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# SUMMER SCHOOL

WITH DR. NIKKI LANE

## **"I'm Black and I'm Proud": Black Pride and Black Queer Life in DC**

### ***Important Quotes***

#### **On the phrase: *Black Queer***

"We want [...] to throw shade on [queer's] meaning in the spirit of extending its service to "Blackness." [...] Just as "queer" challenges notions of heteronormativity and heterosexism, "Black" resists notions of assimilation and absorption. And so we endorse the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of "queer" while claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker "Black" (Johnson and Henderson 2005, 7).

#### **"Prove it On Me Blues" performed by Ma Rainey**

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me;  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men  
It's true I wear a collar and a tie  
Makes the wind blow all the while  
Don't you say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
You sure got to prove it on me  
Say I do it, ain't nobody caught me  
Sure got to prove it on me

"For African-American lesbians, making a first contact with someone involved in the gay scene could be crucial. Unlike white lesbians, who could hear about a bar and show up without knowing anyone else there, black women had to form connections with other lesbians in order to know where to socialize" (Thorpe 1996, 44).

"Surprisingly, while the stadium project prompted outcries from housing rights advocates, local residents and some business owners, neither DC's gay activists nor its gay residential mainstream opposed the eradication of this segment of DC's commercial gay terrain or joined other voices in objecting... even though the area has long been a popular gay recreational space, this was not a space that gay men wanted to defined, but an area where loss could unfold without consequence." [Leap 2009, 202]

#### **E. Patrick Johnson, "Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community"**

"Within the context of the sacred "place" of the church, however, the sexual/sensual body is both invisible and foregrounded, shunned and gazed upon, denigrated and enjoyed" (Johnson 1998).

#### **Carrie Wofford, "Black Lesbian and Gay Pride." *Gay Community News*, June 6-19, 1992**

"Many of last year's organizers also expressed frustration by the increasing commercialization and lack of cultural diversity of the larger lesbian and gay pride celebration, which occurs this year on June 21.

Despite the strong Black gay and lesbian political community in Washington, "initial criticisms surfaced [in 1991] that we were being separatists," one of the organizers said. Even the organizers of Pride of Washington wanted to know why it was planned. But Carlene Cheatam, the coordinator of the D.C. Black Lesbian and Gay Pride Day for the past two years, challenged the white pride organizers, "Why not? Why is it so strange that Black people would choose to do [what everyone else does]?"

"When Cheatam was a coordinator of the traditional Gay and Lesbian Pride of Washington in 1983, she recounted, "I personally received a lot of resistance... when [white gay] bar owners saw [that]... this Black woman was running the show" (Wofford 1992).

#### **Kay, "You Can't Just Google That"**

Like I have, like I know people. You know I'm thinking about this party that I went to, it was a birthday party. And.. that's kinda where I am usually surrounded by women of color is at house parties. [...] and like everyone there was pretty much a woman of color and it was awesome. And that was one of those situations where I definitely thought "this doesn't happen enough in my life." And um but most of those women were gay and that kind of thing, you can't just google that. That's the kind of thing, you have to make connections with people. So I definitely appreciated that space created.

## Reading List

Davis, Angela Y. 1998. Blues legacies and Black feminism : Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. New York: Pantheon Books.

Isoke, Zenzele. 2014. "Can't I be seen? Can't I be heard? Black women queering politics in Newark." *Gender, Place & Culture* 21 (3):353-369.

Johnson, E. Patrick, 1998. Feeling the Spirit in the Dark: Expanding Notions of the Sacred in the African-American Gay Community. *Callaloo*, 21(2): 399-416.

Lane, Nikki. 2015. "All the Lesbians are White, All the Villages are Gay, but Some of Us are Brave: Intersectionality, Belonging, and Black Queer Women's Scene Space in Washington, DC." In *Lesbian Geographies: Gender, Place and Power*, edited by Kath Brown and Eduarda Ferreira, 219-242. London and New York: Ashgate.

Leap, William. 2009. "Professional Baseball, Urban Restructuring, and (Changing) Gay Geographies in Washington, D.C." In *Out in public : reinventing lesbian/gay anthropology in a globalizing world*, edited by Ellen Lewin and William Leap, xii, 365 p. Chichester, U.K. ; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.

Thorpe, Rochella. 1996. "'A house where queers go": African-American Lesbian Nightlife in Detroit, 1940-1975." In *Inventing Lesbian Cultures in America*, edited by Ellen Lewin, 40-61. Boston: Beacon Press.

## Important Places in Black Queer History

- Richard Bruce Nugent's Home: 1231 T St NW, 1906-1926
- Alain Locke's Home: 1326 R St. NW, 1918-1954
- Nob Hill: 1101 Kenyon Street NW, 1953-2004
- Wet: L Street, SE, 1999-2006
- Bachelor's Mill: 1104 8th St SE, Est. 1984
- Clubhouse 1296 Upshur St NW, 1975-1990
- Edge: L Street, SE, 1991-2006
- Tracks: 1111 First Street SE, 1984-1999
- Hung Jury: 1814 H Street, NW, 1984-2002
- Delta Elite Social Club: 3734 10th St NE, 1976-2013
- Ziegfields: 1345 Half Street SE, 1988-2006
- Lace: 2214 Rhode Island Ave NE, 2008-2013

## Discussion Questions

- 1) Discuss the reasons why DC became the site of the first Black Pride. Can you think of other cities, that might have similar conditions? Look up whether or not they have celebrations of Black Pride.
- 2) Considering the importance of house parties, why might the distinction between "public" and "private" not necessarily helpful in thinking about how black gay/lesbian/bisexual people have socialized in the US?
- 3) The closing of the gay clubs in Navy Yard had a significant impact on the way that black lesbians partied and socialized, however, it by no means prevented them from doing so. Knowing what you do now about the history and contemporary experiences of black queer people, why do you think that is?
- 4) Review the excerpt from Carrie Wofford's June 1992 article about Black Pride. What stands out to you about Cheatham's experience? Considering her experience, how might you respond to someone who asks why there's a "Black" Pride?