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Marlon M. Bailey

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BLACK GAY SEX, HOMOSEX-NORMATIVITY, AND CATHY COHEN'S QUEER OF COLOR THEORY OF CULTURAL POLITICS

Marlon M. Bailey

It is difficult to capture in this short amount of space and time the extent to which Cathy Cohen's scholarship has influenced my work, and shaped the fields in which I am situated, such as gender and sexuality studies, Black studies, performance, and HIV/AIDS prevention. Therefore, I decided to discuss how Cohen's queer of color theory of cultural politics guides my current project, which examines the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on Black gay sexual subjectivities in the United States. I want to highlight these contributions in two points, and I draw from "Punks" and her 2004 article "Deviance as Resistance: A New Research Agenda for the Study of Black Politics." These articles have influenced my work that contemplates the daily experiences of Black gay men, and how HIV-related stigma and the AIDS epidemic shape our subjectivities in the United States.

Today I ask, how does Cohen's queer of color theory help me describe and examine the conditions under which Black gay men live that make us structurally vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, among other health disparities and social inequities. One of the most important contributions that "Punks" makes to my work is that it helps explain how power works under systems of domination, as well as in the margins. Cohen (1997: 438) encourages us to highlight and analyze power relations as opposed to "static, stable sexual identities and behaviors," for example, to understand how systems of domination work and how to collectively mobilize against them.

Second, I engage Cohen's (2004) notion of "deviance as resistance." I use this concept to analyze my ethnographic data on Black gay men's raw sex practices in this moment of our disproportionate representation in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. Hence I am interested in how this dimension of Cohen's queer of color theory of power delineates both the oppressive conditions under which Black gay men live and how we challenge, resist, and (sometimes) negotiate the obstacles to and constraints on our bodies, sexual health, and well-being.

Structural Conditions of Black Gay Life

What are the structural conditions under which Black gay men live? How does HIV/AIDS shape these conditions? Black gay men's disproportionate representation in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States is the most vivid example of the severity of health disparities that we continue to experience after nearly four decades of the epidemic. Social inequality and health disparities are caused by convergent racism and homophobia and contribute to Black gay men's structural vulnerability to HIV. When I say structural vulnerability, I mean how Black gay men disproportionately experience the consequences of institutional racism, such as poverty, homelessness (including housing instability), under/unemployment, incarceration, health disparities, and violence perpetrated by law enforcement and civilians. While Black gay men live and navigate the realities of structural racism that, in part, affect their health outcomes, they also simultaneously experience institutional and communal homophobia that includes gay and HIV-related stigma, linked to violence, abuse, discrimination, and exclusion. In their study of Black gay men in the SF Bay Area, Emily Arnold and her colleagues (2014) describe these men as "triply cursed," because of their multiple experiences with homophobia and HIV-related stigma within the larger societal context of racism. In addition, in her intersectional study of Black gay and bisexual men, Lisa Bowleg (2013: 755) captures the ways in which these Black men's experiences are shaped by race, gender, and sexual oppression that challenges their mental health and overall social well-being.¹

In "Punks" Cohen (1997: 438) argues that one's relationship to power, not some homogenized identities, should be the basis by which we come to understand the nature of social oppression, as well as what we do to mobilize against it. Cohen focuses on the intersectional identities of Black men, Black lesbians, and Black heterosexual women, all of whom are similarly situated within relations of power. I apply this theory to highlight Black gay men's relationship to power and structural vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in ways that are dissimilar from other gay men. For instance, last year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2016) concluded that one in two Black gay men will become HIV positive within their lifetime. And in 2005 the CDC conducted a five-city study and released another startling report concluding that 46 percent of Black gay men are infected with HIV and 67 percent of those infected were unaware of their HIV seroconversion. Thus Black gay men's relationship to power is informed by our race, gender, sexuality, and HIV status, as well as our seemingly inevitable seroconversion. Being Black and seroconverting is substantially life altering for most multiply marginalized

people, let alone Black gay men. Drawing from Cohen's work, I suggest that HIV is not merely a retrovirus; rather, it functions as a vector of power, a social category, which acutely shapes the quality and possibilities of life and the conditions of death, sometimes prematurely, for Black gay men. In my book, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit*, I describe how one of my interlocutors, Noir Prestige, died in 2005 from complications of AIDS, and his hospice nurse told his partner, "We don't die like this anymore." I suggest that, even now, in 2018, some of us actually do (Bailey 2013: 217).

Homosex-normativity

In addition to convergent forms of anti-Black racism and homophobia that structure Black gay men's experiences within public health and other social institutions, dominant discourse and related approaches to HIV/AIDS prevention draw from and advance what I refer to as a *homosex-normative* discourse, not to be confused with Lisa Duggan's notion of "homonormativity," even though I draw from and extend her concept. By using *homosex-normativity*, I am precisely concerned about the management of gay sex practices rather than the neoliberalization of gay kinship and marriage (although there is, indeed, a correlation here). Public health paradigms for HIV prevention and overall sexual health promote/require repressing sexual urges and focusing on the fear of contracting not only HIV but other STDs as well. Instead of a primary emphasis on sexual desire, urges, and pleasure as healthy sexuality, emphasis is placed on reducing or eliminating risk at the expense of pleasure and sexual satisfaction. As Brandon Andrew Robinson (2013: 102) observes, for public health in the United States, sexual health discourse is centered on subordinating sexual urges to rational thinking and behavior. Furthermore, too often, white heterosexual health officials function as the paternalistic authorities on and managers of the sexual behaviors of Black gay men (*ibid.*). These encounters with public health authorities cause many Black gay men to internalize repressive and disciplinary discourses about their sexuality. By using the term *homosex-normativity*, I bring into focus the management of gay sex practices as part of the neoliberalization of gay life, marriage, and kinship, underpinned by an anti-Black racism. *Homosex-normativity* is a particular technology that public health uses to manage Black men's sex practices in the age of AIDS.

A basic assumption that underpins a *homosex-normative* logic of HIV prevention often promoted by public health and larger society is one that assumes that for all rational, self-loving gay men, avoiding seroconversion, or discontinuing sex if one seroconverts, is more important than satisfying and pleasurable sex. But for

the Black gay men in my study, the aforementioned is not always the most important issue. For instance, when asked about the role that HIV awareness plays in his sexual decision-making, Tyrone, who is HIV positive from Indianapolis, said, "I just don't see it as, I guess, that big of a deal because I got so much knowledge about HIV; I feel like it's not the end of the world. It's a lot more worse stuff out there. I'd rather have HIV than diabetes or some other stuff you know." In addition, for many of the interlocutors in my study, including those who were HIV negative at the time, the fear of or concern for contracting HIV was not always a primary factor in their sexual decision-making. Johnthon from Indianapolis, who is HIV negative, made this point:

There's a risk with sex either way it go. You know what I'm saying? So it's a choice I had to make. If I'm gonna have no sex or if I'm gonna have sex that I want to have an enjoy it. And if I'm gonna do it, if I'm gonna take the risk, I wanna enjoy it. I don't wanna take a risk and be like, damn, I took this risk for nothing and now I'm like, what the fuck did I do it for. So I'm gonna take the risk, I'm gonna make it mean somethin'.

I do not suggest that Black gay men do not think about or fear seroconversion and that HIV never plays a role in their sexual decision-making. Instead, I argue that other needs and priorities such as sexual pleasure, intimacy, connection, and satisfaction are also key factors, and in some cases, more important ones. Ultimately, the assumption that, as a Black gay man, one's goal is to remain HIV negative at any cost and adhere to an anti-Black homosexual-normative regulatory regime that requires less satisfying sex to make others feel comfortable and safe at his own expense should not be the logic that underpins all HIV prevention and sexual health models.

In "Deviance as Resistance," Cohen (2004: 27) calls for a "paradigmatic shift" in African American studies to examine, detail, and highlight the agency of those on the outside, on the bottom, of society who through their acts of nonconformity choose outside status, at least temporarily. Here I use Cohen to examine how some Black gay men, through their raw and "high risk" sex discourse and practices, contest and resist the homosexual-normative logics that underpin HIV prevention strategies and discourse for Black gay men.

In my larger project, I analyze how Black gay men advance a form of sexual noncompliance, sometimes unwittingly, by describing how they represent their raw sex practices on gay networking and sex profiles, as well as ethnographic accounts of the sex that Black gay men have where pleasure and risk are coconstitutive.

“Anything Goes” (raw sex) profiles on gay sex websites are an example of noncompliance or deviance as resistance. A raw sex profile on a dating and sex website not only tells a would-be suitor basic information about a person, such as race/ethnicity, age, height, weight, endowment, and so forth, but also HIV status and whether the individual uses substances and engages in group-sex situations, among other information that someone may find pertinent (Bailey 2016: 352).

i jus wanna fuck raw . . .

33, 6'0", 190 lb, 34w, Athletic, Black Hair, Some Body Hair, Black,
Looking for 1-on-1 Sex, 3some/ Group Sex, Misc. Fetishes, Cam2Cam.

I like to fuck raw only . . . get at me . . .

Conservative, Out No, Smoke Yes, Drink Occasionally, Drugs No, Zodiac
Taurus.

Top, 9" Cut, *Anything Goes*, HIV Positive, Prefer meeting at: My Place.

I'll make three points about this profile, which I've discussed elsewhere (Bailey 2016: 352):

First, for this website, titling one's profile with the proclamation “i just wanna fuck raw. . .” is a radical claim because, while many men desire and engage in raw sex, most will not admit it.² He reveals his positive HIV status, which is also nonnormative for these websites, as many men who are HIV positive either falsely represent themselves as HIV negative or occlude the status from their profile altogether because of the extreme stigma associated with HIV. This Black man who has sex with men (MSM) (who is not out) is a sexual top, implying that he fucks bottoms raw and that he is into threesomes and group sex and not interested in a relationship (marked as romantic and monogamous). His claim to engage in this panopoly of non-homosex-normative practices in the gay domain of this website can be viewed as a radical position and practice of sexual autonomy.

Second, when examining a profile like this, it is important to situate practices within the larger context of Black gay subjectivity and grapple with its contradictions and complexities. For Black gay men who engage in raw sex, for example, sexual pleasure and desire are often in conflict with social norms and gay identity. In addition, while many men may align with what is stated in the Black gay man's profile in practice, they are not willing to proclaim these practices publicly. It is very common for Black gay brothers to throw shade on other Black gay men who engage in raw sex and group sex, who are HIV positive in public, while engag-

ing in the same practices themselves on the low. It is worth reiterating that non-homosex-normative Black gay men, viewed as bad sexual subjects, are stigmatized not only by larger society, particularly public health institutions, but also by other Black gay men.

Finally, the social context in which this Black gay man, who is HIV positive, has raw sex is very informative. Because of his status, he lives with a multiple social disqualification: Black, gay, and HIV positive, and has raw sex. This multiple disqualification constitutes the constraints under which he lives, and for him, the emphasis is placed on what he should not do sexually under the hegemony of safe sex. However, another dimension of his experiences is about his desire and pleasure—what he wants in terms of sex. Thus the politics of desire that may inform this Black gay man's sexual pursuits can be seen as a sociopolitical resistance to the hegemony of safe sex that produces shame and self-hatred for those who do not comply, combined with the sensual and tactical pleasure of skin-to-skin sexual contact. Ultimately, this profile articulates and reflects a radical epistemology of Black gay sex that unabashedly highlights sexual pleasure and risk as coconstitutive.

Cohen's queer of color theory of power, which informs her notion of "deviance as resistance," helps bring into focus how, through our existence and everyday survival, we embody sustained and multisited resistance to systems based on dominant constructions of race and gender that seek to normalize our sexuality and limit our life possibilities. Cohen brings clarity to our need to mobilize against homosexuality. To interrupt the myopic focus on modifying Black gay men's sexual behavior, we need to examine the forms of structural inequality that undermine our social and sexual health and well-being and our overall quality of life. While resistance to homosexuality is important for Black gay men, any form of sex normativity designed to limit and deny the desirable and pleasurable possibilities of consensual sex concerns all of Black society.

Notes

This essay is an excerpt from a larger essay, "Black Gay Men's Sexual Health, and the Means of Pleasure in the Age of AIDS," in the forthcoming collection *AIDS and the Distribution of Crisis*, edited by Jih-Fei Cheng, Alexandra Juhasz, and Nishant Shahani, published by Duke University Press. The research for this essay was funded by the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies (CAPS) in the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, as part of the Visiting Professors Program. I also thank my Raw Sex Project research team for assisting me with this project.

1. Celeste Watkins Hayes and Michelle Tracy Berger, in their respective scholarship, have done extensive research on Black women's structural vulnerability to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.
2. This is also very radical and risky because in some states, particularly the one in which this person lives, "Duty to Warn" or compulsory disclosure laws require that those who are HIV positive must reveal their status before having sex with anyone, protected or not.

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