourselves properly—I guess the old cliché about representing the race. I knew I had to have a certain deportment, if you will; behave as an upstanding citizen and to make my people proud of me. Whenever I was in a situation where I was probably the only Black, to have courage in those situations. It wasn't preached to us but it was something that my mom in some ways talked about and other people in the community; so you got it from osmosis that you weren't going to be treated fairly so you had to be prepared to deal with it and you had to survive. Not only survive, you had to thrive.

The collective racial identity experienced by members of these older age cohorts grew as civil rights issues began to take center stage in the 1950s and 1960s. This generation built churches, newspapers, social clubs, racial uplift groups, and various other political and social institutions that were and continue to be the foundation of Black community life. Those raised in and around these institutions and socialized by these elders have a firm, taken-for-granted sense of themselves as members of Black communities. Older Black gay people have maintained the historical memory of these events and understand the cultural symbols, subtle cues and other interactional language that accompany an insider status.

When dealing with heterosexuals within the racial community, Black gay people in this study born in 1954 or earlier experience gay sexuality as a stigma they have had to endure throughout their adult lives. They believe that the open and public way of expressing gay sexuality through marriage and other processes of family formation has been slow to reach Black communities, and some say that until Black heterosexuals gain a more full understanding of who they are, they will not add to their marked status through rainbow flags, “queer” language, and other indicators. They downplay their same-sex relationships and participation in gay community life through covering behavior. Historically, older lesbian and gay male African Americans have felt less free to violate racial community norms. Instead, they created vibrant gay communities in racial minority neighborhoods, keeping these parts of their identities separate from other components of Black life (Garber 1989; Moore forthcoming; Thorpe 1996).

At the same time, those born in the 1960s and into the 1970s who came into a gay sexuality in late adolescence or early adulthood, did so amidst an emerging public discourse about same-sex desire centered on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, depictions of LGBT people in film and on talk shows, news articles about gay rights issues, and increases in women and men choosing to lead openly gay lives. The socialization they received from African American elders helped cement a strong racial group membership, but coming of age in this contemporary historical period also encouraged the construction of a modern gay identity. This generation of Black lesbians and gay men is trying to figure out for themselves how to enact a modern gay identity within particular cultural contexts. They are also calling on the racial group to take seriously the fact that group members can have other salient identities that co-exist with and do not threaten a strong race consciousness or sense of linked fate.

A third generation of Black LGBT people, born after 1980, came of age during a time of greater access to resources and opportunities, and this has caused some to rely less stringently on the racial community as their only source of support. They feel more freedom to express their frustration with what they experience as pressure to de-emphasize a gay sexuality in Black social environments. For example, Reverend Dr. Cecil “Chip” Murray is the former senior pastor at First AME Church, the oldest and one of the largest Black congregations in Los Angeles. Pastor Murray says that during the time of his tenure he has witnessed among Black lesbians and gay men an increased willingness to express a gay sexuality in public spaces. In a published interview with Gary Comstock (2001), he said the following:

I have seen their emergence . . . from the closet. They feel less [of] a need to be apologetic than a need just to assert their is-ness. And it is up to others how they are received. They seem to have taken the initiative and are saying “I have the right to be who I am and you don’t have the right to determine who I shall be”. . . I think there has been a decided change in those who were hidden and who are now revealed and are proud of the revelation (p. 76).

In January 2008, political organizer Jasmyne Cannick co-sponsored the forum "It's a Black Thang: The Black LGBT Vote '08" at the Lucy Florence Coffee House and Cultural Center in historic Leimert Park, as part of a national series of meetings across the country to define and discuss a Black gay political agenda. Ronald Moore was present at the Los Angeles meeting. While he acknowledged the difficulty some African Americans have in discussing their sexuality with others in the racial group, he also verified the importance of race for their identities. "Coming out [as Black gay men and lesbians] is the most potent weapon we have, but that's still the hardest step to take," Moore said. "We need more people of color to come out and we need more of the White GLBT organizations to understand we can't and will not leave our Blackness at the door."

In an on-line discussion¹³ amongst a group of young Black lesbians living in Los Angeles following the November 2008 election, Aaliyah Knowles¹⁴ shared her frustration with the high proportion of African American votes to ban same-sex marriage. One participant asked Aaliyah if her neighbors know she is gay and her response suggested she had not revealed this information in any concrete way. The group agreed that if Black LGBT people wanted the Black community to support gay rights, they had to be willing to reveal themselves to Black heterosexuals because this would help the racial group understand their sexuality as part of their identity rather than as illicit behavior they engaged in secretly.

But one problem in asserting a gay sexuality in Black social contexts is the puzzle of how to show oneself as gay in a culturally appropriate way. Those in the on-line discussion group agreed they had to navigate a fine line between making their gay relationships more identifiable to heterosexuals, and conforming to certain patterns of interaction they were expected to have with others, particularly African American elders. For example, regardless of sexuality, they had learned that it was not polite to refer to a partner as a "lover" or to use terminology that approached anything sexual in nature when describing someone who was not a husband or wife. They had been raised with particular southern norms around polite language and appropriate topics for public discussion that called for a certain type of discretion when discussing intimate relationships (see also Johnson 2008). In short, they needed to figure out how to portray their gay sexuality as a status that co-exists with familiar Black cultural norms. This was key to maintaining close relationships with heterosexuals in the racial community.

LGBT Protest in African American Contexts

McQueeney's (2009) study of gay and lesbian participation in a southern Black church uses the concept of "oppositional identity work" to explain how its research subjects managed to maintain Christian identities while simultaneously having openly gay identities in the South. She argues that they were able to successfully challenge homosexual stigma while creating strong identities around their Christianity by "transforming discrediting identities into crediting ones and redefining those identities so they can be seen as indexes of noble rather than flawed character" (p. 152). They moralized sexuality to challenge homophobia. I saw this approach put into practice in a different way, with efforts made to challenge homosexual stigma while reaffirming strong racial identities, when I followed a group of Black LGBT activists as they mobilized against the political changes that resulted from the passage of Proposition 8. I shadowed this group from November 23, 2008 until February 1, 2010. Below I identify the distinctive features of Black LGBT protest, and discuss their implications for how racial and LGBT identity statuses are simultaneously expressed and incorporated into Black community life.

On Sunday, November 23, 2008 Yardenna Aaron (b. 1981), LaTrice Dixon (b. 1970), and an older Black lesbian activist known as Qween led a protest march of Black LGBT people, their non-Black supporters, and heterosexual allies along Crenshaw Boulevard between King Drive and Leimert Park, an important, historically Black corridor in South Los Angeles. Dixon and Aaron were seasoned organizers, though Aaron had never before applied her labor skills to the defense of LGBT issues. Aaron explained that the march was meant to “show their anger at the passage of [Proposition 8] and increase the visibility of Black LGBT people in their own community.” They marched at noon on Sunday to avoid the church-going population, and the protesters were escorted by the police. The event was successful with over two hundred participants, and shortly afterwards the organizers thought they should name the group so that it did not disappear into obscurity. They subsequently formed the Here to Stay Coalition. The mantra of the group would be “We’ve been in the community, we’re in the community, and we’ll always be in the community.”

After the event, the police left and most of the crowd dispersed. About six protesters remained and were approached by a few young men. Several of the marchers shared their version of what happened. Here is the organizer Yardenna Aaron’s version:

It got hostile. One dude comes up [and says] “You’re going to Hell.” “You’re an abomination.” “You’re not wanted here.” Then about three more dudes come up, so they’re starting a little mob thing. . . He was on the phone and told us he had called the homies and they were on their way. So he was pretty much threatening us with physical violence, like we fixin’ to get beat up or killed.¹⁵

The stranger assumed they were outsiders to the community. At one point he told them “Take that shit back to West Hollywood. Me and the homies, we’re going to come up to where y’all stay and get you.” Aaron, who owns a home in South Central, replied “West Hollywood? Man, we live right here. *This is* our community.”

Aaron’s other concern was that the on-lookers and business owners bordering the fountain where the confrontation was taking place were not responding to the harassment. They were not moving forward to protect or defend the six remaining protesters, who were mostly women. They were just silently watching the scene unfold. One protester told me “What really stuck out was the silence from the community in not defending us. Not a peep.” Coalition leader Aaron recalls:

The way I describe it, the community was setting itself up to “hear no evil, see no evil,” because people had come out of their shops, people were just watching! So I felt if something happened, there would be a great silence. No one would ever *really* know what happened. ‘Cause if they’re not stopping these guys, they’re having complacent silence. So they could beat us, rape us, kill us and the police would *never* get a straight story. Our families would never get a straight story. ‘Cause when the community cares about something, they speak out against it. They’d be like “Hey man, shut up!” or whatever they’re going to say. But you don’t have a growing number of silent on-lookers while five, six guys prepare themselves, keep amping themselves up, calling other guys to come and exert violence upon us.

Despite the threat of violence to herself and other protesters, Aaron’s sense of racial solidarity also strongly influenced how she wanted to resolve the situation, and made her feel ambivalent about the police’s potential involvement:

Between the shouting matches between our people and their people, we were finally getting ourselves to pull our people away. Just as we were getting in the car the police pulled up and I don't know what happened. I don't know if they arrested the guy or not. But we don't want to see that happen either! We don't want it to be like "Oh, Black gay people come out and now brothers are getting arrested," 'Cause we have those brothers [in our families]. Police violence and brutality is very real! I've seen it exacted upon the male members of my own family and some of the female ones, too. So that's not the conclusion that we really wanted to have. But then again, you ain't fixin' to kill me in midday, 'cause you got a piece [weapon] and I don't. So it's that kind of thing I have yet to reconcile.

When trying to decide how open to be about their gay sexuality, this fear of apathy from the community is a powerful force that shapes the decisions Black LGBT people make. The response from the antagonizers as well as the business owners watching the interaction raises the question of when and under what conditions a shared racial group identity translates into a unified mobilization around issues that are not seen to represent the larger group's interests. Black LGBT people are uncertain of whether the racial group, who can be counted on to come to their defense in times of racial strife, will also be there to help when the threat centers on an issue that does not have consensus or unanimous support.

In January 2009, the Here to Stay Coalition partnered with the Jordon/Rustin Coalition, a Black LGBT organization in Greater Los Angeles, to march in the "Kingdom Day" Parade as part of the Martin Luther King Jr. national celebration. The parade route goes through several Black and Latino neighborhoods and the coalition organizers told me this would be the first time an openly gay African American group marched in the parade with a sign that specifically referenced Black homosexuality. Given the recent repeal of same-sex marriage, the organizers thought it very important that the group march with a clear banner. They chose "Black, Gay and Here to Stay" as the main slogan and "We are Your Family" as the secondary heading (Figure 1). The sign was written in plain, large lettering on top of a white background with the word "Gay" in lavender, and the words "Here to Stay" in the Black nationalist colors of black, red and green, consistent with similar types of organizations in the past who have combined cultural nationalist ideals with symbols of LGBT identities that link racial group interests with other group identifications (Battle and Bennett, 2005).

Dixon commented that this was a prescient moment to have something about gay sexuality so visible in the community, given the forums and discussions about Proposition 8 that had been taking place across the country. In one of the planning sessions before the 2009 march, the coalition members talked about the intense fear they had in walking behind a banner directly expressing homosexuality. Some expressed concern over what they might encounter in some of the tougher neighborhoods; some were also worried about seeing neighbors or former church members in the community while marching under the "gay label." They decided they would wear white because "it is the color of peace" and respond to any heckling by returning positive affirmations like "Love!" and "Unity!" In the planning sessions, Qween predicted that the experience would be a positive one because of the communal nature of the racial group. She said:

I believe that fundamentally we are a people that have love in our hearts for one another, and compassion for folks that are discriminated against. I do believe in the end that that's what we are going to see from our community.¹⁶



Fig. 1. Here to Stay Coalition in the 2009 MLK Kingdom Day Parade, Los Angeles²¹

In addition to marching as a group, the coalition had allies walking along the parade route who could hear and respond directly to the crowd. As they marched they could see the on-lookers reading their signs and either clapping wildly in support, nodding as if they understood but perhaps not clapping, or just watching silently. They thought all of these responses were respectful and consistent with their goal of creating awareness in the community.

At the debriefing session immediately following the 2009 march, the participants reported that the positive responses by the crowd outweighed the negative reactions by ten to one, and that the strongest negative responses did not come as they walked through the rougher parts of town but when they reached some of the more middle-class areas. Stacey Robinson,¹⁷ a twenty-eight year old single lesbian and resident of South Los Angeles, had this to say:

I will tell you this. It was really our time to make that walk because there was way more love and respect that I felt coming from the audience than boos and jeers. Because we had heard the boos and jeers and stuff before, but the public display of appreciation and love, we hadn't necessarily experienced that before. And every person walking in the parade had a story of making eye contact with someone. . . . Once they read the [banner], either waving like they're crazy or clapping. . . . It was way more than I had ever expected.

At one point a few on-lookers tried to rouse the crowd against the LGBT group but were drowned out by the majority around them who said things like "Not today, man. Forget that. We're here together today." Aaron said it was gratifying that the silencing of the homophobia came from the community rather than the marchers themselves. She told me she was happy with the love they received and grateful that "It was not us having to control the crowd but the community itself, saying 'Peace out on that homophobia today.' So that was very powerful for us to hear."

The timing of the 2009 Kingdom Day Parade was important to the coalition's success. The mostly African American crowd was jubilant about the recent Obama presidential victory. Many were preparing to go or had already left for the Inauguration festivities in Washington, DC, and there was a spirit of anticipation, happiness, and togetherness in the community that day. The affirmation of the crowd that January, and their willingness to silence the negative responses to the marchers, was a noticeably different response from the earlier confrontation and lack of response by community members during the group's first protest in November. The Black LGBT community was elated and felt especially powerful and hopeful that by accomplishing this political act they were moving the racial group towards greater acceptance of gay people as full members of the racial group.

Cultural Distinctiveness of Black LGBT Protest

In January 2010, the Here to Stay Coalition marched in the Kingdom Day Parade for a second year. It rained heavily, but they had a solid group of about fifty people who marched with them. This time the Barbara Jordan/Bayard Rustin Coalition and Black Lesbians United marched as well, and the banners of all three organizations led the contingent. There was a debriefing session that followed the march. In this meeting the organizers were clear on how they understand the connection between the acceptance they are seeking within the larger Black community and the larger Civil Rights Struggle that serves as the historical memory for the Kingdom Day parade.

I observed and audio-recorded the debriefing session, and in analyzing the discussion that took place amongst the marchers, three distinctive features of LGBT protest in Black community contexts emerged. The first distinction in the way Black LGBT activists interpret their work is that they use Black historical references to link what they are doing with previous struggles for racial equality. They see their struggle as an extension of the Civil Rights movement. Because of race, these leaders feel a sense of ownership of past Black political movements and comfortably use the language of Black protest to describe the work they are doing right now.

After the march, the protesters met at the Lucy Florence Coffeehouse for refreshments. They ate and gathered in the small theatre afterwards to discuss the events that had just taken place. Qween, one of the organizers, addressed the group by drawing explicit linkages to Black culture, Black spirituality, and Black history. She began by saying "Now I want to give thanks to the ancestors for those like Sojourner who started the real march. We just stepped on the trail and kept it pushing." LaTrice Dixon also addressed the group with historical references to Black political resistance:

Thank you so much, everybody who contributed to this effort. This is the second year in a row and we didn't expect rain, but we did it anyway. We got the word from Qween, who said we would march rain or shine. Our ancestors—Harriet Tubman didn't have food sometimes. They didn't have shoes. They didn't know what territories they were going into coming out of the South. And Brother Jones was likening what we did today like going into the South marching to Selma, into the unknown. It takes a lot of courage. We walked when so many could not.

Here you see the intermingling of references to various Black freedom struggles: Sojourner Truth, known for the "Ain't I a Woman" speech she is said to have delivered during the 1851 Women's Rights Convention; Harriet Tubman leading the

enslaved to freedom, the voting rights marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama that took place in 1965, and the current march this group had just participated in on behalf of other Black LGBT people. An African man in the debriefing session known to me only as Brother Mokele¹⁸ said the following:

I know they have compared this to Dr. King walking across the bridge in 1959. This is the equivalent—what you are doing today. So please, this is not an ordinary march. You donated your blood, you donated your courage, you donated your breath to something that is very, very essential and of consequence *in our community*. So you may not have received applause as you were walking on the streets today, but I tell you that the path has been set. You are piercing the wall of prejudice and you are tearing down the curtain of homophobia! This we shall win. (emphasis in original)

Black LGBT leaders felt an ownership of these historical movements because of their race, but more importantly, they saw their activism as paving the way for their own eventual liberation *within the racial community*. This was not a conflict between the larger LGBT population and the more general mainstream society. This was a very personal intraracial struggle taking place within racial group boundaries.

Dixon continued:

We made a statement and we don't even know the effect it will have on this community. *Our* community. The love we sent out. The presence that we are here to be seen in our full, whole selves as proud people. Proud! And so I am thankful to my ancestors. I am thankful to my grandmother, who talked with me this morning and she had this song: *Lord guide my feet while I run this race*.

Here she referenced the ancestors, her grandmother, and a portion of a Negro spiritual, all as motivating forces girding the political work she was about to undertake. A second distinctive feature of Black LGBT protest is the way leaders infuse key components of African American culture in how they understand and interpret the work they are doing, and draw from consensus issues to connect themselves to the larger racial community.

In the year since the Here to Stay Coalition was formed, the group marched in protests against police brutality and other issues centered around the dismantling of racial and economic inequality. The coalition consists of people who are firmly planted in Black racial identities, who have a strong sense of linked fate with African Americans as a group, and who are committed to racial group uplift. For example, banners carried by the marchers said things like “I Am You; You are Me,” “We are Your Family,” “Hi Neighbor—I’m Gay,” “LGBT Leaders for Black Civil Rights: Bayard Rustin, Audre Lorde, June Jordan.” While they marched, they sang songs like Whitney Houston’s “The Greatest Love of All” and chanted the following:

We're your mothers, your fathers, your sisters and your brothers
Now is the time to love one another!

These approaches appealed to a sense of oneness and unity across sexuality, and were a far cry from slogans like “We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used to It” which suggest the dominant culture assimilate to “queer” culture, or a set of values that people who have been defined by a variant set of norms adhere to (Warner 1993). Black LGBT activists were instead asking the racial group to look beyond their differences and bond around a similarity of history and culture.

While the tactics of Black gays may appear to be assimilationist when used by Whites to advocate for mainstream acceptance, I argue that the particular context of Black LGBT protest makes the actions of Black activists read as radical to those they want to address. The radicalism of their actions is not driven by acceptance from the broader mainstream society, or from White LGBT activists, although these are goals for some individuals. Their dominant concern is how to maintain and build relationships with their racial community, how to stand proud and openly express a gay identity that is simultaneous with a racial identity. They feel particularly vulnerable because their protest is taking place within the most intimate of spaces—amongst racial group members.

Brother Mokele portrayed their struggle as a battle within the racial community. His words spoke volumes about the public expression of gay sexuality as a cross-cutting issue in Black spaces:

What has been completed by this group for a second time is that you have delivered your blood and your breath to a historic human rights and civil rights struggle. And this is something you must know . . . with all due respect to White folks, it is not like marching in West Hollywood because the stretch of land between King and Crenshaw into Leimert Park is seen by some of my own Black people as the Black cultural center, and they think “We are not going to allow this to take place.” [Referring to an openly LGBT group marching in the Kingdom Day Parade] . . . But for a second year . . . they were walking with their heads high. Heads high!

After the march, Aisha Knowles,¹⁹ a twenty-seven year old public school teacher who is legally married to her partner but who is not openly gay at work, told me she did not make up her mind to participate in the parade until the morning of the march because although her family knows she is gay, her co-workers and students do not. She feared what would happen if the parents of the children she teaches saw her marching behind a gay-themed banner. She has participated in gay rights protests in the past, but those were well outside of the community in the state’s capital and in other majority-White spaces. She told me it was relatively easy to stand up as gay in a “sea of White folks,” but “marching down King Drive waving a sign” was much more scary and difficult, and could potentially have a greater (and more negative) impact on her life.

Throughout the debriefing discussion after the 2010 event, there was a sense of intimacy and a familial relationship the LGBT marchers felt with the parade on-lookers. This language of kinship could be seen in the titles of “Brother” and “Sister” that were used to address the other members of the contingent. For example, in giving out instructions for how to line up for the march, or when individuals wanted to speak in the debriefing sessions that followed, one of the leaders would call out “There’s a Sister on the floor!” or “Brother has the floor!” to get the group’s attention. The goal for these activists is change and equality within the racial community, and they believe their actions are resulting in forward movement towards complete acceptance. Brother Mokele said when the group marched in 2009 he did not participate, but observed what was taking place along the sidelines in response to the coalition’s presence:

I saw from the side streets families holding a dialogue about the marchers, looking at their faces and thinking “They are our mothers, they are aunts . . . they are not strangers, they are not aliens in the Black community.”

A third distinctive feature of Black LGBT protest is an expressed goal for the work they are doing to challenge and conquer their own homophobia. Qween told the group the following:

I just want to say what is on my heart before we close. The march is about *us* accepting *us*. It's not about anything outside of us. It's not about family accepting us, it's about *us* accepting us. And when we vibrate that magnetism, we will attract acceptance. Not tolerance. We will attract acceptance. People will be able to see themselves in us.

Some of the comments from the marchers support Qween's contention. Amani Asir,²⁰ a young Black woman who also marched in the 2010 parade, raised her hand and said that in walking behind the LGBT banner,

There was still some part of me that felt a little bit of fear. Maybe it was a bit of shame in the moment because I think I have come so far, but then you have to confront them [other Black people]. . . . I think it's a beautiful thing when people can get past their internal homophobia and internal shame that you don't think still needs to be cleansed and thrashed out and put back together. Those people out there a lot of times are our friends and family members, cousins, people we are going to see tomorrow night. We have to deal with the fact that we are now representing *this* facet of the community and that's just—I am happy to grow.

In addition to working to change the minds and hearts of the racial group, their political work is expressly meant to build their own self-confidence and self-acceptance by de-stigmatizing and transforming the meaning of gay sexuality, which is consistent with McQueeney's (2009) study in the south. Each time they reveal themselves to others, they validate a gay identity within themselves. And the most critical aspect of this work is that it takes place in familial racial environments.

DISCUSSION

As a group, Black LGBT people might be thought of as one of the lesser empowered contingents of African American communities. They are "coming out"—moving gay sexuality from an "open secret" to an identity status when many would prefer it remain solely in the private realm. They are asking the larger racial community to acknowledge this status as an identity that exists alongside race. They no longer want to pass as heterosexual or "cover" or de-emphasize their sexuality in Black spaces. Despite the outward disapproval of gay identity that is expressed by some individuals and institutions, these LGBT people are pushing the racial community towards acceptance, and are using Black history, culture, and political tactics in their approach to LGBT protest to accomplish this task. They are fulfilling a quest for authenticity in multiple realms of their lives and across multiple identity statuses.

Dawson's (2009) argument that there is a continued strong sense of linked fate experienced by the majority of Blacks in the United States helps explain why the Black LGBT people in this study fight against anti-gay sentiments in their racial communities. Rather than distance themselves from Black environments where they believe individuals will hold negative attitudes towards homosexuality, they see other self-interests as most closely aligned with the racial group and choose to remain. Some own property, rent, and/or work in historically Black communities of South

Los Angeles. Even those who live outside of South LA return to participate in Black LGBT protest activities there because they have a vested interest in resolving the intraracial conflicts and disagreements over support of gay rights that continue to exist.

In this way, they validate Cohen's (1999) argument that gay sexuality is an issue that threatens to exclude LGBT Blacks from the group narrative, but are actively working to resolve these issues in order to continue their participation in the Black social worlds of Los Angeles. While cross-cutting issues often exaggerate in-group differences, the Black LGBT people in this work, particularly the younger generation of visibly gay people, are pushing for the racial group to recognize the broadening of identities through which Blacks exist in and understand the world. This research shows how Dawson's and Cohen's arguments can complement one another in motivating action on the part of the stigmatized group and produce the type of LGBT protest that I identify in Black community contexts.

The relationships Black LGBT people in Los Angeles have with their racial communities cannot be explained in a linear, uniform way. There are times when Black sexual minorities experience support from the racial group and times when they are disappointed with the lack of progress in their struggle for acceptance. There are heterosexuals in the community who are becoming more supportive of gay sexuality as an identity status that can exist alongside a strong racial group affinity. Others are holding fast to religious and cultural ideologies that reduce gay sexuality to an immoral behavior and not a valid identity status. Some LGBT people respond to the inconsistencies and occasional rejection by physically distancing themselves from the racial group. Others retreat from "gay" life and build a primary heterosexual identity while continuing to have same-sex intimate relationships in secret.

But despite the disapproving attitudes and religious condemnation that surface from time to time, the majority of Black LGBT people that I have studied remain in predominantly Black neighborhoods and social contexts and negotiate daily with family and community. Those who remain, particularly those with the resources to leave if they choose, say the support of and membership in the larger racial group is important to their sense of self. They remain because they trust in racial solidarity and racial group membership, and believe this sense of linked fate, combined with the collective mobilization they are engaged in, will result in the evolution of community members towards full acceptance. They also remain because they have less confidence that they will be fully accepted as members of other identity groups such as those based in sexuality. Nevertheless, in recent years they have been increasingly willing to test that support by making their gay identities more public and asserting their interest in taking on leadership roles in Black social environments as openly gay members of the racial community.

These people are at the forefront of an intraracial struggle for acceptance. They genuinely perceive the differences between themselves and Whites, including White LGBT people, to be greater than the points of divergence between themselves and members of the larger Black community (Moore, forthcoming). They continue to connect with the racial group on consensus issues that affect their lives and the lives of family members, such as police brutality, economic disinvestment in racial minority neighborhoods, and inequalities in educational opportunities for Black youth. They use these consensus issues as a starting point for a discussion of cross-cutting issues like same-sex marriage, employing a language and politics that directly speak to the larger racial group.

The move from gay sexuality as a primarily private activity or behavior, to the open expression and insistence on acknowledgement of it from family, community

residents, and even church parishioners often comes at a price. In living an openly gay life, some may temporarily forego full and unconditional acceptance from family and friends, but this is a price many are willing to pay in order to nurture their racial group affiliation and elaborate a racial authenticity. In Pattillo's (2007) study of class tensions within a rapidly gentrifying Chicago neighborhood, she identifies the various disputes between residents as working- and middle-class Blacks struggle for ownership of the community. She says these on-going debates are part of the contestations of what it means to be Black. Those committed to the group choose "participation over abdication and involvement over withdrawal, even and especially when the disagreements get heated and sometimes vicious" (p. 5).

The LGBT African Americans in my research remain in their racial communities despite the conflicts over acceptance of their sexuality because those conflicts are part and parcel of a sense of community and belonging. Group membership is not about sameness or having one voice, but having a commonality, a perceived link that connects its members regardless of other differences that might also exist. This work offers an understanding of how Black gay people embark on the maintenance of group affiliation and "insider" status around one identity based on race, when cross-cutting issues around the public enactment of homosexuality threaten to separate them from strong and positive affiliations with the racial group.

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NOTES

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2. In this work I use the terms "Black" and "African American" interchangeably to refer to people of the African Diaspora and to such populations that reside in Los Angeles. Although two transgendered people and four bisexual people were interviewed for this research, the data are primarily drawn from lesbians and gay men. I sometimes use the term "gay" to describe men as well as women with same-sex desire who may also identify as lesbian. I do this to be consistent with the terms women and men in Los Angeles' Black gay communities use to describe themselves and others. While the term "queer" is used by some scholars and activists to describe individuals in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities, it has not been embraced by many of the women and men in my research so I do not use it as a descriptor of the population I study.
3. See, for example, DiMassa and Garrison (2008); *Los Angeles Times* (2008); Vick and Surdin (2008). Bérubé (2001) suggests that some gay movement leaders purposefully allow the assumption that gayness is White to remain in place because it helps them gain the attention of powerful political figures.
4. Egan and Sherrill (2009) show that fifty-nine percent of African American voters in California supported the measure to deny same-sex couples the right to marry, relative to fifty-eight percent of Latinos, forty-eight percent of Asians and forty-nine percent of whites (p. 3, Table 1).

5. In an earlier (Herek and Capitanio, 1995) study of Black attitudes towards homosexuality, one-third of African Americans reported that they “never” or “rarely” thought of Black (males) as gay. If these figures are comparable to the attitudes Blacks hold towards gays today, it would not be difficult to see why many in the larger racial group have been slow to link gay rights issues like same-sex marriage as issues that are important for the Black community.
6. Unpublished tabulations by Gary Gates from the 2007 California Health Interview Survey.
7. The California Health Interview Survey did not identify transgendered people, so these figures only refer to lesbians, bisexuals and gay men.
8. Unpublished tabulations by Gary Gates from the 2007 California Health Interview Survey.
9. Jewel’s Catch One nightclub and related businesses owned by Jewel Thais-Williams are important exceptions. The Catch opened in 1972 as the country’s first and oldest Black lesbian and gay disco. Today it is much more than a nightclub. With its three levels and various enclosed spaces, it is the primary center of Black gay community activism and social life in Los Angeles. Thais-Williams regularly allows local Black gay community groups to use the space for meetings and events, and has also serviced HIV and peer counseling services, poetry readings, men’s discussion groups, dependency groups like Alcoholics Anonymous and other programs and services with no or minimal charge. Currently, Thais-Williams owns a vegetarian soul-food restaurant called the “Vegan Village Café” located in the Catch One building. She also owns the Village Health Foundation, an alternative non-profit medical clinic located next door to the nightclub. Thais-Williams and her spouse Rue also operate The Village Manor Hospice, a program that houses recovering substance abusers.
10. See, for example, Crichlow (2004); Garber (1989); Gonzales Ruddell-Tabisola, (2009); Hunter (2010); Moore (2010); Smith (1999).
11. These include interviews with eleven lesbians, eight gay men, four bisexual people and two transgendered (MTF) women.
12. Pseudonym.
13. Discussion forum held on November 7, 2009 at www.facebook.com.
14. Pseudonym.
15. Interviewed January 25, 2009.
16. Here to Stay and Jordon/Rustin Coalition planning meeting, January 17, 2009.
17. Pseudonym.
18. Pseudonym.
19. Pseudonym.
20. Pseudonym.
21. Photo taken by author.

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