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12 "As Proud of Our Gayness, as We Are of Our Blackness"

Race-ing Sexual Rhetorics in the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays

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Through examining the combination of our triumphs and errors, we can examine the dangers of an incomplete vision. Not to condemn that vision but to alter it, construct templates for possible futures, and focus our rage for change upon our enemies rather than upon each other.

—Audre Lorde, "Learning from the 60s" 135

Audre Lorde spoke these words in a February 1982 speech titled "Learning from the 60s," delivered at Harvard University's "Malcolm X Weekend." In the epigraph, and the longer speech from which it is drawn, Lorde challenges us to look upon the activism and social transformation of the 1960s with clear eyes, open hearts, gratitude, healthy skepticism, and feeling accountable to what the work of freedom and justice calls one to do in their own times so that they too may do the necessary work of creating possible futures. Lorde, who lived in and contributed to the social transformation of the 1960s, was compelled to engage the problematic ways in which the diversity and complexity of Black life and culture is ignored in the fantasy of sameness over the reality of difference. Taking this point then, we are left with the challenge of looking upon histories of the 1960s, and in particular the Black civil rights and burgeoning gay and lesbian rights movement, with a "persistence in examining the tensions within diversity" on our efforts to reach the fullest expression of freedom and justice for the many (Lorde 135). For Lorde, that "many" was more a question of who *could* be in a collective rather than solely a consideration of who already presumed to be in it. That is, Lorde's vision of transformative justice envisioned a collective that included many who may have been hesitant to join the struggle, but whose lives (whether they realized it or not) depended on their being a part of a coalition with individuals whose concerns were also urgent, cross cutting, and complex, such as heterosexual Black women and men, White feminists, and White LGBT people. Through this work, we also simultaneously make legible the presence and contributions of people like Lorde to the civil and gay and lesbian rights movements. Such change is necessary

since Lorde and other Black LGBT rhetors slip in and out of historical recognition in narratives about the civil rights, Black power, and LGBT and feminist movements.

At the same time Lorde delivered the speech, a group of activists known as the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays (or NCBLG) were also engaged in questions about the place of Black LGBT people in the history of the civil rights movement. They would also raise similar questions about the history of the then nascent LGBT rights movement. Lorde and the NCBLG's paths converged around this very same issue at key moments in the 1970s and 1980s due to her role as a member of the organization's Board of Directors and an elder to many who regarded her as a role model for whom they held great respect.

This chapter focuses on four actions of the NCBLG's historic interventions to draw connections between the Black civil and LGBT rights movements: the NCBLG's role in organizing the first Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference in 1979; a speech delivered by Audre Lorde at a 1983 March commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the iconic 1963 March on Washington; the organization's AIDS activism on the local and national level; and a published interview with civil rights movement icon Bayard Rustin in the NCBLG magazine *Black/OUT*. Through this work, the NCBLG and other 1970s and 1980s LGBT of color activists and allies helped redefine the texture of US histories of race, sexuality, and politics.

Drawing on an analysis of oral histories I conducted with three NCBLG founders, archival documents, and news reports, I examine key actions in the history of the NCBLG to ascertain the promises and perils of a usable rhetorical past—those historical moments that can be repurposed for rhetorical intervention now—for the contemporary and futurity of scholarly, pedagogical, and activist inquiry and action. I argue that the NCBLG forged new paradigms for social action through a rhetoric of radical “intersectionality” (Crenshaw 93–118). This use of intersectionality queers conceptions of sexual rhetoric as solely concerned with sexuality, into a recognition of sex, sexuality, and sexual rhetorics as always a raced discourse and vice versa. Put simply, we might view sexual rhetorics as the formation of discourses about sexuality that shape the ways sexuality is understood/misunderstood. By examining the ways the NCBLG navigated the sexual rhetorics of their time, we see how this rhetoric is always one that is awake to the collision of race and sexuality in the subject and in the world. To that end, the NCBLG mobilized a series of rhetorical interventions that (1) helped establish a national coalition of LGBT of Color social and activist organizations; (2) made interventions into historical erasure of Black LGBT people; (3) assisted in coalition building among the Black and LGBT political establishment; and (4) envisioned and articulated some paths forward built on the specific ways that race, sexual, and gender experiences of Blackness and queerness would congeal and be expressed in Black queer life, culture, and activism today.

Examining the radical intersectionality of sexual rhetorics as a historical matter with contemporary and future implications is rhetorically necessary because it demonstrates where social movements built around sexual, but also gender and racial justice, get perennially derailed in language, including the ways it frustrates coalition politics; it offers a theory of sexual rhetorics that is accountable to the materiality of the historical subject(s) under examination; and it shows us what were the discursive practices at a specific time in history in which people acted rhetorically and with consequence to reshape dominant, and exclusionary, ideas around sexuality through attention to its own complexity and its intersections with other identities.

The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays: A Brief Historical Sketch

The 1970s and 1980s were watershed years for the emergence of gay and lesbian organizations working at the intersections of race and sexuality. Among the organizations leading the way was the National Coalition of Black Gays or NCBG (later renamed National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays [NCBLG]). Founded in the era of massive white backlash against the civil rights movement and heteropatriarchal attempts to dismantle the women's rights gains of the 1960s, the NCBG drew from the politics and strategies of the civil rights, feminist, and burgeoning gay and lesbian movements, while simultaneously challenging the marginalizing effect each of these movements had on black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

Operating as two separate community organizations that began in 1974 and 1975, the Washington D.C. Coalition of Black Gays and the Baltimore Coalition of Black Gays merged in 1978 to form the National Coalition of Black Gays, the first national organization of LGBT people of African descent in the United States (Brinkley). The organization took the official motto: “as proud of our gayness, as we are of our blackness.” The organization changed its name to include “lesbians” in 1980, though women were founders and leaders in the organization from its inception. The organization's constitution and bylaws, adopted on November 29, 1980, also noted the commitment to struggles affecting “transpersons” and bisexual people (1).

The NCBG's founding members were A. Billy S. Jones, Dolores Berry, Darlene Garner, Louis Hughes, Gil Gerald, Rev. Renee McCoy, and John Gee. I have located records that confirm there were approximately 17 NCBLG chapters across the United States. The NCBLG Board of Directors included some of the leading writer-activists of what is seen as a Black queer literary renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s, including Lorde, Joseph Beam, and Barbara Smith, founding member of the trailblazing Black feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective.

Throughout its life, the organization was at the forefront of campaigns to call attention to issues specific to the Black LGBT community on political, health, cultural, economic, and social fronts. The NCBLG was also crucial to

the social and artistic lives of its members and communities where chapters thrived. They regularly held parties, banquets, and awards galas that created social spaces for Black LGBT people and their allies where none existed and to celebrate the legacy and achievements of Black LGBT people that were not celebrated or noted elsewhere. They also held fundraisers and organized poetry readings, film screenings, art shows, and theater performances that introduced to some, and presented to others, the work of notable writers and artists, including Black gay poet Essex Hemphill and filmmaker Marlon Riggs. No formal announcement of the organization's end occurred, but the NCBLG's formal operations ended in 1990.

1979: The Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference and the First Gay and Lesbian March on Washington

In 1979, the NCBLG led the organizational efforts to convene the first Third World Conference of Lesbians and Gays, which was held in Washington, DC, on October 12–15, 1979, under the theme “When will the ignorance end?” The conference site was the Harambee House, a frequent gathering place for Black people in Washington, DC, and located very near the campus of Howard University, a historically Black college and university (HBCU), which was also the site of some of the conference workshops and caucus meetings. According to the Third World Conference Program booklet, the NCBLG served as the official sponsor of the conference and as “conference planners” (2). The conference program also notes that the conference was specially geared toward “American Indians, Latin Americans, Asian Americans, and Afro Americans,” gathering under three goals: “[t]o edestablish [*sic*] a national network for Third World Lesbians and Gays; [t]o establish an education and communications network for and among Third World Lesbian and Gay organizations; [t]o confront the issues of racism, sexism, homophobia and heterophobia among, by and against Third World Lesbians and Gays” (2). In addition to workshops for gay and lesbian people of color, the program states that additional “workshops and caucuses are open and provided for non-Third World and non-gay persons” (2). Among the caucuses that took place were a “Women’s Caucus,” “Transperson’s Caucus,” and various racial/ethnic caucuses and regional caucuses (12).

Certainly, the conference is significant because it is the first national conference to bring together LGBT of color organizations and collectives. This fact alone warrants attention to what LGBT people of color as individuals and collectives felt about the state of race and sexual politics in their times, and also the role of rhetoric in how they went about the tasks that would create, advertise, manage, and then document this occasion. However, I argue that the most significant and available information regarding this rhetoric, and specifically how they were negotiating the terrain of racial and sexual politics in ways that had not been on the national stage prior to their arrival, were the choices that the conferences planners made about

the timing and location of the conference, as well as the ways in which the conference would converge and diverge from events surrounding the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington.

One of the first details I wish to foreground in my analysis is the timing of the event. As noted, the conference was deliberately held the same weekend as the first Gay and Lesbian March on Washington to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Rebellion. Conference organizers saw holding the conference the same weekend in DC as the historic first Gay and Lesbian March on Washington as a way to enable coalition-building among LGBT activists of color, and also build alliances with White gay and lesbian activists while holding them accountable to issues of racism, xenophobia, and economic justice (Louis Hughes interview, 2007).

Another way the conference can be seen as a rhetorical intervention is that it was held at Harambee House near Howard University, which are both, again, associated with Washington, DC’s Black community, and in the case of Howard, the educational legacy of Black America. By selecting this place as the site of the March the conference planners were, I contend, deliberately centering the lives, concerns, stories, and politics of LGBT people of color in the Black diaspora from D.C. to the Dominican Republic, from Brooklyn to Brazil. This choice is consistent with more than one of the conference’s stated goals. The statement of this act is that what affects Black and other people of color is not mutually exclusive of what affects Black and people of color who identify as LGBT as well. Essentially, the claim is that any national initiatives surrounding issues affecting people of color must also be attentive to the specific effects on LGBT people, with emphasis on LGBT people of color. For example, NCBLG co-founder A. Billy Jones, in an article about the NCBLG, stated that the conference put the NCBLG and LGBT people of color on the map as visible on the national stage as far as any attention to any social and political issues concerning LGBT and people of color (Brinkley).

Another way that the conferences’ location operated as intervention in sexual rhetoric, framing race and sexuality as separate matters, was that the Third World Gay and Lesbian Conference site was Harambee House, which was located on Georgia Avenue. Georgia Avenue’s streets went through the Black community, and according to NCBLG co-founder Hughes, the conference planners thought it was important to not follow the most convenient route to the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington site or even the route that the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington organizers had planned. Instead, Hughes said, they wanted to take the route most direct from Harambee as it would take them directly down Georgia Avenue, the thoroughfare going through DC’s Black communities, and into the main mall where they would join the rest of the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. Doing so, the conference planners were ensuring that the more than 500 attendees of the Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference would arrive together as LGBT people of color to join an almost completely

White group of March attendees. My assessment of this choice is that the NCBLG as conference planners were symbolically linking the Black communities that ran alongside Georgia Avenue, and the various issues affecting those communities and themselves as well as Black LGBT people, to the set of issues noted in the platform for the Gay and Lesbian March on Washington. Thus, in this moment of heightened attention to the gay and lesbian community, and thus a heightened moment of sexual rhetoric, the NCBLG forwarded a counter rhetorical messaging through their language, timing, use of space and location, and embodiment.

1983: March Commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

The 1983 “We Still Have a Dream” March was billed as a hope for the kinds of legislative change realized by the 1960s Black civil rights movement. In new reports in the *Washington Post*, March organizers stated that the March was linked to its 1963 predecessor in its desire for new civil rights legislation, and that the timing of the March would draw national attention and support for their legislative initiatives on the table when Congress returned in September, including a proposal to make the observation of the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr. a national holiday (Barker C1; Barker A1; Barker and Perl A1).

As recalled by NCBLG cofounder Gil Gerald in his movement memoir essay, “The Trouble I’ve Seen,” in May 1983, he learned of a meeting held a few months prior where an initial list of speakers for the March was presented by March organizers (23). The list was a who’s who of civil rights movement legends, politicians, activists, and artists, but no one was included to represent the gay and lesbian community or organizations, nor listed as a speaker or as a representative on the steering committee. Gerald writes that this oversight led activist Michelle Guimarin of Mobilization for Survival to request that a member of the National Gay Task Force (NGTF, now NGLTF) be added to the March steering committee (23). Gerald recalled that Frank C. Branchini of the Gay Rights National Lobby told him that, in response to the request for gay and lesbian representation, DC Congressional Delegate Walter Fauntroy said the rights of gay and lesbian people had as much to do with the March as did the rights of a penguin, and therefore gay and lesbian people should not be included (Gerald 23). After Fauntroy’s comments were attributed to him in news articles, he denied ever making such observations, but all the same doubled down on his opinion that gay and lesbian people should not have a speaking role at the March, as reported by the *Washington Post* (Barker C1). This information prompted numerous individuals and organizations to refuse to endorse the March (Gerald 23). The fallout from Fauntroy’s alleged comments and the March organizers resistance to the activists request to include gay and lesbian people kicked off a more than six-month set of organized actions led by the NCBLG, including numerous public protests and a sit-in at the congressman’s office, resulting in the arrest of NCBLG activists

and allies. As the date of the March grew closer, the controversy surrounding gay and lesbians threat of nonsupport for the March began to get more media attention than the March itself. According to Gerald, Coretta Scott King was especially concerned that gay and lesbian organizations would pull out support for the March and wanted a resolution that would most satisfy all parties. They reached terms of such a resolution during a conference call in the late hour of 12:30 A.M. on August 25 between March organizers and gay and lesbian activists and allies (25). Participating in the conference call were Gerald, 1983 March organizer Donna Brazile, Coretta Scott King, leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference’s Joseph Lowery, the NAACP’s Benjamin Hooks, the Congressional Black Caucus’s Barbara Williams-Skinner, and the Task Force’s Virginia Apuzzo (Gerald 25). Their campaign proved successful. Mrs. King, Lowery, and Hooks individually endorsed what was a pending federal gay rights bill at a press conference the day before the March, though the March organizers resisted having the March itself endorse the bill (Gerald 25–26). In addition, March organizers finally agreed to include a gay or lesbian speaker on the March program (Gerald 26).

On the date of the March, standing on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, the site where March speakers stood 20 years prior, Audre Lorde, the self-professed “Black lesbian feminist mother poet warrior,” delivered a speech as part of the “Litany of Commitment” section of the March program. Her speech gave voice to a vision of liberation that linked the struggle of gays and lesbians to the Black civil rights and other liberation movements throughout the world. She began as follows:

I am Audre Lorde, speaking for the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gay Men. Today’s march openly joins the Black civil rights movement and the gay civil rights movement in the struggles we have always shared, the struggles for jobs, for health, for peace, and for freedom. We marched in 1963 with Dr. Martin Luther King, and dared to dream that freedom would include us, because not one of us is free to choose the terms of our living until all of us are free to choose the terms of our living.

Today the Black civil rights movement has pledged its support for gay civil rights legislation. Today we march, lesbians and gay men and our children, standing in our own names together with all our struggling sisters and brothers here and around the world, in the Middle East, in Central America, in the Caribbean and South Africa, sharing our commitment to work for a joint livable future. We know we do not have to become copies of each other in order to be able to work together. We know that when we join hands across the table of our difference, our diversity gives us great power. When we can arm ourselves with the strength and vision from all of our diverse communities then we will in truth be free at last.

(Lorde, “Address” 212)

Lorde's speech serves as a touchstone for the kinds of interventions by the NCBLG I have discussed thus far. In Lorde's archive are multiple early drafts of the speech, from her initial handwritten musings of what she might say through to the typed drafts she finished before settling on the version she read at the March. Thus, some analysis of the finished product alongside the drafts provides important information about the choices Lorde made that cemented the kind of intervention she and the NCBLG sought to make.

Lorde's speech establishes the major vision of broadening perspectives about Black identity and the connections between race and sexual identities for social movements. In early drafts of the "Litany of Commitment" address, there are no explicit references to joining the Black civil and gay rights movements (1). Also, Lorde's early draft speaks of the March as an occasion "recognizing the diversity of the Black community." However, in a later draft and in the final speech, she says that the march "is openly joining the black civil rights movement and gay civil rights movement in those struggles we have always shared. ..." This revision by Lorde is significant in that it shows that the occasion of the March demonstrates the diversity of the Black community in terms of sexuality and gender, and that the Black civil and gay and lesbian rights movements are not as disparate as one might believe.

Lorde's joining of the Black civil and gay rights movements, as well as stating the diversity of Blackness, is further achieved in her riff off of Dr. King's own words. In an early draft of the speech, Lorde writes: "With Dr. Martin Luther King we have each dared to dream that freedom would include us because, not one of us is free until all of us are free." The arrangement of the sentence, and also its meaning, calls up King's powerful and oft-cited words in his "Letter from Birmingham Jail": "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly" (77). Interestingly, it is this same line that Coretta Scott King often quoted in speeches of support for LGBT people, including her 1996 speech at the Atlanta LGBT Pride Festival.

Lorde's take on Dr. King's words and her own articulation of the ways our freedoms and futures are wrapped up in one another also reflect the use of empathy as a rhetorical strategy that exposes people's direct and indirect role in other people's oppressions and invites the possibility of coalition building. This is also reflected in her saying that "we do not need to become copies of each other in order to work together" or that "when we join hands across the table of our difference, our diversity gives us great power." Both of these statements imply empathy as a tool and process through which we seek to recognize, affirm, and feel what others are going through, and choose to connect *because* of difference not *in spite of* difference. I view Lorde's comments here as a direct challenge to the media coverage prior to the March, which largely attempted to portray the March and its diverse interests and people as disunified.

Overall, Lorde's speech synthesizes myriad concerns, while centering Black and LGBT issues and concerns; it builds a framework through which the contributions of Black LGBT people to the Black civil rights movement destabilizes the stranglehold of narratives that erase Black LGBT people from that history. For her, people of color have a visible face in the LGBT rights movement, another act of intervention which in that moment disrupts discourses of that movement as solely White. Finally, Lorde's speech reflects on the past and the moment in which the speech was delivered as a usable moment for the future of coalition-building across racial and sexual politics.

1985–1987: AIDS Activism, Habari-Habari, and Black/OUT

Although Lorde's 1983 speech articulated the NCBLG's interventions, many of those same issues emerged multiple times in the organization's AIDS activism and writings that appeared in the NCBLG newsmagazine *Black/OUT*. Attention to this part of the NCBLG's work provides another space to explore the sexual rhetorics of those times, how the NCBLG viewed those rhetorics, and the stance the NCBLG adopted which centered race in sexual politics. Two issues of concern were a continued focus on the presence of Black LGBT people in the histories of the Black civil rights and LGBT movements, and also AIDS activism which centered the particular ways that the Black community was being effected in the earliest days of what became a global epidemic.

The NCBLG led campaigns concerning the AIDS crisis. AIDS prevention, treatment, and education remained a key part of the organization's work until the organization's end, and was also a featured discussion in its annual national membership conventions. In examining the early AIDS prevention and education efforts of the NCBLG, we see how they steered the conversation around AIDS to give attention to its impact on Black and other communities of color. By centering race in their AIDS activism, the NCBLG was able to highlight how what was largely being thought of as a gay (read: White) disease was also affecting Black gay men and therefore Black communities. They were also able to expose the limitations on interventions and care that were not attentive to how racial and ethnic as well as class identity played into the discourses around AIDS that were most pervasive for particular communities. Lastly, they created a space for early AIDS prevention and education work that sought out the ways to use culturally, racially, and ethnically situated language to reach people where they stood. For instance, in July 1986 the NCBLG organized "AIDS in the Black Community," known to be the first national conference on AIDS geared toward Black people. A conference pre-registration forms notes that the event was cosponsored by the National Conference of Black Mayors and the National Minority AIDS Council (1). Also, a number of articles in the organization's newsmagazines *Habari-Habari* (also published as *Habari-Daftari*), and *Black/OUT* featured news updates about AIDS nationally and internationally, including initiatives in local communities where NCBLG chapters were located to raise people's

awareness about prevention and treatment. They also published poetry, short stories, and nonfiction essays, which were also important in disseminating this information in another pedagogically relevant and specific way familiar to the members of the organization and the readers of its newsmagazines.

The NCBLG's magazine *Black/OUT*, and its precursor the newsletter *Habari-Habari*, provide another layer of insight into the ways the organization's race and sexual politics forged a sexual rhetoric that would intervene into dominant discourses about race and sexual identity, and particularly the Black civil rights and lesbian and gay rights movements. In 1980 *Habari-Habari*, Swahili for "What's the news? What's the news?" was a bimonthly newsletter. The newsletter was later renamed *Black/OUT* Newsmagazine and published quarterly. The organization sold subscriptions to both members and nonmembers and sold the magazine at local bookstores and newsstands, primarily on the east coast.

Joseph Beam was the editor of *Black/OUT* and, again, served on the NCBLG's Board of Directors. Beam is best known as editor of *In the Life* (1986), the first anthology of Black gay men's literature. The Black gay and lesbian presence in, or more commonly, their absence from, history was a theme resounding across many of Beam's writings, as it was clearly also a chief concern of the NCBLG. Beam's writing on this issue continued the clarion call for intervention about overlooking Black LGBT people in Black history, as is apparent in the first lines of a 1985 essay, "Black History Month: Act Like You Know," first published in *Au Courant* newsmagazine, in which he writes about the tactics of thriving despite historical erasure, saying: "to endure with any safety, I must be a historian, librarian and archaeologist, digging up and dusting off the fragments of black history and black gay history" (n. p.). Beam would perform this intervention multiple times in his career, most notably through a 1987 issue of *Black/OUT*. The issue cover foreshadows its claims about history. In large white lettering on a completely black cover appears one sentence: "Because silence is costly" (1). The cover represents the focus of this edition: erasing Black LGBTQ people from Black and LGBT history. Edited by Beam, the magazine particularly emphasizes breaking the silences around Black LGBT life and culture in historiographies of the Black freedom movement. Beam's "The Elder of the Village: An Interview with Bayard Rustin" is the clearest example. It was Rustin, a black gay man, who served as principal organizer of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. This fact is often overlooked in the historiography of the movement; it also made him a target for exclusion by many of his contemporaries due to their anti-gay bias and bigotry, occurrences that are well-documented in historical accounts, most notably by John D'Emilio.

In the interview with Rustin, Beam disrupts the very language and categories by which history is shaped and disseminated. He writes:

At another time, on another continent, I might have gone to his [Rustin's] hut to bask in the warmth of his fire and to listen to his words of wisdom

as the elder of the village. But it is another day, and this is certainly another continent, but Bayard Rustin is no less than the wise man of the village of many centuries ago. (17)

Here Beam makes several rhetorical interventions. First, he positions Rustin in the role of griot, traditional within many African cultural and communal practices. In some cultures, among other responsibilities, the griot is keeper of history and extoller of wisdom for a community. Thus, Beam places Rustin in an authoritative relationship to Black history, saying essentially that Rustin would easily have occupied the position of the wise elder if not for the circumstances of time and space or for how homophobia displaces him from being normative enough to inhabit the role. Situating Rustin firmly in discourses of traditional African culture and history, Beam queers notions of the griot by elevating a black gay man to a position generally seen through the prism of heteronormative assumptions. We might read Beam here as challenging not only history, but also the culturally specific frameworks for documenting and theorizing history itself.

Beam extends this critique in another moment from the interview, when he writes:

Rustin was a Black Gay civil rights activist long before it was lucrative and legitimate, long before the rebellion at the Stonewall Inn in 1969; long before the tumultuous Black liberation struggles of the 60s, long before the Brown vs. Board [sic] Supreme Court decision in 1954. (17)

Beam's comments move in defense of Rustin's legacy, placing the activist at the center of social change in the 1950s and 1960s. In this way, Beam uses Rustin to exemplify larger criticisms about the historical erasure of Black LGBT people, which simultaneously forces one to question whether the frameworks for understanding identity in those histories are problematic, and argues for a connection between movements for race, sexual, and gender justice.

Conclusion

In their own examination of historical intervention into various forms of omission and oversight, rhetorical studies scholars Jacqueline Jones Royster and Jean C. Williams begin with the statement that "history is important, not just in terms of who writes it and what gets included or excluded, but also because history, by the very nature of its inscription as history, has social, political, and cultural consequences" (563; emphasis in original). The NCBLG's struggle and contributions to what we might call sexual rhetorical studies is evidenced in an important series of critical events and related texts that reflect the necessity of interventions into historiographies and cultural memory because of its impact on the present. In this case, for instance, the

grassroots tactics, public address, and writings by NCBLG members work to excavate the invisible presence of Black LGBTQ people who have always been a part of and central to the modern Black freedom and LGBT rights struggle. What is at stake by not continuing, complicating, and building upon the interventions of the NCBLG and allied activists is the loss of language that has the potential to produce radically intersectional politics that allows for the simultaneity of racial and sexual subjectivities to drive the creation of sustainable coalitions. In addition, by not complicating and building on this rhetorical tradition, we obstruct the possibility of a progressive future for queer politics that brings everybody along, and does not continue the fractious divides and siloed practices of historical and contemporary justice movements. By doing this, we can avoid the hurt resulting from the silence of numerous (white) LGBT activists and organizations regarding the extrajudicial police killings of Black people and the daily harassment, abuse, and murder of transgender people of color, as powerfully discussed in recent open letters by writer-activists Darnell Moore and Charles Stephens, as well as filmmaker Dee Rees. Thus, we see the uses of Black LGBT history in unresolved complexities and unexplored points of connection that will be generative and beneficial in this so-called new era of possibility for coalition-building in American politics.

I have argued here for the significance of the NCBLG and Black LGBT activism of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as a writing and rhetorical theory of those histories, as a useful way to imagining and reimagining the intersections of race and sexual politics. Such a perspective is crucial to a variety of issues in contemporary quests for social justice and the sexual rhetorics therein, from bullying and marriage equality to violence against Black and queer people by the state. I end this chapter as it began, returning to Lorde's Black queer ancestral guidance in "Learning from the 60s" in which she says: "we do not have to romanticize our past in order to be aware of how it seeds our present. We do not have to suffer the waste of an amnesia that robs us of the lessons of the past rather than permit us to read them with pride as well as deep understanding" (139).

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