

Finding home: Black queer historical scholarship in the United States Part II

Jennifer Dominique Jones 

University of Michigan

Correspondence

Jennifer Dominique Jones, Department of History, 1029 Tisch Hall, University of Michigan, 435 South State Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109.

Email: jonejenn@umich.edu

Abstract

This essay surveys the extant historical and historically minded scholarship about the political, social, and cultural life of African American/black LGBT/queer. Characterizing this area of inquiry as “black queer historical studies,” this essay addresses scholars' diverse approaches to the challenge of archival research, current scholarship about the intersecting histories of blackness and queerness in the United States, and four key topical concerns: black “lesbian” histories, gender transgression, class, and community formation/politics.

1 | INTRODUCTION

“Imagine,” utters the narrator. “It’s 1945. The War is over, you’ve come back, and we’re fixing up our swell new place.” This historical hypothetical in activist and writer Barbara Smith’s short story “Home” is met with loving laughter from her lover Leila. “You’re so crazy,” she cried. “You can bet whoever lived here in 1945 wasn’t colored or two women either.” “How do you know?” the narrator retorts. “Maybe they got together when their husbands went overseas and then decided they didn’t need the boys after all. My aunt was always telling me about living with this friend of hers, Garnet during the War and how much fun they had and how she was so gorgeous.” Smith’s essay—with its willingness to imagine the existence of queer community in unsuspecting times/spaces—mirrors the growing corpus of interdisciplinary scholarship about black queer histories (Smith, 1983). The second part of this essay continues its survey of this literature, identifying four overlapping subjects: black “lesbian” histories, histories of gender transgression, black communities, class and histories of belonging and communal/political formations.

2 | BLACK “LESBIAN” HISTORIES¹

Histories of black women who loved women and/or transgressed gender norms have largely emerged from the field of black women’s history (and black feminist scholarship broadly). Much of this work focuses on black women living in urban areas during the first half of the twentieth century. Karen V. Hansen’s article “No Kisses Like Youres”—which

analyzes the erotic friendship of two black women from Hartford, Connecticut in the 1860s and 1870s—is an exception. Using rare correspondence, Hansen interrogates how the particular intersections of race, class, and gender facilitated some communal tolerance of their relationship and dramatically intervenes in the extant literature on romantic friendships (Hansen, 1995).

Scholars document the erotic relationships of black female performers (and to a lesser extent activists). In her groundbreaking book *Blues Legacies and black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis interrogates the lives and lyrics of blues performers who referenced same-sex intimacies, gender nonconformity, and other transgressive ways of being. (Davis, 1998). Erin Chapman's *Prove It On Me: New Negroes, Sex, and Popular Culture in the 1920s* and Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls: black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* offer critical insights into black women's challenges to respectability politics in their artistic performances, public personas, and intimate lives (Brown, 2008; Chapman, 2012). Erick McDuffie's *Sojourning for Freedom: black Women, American Communism and the Making of black Left Feminism* briefly raises the possibility that some black female leftists may have pursued “sexual modernism” through their intimate relationships with other women as they crafted a particular vision of feminism during the first half of the twentieth century (McDuffie, 2011). Greater scholarship is needed exploring the relationship between black queer identification and political activism before the Second World War.

Several studies analyze the relationship between the criminalization of black women, carceral spaces, and articulations of same-sex intimacies/gender transgression. In *Colored Amazons: Crime, Violence, and black Women in the City of Brotherly Love, 1880–1910*, Kali Gross analyzes prison officials' concerns about black women's same-sex intimacies as well as the responses of African American communal leaders in Philadelphia (who lacked consensus on whether to support a woman accused of her female lover or condemn her actions; Gross, 2006). Regina Kunzel's *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* interrogates prison officials and sociologists' masculinization of black women and subsequent utilization of this gendered framework to understand cross-racial intragender intimacies among female prisoners (Kunzel, 2008). In *Talk With You Like a Woman: African American Women, Justice, and Reform in New York, 1890–1935*, Cheryl Hicks argues that black women utilized their intake interviews at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility to reveal aspects of their intimate lives—including their erotic relationships with women. These accounts suggest that same-sex affection in public or the adoption of gender transgressive clothing (like pants) elicited derision from other African Americans (Hicks, 2010). The implication that women who loved women may have provoked greater communal displeasure than their male counterparts deserves further exploration. Cookie Woolner's article “‘Woman Slain in Queer Love Brawl’: African American Women, Same-Sex Desire, and Violence in the Urban North, 1920–1929” offers an important analysis of how black newspaper coverage figured black “lady lovers” as dangerous criminals and a threat to respectability (Woolner, 2015). Sarah Haley's *No Mercy Here: Gender Punishment and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity* analyzes black women's experiences in the convict leasing system in Georgia, offering an important conceptual intervention—namely, how the relationship between blackness and queerness in carceral spaces predated and informed the term's eventual association with “counternormative” sexualities (Haley, 2016). Given the profound effects of criminalization and especially mass incarceration in the post-World War II period, there is a great need for scholarship that builds on the contributions of the aforementioned studies about the imbrication between the criminal justice system and black women's sexual subjectivities.

3 | HISTORIES OF GENDER TRANSGRESSION

There is a dearth of historically-minded scholarship interrogating black gender transgression, expression, and identities. An older group of historically minded scholarship subsumes these experiences under a broad category of gay/lesbian/queer life. In these and other studies, figures like transgender activist and Stonewall Uprising participant Marsha P. Johnson and 1930s blues performer Gladys Bentley are regularly referenced. Both deserve greater scholarly attention. Existing work offers an important corrective to the largely cisgender focus of black queer historical texts and indicate enriching possibilities of future research. Matt Richardson's important *The Queer Limit of black*

Memory: black Lesbian Literature and Irresolution analyzes an “alternative archive” of black lesbian fiction and artistic production, arguing for the crucial ways that black lesbians conceptualize “gender diversity” along with sexual difference as part of the assumed non-normative nature of black racial difference (Richardson, 2013). Lauren Grantmyere’s article about the lives and labors of black “female impersonators” living in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, analyzes the uneasy coexistence of acceptance and ridicule, discrimination, and incorporation of this particular segment of black communities during the middle of the twentieth century (Grantmyre, 2011). Kortney Ziegler’s essay in the anthology *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in black Queer Studies* analyzes Gladys Bentley’s performances utilizing a “sissy imagery” framework, offering a challenge to the politics of respectability (Ziegler, 2016). C. Riley Snorton’s *black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* is the most important recent contribution to historically minded work about blackness and transness. Snorton argues that “the condensation of transness with the category of transgender is a racial narrative.” (Snorton, 2017, p. 8) “Not a history per se,” this work utilizes original archival research and well-known texts, to offer “a set of political propositions, theories of history, and writerly experiments” that considers imbrications of blackness and transness (Snorton, 2017, p. 6). Together, these studies suggest the generative possibilities of approaching well-known figures, texts, and archives with particular questions and analytical lenses. Yet many questions remain: What were the key spaces/institutions shaping self-identified black transgender political/communal life? What sorts of tensions and solidarities emerged between gender conforming and gender nonconforming black queer individuals? Such work promises to transform black queer historiographies.

Equally important are conversations about accountability, transparency, and privilege in the production of black transgender histories as well as queer histories. In the Fall of 2017, filmmaker and activist Reina Gossett issued a public statement to director David French, accusing the well-known white cisgender filmmaker of appropriating her and collaborator Sasha Wortzel’s archival labor and vision to create the Netflix released documentary *The Life and Death of Marsha P. Johnson*. “This kind of extraction/excavation of black life, disabled life, poor life, trans life is so old and so deeply connected to the violence Marsha had to deal with through her life,” Gossett wrote in a widely shared Instagram post. She elaborated in an op-ed piece for *Teen Vogue*: “Every day [trans and gender nonconforming people’s] stories and our images are misused, sanitized, and extracted ... for the gain of others. This is why it is crucial that we uplift and support the work of trans people to tell our own stories — on the screen, on the page, and on the streets” (Gossett, 2017). This imperative (and related topics) is critical and should spark continued conversations across various realms of historical inquiry (artistic, scholarly, etc.).

4 | BLACK COMMUNITIES, CLASS AND HISTORIES OF BELONGING

Attention to the ways in which African American class dynamics shaped queer subjectivities and black communal attitudes towards sexual/gender difference demonstrate how the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality create varying forms of identification and experience. Broadly, historians of sexuality document a shift in Euro-American conceptions of same-sex intimacies and gender transgression from non-normative acts to a concrete and increasingly rigidly defined set of identities over the course of the 20th century.² This shift from “acts” to “identities”—some scholars argue—is intimately connected to economic developments. As John D’Emilio notes in his influential essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity,” increased opportunities for financial independence beyond the heteropatriarchal familial unit facilitated the ability of some individuals to create lives and communities centering non-normative gender and sexual behaviors (D’Emilio, 1983). These frameworks—while crucial—do not take racial formations into the account. Extant work that considers the importance of class have profoundly contributed to black queer historical scholarship.

George Chauncey’s *Gay New York* reveals that queer men during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not uniformly embrace an object choice-based understanding of sexual identity. For particular ethnic/racial working-class communities (including African Americans), sex role and gender nonconformity marked an individual as non-normative. African American middle-class men appear to have readily embraced an object choice centered

understanding of sexual identity—in which same-sex intimacies of any kind rendered one non-normative (Chauncey, 1994). Writing about black lesbians during the twentieth century, sociologist Mignon Moore identifies a link between class and gender presentation. In *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among black Women*, she argues that butch-femme relationships (in the past and present) are more common among working-class black lesbians than their middle-class counterparts, who tend to embrace a more androgynous style of dress and presentation that facilitates upward class mobility. This and many other notions around identity deserve further exploration. How did class shape the ways in which black queer folk socialized? How did certain institutions facilitate/marginalize various forms of identification? How (and to what extent) did feminism (and black feminism in particular) shape black lesbian identities?

Other studies suggest that class standing informed larger black communal conceptions of gender and sexual transgression as well. Like other racially or ethnically defined groups, black communities have/do hold diverse opinions of same-sex intimacies and gender transgression. Class standing as well as larger socio-political developments acted as important determinants of (in)tolerance. A number of studies—including Chauncey's *Gay New York*, Thaddeus Russell's article "The Color of Discipline: Civil Rights and black Sexuality," Kevin Allen Leonard's article "Containing Perversion: African Americans and Same-Sex Desire in Cold War Los Angeles", and Moore's *Invisible Families*—argue that middle-class and elite African Americans tended to evince more negative attitudes towards sexual and gender nonconformity (Chauncey, 1994; Russell, 2008; Leonard, 2011; Moore, 2011). A desire to recuperate black sexuality from longstanding reverberations of anti-black narratives of hypersexuality spurred some of this policing of non-normative black subjects.

Historical interpretations of working-class African American views of queerness are more convoluted. There is evidence that during the first half of the twentieth century, many African Americans tolerated and accepted gender and sexual diversity. Yet the simultaneity of Cold-War-Era sexual conservatism (including the anti-gay animus of the Lavender Scare) and presentations of respectability that sought to bolster African American claims to full citizenship prompted black elites to articulate denigrating characterizations of lesbians and gay men—that then crucially influenced other segments of black communities (Leonard, 2011; Russell, 2008). The strident masculinity of black Power advocates during the 1960s and 1980s also contributed to intolerance by framing "homosexuality" as a white phenomenon. While tangible disdain within black communities existed, the narrative that African Americans are often and more stridently homophobic than the rest of the American populace has various roots. In *Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence*, Christina Hanhardt argues that a particular set of interests within mainstream gay politics advancing claims to safety and access to urban spaces promulgated the narrative of black communal (and especially working-class) homophobia (Hanhardt, 2013). There is a need for further scholarship that interrogates social and political responses to black queer subjects within (and outside) of black communities. Future studies will, one hopes, move away from urban northern/coastal areas to consider rural and Southern communities.

5 | COMMUNAL/POLITICAL FORMATIONS

Another exciting area of inquiry are studies analyzing black queer community building and political organizing after the Second World War. William Hawkeswood's *One of the Children: Gay black Men in Harlem* is an anthropological work documenting black gay male identification, chosen familial formations and urban life in New York City (Hawkeswood & Costley, 1996). Keith Boykin's *One More River to Cross: black and Gay in America* provides a crucial overview of the history of black gay and lesbian political/social organizing until the mid-1990s (Boykin, 1996). Building upon these early works, a number of other studies explore black queer life and experience. In *Sweet Tea: black Gay Men in the South An Ethnography*, E. Patrick Johnson documents the multifaceted and diverse experience of Southern black gay men (Johnson, 2008). Through the medium of oral history interviews, Johnson highlights the powerful influence of race, gender, and region to shape the interviewees' experiences and carefully excavates how

"queer possibilities" exist in a region often associated with sexual and racial repression (Johnson, 2008, p. 5). A forthcoming volume titled *black. Queer. Southern. Women: An Oral History* acts as a companion work, centering the experiences of black queer women living in the South.

The interviews in *Sweet Tea* highlight the importance of religious spaces (largely churches) as sites for queer community building and performances of respectability—a topic that deserves further inquiry. Wallace D. Best's *Passionately Human No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in black Chicago, 1915–1952* (about the effects of the Great Migration on black religion in Chicago) and Tim Retzlaff's "*Seer or Queer?*": *Postwar Fascination with Detroit's Prophet Jones* (about the morals scandal of preacher Prophet Jones) indicate how black sacred spaces served as sites of policing and possibilities for sexual/gendered expression (Best, 2005; Retzlaff, 2002).

Scholarship analyzing black gay/lesbian and queer political organizing is growing rapidly. Kevin Mumford's *Not Straight, Not white: black Gay Men from the March on Washington to the AIDS Crisis* documents the shift of black gay masculinity from "misrecognition and marginalization" to the formation of a collective social and political community. As the first book length monograph by a historian documenting black gay political and community formation, *Not Straight, Not white* offers an important model for forthcoming works about black queer social, cultural, and political life (Mumford, 2016). Darius Bost's forthcoming *Evidence of Being: The black Gay Cultural Renaissance and the Culture of Violence* documents the development of a community of black gay culture workers in Washington, D.C., and New York City who used art to challenge contemporary marginalization and imagine new possibilities in the 1980s and 1990s (Bost, 2019).

A small but rich set of works analyze black lesbian political organizing. Kimberly Springer's *Living for the Revolution: black Feminist Organizations, 1968–1980* reveals how lesbian sexuality caused tensions within black feminist circles during the 1970s and 1980s—an assertion deserving additional scholarly exploration (Springer, 2005). A segment of A. Finn Enke's *Finding the Movement: Sexuality, Contested Space and Feminist Activism* analyzes the ways in which queer women (black and white) utilized public spaces in St. Paul, Detroit, and Chicago, offering important insights into the equation of "feminist" and "lesbian" spaces with "whiteness" (Enke, 2007). Forthcoming work by SaraEllen Strongman on black lesbian feminist cultural production promises to add to our knowledge about the ways in which race, sexuality, and gender influenced a broad array of thinkers, activists, and artists during the 1970s and 1980s.

Scholarship analyzing cultural and political responses to the AIDS Crisis of the 1980s and 1990s is another important subject. Cathy Cohen's critical work *The Boundaries of blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of black Politics* interrogates the interlocking factors that facilitated inadequate responses to HIV/AIDS during the 1980s and early 1990s. Crucially, Cohen documents the interlocking racism/homophobia that marginalized black gay men/lesbians in white gay AIDS organizations and mainstream black political groups alike. Black gay and lesbian organizing against HIV/AIDS placed them at the vanguard of black communal efforts to combat this health crisis. (Cohen, 1999). Sociologist Brett Stockdill's *Activism Against AIDS: At the Intersections of Sexuality, Race, Gender, and Class* also documents the challenges and achievements of AIDS activists of color during the 1980s and 1990s (Stockdill, 2003). In *Infectious Ideas: U.S. Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis*, Jennifer Brier provides an important analysis of the ways in which certain AIDS activists adopted an assumption of universal gay male identity rooted in whiteness, undermining efforts to combat the disease and engage with communities of color in the San Francisco area (Brier, 2009). Dagmawi Woubshet's *The Calendar of Loss: Race, Sexuality, and Mourning in the Early Era of AIDS* highlights literary and artistic responses to the epidemic, arguing that using the lens of black mourning enhances scholarly understandings of interracial queer responses to the epidemic (Woubshet, 2015). Daniel Royles forthcoming monograph *To Make the Wounded Whole: The Political Culture of African American AIDS Activism* investigates how a broad cross section of black AIDS activists sought to address the growing toll of HIV/AIDS, drawing upon longstanding African American political and rhetorical traditions (Royles, 2019).

A related group of scholarship analyzes moments of intersection, alliance, and antagonism between various social and political movements. A number of these works address the intersection of black freedom struggles and gay/lesbian political movements. Hanhardt's innovative *Safe Space* carefully examines the influence of race and class in the emergence of an urban gay liberalism that embraced free market economics and dominant modes of policing, which

disproportionately affected people of color and/or working-class communities (Hanhardt, 2013). Timothy Stewart-Winter's *Queer Clout: Chicago and the Rise of Gay Politics* argues, in part, that the ascendancy of a liberal blacked municipal regime facilitated the increasing importance and visibility of gay and lesbian politics in the Windy City (Stewart-Winter, 2016). Kwame Holmes' forthcoming monograph *Chocolate to Rainbow City: Liberalism and Displacement in the Nation's Capital, 1957–1999* promises to transform the historiography on liberalism through its careful examination of how various articulations of radical racial and sexual movements became subsumed within middle-class urban politics (Holmes, forthcoming). Emily Hobson's *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left*, Kevin Mumford's article "The Trouble with Gay Rights: Race and the Politics of Sexual Orientation in Philadelphia, 1969–1982," and Jared Leighton's article "All of Us are Unapprehended Felons: Gay Liberation, the black Panther Party, and Intercommunal Efforts Against Police Brutality in the Bay Area" (about the black Panthers and Gay Liberation activists) analyze the difficulties and efficacies of lesbian/gay activists calling upon rhetoric and tactics of the black Freedom Struggle, building coalitions and the persistent ways in which queer activists of color experienced political marginalization (Hobson, 2016; Leighton, 2018; Mumford, 2011). Many of these studies also provide critical information about African American gay/lesbian social and cultural life.

Biographical work on black queer political activists like Bayard Rustin and Pauli Murray act as exemplars for scholarship that considers how black queer intersectional identities can inform (and limit) political action (D'Emilio, 2003; Rosenberg, 2017). In *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*, John D'Emilio argues that Rustin's experience of homophobia from foes and allies alike informed his ideological movement to the right and embrace of electoral politics during the late 1960s and early 1970s (D'Emilio, 2003). Historians Rosalind Rosenberg and Doreen Drury reveal how Murray's understanding of her gender, sex, sexuality, and race shaped her writing, activism, and intersectional legal and political visions (Drury, 2013; Rosenberg, 2017). Jared Leighton's monograph in progress "Freedom Indivisible: Gays and Lesbians in the African American Civil Rights Movement" uses meticulous oral history research to assess the experiences of LGBT civil rights activists, analyzing how their sexual subjectivities influenced their political activism (within and beyond the Modern Civil Rights Movement). Leighton also examines how adversaries of the Civil Rights Movement publicized or fabricated narratives of same-sex intimacies of civil rights activists to undermine their political legitimacy (Leighton, 2013). This latter contention aligns with Gillian Frank's article "The Civil Rights of Parents," a re-examination of Anita Bryant's famous 1977 Save Our Children campaign to overturn Miami Dade County's anti-discrimination ordinance. Frank roots this Florida based anti-gay mobilization in established networks and rhetoric associated with earlier anti-bussing efforts (Frank, 2013). Glenda Elizabeth Sherouse's "The Politics of Homosexuality in the Twentieth - Century black Freedom Struggle," examines the participation of African American LGBT persons in black civic, political, and social life, while navigating homophobia within these same spaces. (Sherouse, 2013).

6 | CONCLUSION

"More than anything, I wish Leila and I could go there. That I could make the reality of life now and where I came from touch." Barbara Smith's desire for a return, for engagement between her present and past to build a future reflects the longstanding and continued labor of many archivists, activists, culture workers, and intellectuals to compose interdisciplinary historically informed work about black queer experiences and epistemologies. The cited (largely scholarly) texts begin to address the still too large lacunae about black gender transgression, same-sex intimacies and related subjectivities, political organizing and community building. Yet questions remain: What spaces and institutions shaped the development of transgender, non-binary and gender transgressive politics? What tensions emerged between black transgender, gay and lesbian communities? How might future studies of southern and/or rural black queer life differ from the predominately urban, northern, and coastal histories? How did the Women's Movement and black Feminism in particular shape black lesbian/queer women's communities? How will forthcoming queer histories of slavery transform our understanding of both that "peculiar institution" and racial

formation? The continued development of this area of inquiry will (hopefully) address these and many more questions, undoubtedly continuing to intervene in existing historiographies, (inter)disciplines and (more importantly) visions of possible futures.

ENDNOTES

¹I placed the term “Lesbian” in quotation marks to denote the fact that many historical figures that formed erotic and/or romantic bonds with other women did not utilize this term or identity.

²As Michael Foucault famously articulated in *History of Sexuality Vol. 1* “the sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual is now a species.” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43).

ORCID

Jennifer Dominique Jones  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2463-0280>

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer D. Jones is an LSA Collegiate Fellow in the Department of History at the University of Michigan. Jones received her doctoral degree in American History from Princeton University in 2014 and a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Distinction from the University of Michigan in 2007. She is currently working on a book monograph titled "Queering An American Dilemma: Sexuality, Gender, and African American Political Organizing in the United States, 1945-1993." In this project, Jones analyzes how the increasing visibility and political organizing of gay and lesbian communities reverberated into 20th century campaigns for and contests over racial equality.

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