

# Picture It! : A Black History

By Craig Washington

1981 in the Black and Latino Brooklyn village known as Fort Greene. It was a year of many firsts as I was incredibly young and possessed of a boldness I mistook for courage. I lived with two roommates Daryl and Kevin in my first apartment a third floor brownstone flat on Cumberland St. I was crazy in love with Spencer, my first boyfriend, and quite pleased to have escaped the looming shadow of my father's raised brow. I felt that I had all that I needed and that I had escaped all perceptible dangers. I was living this way when I warned our friend Ricky about traipsing over to Man's Country, one of the hottest bathhouses in midtown. "There's something going around, that gay cancer that's hitting the white boys," I told him. Ricky loved, loved, loved him some white boys and while he was a diehard romantic, he was also decidedly anti-monogamous. I thought he did not have sense enough to be afraid so I was afraid for him. Although I suggested that he settle down and get a boyfriend like mine, whom I later discovered he was having, I also envied his ability to skip through sexual playgrounds I only dared visit in my fantasies. I was shielded by my fairy godmother friends and the illusion of sexual propriety provided by a "don't ask – don't tell" arrangement. My boyfriend and I loved to fuck. We did it often and well and never used condoms. Condoms were for boys like Ricky who loved boys from Man's Country. Not boys like Spencer and I who were devoted to accommodating each other by uncritically complying with traditional relationship values we had inherited.

I had no clue that a plague of unparalleled dimensions had already broken through the barricades. With a terrible swiftness it washed over all of us, staining our bodies and tinting our lenses and we would never look at each other in the same way. For the first decade it was all we could talk about, or not talk about, our silences betrayed by the fear beaming from our eyes. "Now we think as we fuck!" Essex Hemphill signaled. "This nut might kill us."

Although our accomplishments would be largely omitted by the histories written by white gay men, we created legacies to inspire and crafted tools to be used by our progeny. Hemphill wrote "I want to start an organization to save my own life" and Phill Wilson who would later start the Black AIDS Institute, co-founded the Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum. Carl Bean joyously proclaimed "t'aint a fault, it's a fact, I was born this way" and launched a gay affirming Black church movement. Other Countries, a black gay men's writing collective delivered performance pieces about AIDS at Studio Museum of Harlem and the club TRAXX. I got life from local activists and writers like George Bellinger Jr., Colin Robinson, and Craig Harris who took up their fallen brothers' spear. When I finally found myself host to the unwelcome visitor, I could not confide in even these the most trustworthy men I knew. In those cloak and dagger times I trusted no man with my tea. I relied on my good sisters Simone, Clara and Michelle for solace and laugh therapy.

There was however one particular "office site" that would "operate at night" where I got my religion straight through Sunday morning. The Paradise Garage on King and Varick in downtown Manhattan was the unrivaled pinnacle of Black and Latino gay dance culture. It defied rote description though many have attempted to single out what made it so uniquely fabulous. Some claim it was the eclectic menu of music spun with supernatural intuition by the legendary Larry Levan and no doubt enhanced by the acid laced punch. Others cite the undulating throngs of beautiful people of various hue, gender and expression writhing to Chaka, Loleatta Holloway, Jocelyn Brown and First Choice. "Different shapes and sizes, behind the horizon." It was the temple where I worshipped many gods and goddesses, the palace where I celebrated my precious flesh and the unbowed spirit that inhabited it. How many of us were counting our days or searching for telltale signs, "just us" dancing to fight oblivion?

Today is such a different world from where I came from and what I have been through. I suffer no romantic notions of a utopian past, nor apocalyptic nightmares of a hopeless future. It is the present at hand which concerns me. A whole new generation, born as so many of their forebears

were dying, has come of age. A few of them have refined their brothers' fallen spear and have thus honored their ancestors. They are charting frontiers and interrogating traditional views about sexuality and identity in ways that my generation could not have conceived. James Baldwin once observed that the fate of the world rests in the hands of a handful of people who are brave enough to love us all. When I consider the plight of Black men who love men it is this handful that I pray for, and I pray that they are praying or pulling for me.

I used to wonder how different the world and I would be had the plague never happened. I find it much more useful to imagine the kind of community we would own if Hemphill, Assoto Saint, Marlon Riggs, Joseph Beam and thousands of other committed brothers had lived to mark this somber anniversary. I am then visited by spectacles of what should be. Three clubs in Atlanta where the kids bop and vogue to house, Afro-Brazilian and non-toxic hip hop. A gala premiere of Marlon Riggs 20<sup>th</sup> film at a Black gay owned arts center where hundreds line up to meet the director. Primetime coverage of mass walkouts and demonstrations at Black churches across the nation. Universal health coverage that ensures quality services for Black people of any sexual orientation. Interventions unyoked by political machinations and fundamentalist ideologies, and informed by innovative research conducted by Black scientists. Dramatic drops in HIV infection and mortality rates, and other health disparities among Black gay men.

Then I reawaken to my sobering reality and I am reminded of my purpose. In his essay "How Hip Hop Killed The Fag", my young brother Michael Gipson observes how desperately we strive to be perceived as "normal" and use masculinist hip hop values to measure our manhood. I hope you realize "the fag" is you. Whether you are femme, swimmer's build, top, DL, versatile, a blouse or a big gul, it does not matter. You are certainly free to substitute fag with whatever you call yourself as it pleases you to do. You are also free to choose to begin to accept yourself as is. That is a difficult uncharted path that we each must walk if we are to free ourselves, to live as fully human beyond the safety lines of category.

If we are going to make it then we must look past simply surviving HIV because that is not what presages our extinction. HIV is only the most visible symptom. It is the maddening and pervasive lack of love between Black gay men that renders us utterly vulnerable to our onslaughts. People in their sixties and seventies reminisce as a way of making sense of their lives. As a 47 year old gay man who has lived with HIV nearly half my life and has lost my share of friends and lovers, I reminisce quite often. I ponder what could have been in order to stay clear about what could be. Picture it. 2017. Visit adam4adam and find profiles that list preferences without condemnations. Perhaps you will not have time to scroll the paltry number of online pics because you are late for the monthly potluck that gathers 200 Black gay men. You attend in hot pursuit of a date and find community.

It is not enough to state what we do not want. We need to conjure up what we do want and work in that direction. I have not come this far to settle for the miasma that lies before me now. I have too many names scratched off my book to settle. Too many living friends on speed dial to settle. It will take more than HIV updates or war stories to mobilize us to action. We need a better incentive, not just something to escape or withstand, but something positive to reach for. Let it be us loving us in ways that could have been had we not lost so many angels. Look to their words and their lives for models we can use to realize that vision. Picture it!

Craig Washington  
404-849-4461  
<http://www.craigwerks.com>