


# *At the Club: Locating Early Black Gay AIDS Activism in Washington, DC*

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Darius Bost

Numerous studies have focused on the national and even global impact of AIDS, paying attention to the cultural politics that has undergirded the uneven distribution of care and state resources. Fewer have directed attention to the local political responses that have also shaped how the virus is understood in particular cultural communities. What follows is a case study of the early impact of AIDS in black gay populations in Washington, DC, and the local community's response to it. In her groundbreaking study of AIDS and black politics, Cathy Cohen identifies the early 1980s as a period of denial regarding the impact of AIDS in black gay communities.<sup>1</sup> Though this is true, attention to the specificity of Washington's black gay nightlife nuances this narrative. When many black male members of the DC black gay nightclub the ClubHouse became mysteriously ill in the early 1980s, club and community members responded. This essay asks, how did black gay men who were dislocated from the center of AIDS service

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 95–97.

and public-health outreach (by discrimination or by choice) in the early years of the epidemic receive information about the virus's impact? How did the racialized geography of gay culture in Washington, DC, shape the black gay community's response to the onset of the AIDS epidemic? This essay only begins to approach these questions by considering the critical role that the ClubHouse played in early AIDS activism directed toward black gay Washingtonians.

Drawing on archival materials, oral-history narratives, and close textual analysis, I show how racial and class stratification structured Washington's gay nightlife scene in the 1970s and early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> I then demonstrate how social divisions and spatialized arrangements in gay Washington shaped black gay cultural knowledge about the AIDS virus. Community-based narratives about the virus's transmission through interracial sex, coupled with public-health officials' neglect of black gay neighborhoods in AIDS outreach, structured the black gay community's belief that the virus was a white gay disease that would not affect them as long as they maintained separate social and sexual networks organized around shared geographic locations. However, local black gay activists strategized to create culturally specific forms of AIDS education and outreach to counter this misinformation and neglect. The ClubHouse—DC's most famous black gay and lesbian nightclub—became a key site of AIDS activism because of its prior visibility as the center of African American lesbian and gay nightlife and as a local venue for black lesbian and gay activist efforts. And although national media attention continued to focus on the impact of AIDS on white gay men, the ClubHouse emerged as a local site where the devastating impact of the virus on black same-sex-desiring men was both recognized and felt. The club also became a foundational site for the development of both longstanding local institutions for fighting AIDS in black communities and national AIDS campaigns targeting black communities.

## **MAPPING THE RACIAL AND CLASS DIVIDE IN GAY WASHINGTON, DC**

On several occasions since white gay-owned bars like the Pier, the Way Off Broadway, and the Lost and Found opened in the 1970s, DC's Commission for Human Rights cited them for discrimination against women and blacks. Racial discrimination at white gay-owned establishments occurred primarily through the practice of "carding." Many black gay men witnessed white patrons walk into these establishments without showing ID, while black patrons were asked to show multiple pieces of ID, only to be told that the identification was unacceptable for admission.<sup>3</sup> In January 1979, then mayor Marion Barry met with a local black gay rights organization, DC Coalition of Black Gays to discuss the group's complaints about the alleged discrimination. DC's leading LGBT-themed newspaper, the *Washington Blade*, reported the mayor's reaction upon learning about the black gay community's experiences of racial discrimination in white gay-owned establishments: "Barry, who had not previously met with Black Gay leaders, seemed

<sup>2</sup> The Rainbow History Project is an all-volunteer, not-for-profit organization dedicated to collecting and preserving LGBT history in metropolitan Washington, DC. Most of the oral histories used for this essay were collected and recorded by Mark Meinke, one of the project's founding members. For more information on the Rainbow History Project and its collections, see <http://rainbowhistory.org>.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Bèrubè includes "carding" as a "whitening practice" that prevented gay establishments from "turning," meaning a change of patronage from white to black and Latino. Bar owners linked this shift in patronage to a decrease in profits. Alan Bèrubè, "How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays," in *My Desire for History: Essays in Gay, Community, and Labor History*, ed. John D'Emilio and Estelle Freedman (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 206.

surprised to hear about discrimination by White Gay establishments.<sup>4</sup> In an editorial in the DC-based, black, LGBT-themed magazine *Blacklight*, Sidney Brinkley, the magazine's publisher and founder of the first LGBT organization at Howard University, noted how frequently this had been happening in white gay bars in particular, "As Black Gay people, we know all too well about discrimination in 'white' Gay bars."<sup>5</sup> Yet this practice, though occurring often within white gay-owned establishments, received little media attention prior to black gay and lesbian activist efforts to bring public attention to the issue.

But for many black gay Washingtonians, racial discrimination in white gay-owned establishments was not an issue, because the majority of black gay social life existed outside these clubs and bars. Since at least the mid-twentieth century, private black male social clubs, through their politics of discretion, provided a space for many same-sex-desiring black men in DC to act on their sexual desires, despite the cultural, economic, and political restraints that circumscribed their sexual practices. Though these social clubs would remain active throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, black gay sociality began to coalesce around more public venues. In the feature story of the December 1980 issue of *Blacklight*, titled "Cliques," the author, who chose to remain anonymous, explained how black gay community formation in Washington, DC, shifted from private social clubs in the mid- to late '60s to more public venues in the mid-'70s and early '80s, causing "cliques" to emerge based on shared social spaces like churches, bars, neighborhoods, and apartment complexes.<sup>6</sup> While the persistence of de facto forms of segregation in DC's gay scene and the cultural stigma attached to homosexuality within black communities did shape the formation of discrete social and sexual networks among black gay men in DC, many of these men *preferred* to socialize based upon shared geographic spaces and common racial and class identities. This also meant that black male social clubs and "cliques" often excluded persons from membership and events based upon markers of social class, such as appearance, living in the right neighborhood, and belonging to certain social circles.

Social divisions within Washington's black gay community also shaped the geography of the emerging public, black gay nightlife scene. In the mid-1970s, Washington, DC, developed a vibrant black gay nightlife scene, with nightclubs and bars such as the ClubHouse, Delta Elite, Brass Rail, and La Zambra emerging in various business and residential districts throughout the city. DC had long been home to one of the oldest predominantly black gay bars in the nation, Nob Hill, which opened in 1957. Nob Hill primarily "catered to the middle class, composed of high government workers, ministers and schoolteachers."<sup>7</sup> The bar's uptown location in the middle-income, black residential area of Columbia Heights distinguished it from more working-class black gay establishments, like the Brass Rail, which was located downtown in the "hustler section near 13th Street and New York Ave."<sup>8</sup> Many black gay middle-class men considered the Brass Rail to be "dangerous" and "raunchy" because of its location and because it was frequented by hustlers

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<sup>4</sup> Ernie Acosta, "Black Gays Raise Issue in Meeting, Barry Vows Action on Bar Bias Complaints," *Washington Blade*, February 7, 1979, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sidney Brinkley, "The Bottom Line," *Blacklight* 1, no. 2 (1979): 2.

<sup>6</sup> "Cliques," *Blacklight*, December–January 1980–81, 5.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> The *Washington Blade* reported in July 1978 that six gay men had been murdered since January of that same year. The men were reported to have frequented bars in DC's "hustler section near 13th and New York Ave." Lou Romano, "D.C. Police Report Increase in Murder of Gays," *Washington Blade*, July 1978, 5.

and drag queens.<sup>9</sup> The correlation between the geographic location of black gay bars and the class of their clientele further reflected the racial and class stratification of DC's gay public culture in the 1970s and early '80s.

### SPATIALIZING DENIAL, RACIALIZING OUTREACH

In 1987 the *Washington Post* reported that AIDS cases in Washington, DC, were distinct from those in places like New York City in that the majority were black homosexual and bisexual men: "In the district, half of the 693 reported cases are black, while only 3 percent are Hispanic. But unlike New York City, where the vast majority of black and Hispanic victims are intravenous drug users or their sexual partners, 70 percent of black AIDS patients in the District are homosexual or bisexual men, according to statistics compiled by city health officials."<sup>10</sup> This local distinction in the impact of the AIDS epidemic also shaped the response to it, especially in black communities. When media representations of AIDS appeared in 1981, black gay activists in DC were already embroiled in political battles over racism in the local white gay press and over black gay exclusion from the black popular press.<sup>11</sup> Given these dual forms of exclusion, black gay and lesbian activists in DC in the late '70s and early '80s were tasked with both challenging the category of gay as "white" and making black bodies intelligible to the state as sexual minorities. This political struggle spilled over into the fight against AIDS in black communities in the early '80s.

*Blacklight*, which sought to engage local black same-sex-desiring communities not otherwise involved in "out" black lesbian and gay politics, ran a cover story on AIDS in 1983. The story, titled "The File on AIDS," gave an overview of the disease and its impact, interviewed a Howard University physician about the racial politics of AIDS, and included three op-ed pieces by black gay activists in the community on their various responses to the virus.<sup>12</sup> One Philadelphia reader responded to "The File on AIDS" feature in a letter to the magazine, articulating his continued belief that AIDS was a white disease: "I am one who believes that AIDS is a white disease even though Blacks are catching it. One way Black men can cut down the risk of catching it is to stop having sex with white men."<sup>13</sup> In his oral-history narrative for the Rainbow History Project, Courtney Williams, the former cochair of the DC Coalition of Black Gays also mentioned the popular belief that black men were dying of AIDS because they were "dealing with whites." Interestingly, Williams located the source of this belief as "the clubs."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>9</sup> In his essay "Without Comment," Essex Hemphill describes the Brass Rail as "the raunchy Black gay club" that "was bulging out of its jockstrap. Drag queens ruled, B-boys chased giddy government workers, fast-talking hustlers worked the floor, while sugar daddies panted for attention in the shadows, offering free drinks and money to any friendly trade." Essex Hemphill, "Without Comment," in *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry* (Berkeley, CA: Cleis Press, 2000), 75.

<sup>10</sup> Sandra G. Boodman, "AIDS Message Misses Many Blacks, Hispanics," *Washington Post*, May 31, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> On November 21, 1978, the newly formed DC Coalition of Black Gays sponsored a forum on racism in the gay community. One of the issues mentioned at the forum was racism in the white-dominated gay media. The coalition condemned *Out* magazine, a gay entertainment magazine, for its failure to include black gay establishments. They also objected to personal, employment, and housing ads in the *Washington Blade*, the city's leading gay-themed magazine, for allowing the inclusion of racial criteria in their classified and housing listings. Ernie Acosta, "Black Gays Air Complaints," *Washington Blade*, December 4, 1978, 19, 21.

<sup>12</sup> "The File on AIDS," *Blacklight* 4, no. 3 (1983): 21–32.

<sup>13</sup> "Letter to the editor," *Blacklight* 4, no. 4 (1983): 3.

<sup>14</sup> Courtney Williams, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

Indeed, several local black gay activists recalled in their oral-history narratives to the Rainbow History Project how many black gay men totally dismissed the possibility that the disease might impact their community, because they understood it as a “white disease.” Furthermore, many of them believed that the few black gay men who had the disease had caught it from having sex with white men. This narrative remained salient in part due to the discrete communities that black gay men formed on the basis of shared geographic location. In his study of black gay men in Harlem, William Hawkeswood notes how the community of men that he studied in New York remained free of AIDS in the early years of the epidemic by limiting their social and sexual lives to Harlem. Those who contracted the disease or died were believed to have had social and sexual connections either with the mainstream gay community downtown or with people in other areas of the city.<sup>15</sup> Like the men of Harlem, black gay men in Washington, DC, also formed social and sexual networks based on shared location. Many of these groups excluded potential members on the basis of markers of social class in order to further reduce the potential of “risk” and “danger” within their social and sexual networks.<sup>16</sup> That DC’s black gay communities formed along socio-economic lines and according to shared location suggests that they, too, believed that managing the threat of AIDS in the early years of the epidemic was a matter of maintaining the racial, class, and spatial boundaries that were already structuring Washington’s gay scene.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the community’s early denial partly stems from the fact that the public-health apparatus, which has historically been insensitive, and even hostile, to cultural difference, administered AIDS outreach efforts.<sup>18</sup> In 1983 Mayor Barry reported to the *Washington Blade* that he pledged his continued support for AIDS funding through local institutions like the Department of Health and the Whitman-Walker Clinic, an outgrowth of the Gay Men’s V.D. Clinic that had been established in Washington a decade earlier to address the particular health needs of gay men and lesbians. But these institutions participated in the constitution of AIDS as a “white disease,” mostly through their failure to reach out to black communities. James “Juicy” Coleman, founder of one of the oldest social clubs for black gay men, at Howard University in 1968, discussed in his oral-history narrative for the Rainbow History Project how hard it was for black men who had venereal disease to find racially and sexually sensitive doctors and how Howard University Hospital discriminated against black AIDS patients. Coleman, who later devoted his life to AIDS education and prevention, also discussed how the Whitman-Walker Clinic was labeled “White

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<sup>15</sup> William G. Hawkeswood, *One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 169–70.

<sup>16</sup> In the editorial “Cliques” (*Blacklight*, December–January 1980–81, 5) the author points out that many black gay men “did not possess the physical, social, or economic attributes that would permit them to exist on their own among Washington’s black gay community, for the name of the game is acceptance.” Those deemed “low lifes” were left to mingle among their own “peer” group or participate in more public forms of sociality, like white or black gay bars or cruising for sex in public spaces.

<sup>17</sup> Historian Kwame Holmes notes how the production of a geographically and racially limited gay identity in DC was not only engineered by white gay entrepreneurs and political organizations but also enforced and reproduced daily by both white and black gay Washingtonians. Kwame Holmes, “Chocolate to Rainbow City: The Dialectics of Black and Gay Community Formation in Postwar Washington, D.C., 1946–1978” (PhD diss., University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2011; Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI), 165.

<sup>18</sup> For further discussion of anti-black racism in US public health, see, e.g., James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 2006); and Johanna Schoen, *Choice and Coercion: Birth Control, Sterilization, and Abortion in Public Health and Welfare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).



Man Walker” by the local black gay community because of its lack of culturally appropriate programming and because its outreach occurred primarily in white gay neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup> Public-health officials initially neglected other gay areas of the city such as “Homo Heights,” the name black gay writer and activist Essex Hemphill gave to the concentration of black gay men residing in the Columbia Heights neighborhood of northwest Washington, directly adjacent to Meridian Hill/Malcolm X Park.<sup>20</sup>

This lack of attention to the impact of AIDS in black Washington, DC, shifted between 1982 and 1983 when the DC Coalition of Black Gays and the Whitman-Walker Clinic noticed alarming numbers of black gay men with the disease. *Blacklight* advertised an “AIDS Forum for Black and Third-World Gays” to be held at the ClubHouse nightclub on September 28, 1983. The *Washington Blade* reported that forty people attended the Wednesday night forum and that concerns were raised about whether the epidemic’s impact on racial minorities was being adequately reported. The AIDS forum was the first of its kind, both in the specificity of its target audience and because of its location.<sup>21</sup> If “the clubs” were a source of misinformation, as Williams claimed, the forum utilized a predominantly black gay club as a site of redress: to disseminate accurate information, facilitate community outreach, and respond to the prior neglect of black communities by the public-health apparatus. In choosing the ClubHouse as the site of the event—known primarily as a space of affiliation *between* black same-sex-desiring men—black gay activists sought to counter community-based claims that promoted intraracial sex as a mode of risk reduction.

The way that *Blacklight* advertised the forum was also significant. The full-page advertisement for the forum contained a photograph of three black men in an embrace. The caption below the picture reads, “There has to be a solution. Be there. Together, let’s educate ourselves to live!” This advertisement represents one of the first AIDS campaigns in the United States to feature black men. That there are three black men embracing implicitly challenges the popular belief that the disease is transferred solely between black and white bodies. DC black gay activist and performance artist Michael “Micci” Sainte-Andress recounted in his oral-history narrative how two black lesbians, working for the *Washington Post*, had trouble finding models for a campaign to target the black community. Eager to help, Sainte-Andress posed along with Sidney Brinkley, founder of *Blacklight* magazine, and another activist, Parris Bryant, founder of the *Diplomat*, a competing black LGBT-themed magazine.<sup>22</sup>

This campaign accrued more import because of an occurrence during the AIDS forum at the ClubHouse. According to the *Washington Blade*, during a presentation on the symptoms of Kaposi’s sarcoma, a rare skin cancer associated with AIDS, one attendee pointed out that most slides depicted the lesions on a white person’s skin. The person “wonder[ed] what the lesions would look like on dark skin.”<sup>23</sup> The person’s response demonstrated the significance of the visual in making AIDS recognizable as a disease affecting black people. While the visual images of the public-health apparatus reaffirmed the discourses of AIDS as a “white disease,” the advertisement in *Blacklight*, featuring black gay men, and conspicuous figures within the black gay community at that, served as a counternarrative to state forms of knowledge production about the virus.

<sup>19</sup> James “Juicy” Coleman, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>20</sup> Hemphill, “Without Comment,” 74.

<sup>21</sup> Lisa M. Keen, “First-of-a-Kind AIDS Forum for Black Gays Held at ClubHouse,” *Washington Blade*, September 30, 1983, 17.

<sup>22</sup> Michael “Micci” Sainte-Andress, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>23</sup> Keen, “First-of-a-Kind AIDS Forum,” 17.

## NO LONGER A NIGHTTIME THING

Nestled in the primarily black middle-class residential neighborhood of Columbia Heights in northwest Washington, DC, at its peak the ClubHouse had more than four thousand members. For fifteen years, the nightclub provided the central focus for African American gay social life in DC, with as many as a thousand people attending the club on a Saturday night. According to the Rainbow History Project, the ClubHouse opened in 1975 to popular success, with people lining up for membership for months. The success of the club was most likely due to its national reputation for world-class deejays, state-of-the-art lighting and sound, performances by national recording artists, and elaborate parties. Many local club-goers would hop to various black gay bars around the city, making the ClubHouse their last stop because it was known for its late-night parties, sometimes lasting until dawn. The majority of the ClubHouse's attendees depended upon the club's uptown, residential location and membership-only policy to maintain discretion. Williams described the shifting cultural climate of DC between night and day, in which many black same-sex-desiring men were "career-oriented during the day and gay was a pastime and nighttime thing."<sup>24</sup>

The ClubHouse developed out of a series of popular dance clubs in DC, and was based on the house parties of the Metropolitan Capitalites, an early black male social club.<sup>25</sup> However, a politics of discretion prevented most social club and ClubHouse members from formally participating in the local black LGBT political organizing that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, including the fight against AIDS. In his oral-history narrative, Otis "Buddy" Sutson, cofounder of the Best of Washington social club, expressed special regret for the group's lack of participation in AIDS activism out of "fear of what the reprisal might be for their publicity."<sup>26</sup> So when the AIDS virus began to infect black men in DC, the male social clubs—which had for so long provided support for these men to act on their desires—did not address the virus's impact on club and community members.

Given the cultural constraints that many black lesbians and gays faced in Washington, DC, the ClubHouse, which straddled the line between offering privacy and publicity to its constituents from its start, became a key site for black gay AIDS activism. Upon its opening in 1975, the club had a broader mission than just providing a super dance venue. Rather, the club owners sought to reach out to the larger community.<sup>27</sup> With ten thousand square feet of space and state-of-the-art lighting and sound, the club developed into an attractive venue for black Washingtonians, especially for the burgeoning black gay and lesbian political movement in DC. In 1979 the ClubHouse helped to fund the historic Third World Gay Conference, a meeting of black, Latino, Asian, and Native American lesbians and gays held at the Harambee House Hotel in Washington, DC. The club held a special Rally Ball, and ticket sales supported the conference. In 1982 DC black gay activists also held several campaign rallies and fundraisers at the ClubHouse for mayoral candidate Marion Barry, supporting their mission to take a more forceful role in DC's municipal politics, which had been dominated previously by white gay activists. When the DC Coalition of Black Gays and the Whitman-Walker Clinic noticed how many black

<sup>24</sup> Courtney Williams, interview by Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>25</sup> "The ClubHouse, 1975–1990: Can You Feel It? Evolution," Rainbow History Project Digital Collections, accessed August 2013, <http://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/clubhouse/can-you-feel-it/evolution>.

<sup>26</sup> Otis "Buddy" Sutson, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>27</sup> "The ClubHouse, 1975–1990: The ClubHouse in the Community," Rainbow History Project Digital Collections, accessed August 2013, <http://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/clubhouse/clubhouse-in-community>.

same-sex-desiring men were contracting AIDS, the ClubHouse—an institution that had served the needs of black gays and lesbians who sought pleasure under the guise of night and those who sought political visibility—became the logical site of outreach and education.

### **LOCAL ROOTS OF NATIONAL AIDS ACTIVISM IN BLACK COMMUNITIES**

Though the national media continued to focus their attention on white gay men as the primary victims of the AIDS epidemic in the early 1980s, the virus continued to infect black gay men in Washington, DC. At the local level, the ClubHouse emerged as a site where the virus's impact on black gay men became perceptible. DC black gay activist Rainey Cheeks managed the ClubHouse in its early years. In his oral-history narrative, Cheeks remembered how black male members of the ClubHouse began to disappear from the club in the early '80s. Noticing that some of the members had become sick and were no longer able to attend, Cheeks decided to do something to help his community. Along with other community members, Cheeks raised money from the club proceedings on Tuesday nights and gave it to individuals who were unable to work or pay their rent. The club also held a date auction called Slaves for Love, pajama parties, dance marathons, and other fundraising events to help people who were sick. Cheeks recalled sending limousines to pick up individuals who were too ill to come to the club on their own so that they could see such acts as Patti LaBelle, the Weather Girls, and Nona Hendryx. Eventually, he began to organize people into buddy systems, designating people who could help ill club members with cleaning and everyday tasks.<sup>28</sup>

This informal system of community care eventually developed into a formal organization, Us Helping Us, People into Living, Inc., a longstanding black AIDS institution in DC. In 1986 Cheeks, trained in yoga and martial arts, began a meditation group at the ClubHouse. This meditation group grew into a twelve-week program that would eventually become the signature effort of Us Helping Us. The program took a holistic approach and focused on interventions through diet, cooking, meditation practices, nature retreats for emotional healing and workshops geared toward helping people become free of the guilt and shame associated with their illness. Twenty-two people showed up at the support group when it moved to Cheeks's apartment after the ClubHouse closed in 1990.<sup>29</sup> Ron Simmons, the eventual director of Us Helping Us, attended this first meeting. Simmons's presence at the meeting is significant, given his earlier critique, published in *Blacklight*, indicting the black gay intelligentsia because he feared that they would "use their energies to organize AIDS research fundraisers, or lobby Congress to appropriate more money for AIDS research."<sup>30</sup> Simmons's participation in this program demonstrated its important role as a mode of "invention," a grassroots effort that developed endogenously within black gay communities, a mode of caretaking and a political strategy against a virus that was dramatically affecting the community but about which the community had little knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Kwabena "Rainey" Cheeks, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Brother Ron, "AIDS: A Government Conspiracy," *Blacklight* 4, no. 3 (1983): 29.

<sup>31</sup> Marlon Bailey calls for a shift in HIV/AIDS prevention studies from "intervention" to "invention," "to capture what so-called communities of risk do, based on their own knowledge and ingenuity, to contest, to reduce, and to withstand HIV in their communities." Marlon Bailey, "Performance as Invention: Ballroom Culture and the Politics of HIV/AIDS in Detroit," *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 11, no. 3 (2009): 259.



Us Helping Us is not the only institution that emerged out of the ClubHouse to confront AIDS in black communities. The ClubHouse hosted an annual party for its staff and members known as “the Children’s Hour.” The first party was held in 1976 but became a national event that drew African American lesbians and gay men from all over the United States to the city. According to the Rainbow History Project, the party established Memorial Day weekend in DC as a national event, with the Children’s Hour party on Sunday as the capstone. In the late 1980s the ClubHouse suffered declining membership—mostly because of the devastating impact of AIDS, with estimates of its membership lost to AIDS as high as 40 percent. The club owners held the final Children’s Hour party on Memorial Day weekend in 1990. The following year, another longstanding black LGBT institution, Black Gay Pride, filled the empty slot left by the Children’s Hour. DC Black Gay Pride event has taken place on Memorial Day weekend ever since.<sup>32</sup> In DC, Black Gay Pride began as a benefit to fund AIDS prevention efforts in DC’s black gay communities. Local AIDS organization Best Friends, which developed out of the formations of community care that began in the ClubHouse, put together the first Black Gay Pride event to give back to AIDS service organizations such as the Inner City AIDS Network (ICAN). Best Friends and ICAN were among the first to direct their services toward communities of color. According to Gil Gerald, former president of the DC and National Coalition of Black Gays, the model of cultural specificity and cultural competence developed through these grassroots efforts of black lesbian and gay communities in Washington, DC, would serve as a guide for national campaigns against AIDS in black communities.<sup>33</sup>

Other black gay nightclubs, such as Jewel’s Catch One in Los Angeles, would eventually join the fight against AIDS in black communities.<sup>34</sup> However, the ClubHouse remains distinct for its early role in black gay grassroots struggles against AIDS and as a site of memory that archives the trace of the traumatic, yet largely unremarked, impact of the AIDS epidemic on black gay men. Furthermore, by situating the ClubHouse within the racialized and classed geographies of gay culture in Washington, DC, this essay demonstrates how the racial and class stratification of gay social space factored not only into black gay collective strategies for developing culturally specific AIDS campaigns but also into the community’s understanding of the disease’s origins. The discrete sexual networks that black gay men formed—based on shared geographic location and socioeconomic background and participation in social spaces of intraracial affiliation like the ClubHouse—promised to protect them from infection. Yet the alarming numbers of black men contracting the virus in DC in the early 1980s—including a large portion of the ClubHouse’s membership—told a different story. The ClubHouse becomes a complex site of historical retelling, demonstrating the necessity for scholars to attend not only to local cultural responses to the AIDS epidemic but also to how those responses are situated within particular cultural geographies. A

<sup>32</sup> See “The ClubHouse, 1975–1990: Events at the ClubHouse; Children’s Hour,” Rainbow History Project Digital Collections, accessed August 2013, <http://rainbowhistory.omeka.net/exhibits/show/clubhouse/events-at-clubhouse/childrens-hour>.

<sup>33</sup> Gil Gerald, interview by Mark Meinke, 2001, Rainbow History Project, Washington, DC.

<sup>34</sup> Jewel’s Catch One opened in 1972 in Los Angeles as one of the nation’s first black discos. In 1985 club owner Jewel Thais-Williams cofounded the Minority AIDS Project and later joined the AIDS Project Los Angeles Board of Directors to “bring the services they provided down to the hood.” She also opened Rue’s House, the country’s first housing facility for women with AIDS and their children, most of whom were poor and black. Karen Ocamb, “Historic Catch One Disco Celebrates 40th Anniversary,” *The Bilerico Project*, [http://www.bilerico.com/2013/05/historic\\_catch\\_one\\_disco\\_celebrates\\_40th\\_anniversa.php](http://www.bilerico.com/2013/05/historic_catch_one_disco_celebrates_40th_anniversa.php).