

“Black Men Loving Black Men is the Revolutionary Act of the 1980s”:
AIDS and the Emergence of Black Gay Men’s Political Consciousness

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Note to CHR Readers: This is an early draft of the second chapter (or the third if you count the introduction) of my dissertation on African American AIDS activism. My larger argument has several components—that black AIDS activists focused on HIV in the broader context of other political and social issues, and that the AIDS epidemic has reshaped the ways that African Americans think of themselves in relation to the rest of the African diaspora (unfortunately the parts of the chapter that are pertinent to the latter point haven’t yet made it in here). The chapter that comes before this one deals with the establishment of the country’s first black AIDS service organization in Philadelphia, so some of that story will be familiar to readers of the final product.

According to “Back of the Line,” a report released by the Black AIDS Institute in the summer of 2012, one in four black men who has sex with men (MSM)¹ will contract HIV by age 25. By age 40, their incidence for HIV infection rises to 60%. Moreover, the problem appears to be getting worse—from 2006 to 2009, as the overall rate of HIV transmission in the United States declined, the rate of new infections among young black MSM rose by 48%. Though perhaps shocking, these numbers are nothing new. For most of the time that has elapsed since doctors first identified a rash of rare opportunistic infections among gay men in New York and Los Angeles in 1981, the first recognized sign of a deadly new epidemic, African Americans have born made up a share of the AIDS caseload in the United States that far outstrips their share of the total population. Within black communities, men who have sex with men have been the hardest hit.²

In its sheer devastation, AIDS irreversibly transformed the lives of gay men and shifted the terrain of gay and lesbian politics in the United States. For black gay men, the epidemic facilitated the emergence of a distinct political consciousness that held blackness and gayness as mutually reinforcing and deeply intertwined parts of the same public identity. By contrast, in his 1981 doctoral dissertation, Berkeley psychology student Julius Johnson divided the black gay men whose community attachments in those who primarily identified themselves as gay and made their social lives among mostly white communities of openly gay men, and those who

¹ “Men who have sex with men” or “MSM” refers to men who may have sexual contact with other men but may not identify as gay or bisexual.

² Phill Wilson, “Deciding Moment: Together We Are Greater than AIDS,” *Back of the Line: the State of AIDS among Black Gay Men in America* (Los Angeles: Black AIDS Institute, 2012), 5–6. For additional statistics, see “The Black Epidemic by the Numbers,” *Deciding Moment: the State of AIDS in Black America* (Los Angeles: Black AIDS Institute, 2011), 56–72.

primarily identified themselves as black, and associated mostly with other African Americans. Feminist scholar bell hooks has painted a somewhat similar picture of gay life in the black communities of her youth, where racial segregation and lack of economic opportunity, rather than individual identity, dictate that black gay men and lesbians remained part of the racial communities into which they were born, with whatever negotiations about the publicity of one's sexuality were necessary to make the arrangement work.³

When the AIDS epidemic “hit” the United States in 1981, the mainstream media reported the growing crisis as primarily affecting gay men—a community represented and widely understood to be almost exclusively white. Longtime AIDS activist and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute Phill Wilson recalls, “In the beginning, like most Americans, I believed that AIDS was a white gay disease. But very quickly, I was disabused of that notion.”⁴ His attitude was not unique—many other black gay men saw themselves as insulated from risk of AIDS because they themselves were not white and didn't sleep with white men. However, as their friends and lovers began to fall ill and die painful deaths from the opportunistic infections that AIDS affords a takeover of the human body, it became increasingly clear that black gay men were not immune from the new “gay cancer.” Once the HIV antibody test became available in 1985, the prevalence of the virus among black gay men became impossible to deny.

However, many of the first AIDS service organizations that had arisen early in the epidemic emerged out of the social networks of white gay men who were the most visible as early people with AIDS, and thus were primarily staffed by and responsive to the HIV-prevention needs of that community.⁵ These included Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City, Whitman Walker Clinic in Washington, D.C., and the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, all of which today have expanded their efforts to serve their own diverse client bases, including gay men of all ethnic backgrounds and women of color, who make up the majority of women with AIDS in the United States.

In the middle of the 1980s, however, the landscape of the disease looked much different. In the years before the Ryan White CARE Act, which upon being passed in 1990 vastly expanded funding for HIV prevention and treatment, money in the AIDS service industry was scarce. AZT, the highly toxic first drug approved to treat people with AIDS, was not yet available, much less the powerful HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy) drugs that came

³ Julius Maurice Johnson, “Influence of Assimilation on the Psychosocial Adjustment of Black Homosexual Men,” (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1981); bell hooks, “Homophobia in Black Communities,” in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston: South End Press, 1989);

⁴ Wilson, “Deciding Moment,” 5.

⁵ In 1983, at the National Lesbian and Gay Health Conference in Denver, Colorado, early AIDS activists gathered to draft a set of proposed standards for the political organization and treatment of those ill with the new disease. This statement, known as the “Denver Principles,” began by addressing the very language used to describe the sick: “We condemn attempts to label us as ‘victims,’ a term that implies defeat, and we are only occasionally ‘patients,’ a term that implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are ‘People With AIDS.’” Hence, I eschew the terms “patient” and “victim” as general terms for people living with AIDS in this paper. Denver Principles, 1983; available from http://data.unaids.org/pub/ExternalDocument/2007/gipa1983denverprinciples_en.pdf; accessed 21 October 2012.

onto market in the second half of the 1990s. As gay men of color fell ill and died, local AIDS service organizations faced pressure to broaden their education and prevention efforts to include culturally competent programs that would make their services more accessible to people other than white gay men. With little money to go around effective treatments non-existent, advocates of culturally competent prevention and education messages called on organizations to include people of color in their poster campaigns, broaden their outreach efforts beyond the bars, bookstores, and bathhouses that served mostly white customers, and to consider the cultural norms of minority communities in crafting their prevention programs.

Many established organizations tried to be more inclusive in their programming, with varying degrees of success. In Philadelphia, AIDS activists of color working at Philadelphia Community Health Alternatives, the city's gay and lesbian clinic that had begun as Lavender Health in the late 1970s, and the associated Philadelphia AIDS Task Force publicly split with those groups in 1986 over their failure to devote sufficient resources to the epidemic among communities of color at a time when over half of the city's people with AIDS were black or Latino. [note to CHR readers: this will have been covered in depth in the previous chapter] Joseph Beam, a black gay writer living in the City of Brotherly Love, penned an editorial that year for the *Philadelphia Gay News* in which he chalked the failure of existing, white-oriented AIDS service organizations to reach out to communities of color up to a historical axiom, that "The State (a euphemism for the ruling class) has never been concerned with the welfare of black people." White gay men, though marginalized by widespread, entrenched homophobia, still had access to greater economic resources and social privilege than their black counterparts, and couldn't be counted upon to be concerned for their welfare. Thus, he continued, "Our responsibility is twofold: we should continue holding a gun to the heads of Philadelphia AIDS Task Force, Gay Men's Health Crisis, and the Whitman-Walker Clinic until minority outreach coordinators are hired and specific programs are implemented. But concurrently we must ensure [sic] our own safety and administer to our own sick." This could mean literally caring for the sick black gay man sitting in a hospital bed because he had nowhere else to go, but it could also mean simply using condoms and educating oneself about safer sex. Beam ended the editorial with a challenge: "Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act of the eighties. So I say to you: What have you done for us lately?"

Though rooted in Philadelphia, Beam shared a larger social, cultural, and intellectual network of like-minded black gay men reaching up to New York and across the country to Oakland and San Francisco. As editor of *In the Life*, the first anthology of writing by black gay men, Beam had forged connections with others from around the country who explored their "tenuous position as Black men in white America... exacerbated because we are gay," through writing. Beam's friends and artistic collaborators in New York included members of both the writers' collective Other Countries and the black gay men's group Gay Men of African Descent (GMAD), both founded in 1986. When GMAD founding members Harold Robinson, Colin Robinson, and Charles Angel got together to write the group's statement of purpose in early August of that year, they framed their goals in expansive political and geographic terms, dedicating themselves "to end any and all ills that interfere with the rights of all individuals to exist and co-exist in a free, democratic society" with a commitment to "[end] racism, sexism, class oppression, and all Lesbian and Gay oppression, wherever these may exist." They made no specific reference to HIV or AIDS, although the minutes of an early GMAD meeting, held later that month, indicate members' interest in the growing epidemic as they discussed New York City's Minority Task Force on AIDS and the recently-formed Minority Caucus of Gay Men's

Health Crisis. Nevertheless, in some ways the epidemic hung over the group from its inception. Within six months Angel, who was also a Pentecostal preacher, had died of complications from AIDS, prompting a brief hiatus in the group's activities. After re-forming the following year, GMAD's leadership steered the group more and more toward providing AIDS services, as they sought and won grants from public and private funders to do HIV prevention education among black gay men. Throughout the rest of the decade and well into the 1990s, the vision of the board of directors, combined with the availability funding for community-based organizations providing AIDS services, pushed the group toward making HIV prevention a significant portion of its work.⁶

Taking a holistic view, GMAD leaders saw the epidemic among black gay men as symptomatic of the unique constellation of oppressions facing a population marginalized by both racism and homophobia. The central idea in their HIV prevention work was that black gay men suffered from low self-esteem due to these intersecting forces, which in turn led them to risky sex or drug use. GMAD's programs tried to tackle this problem in three ways. One was to carve out a discursive space for black gay men's identity by offering positive representations of same sex desiring men of African descent. The second was to create a sense in the group that safer sex was normal and pleasurable, most frequently by offering free condoms and lubricant at all of GMAD's activities. And the third was to offer black gay men a literal space for working out their emotional and psychological burdens in a consciousness-raising format. We can see these different approaches in a sampling from the groups centerpiece activity, the Friday Night Forum, where members might learn about prominent gay black men "from Africa to the present," participate in "Hot, Horny and Healthy," a "safer sex playshop" designed to eroticize safer sex, or to examine homophobia in the black community through group discussion.

Though GMAD at times lent advice and manpower to the better-established GMHC, they also asserted that the latter group could not reach black gay men with HIV prevention messages as effectively as could GMAD. They insisted that black gay men, caught at the intersection of systemic racism and systemic homophobia in American society, required interventions designed specifically with them in mind, rather than those designed for white gay men but transposed for minority consumers. At the same time, they aimed to combat homophobia in black communities and racism among white gay men by asserting themselves as integral parts of both the larger African American and gay communities. Their efforts to fight racial and sexual prejudice in the world around them correlated to a desire to undo the racism and homophobia that many black gay men had internalized as a result of growing up in a discriminatory society. This simultaneous assertion of difference and inclusion formed the crux of an emergent black gay men's political consciousness, overlapping but distinct from those of heterosexual African Americans and white gays and lesbians alike.

The homophobia in black communities that GMAD sought to challenge drew from both long-term historical circumstances and more proximal cultural developments. The black middle class concern for sexual respectability, promoted in particular by African American churches, stems from the ways that white society has pegged black sexuality as deviant in order to justify ongoing racial inequality, stretching back to the exploitation of African Americans' labor as chattel slaves in the New World. More recently, the Black Arts movement and Afrocentric scholars such as Frances Cress Welsing, Leonard Jeffries, and Molefi Asante had given

⁶ Joseph Beam, "Introduction: Leaving the Shadows Behind," in *In the Life: a Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 17.

intellectual credence to the association between true blackness—whether figured as political radicalism or adherence to African tradition—and heterosexual masculinity. Welsing, for example, argued that homosexuality among people of African descent was both a perversion introduced by contact with white society and a marker of the race's sorry state of social subjugation in the Western world. Such anti-gay attitude led some black men who identified themselves as gay or otherwise had sex with other men to conceal their sexual desires and practices, or to maintain separate sexual relationships with both men and women.⁷

On the other hand, black gay men regularly encountered racial discrimination from white gay men. Black gay men around the country reported the common experience of being carded at gay bars, and sometimes having to show multiple forms of identification, while their white counterparts entered freely. Historical patterns of residential segregation also contributed to a disconnect between white and black gay communities in some cities by marking the affluent neighborhoods in which gay enclaves developed as specifically white. Spatial segregation thus yielded social networks and gathering places for black gay men that were relatively distinct from those of their white counterparts. Inasmuch as these gay enclaves represented a visible gay presence in American cities, they projected an almost entirely white image of gay men's community. National gay-interest magazines like *The Advocate* also contributed to a sense of racial homogeneity among gay men. For their part, black gay men were acutely aware that representations of gay life in the United States often excluded them.⁸

Claiming Inclusion and Difference:

To combat this sense of invisibility and the psychological turmoil that came along with it, Gay Men of African Descent sought to construct a usable past for black gay men that located them as important actors in movements for African American civil rights and gay liberation alike. In a 1995 press conference at the Adam Clayton Powell Jr. State Office Building in Harlem, GMAD board co-chair George Bellinger emphasized that “Black gay men have always been a part of the larger community.” He pointed to the example of Bayard Rustin, the gay Civil Rights operative who had been the “architect” of the 1963 March on Washington. “The Black community,” he told the crowd, “believed that it would be better if the gay director of that

⁷ Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 34–35; Phillip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 50–51; Dwight A. McBride, “Can the Queen Speak?: Racial Essentialism, Sexuality, and the Problem of Authority,” in *Black Men on Race, Gender, and Sexuality: a Critical Reader*, ed. Devon W. Carbado (New York University Press, 1999), 253–275; Asante has since revised his position on homosexuality.

⁸ Curtis Wadlington, interview by author, video recording, Philadelphia, Pa., 9 May 2012; Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945–72* (University of Chicago Press, 2000); Charles I. Nero, “Why Are Gay Ghettos White?” in *Black Queer Studies: a Critical Anthology*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 228–248; Louis Hughes, Buddy Sutson, Ralph Pritchett, and John Gee, “National Coalition of Black Lesbians & Gays Panel,” group interview by Scott Seyforth, Washington, D.C., 1 June 2008, available from <https://www2.housing.wisc.edu/diversity/lgbtclass/docs/hughesSutsonPritchettGee.pdf>, accessed 21 Oct 2012.

momentous march took a backseat to a heterosexual spokesperson.... [Rustin's] contribution was rarely acknowledged and his silence was expected." He continued, "We as a community are a vital component of our families and will be silent no longer. To paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 'Until we are all free, none of us can be free.'" Bellinger thus projected gay involvement in black politics into both the past and future: "We have and will continue to defend you tooth and nail. We have been a part of every major activity and yet some of you dare not speak our names.... We will no longer be rendered invisible, for we are as proud of our gay men as we are of our Blackness." The sense of division among African Americans over issues of sexual identity registered in the way that Bellinger distinguished a gay-identified black "we" from his ostensibly straight audience, as well as in the article itself. In contrast to GMAD's convention of capitalizing both "Black" and "Gay," suggesting the equivalent significance of their racial and sexual identities, the *City Sun* chose to capitalize only the former term.⁹

Gay Men of African Descent also asserted its members' role in the city's larger gay community. They took part in New York's annual gay pride parade, celebrating the anniversary of the Stonewall Inn riot in Greenwich Village, which also brought the opportunity to commemorate those lost to the epidemic. When the 1995 parade stopped momentarily in remembrance of those who had passed away, the contingent from GMAD stopped in front of the Episcopal Church of the Ascension as the church's bell tolled the hour. Maurice Franklin, the group's board secretary, later told the *New York Times*, "I kept thinking about close friends of mine that I've lost.... And I just tried to bring them into the parade. Wherever I am, they are too."¹⁰

In addition to public displays of belonging to larger communities, Gay Men of African Descent presented black gay connections to earlier periods of cultural and political foment to its members as a consciousness-raising activity. At one Friday Night Forum in 1995, members learned about "the creativity and strategies of Black Gays and Lesbians during [the Harlem Renaissance] in creating or accessing social networks and spaces," concluding with a black gay man in his seventies who shared "a candid personal history" about coming of age in Harlem during the 1920s and 30s. According to monthly report on activities submitted to the United States Conference of Mayors (USCM), which at the time was funding GMAD's activities through an HIV prevention grant, many attendees expressed surprise gay men's involvement in jazz age Harlem culture, and most had never met a black gay man so much older than themselves. The report's author assured USCM that such programming served "as a powerful psychoeducational intervention that provides information to GMAD's constituents which supports the development and maintenance of a health identity, a critical preventive measure to an array of risk behaviors."¹¹

At the same time that Gay Men of African Descent positioned themselves as part of the larger gay community, they had to grapple with the reality that historical patterns of segregation

⁹ "African Americans Are Vocal About Gay Pride," *City Sun*, 28 June–4 July 1995, in Box 24, Folder 4, Gay Men of African Descent Records, Schomburg Center Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, New York Public Library, New York City [abbreviated hereafter as GMAD Records].

¹⁰ David W. Dunlap, "At Fifth Avenue Parade, Thousands Celebrate Gay Pride," *New York Times*, 26 Jun 1995, B4.

¹¹ "US Conference of Mayors Collaborative HIV/AIDS Prevention Grant Monthly Update Report," Feb 1995, Box 24, Folder 4, GMAD Records.

and individual racism had led to the development of unique spaces and social networks for gay men of color. In fact, they argued to granting agencies that other AIDS service organizations, such as GMHC, which began doing outreach to gay men of color during the late 1980s, lacked the requisite knowledge to effectively communicate messages about safer sex to black gay men. To set themselves apart from these groups, GMAD grant writers stressed their own ability to “target Black Gay men where they already go for safe space, support and congregation.” Sometimes this meant working in existing spaces patronized by black gay men, as when the group held a pair of summertime events at the Jacob Riis Park beachfront in Rockaway, Queens. The beach at Riis Park had historically drawn the city’s working class immigrants, and by the 1980s had become a popular gathering spot for gay men of color.¹²

At other times, the group’s approach of placing HIV education within “existing structures of support and empowerment and in the context of broader life-affirming messages about health, well-being and sexuality” meant creating new spaces—even temporary ones—for black gay men to gather. In 1995, GMAD began holding “Card Night,” a weekly event designed to provide a healthy alternative to the bar and club scene, which also helped bring program clients into contact with GMAD staff, who could refer them to HIV-related services or simply provide information about safer sex and harm reduction. Other spaces might be fraught with conflict for constituents, which could complicate the group’s outreach efforts. For the first ten years of its existence, Gay Men of African Descent conducted programs at the Gay and Lesbian Center in Greenwich Village. When it came time for the group to seek funds to lease its own office space for administration and programming, the grant writer wrote that GMAD members felt uncomfortable meeting in the center’s mostly white environment. For some, the act of simply coming to an event for gay black in public would be too much of a display of their sexual orientation; these men preferred to meet discreetly at the home of a friend or acquaintance.¹³

Alienation and Representation:

In their appeals to granting agencies, Gay Men of African Descent highlighted the sense of “alienation” common among black gay men as a significant barrier to reaching them with HIV prevention outreach services. Citing a literature review by Martin Manalansan of Gay Men’s Health Crisis on studies of gay and bisexual black and Latino men, they noted that their constituents were “double minorities,” and “marginal members of marginal groups” who had to contend with both racism and homophobia, limiting their ability to link up with HIV prevention and education services. To reinforce this point, they turned to the literature of Joseph Beam and Marlon Riggs, both black gay men who died of complications from AIDS. As Beam wrote:

I cannot go home as who I am.

When I speak of home I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community, the Black press, the Black church, Black

¹² AmFar Targeted Education Grant Proposal, [ca. 1991], Box 3, Folder 6, GMAD Records; Vernon Boggs, Gerald Handel, and Sylvia Fleis Fava, eds., *The Apple Sliced: Sociological Studies of New York City* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

¹³ “US Conference of Mayors Collaborative HIV/AIDS Prevention Grant Monthly Update Report,” Jun 1995, Box 24, Folder 4, GMAD Records; New York State Department of Health AIDS Institute Peer Delivered HIV Outreach and Prevention Initiative Grant Proposal, 17 Jun 1994, Box 21, Folder 10, GMAD Records.

academicians, the Black literati, the Black left.... I cannot go home as I who I am and that hurts me deeply.¹⁴

Marlon Riggs similarly addressed the problem of being a “marginal member of a marginal group”:

[T]he terrain Black Gay men navigate in the quest for self and social identity is, to say the least, hostile. What disturbs–no, enrages me–is not so much the obstacles set before my path by whites, which history conditions me to expect, but the traps and pitfalls planted by my so-called brothers, who because of the same history should know better.¹⁵

Beam and Riggs belonged to a cohort of black gay writers and artists that filled out the larger social, cultural, and intellectual world inhabited by GMAD leaders and members. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, they published a slew of books featuring the prose and poetry of black gay men: Beam’s *In the Life*, Essex Hemphill’s *Ceremonies and Brother to Brother*, Assotto Saint’s *The Road Before Us*, and *Other Countries Journal: Black Gay Voices* and *Sojourner: Black Gay Voices in the Age of AIDS*, produced by the black gay writers’ collective Other Countries, whose name called back to gay black writer James Baldwin’s 1962 novel. In the introduction to “Back of the Line,” Phill Wilson remarked at “how prolific Black gay writers were during the very worst years of the epidemic. It was as if they were writing for their lives.”¹⁶

Hemphill’s poem “For My Own Protection,” published first in *In the Life* and later in *Ceremonies*, carried the sentiment further:

I want to start an organization
to save my life.
If whales, snails, dogs, cats
Chrysler and Nixon can be saved,
The lives of Black men are priceless and can be saved.
I don’t want to wait for the Heritage Foundation
to release a study saying
Black people are almost extinct.
I don’t want to be the living dead
pacified with drugs, sex and rock-n-roll.
If a human chain can be formed
around nuclear missile sites,
then surely Black men can form
human chains around Anacostia, Harlem,
South Africa, Wall Street, Hollywood,
each other.

¹⁴ Joseph Beam, “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart,” in *In the Life: a Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publication, 1986), 231.

¹⁵ Marlon Riggs, “Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a SNAP! Queen,” in *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, ed. Essex Hemphill (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1991), 254.

¹⁶ Wilson, 5.

If we have to take tomorrow with blood
 are we ready?
 Do our s curls and dreadlocks and Phillies
 make us any more ready than a bush or conkaline?
 I'm not concerned
 about the attire of a solider.
 All I want to know
 for my own protection
 is are we capable
 of whatever
 whenever.¹⁷

Indeed, they were writing for their lives as Wilson noted, but as Hemphill suggested, also for the lives of other gay black men. Their work was not only a means for cathartically working out their shared feeling of being outsiders in American society. In describing and dramatizing the experiences of black gay men, they claimed a discursive space for themselves in a society that viewed gay men as implicitly white and black people as implicitly straight. Their efforts thus dovetailed with GMAD's consciousness raising approach to HIV prevention, which sought to help black gay men understand their shared experiences by providing a cultural canon that affirmed their black and gay identities as part of a coherent, complex whole. To this end, GMAD leaders contributed their own work to the above collections, and often hosted readings and performances by Other Countries members at fundraisers and its Friday Night Forums.¹⁸

The controversy that erupted in 1991 when the PBS documentary film series *P.O.V.* decided to screen Riggs' deeply personal film, *Tongues Untied*, speaks to the problem of black gay men's representation that GMAD sought to remedy, as well as the place of black gay men's art in the emerging culture wars of the 1990s. After graduating with a degree in history from Harvard University and another in journalism from the University of California, Berkeley, Riggs had made a career of using film to reveal the ways that media images of African Americans reinforced negative racial stereotypes, winning a national Emmy Award for his 1986 documentary *Ethnic Notions*. While undergoing treatment for an acute kidney problem in 1987, Riggs learned that he had contracted HIV. Faced with his own mortality, Riggs used film to make sense of his experience, literally turning the camera on himself to connect the rampant spread of HIV among black gay men to the ways that depictions of black queer sexuality reinforced normative values of whiteness, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Due to the film's sexually graphic nature and use of S & M themes, some local PBS station managers refused to air it and black leaders criticized Riggs for sexualizing slave imagery and promoting a vision of black people as promiscuous and sexually deviant, though Riggs had produced such images precisely in order to show their oppressive quality. Republicans in Congress reacted predictably, criticizing the role of the National Endowment for the Arts, which funded *P.O.V.* And had

¹⁷ Essex Hemphill, "For My Own Protection," in *In the Life*, 222–223.

¹⁸ Colin Robinson, Memo to Eddy Lilavois, 4 Nov 1991, Box 3, Folder 7, GMAD Records; "US Conference of Mayors Collaborative HIV/AIDS Prevention Grant Quarterly Report, November 15, 1994–January 31, 1995" Feb 1995, Box 24, Folder 3, GMAD Records; "US Conference of Mayors Collaborative HIV/AIDS Prevention Grant Monthly Update Report," Feb 1995, Box 24, Folder 4, GMAD Records.

awarded Riggs a grant of \$5,000 through the Western Regional Arts Fund. As the *Palm Beach Post* reported, the struggle over Riggs' film threatened to "reignite" the fight over public funding for controversial artwork. Two years earlier, the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. Had canceled a planned exhibition of work by Robert Mapplethorpe funded by the NEA after its similar homoerotic and sadomasochistic themes drew the ire of Republican pundits and Congressional leaders.¹⁹

Colin Robinson, then serving on the GMAD board of directors, and Robert Reid-Pharr, then a Ph.D. Candidate in American Studies at Yale University who had edited "Sojourner: a Chronicle of Living" for *Other Countries*, lodged a trenchant critique of the PBS affiliates who refused to air the film, as well as the mainstream media for failing to include black gay men's voices in their coverage of the controversy. They claimed that the decision to block the film represented not simply censorship, but a wilful [sic] contribution to prejudice" and an abrogation of "public TV's fundamental mission... to honestly represent Americans' rich diversity and complexity." Not only had "Black Gay Americans [missed] an opportunity to see our tax money spent in ways which directly seek to empower and affirm our lives," but the invocation of "chimeric 'community standards'" to block the film dramatized the invisibility of black gay men in the national "community" whose standards PBS purported to enforce. Robinson and Reid-Pharr argued that no such measure of decency would be applied to depictions "of war, of the transatlantic slave trade, of the Nazi holocaust," drawing a parallel—however hyperbolic—between historical acts of violent brutality and the everyday lived experience of black gay men.²⁰

Changing Behaviors:

Whatever the reason, by the early 1990s it seemed clear that although black gay men had imbibed information about the ways that HIV was spread, they had not changed their behavior accordingly to the extent that their white counterparts had. A 1989 study of the knowledge, attitudes, and behavior of black men who have sex with men, funded by the CDC and conducted by the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, found that the men surveyed largely knew that the infection rate was higher among African Americans than among white, what services were available in their communities, and that using a condom during intercourse would protect them from HIV. However, despite this knowledge, only slightly more than half reported always or nearly always practicing safer sex, and almost a quarter said they never used condoms. The challenge for Gay Men of African Descent was to connect black gay men's knowledge about HIV transmission and condom to their practice. They argued that the messenger bearing information about safer sex mattered as much as the message itself. Black gay men would be more likely to implement messages delivered by other gay black men than they would those delivered by white gay agencies, and programs designed for straight African Americans (such as they existed) might not address the full range of sexual behaviors in which black gay men engaged.

If black gay men weren't using condoms regularly, then clearly safer sex had not become normal in their communities to the same degree that it had among white gay men. To change

¹⁹ *Tongues Untied*, dir. Marlon Riggs, 55 min., Strand Releasing, 2008 re-issue, DVD; B. J. Bullert, *Public Television: Politics and the Battle over Documentary Film* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

²⁰ Colin Robinson and Robert Reid-Pharr, Open Letter to PBS, n.d., Box 3, Folder 8, GMAD Records.

this, Gay Men of African Descent provided condoms and lubricant at all of its programs and activities, taught constituents how to negotiate safer sex with their partners, and produced educational materials that presented regular condom use as normal, even erotic. A key part of their strategy for normalizing and eroticizing safer sex for black gay men was *Party*, a thirty-minute educational dramatic film produced in collaboration with AIDS FILMS, a non-profit studio whose executive director, Donald Woods, also contributed poetry to *In the Life, Other Countries, Sojourner, Brother to Brother*.

Party pulled together the main elements of GMAD's approach to HIV education into a package that could be easily shared with other black gay groups around the country. Right off the bat, the film's shooting script editorializes about the significance of the opening shot: "Tight close-up of tapping feet in sweatsocks. Slow pan travels lovingly up a very sexily cut and defined brown body which is barely clad in thin, cotton, Calvin Klein sweats that do very little to conceal the most... voluptuous... evidence of a healthy young body. This is a type of scrutiny ordinarily ignored—or edited out—when an attractive black man is photographed for the American media." Although this text doesn't appear as dialogue in the video, it's a powerful statement of one of the core problems that Gay Men of African Descent sought to address—the absence of affirming images of black gay men.²¹

Further along this mission of increasing black gay men's visibility, "Party" showcases diversity among black men who have sex with men, with each of the characters representing a different part of the group's constituency. Some appear to be solidly middle class. Paul, who is essentially the protagonist of the film and the host of the titular party, is an airline ticket agent. His friends Aaron, Curtis, and Vernon are, respectively, an office manager for a law firm, an advertising executive, and a nurse. Others appear to be working class—Duane works in Curtis' office building as a security guard, and Paul's friend Kofi speaks in grammatically incorrect English that marks him as less educated than the other characters. The video also presents visual markers of class status—when we see Paul's boyfriend Bryan in that opening shot, he's clad in "Calvin Klein sweats," and when we first meet Antoine, "a sixty-ish grande diva from the old school," his boytoy in tow, a well-muscled 19-year-old named Steve, carries two "designer shopping bags." Steve himself wears "overalls, workboots—and little else," but whether he's a manual laborer or a hustler remains unclear.

The characters also differ in the ways that they inhabit their gender and sexual identities. Antoine frequently refers to himself as "Ms. Antoine," and speaks with a flamboyant affect; even his blocking in the script gives the character a sense of femininity, always referring to him with a feminine pronoun. Though apparently younger, another character, Quiana, shares in Miss Antoine's diva affect, as they call one another "miss thing" and "dear," though their exchanges have a sarcastic edge to them. Kofi, on the other hand, occupies the opposite end of the spectrum. He feels like something of an outsider in the group because he's "not your typical brother 'in the life.'" According to Joe Beam, this phrase has overtones of both class status and sexuality, "used to describe 'street life' (the lifetsyle of pimps, prostitutes, hustlers, and drug dealers) [and] also... to describe the 'gay life' (the lives of Black homosexual men and women). Street life and gay life, at times, embrace and entwine, yet at other times are precise opposites."²²

²¹ *Party* Script, 1992, Box 10, Folder 9, GMAD Records. No copy of the film itself exists in the archive; all references to dialogue and action in *Party* are taken from the script.

²² Joseph Beam, Preface to the Introduction, *In the Life: a Black Gay Anthology*, ed. Joseph Beam (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1986), 12.

The characters' different approaches to condom use also affect the ways that they experience and perform their respective sexualities, at the same time that each of their subplots offers a different object lesson for sexually active gay black men in the age of AIDS. The central conflict of the video revolves around Paul and Bryan's relationship. They've been dating for a month, but haven't had sex since their first date because Paul insists on using condoms, whereas Bryan doesn't like them, and says he wants to feel Paul "skin to skin." At the beginning of "Party," Bryan storms out of Paul's apartment over the condom issue, and later gives Paul an ultimatum: if he doesn't agree to give Bryan some "real loving," he'll find someone who will, even if that means leaving the party with someone else. In the end he does just that when Paul turns him down once and for all.

In the meantime, the other characters in the film are busy negotiating their own approaches to safer sex. Miss Antoine, who disappears into the bedroom with Steve immediately after arriving, "sweeps into the kitchen" in grande diva fashion, proclaiming that he feels "positively ravenous!" When the others inquire as to Steve's whereabouts, he replies, "Ms. Antoine was just browsing, not looking to buy. Young men like that are too expensive... one way or another. Too bad, though. They're so much safer at that age." Quiana presses his meaning, to which he replies, "Don't be obtuse, darling. Ms. Antoine has no desire to become just another square-on-the-Quilt," but that he did not make Steve wear a condom. Vernon objects that "in the game of Russian Roulette, it doesn't matter whether the gun is old or new," and Antoine continues: "My dear boys, one by one I've scrupulously relinquished all of my former... diversions. I refuse to deny myself this final, remaining little pleasure. And I'm sorry, but it defeats the entire purpose to make someone wear a condom for oral sex... besides which, it tastes terrible—like stale chewing gum." His obstinacy on the issue occasions some instruction from Vernon, who tells him to "be creative, try some honey on it... or strawberry preserves. Maybe dip it in brown sugar." When Antoine expresses surprise at how "kinky" Vernon is, he replies, "Necessity is the mother of invention. Ever since Lonnie"—his husband—"tested HIV positive, we've had to do some major adjusting." Still, he says, "In a lot of ways our sex life is more fulfilling and exciting than ever. Maybe since we know that whatever we do now is safe, we can relax and really enjoy ourselves."

Here Vernon introduces one of the video's main themes, that safer sex in all of its forms can actually be more pleasurable than sex without a condom. The scene that immediately follows is of Curtis and Duane in the stairwell of Paul's apartment building. Duane is introducing Curtis to frottage or "outercourse"—sexual stimulation without penetration. He tells Curtis that he learned it in the army, where "a lot of guys are trying it cause [sic] it's safer." Curtis replies, "They must've been excellent teachers. It's like you found every erogenous zone in my body—including a few that I didn't even know I had." They leave together for Duane's place, to continue their fun.

However, not all of the characters are so successful in negotiating safer sex with their partners. In one of the video's first scenes, Paul's friend Aaron shows up at his apartment well before the party begins, utterly distraught. He's just been in the park, where he had unprotected sex with an anonymous stranger. The threat of AIDS had led him to be hyper-cautious in his sexual choices. As he tells Paul, "I've been so careful for so long... I wouldn't let anybody touch me. If I couldn't do it myself—it didn't get done." He's distressed not only because he risked exposure to HIV and knows he's going to be anxious for months while he waits for a definitive antibody test result, but also because safer sex has become an important part of his social identity. He tells Paul, "...the thing that really gets me is that I knew better. I'm the one who's

always preaching to you guys about safer sex.” Here Aaron represents the gay man who maintained safer sex behaviors but then “relapsed” into risky practices, but also suggests that abstinence as a safer sex strategy can backfire. Here, pleasurable but safe sexual activity seems like a reasonable middle ground between unprotected sex and sexual self-denial.

Towards the end of the video, when Kofi returns to the kitchen after being gone from the party, the others ask where he’s been. He replies that he’s been “kicking it with Mr. Derrick Davenport in his ‘Benz.” Aghast, the others tell him that Derrick is nicknamed “the Human Torch” because he’s “one of the biggest whores in town.” When Kofi protests, “the brother is... very important in the community. He was featured in Black Enterprise,” Vernon quips, “I don’t care if he was featured in the New Testament, Mr. Respectable-Positive-Role-Model has burned more brothers than the Ku Klux Klan.” Here the characters use “burning” in the slang sense of having a sexually transmitted disease. Even Antoine, who had been perhaps a bit cavalier earlier about his own condom use, asks with concern, “You didn’t do anything... reckless with him, did you?” To this, Kofi asks why one of the others didn’t grab his coat to let him when he left with Davenport, since one of them must have seen them go out together. Vernon lays into him, telling him that he’s an “alright brother and all” but never wants to take responsibility for his own behavior. “Even with something like AIDs [sic],” he says, “you’re the first one to argue that it’s a white man’s plot or the CIA scientists’ latest conspiracy—“ Kofi “storms out of the kitchen” and Paul catches up to him to say, “If it seems that everyone was coming down on you in there... it’s just that we care about you and we want you to be safe.” Kofi replies that he feels like he’s on the outside of the group because he’s not “your typical brother ‘in the life,’” to which Paul comes back, “What is ‘typical’? Each of us is different. But we’re all in this together. Aren’t you the one who’s always preaching that black men should support each other, watch each other’s back? That’s all we’re trying to do. We’ve got to help each other stay strong.” This is the takeaway message of the film, and one that calls back to Beam’s injunction for black men to “ensure our own safety and to administer to our own sick;” in short, for black men to love black men.

Conclusion:

Gay Men of African Descent stands as an example of the black gay political consciousness that arose in the middle of the 1980s in response to racism, homophobia, and the ways that those forces impinged on the spread of AIDS among gay men of color. For their part, black gay men mounted a response that was literally creative, incorporating art and literature into a broad program of holistic health that connected biological illness to social ills. Moreover, their work blurred the line between movement politics and cultural politics, marrying strategic planning and artistic productivity to tangible goals.

A lot has changed since the late 1980s and early 1990s, when GMAD was most active in fighting the spread of AIDS among black gay men. New, extremely effective HIV drugs came to market in the late 1990s, dramatically improving both quality of life and life expectancy for people living with AIDS. At the same time, attention shifted from the domestic epidemic to the global pandemic, and particularly the devastation wrought by the disease in sub-Saharan Africa. However, throughout the same period rates of HIV infection among black MSM rose steadily. During the summer of 2012, pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), the practice of using the same medication to prevent and treat an infection, generated a great deal of excitement when the Food and Drug Administration approved the prescription of tenofovir for this purpose. However, the use of PrEP for HIV prevention raises serious questions about access to the necessary drugs, which are expensive, and the feasibility of adherence to a strict drug regimen for most people.

Biomedical interventions like PrEP can produce remarkable results, but they do not address the underlying psychosocial factors that underlie the epidemic that continues to rage among black MSM. In this context, perhaps GMAD's approach warrants a second look.