

The Prevalence of Racism in the LGBTQ+ Community: A History

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When discussing the past, present and future of race and racism in the United States, all facets of oppression must be considered. One would assume that when oppression is noticed, it is committed by the most privileged group: straight white wealthy men. By focusing on the harm the majority is causing, people often ignore the minority groups and how their communities are often against improving race relations and intersectionality. Intersectionality is a crucial aspect of inclusivity and Critical Race Theory that cannot be ignored when discussing actions that hinder minority groups in the United States and form various intersecting systems of oppression. The choice to ignore how various marginalized communities tend to discriminate based on race is a form of colorblind racism that continues to divide these communities instead of bringing them together. The assumption that a marginalized community cannot discriminate against another marginalized community is the crux of the issue. This behavior has been often seen throughout the years in the LGBTQ+ community, yet many turn a blind eye or are unaware to the racism that often goes unchecked. The crux of this research will focus on analyzing various facets of the LGBTQ+ community throughout the ages, searching for any signs of change.

The main racist and colorblind issues that Black members of the community face can be narrowed down to three points. The first point to be discussed is the disproportionate amount of Black people that have been affected by HIV/AIDS. There will also be a focus on the animosity that Black members of the community face from their White peers. The conclusion of the research will surround the inherent sexualization of the Black gay experience, while simultaneously deeming White members to be more than objects of sexual fantasy and can receive respect from the straight majority. The research itself is formatted as a cumulative history of the strained relationship between the LGBTQ+ and Black communities, however, it is also hopeful in nature as it searches for a future where the two communities can coexist together.

By the end of the last century, more than half a million people in the United States were diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Two thirds of the infected were Black and Latino youths. This disproportionate statistic prompts questions as to why racial minorities seem to be the most affected by it.<sup>1</sup> These statistics are affected by the lack of sexual education in certain districts and areas in the United States that are more likely to be inhabited by people of color, prompting unknowing citizens to engage in unprotected sex and see as they have no knowledge of how the disease spreads. They are also less likely to be aware of the other ways HIV/AIDS can be spread and that is through blood and sharing objects such as needles. Neighborhoods that are more heavily affected by the prominence of drugs like crack and heroin are more likely to see spikes in HIV/AIDS. Scholars Cathy Schneider and Shalini Bharat have both done research on this topic and attempt to dissect how over the ages, the statistics tend to stay the same.

Both scholars discuss the overwhelming number of Black men suffering with AIDS and not being able to gain access to medical care or receive adequate sex education and access to contraception, as well as the damaging stigma surrounding those who are affected by the disease. This link is made by Schneider in her study: “Among the most frequently given interpretations are those that attribute the spread of AIDS to an “underclass” disposed to drug use, promiscuity, and crime. Since almost 50 percent of new AIDS cases occur among drug users, and the rest are concentrated among those who engage in unprotected sex, many argue that underclass culture predisposes blacks and Latinos to higher rates of AIDS”<sup>2</sup>. This commentary on the link between

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<sup>1</sup> Schneider, Cathy Lisa. 1998. “Racism, Drug Policy, and AIDS.” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (3): 427–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2658075>. Pg. 278

<sup>2</sup> Schneider, Cathy Lisa. 1998. “Racism, Drug Policy, and AIDS.” *Political Science Quarterly* 113 (3): 427–46. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2658075>. Pg. 428

drugs and the disease is a testament to the United States's lack of care towards the citizens that live in underprivileged areas that are more likely to be exposed to them. Bharat supports her findings, citing gay men as another 'risk group', and how the stigma surrounding them already is hindering their chances of protecting themselves from the disease. She states that: "The strong linkages of HIV/AIDS with gay men and other so-called 'risk groups' established early on seem to have blinded social researchers and others to the factors of racial, class and gender relations that frame AIDS not as a medical problem alone but as a social one"<sup>3</sup>.

These social problems are usually built upon fears, prejudices and inequalities pertaining to both race and sexuality. These social stigmas are what also prevent Black queer members of the community to be denied treatment or care while they are struggling with the disease, often resulting in a disproportionate number of deaths. Scholar Kevin Mumford goes into the many ways the American Healthcare system has failed Black men and women struggling with AIDS, but most importantly points out how the queer community itself has failed them the most. Their exclusion of Black men and women in the AIDS conversation as well as their denial of offering help to them was noticed by Mumford over the years as he discusses it in his work *Not Straight, Not White: Gay Black Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis*: "Yet given the

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<sup>3</sup> Boyle, Kevin, and Shalini Bharat. "Dimensions of Racism : Proceedings of a Workshop to Commemorate the End of the United Nations Third Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination, Paris, 19-20 February 2003 / Organized by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in Cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)." United Nations Digital Library, 2005. <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/556287?ln=en&v=pdf>. Pg. 83

increased distance between black and white neighborhoods, the insufficient efforts to reach out to black gay men, the statistical variance may have overlooked the number of black men who engaged in same-sex behavior but do not publicly identify as gay. According to one report, although blacks representing the largest percentage of AIDS cases in the city, there were few “black buddies” to help HIV-infected men of color with errands, medical appointments, and other everyday activities”<sup>4</sup>. Black queer people affected by AIDS have been failed by the institutions of the government as well as the members of their own community. This sentiment sadly was not left in the 1980’s, as a disproportionate amount of people of color continue to struggle with the disease.

The physical aspect of the discrimination is one that is easier to access due to the multitude of studies that investigate the colorblindness in both the LGBTQ+ community towards their Black peers and the American Healthcare system. A form of oppression that tends to slip under most people’s noses. It can be as blatant as refusing employment to a person of color in an LGBTQ+ safe space or refusing to acknowledge the requests and concerns of Black peers as it would chip away at their personal freedoms as White members of the community. These sorts of covert colorblind tactics have always been in place, even during pivotal moments for both communities. In the height of the Gay Liberation movement of San Francisco, journalist Randy Alfred aired a shocking episode of his radio show “The Gay Life”. The episode was aired on May 29<sup>th</sup> 1983 and featured speeches from two representative of the group Black and White Men Together. Their existence as an organization is founded on the belief that ignoring the intersectionality between sexuality and gender is what is causing the most harm to both

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<sup>4</sup> Mumford, Kevin. 2016. *Not Straight, Not White: Black Gay Men from the March on*

communities. Billy Jones and Tom Horan are the two representatives that discuss an experiment that spanned eight months, based on a hypothesis both shared: there were little to no people of color employees in queer establishments in the Bay Area. After surveying 200 club and bars in February of that year, they came to a stunning conclusion: “There were 27 out of 300 people of color working in gay men’s bars in February. The same results were found months later in October”<sup>5</sup>. This disproportionate amount of employment is yet another way of suppression that the White queer community imposes on its Black members, and both Jones and Horan acknowledge that. Jones even closes out his speech by stating the following: “Not one of us will be free, until all of us are free. Racism is another tool used by the common enemies to divide us”<sup>6</sup>.

This sort of sentiment was shared also by other political activists, most notably lesbian theorist Barbara Smith. Her writing regarding the dreaded intersections between the queer, female, and black communities have been highly influenced by the events of the 1980’s during the liberation. She does not shy away when discussing the clear privilege and leverage White people in the community have and how they exercise it to keep Black people subordinate. This in turn makes Black queer people question if their queerness and race can ever be perceived as socially acceptable: “They have to speak out vociferously against lesbianism because if they don’t, they may have to deal with their own deep feelings for women... Lesbianism is definitely about something sexual, a so called deviant sexuality. So, the way that most Black women deal about it is to be rigid and closed about it as possible. White people do not have a sexual image

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred, Randy. 1983. “The Gay Life” KSAN-FM. San Francisco, CA, May 29, 1983.

<sup>6</sup> Alfred, Randy. 1983. “The Gay Life” KSAN-FM. San Francisco, CA, May 29, 1983.

that another oppressor community has put on them”<sup>7</sup>. Smith is very open regarding her feelings towards the divide within the communities, often having a cynical view of the past and the future. However, when looking at the state of queer politics today, she may be right. It has become very clear that this sentiment was not only a product of the 1980’s and the rise of the liberation movement.

Presently there is a lot of controversy and hostility surrounding the needs of Black queer people and the amount of colorblind subordination today’s queer youth is going through. Furman et. al. and VanDaalen et.al. Both discuss the sociopolitical effects of this hostile behavior towards the POC members of the community by analyzing the animosity Black Lives Matter has received by participating in Pride parades, the outrage over the intersectional Pride Flag that recognizes both the Black and POC members of the community. With the rise of racial stereotypes and stigmas and various changes within the community, the division between the White and POC members cannot be clearer. VanDaallen examines the amount of harmful rhetoric and stereotypes that have been used to further subordinate Black members of the LGBTQ+ community: “For example, Wilson et al. (2009) found that gay Black men tend to be stereotyped as aggressive and hypermasculine, whereas gay Asian men tend to be stereotyped as sexually reserved and effeminate. In their focus groups of lesbian, bisexual, and queer racial or ethnic minority women, Logie and Rwigema (2014) found that participants received the message

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<sup>7</sup> Moraga, Cherrie. 1983. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*.

from White LGB individuals that LGB racial or ethnic minority people must give up or compromise their racial or ethnic identities to be accepted as LGB”<sup>8</sup>.

These stereotypes are also echoed when Black members of the community demand that issues they face daily be discussed and acknowledged by the White members. A big debate in recent years has been the presence of police officer and law enforcement at Pride parades since the legalization of gay marriage in 2015. Groups like Black live Matter have expressed their frustration with the Queer community and urged that if the safety of all their members is truly their priority, they will continue future parades without the presence of law enforcement. The request was met with anger and astonishment as members of the community called this an aggressive request. Furman et.al. analyzes an example of this behavior during a pride parade in Toronto, Canada: “There was significant backlash from white parade attendees, where people targeted BLMTO members with racist and violent threats and language both in person and on social media. Following this event, BLMTO organizers received hateful mail, social media posts, and death threats in response to their activism from both queer and straight white people”<sup>9</sup>. This

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<sup>8</sup> VanDaalen, Rachel A., and Carlos Eduardo Dos Santos. 2017a. “Racism and sociopolitical engagement among lesbian, gay, and Bisexual Racial/Ethnic Minority adults.” *The Counseling Psychologist* 45 (3): 414–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000017699529>.

<sup>9</sup> Furman, Ellis, Amandeep Kaur Singh, Natasha A. Darko, and Larose Wilson Ciann. "Activism, Intersectionality, and Community Psychology: The Way in which Black Lives Matter Toronto Helps Us the Examine White Supremacy in Canada's LGBTQ Community." *Community Psychology in Global Perspective* 4, no. 2 (2018): 34-54. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1285/i24212113v4i2p34>. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly->



sort of discrimination is often written off as harmless by members of the community, however when examining the racist history of the police in the United States, one might wonder if this ignorance is a facade to keep people of color subordinate and at risk. As the research of this paper starts to become more recent, it seems that the sentiment that Black people will never be a part of queer spaces has not gone away.

While discrimination and colorblindness take many physical forms, there is a more sinister underside to the conversation of the depths of discrimination Black Queer people endure and that is their sexualization and dehumanization. Many see Black men as nothing more than a sexual preference. There are many White gay men that can proudly boast about preferring Black sexual partners, however, are only ever seen marrying partners of their own racial identity. Clarence Ezra Brown III and Tara Alturi are both scholars discuss the facets of the sexualization of the Black queer experience and the harmful preferences that the White members of the community have towards their romantic vs. sexual partners. They ask the question of what obstacles stand in the way of the Black queer community when striving to achieve the same comfortable living as the Queer white members of the community. Queerness is already seen in the same deviant light of sexual perversion by most of the straight population, the queerness of a Black man is a subject that is even more controversial and frowned upon. This leads to most Black queer people being in denial about their sexuality as a method of not being perceived as a sexual deviant.

Brown explores this in this thesis about the intersectional discrimination in the Black and queer communities: “The most common results regarding Blacks and whites and their attitudes

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[journals/activism-intersectionality-community-psychology/docview/2130877374/se-2](https://journals/activism-intersectionality-community-psychology/docview/2130877374/se-2).

toward homosexuality displayed that Blacks were more likely to support anti-discrimination laws but Whites were typically more accepting of the homosexual lifestyle”<sup>10</sup>. This sort of negative relationship with sex and sexuality can cause Black men to engage in riskier sexual behavior due to low self-esteem and have a higher chance of contracting STD’s, including HIV/AIDS. This sort of mindset is never discussed when assessing the causes HIV/AIDS affecting of a disproportionate amount of Black people in the community<sup>11</sup>. The White gay gaze is often found as the major causation of this social racial subordination Black gay men can never seem to escape.

Atluri explores this idea of the ‘White gaze’ and how prominent it always has been, and how it is reaching even new heights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: “The erasure and/or fetishism of racialized skin within white queer writing corresponds to contemporary sexual politics within queer communities. Recent media articles point to racist practices of desire and dating among white queers. Queer people of color are explicitly constructed as phobic or fetishized objects

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<sup>10</sup> Brown, Clarence Ezra. 2008. “Racism in the Gay Community and Homophobia in the Black Community: Negotiating the Gay Black Male Experience.”  
<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/33121>. Pg. 15

<sup>11</sup> Brown, Clarence Ezra. 2008. “Racism in the Gay Community and Homophobia in the Black Community: Negotiating the Gay Black Male Experience.”  
<https://vtechworks.lib.vt.edu/handle/10919/33121>. Pg. 17

within a white gaze”<sup>12</sup>. Many political and queer theorists of the present have started to recognize these concepts; however, Barbara Smith is one of those theorists decades ago that has had her finger on the pulse of Black queer sexuality and its demonization over the years. She states in her work *The Truth That Never Hurts: Writing on Race, Gender, and Freedom* about how Black people view homosexuality as something that is only attainable to white people, going as far as calling it a disease. These perverse attitudes that White people have towards the idea of a Black person being queer is what drives a lot of the psychological inner torment that they experience. This denial of intersectionality and that the two realms of identity cannot be mutually exclusive is what keeps the progress towards liberation for both communities so stagnant<sup>13</sup>.

The ongoing racism in the LGBTQ+ community is an issue that sadly does not seem to be vanishing any time soon. From its very prominent appearance throughout the HIV/AIDS crisis to the blatant colorblind solutions that the White members of the community propose that cause psychological harm to its Black members. This research encapsulates the sad, yet true, reality of the situation. The intersectionality between sexuality and race is still at the level it was decades ago, and very little progress has been made. To illuminate most of this discrimination, at

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<sup>12</sup> Atluri, Tara. "Even Your Queer Reading is White: Vivek Shraya's Poetic Justice." *Lambda Nordica* 23, no. 1-2 (2018): 110-138. <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/even-your-queer-reading-is-white/docview/2424520216/se-2>. Pg. 113

<sup>13</sup>

Smith, Barbara. 2023. *The Truth That Never Hurts 25th Anniversary Edition: Writings on Race, Gender, and Freedom*. Rutgers University Press. Pg. 112-114

least in the United States, extensive reform must be done to the country's healthcare and education systems. There is also a disproportionate amount of queer Black men being excluded from queer spaces and being denied entry into the community. Many activists and theorists look upon the Black queer life as being portrayed by the community as inherently sexual, only existing to fulfill the fantasies of subordination and ownership. The most hard-hitting part to be realized when looking back through this research is that not much has changed from the 1980's to present. There is not much progress that has been made in eliminating the both the blatant and subconscious racism that many members of the LGBTQ+ community harbor. It is up to the queer community to access if these patterns will continue or if they are willing to sacrifice their whiteness and the security it gives them to stand in solidarity with other members of the community. As of today, their decision is still pending.

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