

# UC Riverside

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### Title

Documenting Underground Queer Nightlife Culture Through Photography

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# Documenting Underground Queer Nightlife Culture Through Photography

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## Acknowledgements

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Thank you to everyone who has been a part of making the far-out dreams of a first generation college student a reality. I truly appreciate your belief in my project and my ability to complete it.

# Abstract

My project aims to photograph queer people of color in underground nightlife in Los Angeles and New York. The main project question is: how do queer people use nightlife and fabulousness to decompress from societal pressures by uplifting their emotional wellbeing? Fabulousness is considered dangerous, political, and practiced by queer people who make themselves a spectacle because their bodies are constantly suppressed as stated by Madison Moore in *Fabulous: the Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric*. I will use an auto-ethnographical methodology of portraits, interviews, and my observations to provide a cultural analysis of the underground queer nightlife community. The report will showcase the differences between locations and how aesthetics of fabulousness is created and celebrated in these hidden underground spaces.

## Introduction/ Thesis

Throughout history, representation of queer people of color from marginalized, ethnic, and low-income backgrounds have been limited throughout the art world. A recent study of 10,000 artists represented by major US museums found that 85% percent of artists were white while only 1.2% were African American (Topaz et al. 8). The lack of representation of queer narratives within the art world substantiates the validity and importance of this project. Underground queer nightlife culture and self-styling through fabulousness undermines the hegemonic patriarchal ideologies that promote heterosexuality. Furthermore, the added reality that participation within these spaces could lead to potential violence creates a more complex view of underground nightlife culture. Moore states, style is a form of protest, a revolt against the norms and systems that oppress and torture us all every day, things like white supremacy, misogyny, trans misogyny, patriarchy, toxic masculinity, gender policing, and racism (Moore 9). The locations each have thriving underground queer communities, yet with varying forms of oppressive factors such as political homophobia, violence, social trauma, and mental illness. The project will examine how different forms of fabulousness in underground spaces are created and used to deal with these societal pressures. Deb Willis states, “in the history of photography Black people were the subjects of photographs, but there were no black photographers (Harris, Through a Lens). The work will add to the social and artistic history focusing on queer people of color within the underground community from the perspective of an African American queer photographer. The project seeks to combine the use of photography in both a creative and documentary capacity to produce academic research.

My main interview questions include: are there any aspects of underground nightlife that helps with your emotional well being? As a person of color do you feel safer/accepted in underground or mainstream queer nightclubs? Do you dress eccentrically in your daily life? If so, why do you choose to express yourself through your appearance? If not, why do you choose to only wear eccentric outfits at night? In focusing on the clubs, themselves the photography along with my personal observations will attempt to convey the ambiance of the location while showcasing the varying types of spaces used to create underground experiences. My observations will include the differences in music, levels of diversity, terms of access, and degrees of trans visibility.

The inverted stylized portraits make the subjects appear larger than life and other worldly because in a sense they are. The individuals within the images live life freely and do not allow the constraints of societal pressures to make them conform. They live their life unapologetically by creating an outwardly tangible artistic expression of what is inside them and makes them happy. There is a serious risk that’s involved when the community chooses to present themselves in public in a way that is decidedly outside of the established cultural order, a risk that can often lead to homophobic or transphobic violence (Moore 22) Fabulousness is art created in states of duress, and this is its political edge. (Moore 22) The aspect of documenting these political activists who use fabulousness as their act of resistance to hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal ideologies promotes the use of color in the portraits to attempt to convey the larger than life presence of these fabulous individuals. The use of artistic portraiture, my observations, and data

collected from interviews will comprise my auto-ethnographic report culminating in a body of work featuring over 50 interviews and printed portraits to be exhibited.

The project aims to provide further documentation of the underground queer community from the perspective of an African American queer researcher that differs from that of Andy Warhol and Robert Mapplethorpe which due in part to their whiteness have largely taken over the conversation of queer underground photography still to this day. Artist, Glenn Ligon, showcasing his *notes on the margins of the "Black Book"* in the 1993 Whitney Biennale appropriated Mapplethorpe's images by adding text to them from various sources that serves as a critique of his *Black Book* series which depicted highly fetishized photographs of Black male nude bodies (fig.1). Mapplethorpe himself in an interview states, "All I know is that it's physically attractive to me visually it's also attractive and so it became an obsession with me taking these pictures of Blacks" (Bailey, Mapplethorpe) In continuing Ligon's work of dismantling white artists stronghold of Black and queer people of color's representation within the art world the photographs will serve as a further critique of Mapplethorpe's work as well as artistic institutions that lack diversity. The main aspect of exhibiting the images completes the project by physically placing them in fine art institutions to ensure their physical inclusion into the fine art world.

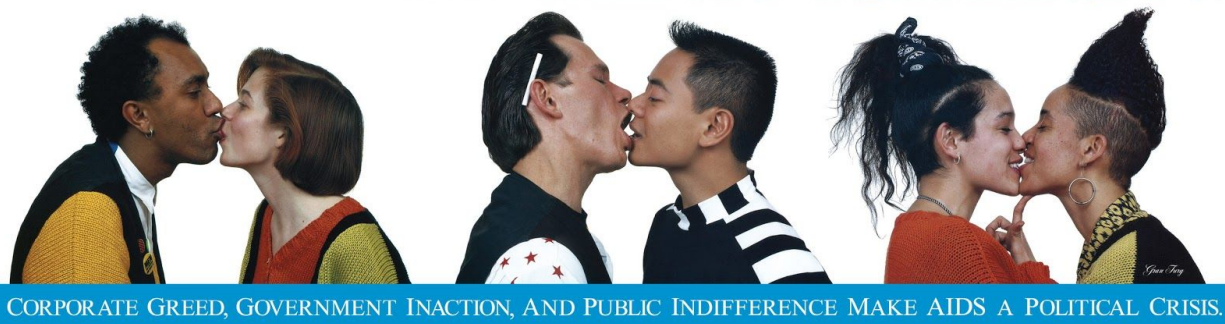
# Critical Analysis: Historical Background and Media Representation

## Art

### Lola Flash

Lola Flash is an African American queer photographer who gained notoriety during the late 80s and early 90s through her photography and work with ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Flash's work focuses on LGBT+, black, and feminist issues which brings her to the forefront of the project due to captivating work. Flash was well known for her cross-color work which inverted images to reveal negative colors and her involvement in Gran Fury's *Kissing doesn't kill* bus advertisements in 1989.

### KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.



*Gran Fury*

Kissing Doesn't Kill, 1989, ink on vinyl, 2' x 2'

Gran Fury (Lola Flash far right)  
*Kissing Doesn't Kill: Greed and Indifference Do*  
 New York City  
 1989

Flash's *Cross Color* and *Gay to Z* series made during the height of AIDS epidemic are the subject of focus for the project. Flash explains her use of cross color photography as the result of work that plays with the psychological aspects represented within color such as black being associated with negative traits. In cross coloring her images Flash inverts shades and removes their normal associations. She also states that within the era of the work the majority of

her subject were closeted and thus felt free to be photographed given the anonymity inverted images afford. In being an activist Flash used her work to protest the injustices occurring against marginalized individuals during the AIDS epidemic. Flash has also stated in an interview with *Feature* shoot that, “I have referenced certain white male artists (Richard Avedon) and then transferred their methods such as composition and gestures in portraits to be my own.”



Lola Flash  
*Charles RIP 1968-1992*  
 New York

**Critical Analysis:** The image above features a man standing against the wall with his arms out beside him bent bracing the wall. Along the man’s body numerous spots can be seen indicating the severity of the disease through HIV skin lesions. The spots carry on to the individual’s hat as well which could be a reference to the public aspect of contracting AIDS which can be easily identified. With his back towards the camera and his shadow cascading diagonally to his right the once black yet now white shadow could represent the individual’s fleeting existence. Another key aspect of the image is the man’s thong because as a potential signifier of his sexuality that was visible before the cross color process becomes now obscured. The obscured thong becomes partially eliminated from the image thus drawing attention to the man’s back and lesions which transcends the individual’s sexuality resulting in simply a man with AIDS which could be applied to any individual. The transcendence of sexuality within the image recontextualizes the term “gay disease” to one that affects all human beings and not simply LGBT+ individuals.





Lola Flash  
*Stay Afloat- Use a Rubber 1993*

**Critical Analysis:** In one interview Flash states that the cross coloring work creates sentiments of an apocalypse and at the time of the AIDS epidemic this was a reality for many with friends and family dying at an exceeding rate. The government and the media's response was to label it as a "gay cancer" thus targeting and shaming the LGBT+ community. The piece *Stay Afloat-Use a Rubber* depicts two men in striped speedos lounging in innertubes holding hands floating above water. The image inverted gives an eerie feeling as the water has shifted to a blood red color with the ripples made black. The water looks like blood and could be used as a visual representation of the virus swarming around the individuals. The innertubes can be inferred as the rubbers in replacement of condoms, but one aspect that is significant are the men's speedos. The speedos are both stripped and could serve to represent the imprisonment of the men's sexual organs. The shadows along the right side of the individual's face and arm could act in a similar function as the previous image in creating a depiction of their fleeting existence.

**Conclusion:** In relation to Flash's work my own reflects that of her's as I employ the same cross color technique. In the context of the modern era I use the cross color method to elevate the beauty of my participants, but also place them in their own underground world. The individuals represented in my photographs operate outside the rigid concepts of what society expects individuals to look like. The colored photographs like the participants also operate

outside the confines of what the art world deems acceptable productions of color. The two married intandem and birthing art work to craft their own spaces that subvert hegemonic ideologies and the white male gaze.



### **Rotimi Fani- Kayode**

A Nigerian photographer born in 1955 Lagos. In 1966 at the tender age of 11 Kayode and his family were exiled from Nigeria during the civil war due to his family's political stature. After leaving Nigeria Kayode's family relocated to Brighton, England. The photographer gained notoriety during the 80s AIDS epidemic for his photography centering around the tensions that

arise when discussing race, sexuality, and culture. The artist's stylized portraits of black men feature moments of intimacy, a mixture of erotic fantasy and ancestral religion, along with critiques on the objectification of Black bodies and masculinity. One critic labeled Kayode's work as neo-romantic depicting the art as, "images that evoke a sense of fleeting beauty." Kayode states, "I make my pictures homosexual on purpose. Black men from the third world have not previously revealed either to their own peoples or to the West a certain shocking fact: they can desire each other. The artist claims Mapplethorpe as an inspiration for his work but also states that his intention for creating art was to provide visibility for African queerness within Western and African worlds. Kayode self-identified as an outsider and used his feeling of otherness within the African diaspora to discuss issues surrounding geography, sexuality, and cultural dislocation. In using a Baroque approach to his photography Kayode would shoot his subjects in studio producing primarily black and white images utilizing masks and other African props. The complexity of his work adds representation of the queer African diaspora from the perspective of an African within art spaces that before had been previously been non-existent.



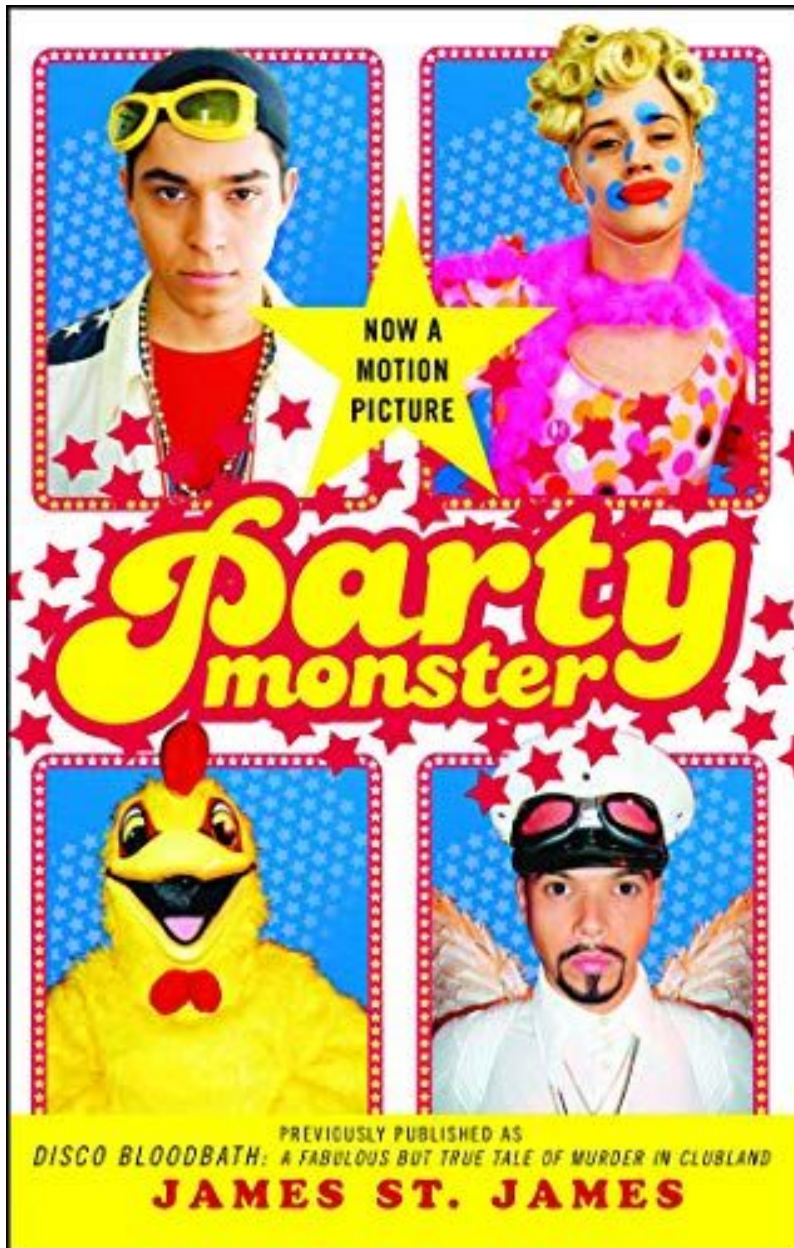
Robert Mapplethorpe  
Self Portrait 1980

### **Robert Mapplethorpe**

was an American photographer born on November 4, 1946 in Floral Park, Queens. Mapplethorpe was and to this day remains a prolific photographer known for his art focusing on black bodies, female bodybuilders, the NYC underground BDSM scene, and floral still lifes. The work of Mapplethorpe is shocking and provocative in nature toeing and sometimes crossing the line between erotic art and pornography. Mapplethorpe once said, “I don’t think that there’s much difference between a photograph of a fist up someone’s ass and a photograph of carnations in a bowl.” The controversial photographer has sparked numerous debates but the one in focus

for my project is his *Black Book* which is quite phallogentric featuring black bodies in highly stylized classical portraits. The book sparked social discourse surrounding exploitation, objectification of black bodies, and his part in adding representation of the African diaspora within the art world. African American poet Essex Hemphill in *Brother to Brother* states in reference to Mapplethorpe's work, "it displayed a lack of concern for black individuals in the gay community, except as sexual objects." The main problem with Mapplethorpe's imagery is his fetishization of black bodies that although beautiful represent the white gay male gaze desire to sexually experience a big black cock. Mapplethorpe in discussion of how he began photographing states, "I went into photography because it seemed like the perfect vehicle for commenting on the madness of today's existence." His works are widely known and have shed light on minorities and subcultures often barred from art institutions. In our current time his work serve as a record of what underground queer sexuality looked like before the advent of cell phones and the marriage equality law.

## Film



*Party Monster* (2003)

Director: Fenton Bailey and Randy Barbato

Production: World of Wonder Studios

Bailey and Barbato's 2003 cult classic *Party Monster* is described as a biographical drama detailing the rise and fall of famed NY club kid Michael Alig who murdered his

roommate Angel Melendez. The film starring Macaulay Culkin, Seth Green, Wilson Cruz, and Chloe Sevigny was my first introduction into queer underground nightlife and club kid culture. As a young queer boy living in the deserts of Adelanto, CA I visiously searched for gay films as I wanted to live vicariously through them and experience gay culture even if it was through a tv screen while my parents were asleep. The film initially excited me as I thought of what it would be like to look glamorous and party until the sun came out. My youth however glossed over the racist undertones of the film and murder of a fellow person of color.

A critical analysis of the film lends it eccentric nature through the white gaze to substantiate my thesis in making it clear that the underground queer nightlife community from the POC perspective needs to value POC individuals over white cis gay men. The film opens with a man dead lying on the floor with blood surrounding him, his face turned away from the camera. Michael Alig while having cocaine with his tea in conversation with James St James nonchalantly states, "I killed him." James St James in response laughs thinking Alig is joking before saying, "nice shoes," to which Alig quickly replies, "he was wearing them at the time." The initial scene introducing the film to the audience also introduces the racist undertones of the film's premise. In having Angel's face turned away from the camera and Alig treating his death so nonchalantly Bailey suggests that POC bodies are subsidiary to those of cis white gay men and that our deaths are not important.

In the following scene the audience is introduced to Alig in his youth as a midwest queer who was bullied with a close up shot of kid spitting on the camera implying spitting on Alig. The scene later transitions to Michael in New York talking about how he felt different in his hometown and never really fit in with the intention to leave the "drearies and normies" stating he wanted a world of color, "one big party". In detailing his ambitions of becoming a NYC party promoter he states his intentions for creating, "a home for everyone who felt like a freak... beat on and spat on in high school." Alig's intentions start out pure as a wide-eyed boy joining in the New York aesthetic of freedom and queerness.

The initial introduction of a POC actor is Wilmer Valderrama playing the superstar DJ Keoki. Once Alig meets Keoki he tells him how he wants him to be his boyfriend and offers him drink tickets. Keoki rejects Alig and says that he's straight and trying to go home with girls to which Alig responds, "we'll see after a couple of cocktails." The film negates Keoki's sexuality and sexual agency within the situation and in turn makes Keoki become Alig's boyfriend to serve as sexualized latin arm candy. As the film progresses it shows the exuberant amount of drugs being used by the NYC club personalities to which Alig responds by wanting to create a superstar drug dealer who he can intentionally use for free drugs. In response to Alig's desires for a drug dealer an angel appears in the form of Angel Melendez who had desires of becoming a club kid after watching them on tv. Angel enthralled by the intoxicating community of the underground queer nightlife scene tries multiple times to join the party, however always at the last minute. Once Angel completes his look with huge Angel wings Alig transforms him into his drug dealer with the caveat that he is to serve Michael's drug appetite. The aspect of making Angel subservient to Alig is made blatantly obvious when asked by the host in a tv interview about club kids, "Angel what do you do [for work]." Alig slides in before Angel can speak and

says, “ can’t you tell he’s a drug dealer,” to which the camera pans back to Michael and doesn’t return to Angel. One quote during the interview by James St James is important to note as it represents the true nature of the underground queer community, “ it’s all about self expression. It doesn’t matter if you have a hunchback throw some glitter on it and go dancing.”

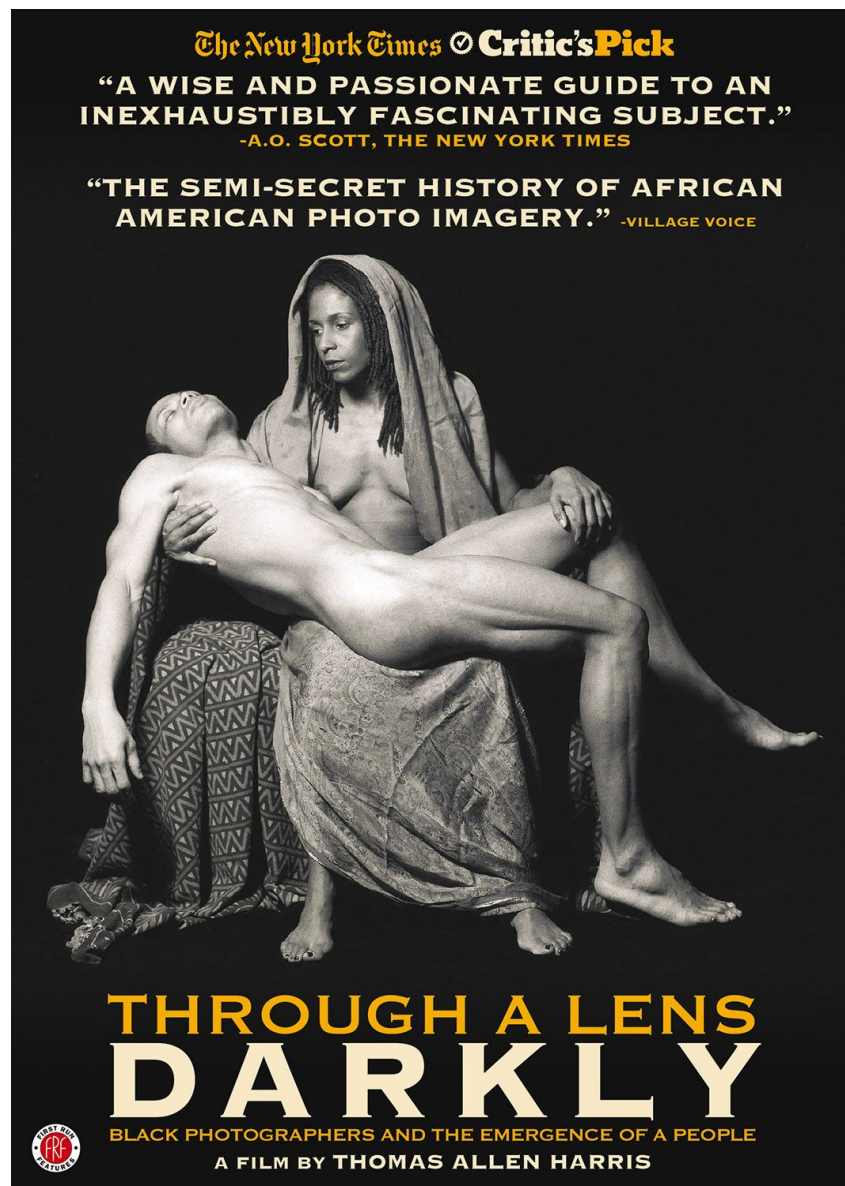
As the party continues the film becomes darker and in a pivotal scene Angel is dressed in a red leather outfit like a Tom of Finland character with large red wings to complete the look. In the scene we are introduced to the third and only female POC who is presumably a sex worker wearing white lace lingerie and smoking a crack/meth pipe. The female character has no lines and is only shown for less than a minute. The theme of POC people in the film being less than their white counterparts is shown through them having shorter screen time and for them being prized for their bodies rather than their character as a whole. In continuation of the scene Angel finds Alig hidden under a homemade fort asking for more drugs. Once Angel drops the drugs and Alig snorts them they begin to fight over money which pushes Alig to overdose. Once awakened after his near fatal drug overdose in a hospital Alig states, “ it was so nice being dead,” and, “ do you have a bump of k [ketamine drug].” The film trivializes death and drugs to the extent of trying to desensitize the audience of its terrible nature and making it in this dramatized reality seem normal to do a bump of k in the middle of the day in a donut shop. The experience however, inspired Michael to create a hospital themed bloodbath party which foreshadows the impending death of Angel Melendez.

In the ending of the film Michael is seen caring for James as he awakens from his overdose in a hospital bed prompting Alig to say, “ let me congratulate you on your first overdose,” as if the near death experience was a badge of honor in the underground scene. James tells Alig how fabulous he thought the party last night was and that lowering Angel from the ceiling was a genius move to be talked about for ages which never happened and was created from his subconscious during his dance with death. In the hospital room James Alig begins to read him a press article detailing the homicide of Angel Melendez. Alig then says, “ don’t cha want to know how I got rid of the body,” with an excited response from James who is still in disbelief, “ ok mr. psycho killer,” patting on his bed motioning Alig to get closer. The film progresses to show Alig being dragged in by the police who are more interested in Michael’s boss than his murder of Angel. The cops try to make a deal with Michael stating if he helped them they could make his little problem go away referencing Angel’s death. The film ends with James St James lounging in the sun while doing a tv interview about his novel on being Alig’s friend and Angel’s death to which he then receives a call from Alig in jail.

The film in its very nature is racist, but it also shows the underbelly of the underground queer nightlife community through the perspective of a white gay male gaze. The gaze in this instance views POC as subsidiary to their white counterparts and subservient to their desires placing their value as only being their bodies and the drugs they can provide to their white actors. The film only contains three POC actors and thus ensures the film’s narrative prizes those of caucasian descent. The blatant disregard for POC bodies is evident in the way they are used throughout the film and in the non-seriousness of Angel’s death. The film only shows one other death which is Christina, a transgender club personality, who became Michael’s first star. In the



scene detailing her death James tells Michael to which he responds, “ we still need to get ready for the party, I’ve been planning it forever.” James in shock exclaims, “ how can you go to a party after her death,” to which Michael disregards and proceeds to apply his make-up. The deaths of Christina and Angel aren’t given a second thought within the film and show that to cis white gay males, who Alig is a personification of, that Trans and POC bodies are of no importance. The bases of my project surrounds specifically QTPOC in underground nightlife spaces because our narratives and representation are often either viewed through the gaze of a white gay male with connections or obscured all together.



*Through a Lens Darkly: Black Photographers and the Emergence of a People* (2014)

Director: Thomas Allen Harris

Production: Chimpanzee Productions

*Through a Lens Darkly* directed by Thomas Allen Harris is a documentary about African Americans through the context of photography within American history. The film features numerous notable artists and historians such as Carrie Mae Weems, Rene Cox (pictured above), and Deborah Willis. The piece begins with a quote from James Baldwin, “every negro boy and every negro girl in this country until this present moment undergoes agony of trying to find in the body politics and social outside himself or herself which is not demeaning.” The quote sparks the conversation of imagery and the power its representation holds in crafting attitudes related towards race. The film continues further with a memory recalled Harris as his father scolded him for overly applying vaseline (skin lubricant) to his young face which in his father’s mind would prompt individuals to view his son as a monkey. The remark made Harris question his appearance and why people would view a young child as a monkey. The visualization of African Americans in negative ways have circulated media since its invention. The initial aspects would be in the form of racist ads, theater troupes depicting black minstrels, and photographs taken of slaves. The first sequence showcases how initially the image of African Americans were controlled by their caucasian counterparts which often looked to exaggerate physical features and portray black Americans as uneducated, thieving, monkeys. The film moves to display that with control over their images black Americans could shift the narrative to focus on their prosperity and also the beauty within black communities that is often overlooked or unnoticed by caucasian individuals.

**Below are some prominent quotes from the film.**

Thomas Allen Harris, “Booker T Washington understood the power of imagery to reshape the understanding of African Americans not by a white audience but by African Americans themselves. A political effort to create a new image of the new negro.”

Deborah Willis, Historian and photographer, “as a student in the 70s I was amazed and dismayed that there were no African American [photographers] in photography history books.” “Black people were subjects for the photographers, but none of the photographers were African Americans.”

Lyle Ashton Harris, Photographer states, “taking photographs of each other was part of the ritual of getting together; it had an impact in terms of a sense of self. What it meant to see one’s own reflection which is a very in counter distinction kind of reflection I might have seen in ads.”

Lyle Harris continues, “our salvation as a people as a culture depends in salving the wounds of this war. A war of images within the American family album.”

Coco Fusco, Art and Culture Critic, “The daguerreotypes were produced with this idea of well if we pose them in a certain way and show them in a particular light, we can use this as evidence of how their bodies are indicative of their inferiority.”

In reference to the media’s representation of ideal beauty and spaces black people belong explains, “Everyday we’re told you ain’t it, you don’t look right. I am saying wait a minute I can

change this. I can inject some of my people into these scenarios.” The quote from Cox speaks to the notion that if we black people shoot themselves in a way that benefits and prizes them then they can imbue images with upright energy to inspire young African American children that they are beautiful, intelligent, and capable of amazing things as this image of an older individual is representation proving that.

The director crafts a powerful sentiment in that, “ freedom is inextricably tied to the power to create one’s self image.

## Visual Materials

The images below contain the photographic portion of my research beginning from 2018-2020. The images were taken at various underground spaces in New York and Los Angeles. In creating the series I tried to work consciously to document the various individuals from varying diverse backgrounds. Each individual within the series has provided verbal consent for the image to be taken. The process of receiving verbal consent is within the guidelines for conducting research involving people, however consent as a photographer goes deeper than scientific requirements. In completing the work I explicitly required consent for each portrait given the potential interruption of an individual's personal life. The other reason is that photography historically is an art form composed of power and I as the photographer hold that power over my subjects because I am completing the action of taking the image. In working with my participants I try to make the process collaborative in allowing the individuals to pose themselves and choose to delete them if they are dissatisfied with the result. The following four images represent the process I underwent in order to create the stylized inverted images.



New York, June, 2019





Los Angeles, July, 2018

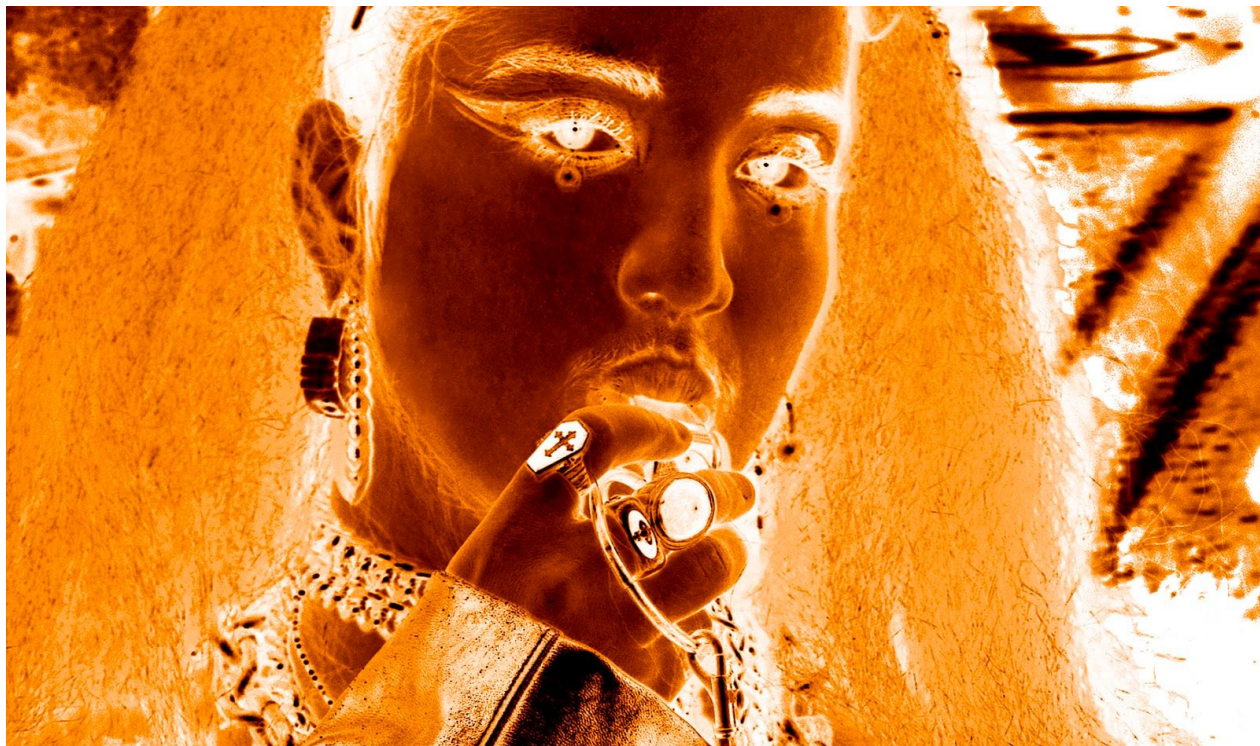


Los Angeles, August, 2018



Los Angeles, January, 2019





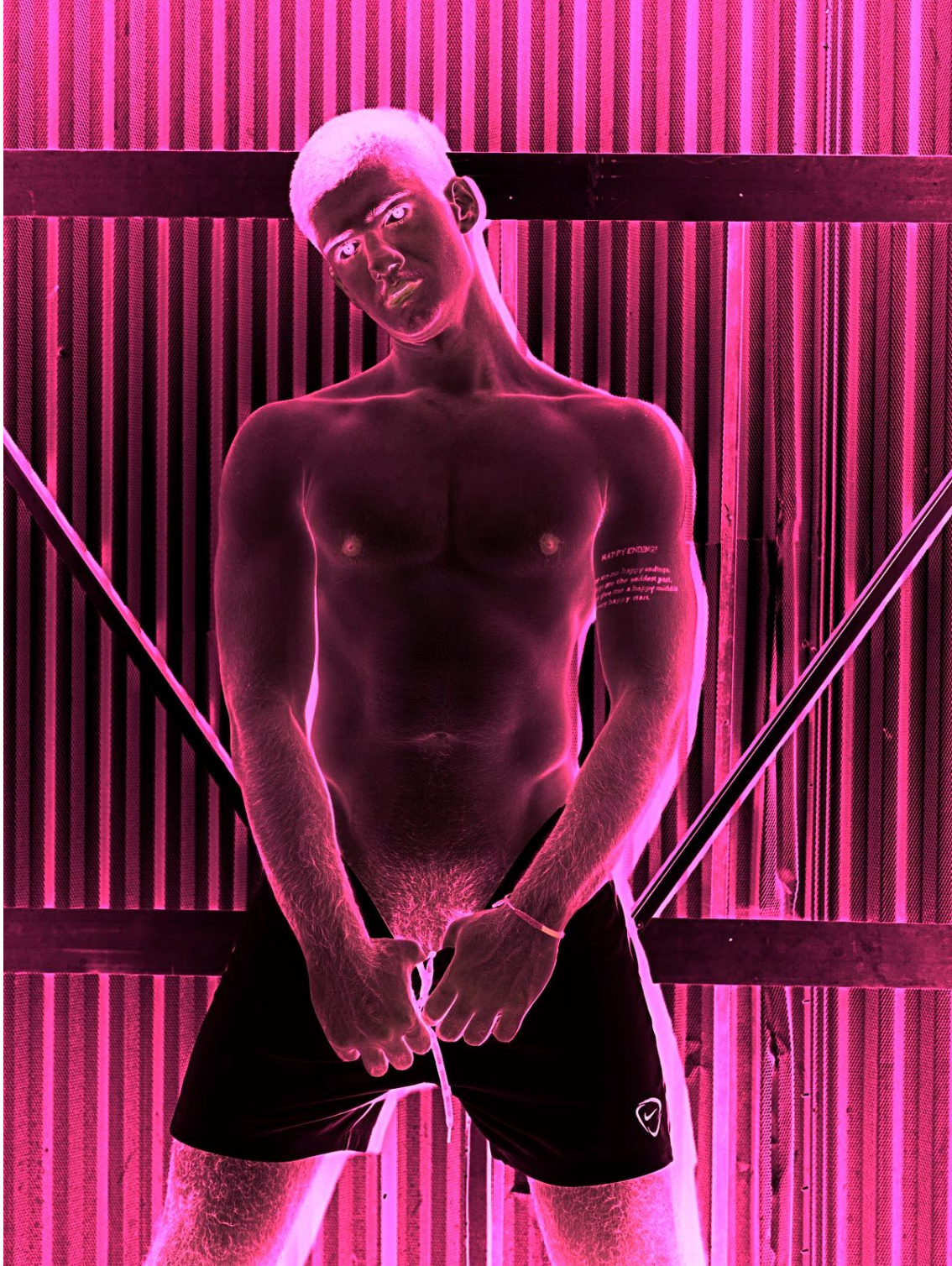
New York, June, 2019



Los Angeles, February, 2019



Los Angeles, October, 2018



Los Angeles, October, 2018



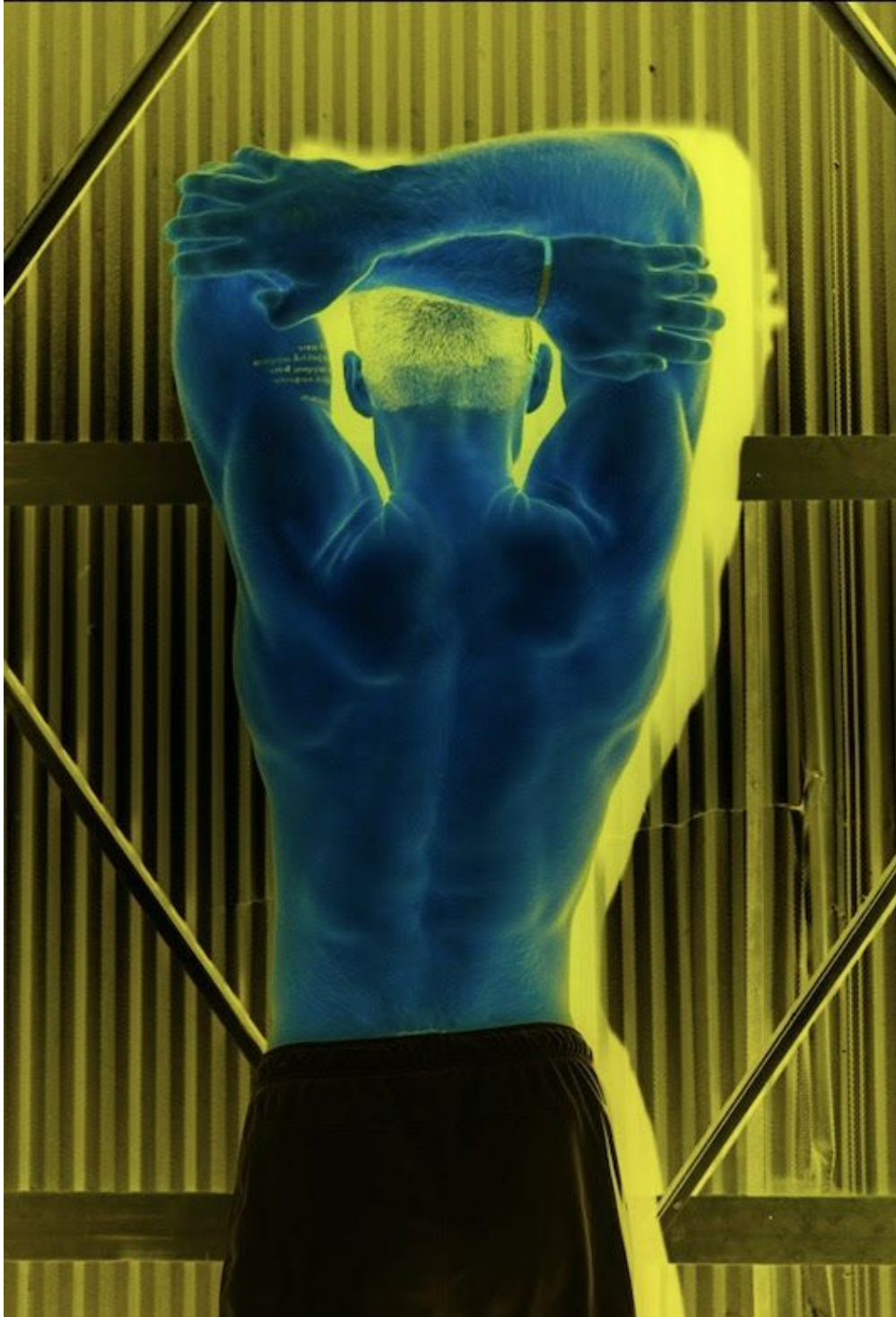
Los Angeles, September, 2018



Los Angeles, January, 2019



New York, December, 2019



Los Angeles, October, 2018





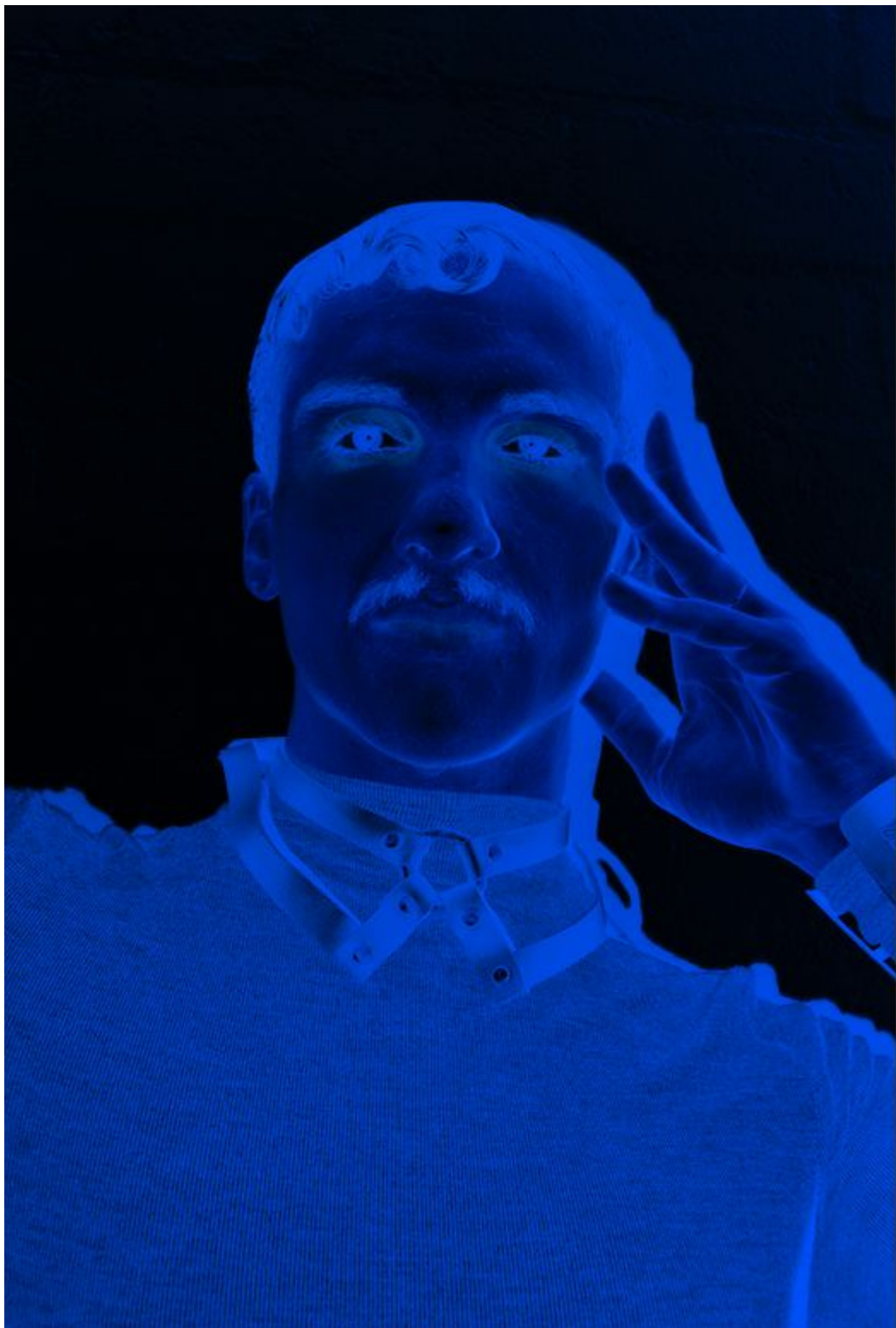
Los Angeles, January, 2019



New York City, June, 2019,



New York, June, 2019



Los Angeles, July, 2018



New York City, June, 2019

## Non-Processed Visual Materials



New York, June, 2019



New York, December, 2019



Los Angeles, January, 2019

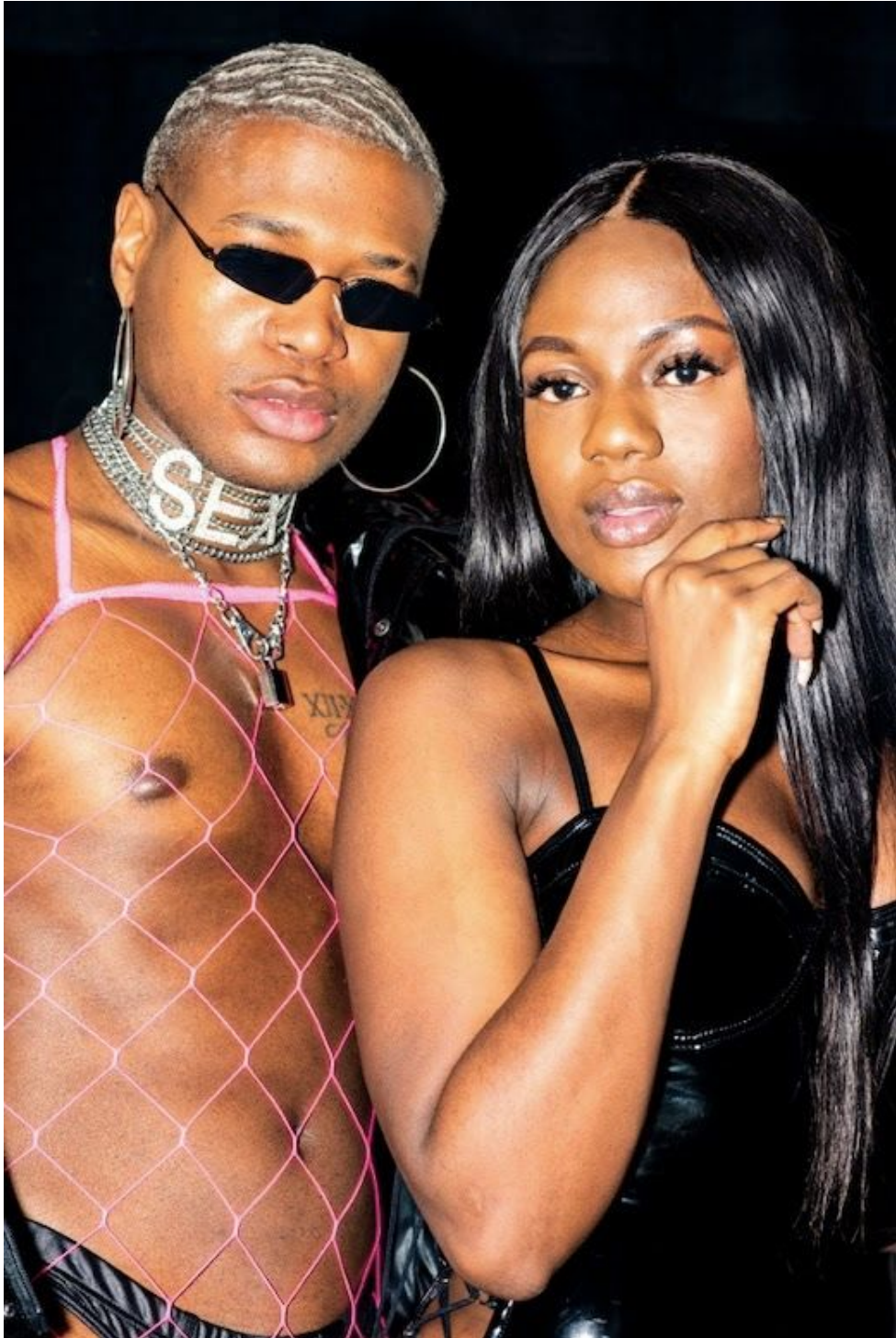




New York, December , 2019



New York City, December, 20



New York City, December, 2019



New York, December, 2019



Los Angeles , January, 2019



Los Angeles, December, 2018



Los Angeles , January , 2019



New York City, New Years, 2020





New York City, New Years, 2020



Los Angeles, January, 2019

# Observations

\*Names of parties are unavailable to preserve the integrity and anonymity of underground spaces\*

## New York City

**D A**

**Location: Brooklyn, New York**

**Date Dec 21,2020**

This party in particular surprised me because the party was created by and for QPOC specifically from the African diaspora. Although the party's main focus is for creating a space for black queer it allows for people of all ethnicities to attend. The cover charge was the normal 20 dollars for underground queer spaces. In the dead of winter with the temperature being 35 degrees people still came to party in droves taking full advantage of the free coat check. The entrance to the venue had a security guard who requested your ID before walking down the stairs following the smell of incense and introducing you to the check in person. Once fully inside the venue there was a wall light with changing colored lights and a full bar with a DJ off in the corner. In my initial observation there was a large number of people from the black diaspora dancing, smiling, and sweating from the tracks the DJ spun. Moving further through the party I saw there was a second partition with another DJ spinning techno based music mixed with modern hits such as Sawaetie's *My Type*. The music within the venue was also primarily Black with influences of techno involving rap and club based versions of RnB songs. The second room had a smoke machine and red laser lights lighting the ceiling creating a red room. My photography was unable to work in the venue due to the excessive use of smoke machines so I asked participants if they would accompany me outside. In leaving the heat and obscurity within the dark venue once we ventured outside and took pictures on the walls lining the outside of the club. One thing I found particularly intriguing was the determination of New Yorkers to go out in the cold and regardless of the weather wear revealing clothing such as tight dresses with laced up stiletto shoes or laced attire predominantly worn by female exotic dancers. I stood outside in sandals and short shorts after coming from a warmer climate and embraced this desire to have my body be seen but I didn't allow the cold to deter me from capturing the shot. Throughout the night I would periodically pop in and out of the club so much so that I felt my toes were going to catch frostbite. Throughout the night I met many beautiful black faces along with various other ethnicities. In the party the majority were people from the African descent while the caucasian community was lower than other ethnicities. The party surprised me because in LA there are black party promoters with their own parties but not with the general understanding the party is for specifically black people rather inversely the parties in LA are more so inclusive of all ethnicities and do not favor one particular race. The difference I feel stems from the community itself because I think in New York the underground nightlife scene has more established communities under the umbrella of the queer nightlife scene that caters specifically to individual races similar to that of the burroughs that are occupied by a large ethnic community

**D D party****Location:** Chinatown, New York**Date:** December 31, 2019**Time:** 8PM-5AM

My initial introduction to the decade party came after my uber dropped me off at a mall in Chinatown, New York. In taking in the experience of celebrating the new year in New York at an underground party I took a deep breath to brace myself. As I began to make my way towards the entrance of the club I could already see individuals walking around in extravagant outfits calling ubers, waiting for friends, and in varying degrees of intoxication. The party had security guards at the entrance as well as a check in table with two individuals from the African diaspora. The cost of admission was displayed clearly with different prices varying depending on one's connection to the underground community (shown in the image above). After walking inside the venue I was led up the stairs with mirrors along the wall. The sensation of walking up the stairs and underneath a chandelier felt as if the venue wanted you to prepare yourself with little adjustments to walk into the party putting your best face forward. Once on the dance floor my outfit was obscured by darkness and artificial haze only lit by the quick color changing lights that shot throughout the room similar to the lasers in a spy movie. The music was played by diverse DJs all of whom played fast and hard hitting techno music intermixed with their unique aesthetic. The list of DJs included 11 New York DJs. The music also involved a call and response feature as there were also instances that reflect Vogue culture in statements like, "does anyone here have a pussy." The crowd was extremely mixed with the different gender representations, ethnicities, sexual identities, and abilities. Unlike some parties there was not an overwhelming amount of white cis gay individuals due to the venues focus being placed on QTPOC. Every individual I walked up to was friendly and willing to partake in the project by allowing me to take their picture. The images I captured that night showed that New Yorkers regardless of the cold would rather walk out in revealing fashionable clothes and endure the cold instead of arriving in comfortable warm clothes. The dance floor reflects that of the runways of New York Fashion Week and the individuals take great pride in displaying their creativity and beauty. The venue did not set a particular theme for clothing and as a result everyone arrived in styles. One thing in particular that I found intriguing was that I saw multiple individuals wearing bikini tops and bottoms as their only attire which struck me because I had difficulty adjusting to the harsh cold of New York. Another aspect of the fashion was the vibrant colors in the form of statement pieces that when lined together could create the signature rainbow flag.

**B T****Location:** Brooklyn, New York**Date:** December 2019

The underground party was a dream come true for me and my project as it incorporated art within the underground scene. The space was created by and for individuals from Asian

descent with the added inclusion of other races. The specific nuances that distinguished this event as unique from the other parties within the city is that the majority of planners and performers were asian. In this aspect the conversation centered around comments and performances catered to various aspects of asian culture specifically. One particular performance was of Full Tac's *Where's My Juul?* sung by an asian musician. The song is about a girl who loses her Juul (vaping device) and goes through her house and asks her friends if they have it. The added aspect of the performance was when the artist took a knife out of a stuff bunny backpack and started viciously stabbing the bag. The piece fits the music perfectly because as Full Tac is searching for her Juul she gets progressively more angry and that anger was exemplified in her high pitched voice and the stabbing of the bag.

The space incorporated an exhibition featuring various presumably New York covered in flowers adorned to their skin. The photographs lined the darkly lit walls of the venue and because of this people had to use their phones to look at the image fully. Initially I considered this an annoyance but in looking back on the experience I feel as though it forced people to take in the piece and notice the finer details as they leaned in with their phone's flashlight. Other aspects of the space I noticed was that they primarily sold beer and took a donation instead of a direct payment. The music incorporated more PC music which refers to music that is computer generated and sometimes uses high pitched voices. The party's crowd was fairly mixed with pockets of party-goers identifying outside of asian ethnicities. I found the place to be welcoming and everyone was extremely friendly. I think that too many minorities have needs that are never met when going to certain clubs because the music is catered to the general populace which favors radio hits and songs from musicians like Britney Spears, Taylor Swift, and Madonna.

## Los Angeles

**O**

**Location: Warehouse, outside DTLA**

**Date: January 1, 2019**

**Time: 11PM-6AM**

The party was thriving when I arrived at 1 AM to a large warehouse randomly located around the outsides of DTLA. The space was a true warehouse and utilizing every inch there were two bars, and outdoor space with porta potties, food, and two separate DJs. The space also had a dark room for the sexually adventurous equipped with listerine, condoms, and lube. The priority of the party was to fully allow individuals the ability to release all inner inhibitions and enjoy the evening. The unique aspect of the party was that there was a performance by a well known gay rapper. One aspect of Los Angeles that I noticed was that at certain parties such as this one could easily see celebrities and instagram influencers dancing and throwing their hips as hard as everyone. The theme of the evening was open to the individual's imagination with the caveat that one has to look their best in a creative way. One individual who stood out to me was a wild Vogue dancer who wore a face fully covered in silver glitter. The individual would sparkle when turning in the lasers shining throughout the space.

**O**

**Location: Los Angeles, CA**

**Date: February 17, 2019**

**Time: 11PM-6AM**

The theme of the evening was ch3mistry introduced to the underground community with the caption, " find your molecular match for an electrifying reaction." The flyer continued by stating, " this Valentine's day love goes microscopic," conjuring images of *Honey I Shrunk the Kids*. The venue was held in a warehouse with a line of participants lining around the corner with at least 3-4 security guards covering the entrance and exits. The price for admission was generalized resulting in 20 dollars spent for a night of fun and freedom. The venue took a nod to the sexual freedom of the past by incorporating a dark room that was held in the corner of the venue blocked off to ensure anonymity. The dark room had hand sanitizer, free condoms, and mouthwash with tiny cups. Although a nod to the past the venue pushed to modernity with acknowledging sexual health and safe sex practices. On the first dance floor I heard a mix between German techno before transitioning to a harder music. In the second larger dance floor participants danced and swayed to vintage queer music while being fanned with rainbow of lights that acted as a soft blanket over the crowd before lifting revealing the shaking hips and outstretched arms. In the back of the venue there were multiple portable restrooms set up along with two food vendors selling hot dogs and mexican food. The smell of the food was delightful and pleasant to ensure that one's energy levels are up to par with the high energy of the DJs and dancers owning the floor. People following the theme wore lab coats, goggles, and their own

interpretation of a chic scientist on the verge of curing boringness. The venue aside from an alcoholic bar also had a marijuana bar to cater to individuals who prefer not to drink. The individuals within the venue were diverse, however with a significant portion being white cis-gay men. In contrast to the white cis gay men the party had a variety of bodies and ethnicities walking around shirtless. I feel as though the added aspect of the dark room allowed for people to enjoy their bodies while enjoying the bodies of others that extended out into the dance floor. Inside the dark room I saw all body types partaking in the sexual experience while also noticing a mutual respect between spectators and participants.

## **B S**

**Location: Warehouse, Los Angeles**

**Date: January 2019**

My first BDSM party was extremely never racking because even within the underground queer scene this space operates under a sub category. The warehouse was medium sized with one DJ station rotating 5 DJs throughout the night. The music ranged but consisted of more hardcore deep bass techno music that would vibrate through your chest. The venue didn't not have a dark room, however it did have an open view play dungeon with hired dominatrixes. The hired professionals were extremely kind and were open to answer all of my curious questions about the assortment of tools on their table. The tools ranged from flogging whips to a taser. The taser made the night remember in that I would have never assumed people use taser or electric play as a form of sexual arousal. In some circles people would judge individuals based on their sexual preferences and proclivities, however here it is to be enjoyed, explored, and experimented. The safe environment included both male and female professionals and worked on a donation base for providing simple experiences such as being spanked or tied to the large X in the corner with a flogging whip. In observing the experiences of participants and the workers I noticed that for some it was their first time and others would scream, "harder." I indulged and decided to get tased and to my surprise it was not entirely bad, however the arousal comes from the anticipation of when you'll be shocked and that your partner is in control as your eyes are closed and the taser swirls around your body before stopping zapping and then its over. Aside from being tased myself I saw that after being whipped or spanked the workers would then hug the individuals after and continuously check in to see if the person was ok.

The BDSM party was quite wild in terms of having a darker aesthetic with haze machines and red lasers. The crowd was predominantly caucasian with sprinkles of minorities moving throughout the party. I really enjoyed connecting with the small amount of black people in the room. In spaces like these where it is underground and open, however not entirely diverse, finding another person of your race who enjoys the same experiences is a moment of joy. I ended the evening with new experiences and new friends in a controlled environment that didn't make me feel like I had to do 100 sit-ups the second I got home to.

## Conclusion

My project serves to validate the necessity to document and protect marginalized communities such as underground queer nightlife. The community is a space that uplifts minorities and marginalized individuals. The media's view of the underground queer community is that of Fenton Bailey's *Party Monster* which prizes drugs and extravagant parties, however at the expense of their minority counter parts. The media also categorizes people outside of their normal reproductions of gender as odd and to be made to conform. The aspect of conforming is evident in mainstream queer media that prizes looking "normal" and dressing as such. In this instance that would mean no colored hair, high platform heels, outfits made at home to fit the parties theme, or wildly inventive make up. In stripping people of these freedoms and forcing them to conform to what is normal oppresses queer people especially those in the underground queer community.

The community is small, however the intimate feel in these spaces welcomes familiarity, companionship, and a space to theoretically and literally let one's hair down. In looking at Harris' *Through A Lens Darkly* the viewer is explicitly shown how connotations associated with images depicting a group of individuals can often create misinformation and be detrimental to that particular group. From my personal experiences I have found the best community within these underground spaces because I myself identify as a cis-gay African American male, however I have long locs and long natural painted nails. The dichotomy between my masculinity and femininity raises questions and eyebrows in mainstream clubs. In underground spaces the oddities that form my being become aspects that are understood and valued instead of ridiculed.

In looking at the two cities separately I feel as though they have many different aspects to them. Firstly, its location in terms of Los Angeles the venues are warehouse parties that are rented out for the evening and are often in somewhat seedy areas where no other clubs exist and it's somewhat secretive. In New York the venues are primarily rented out spaces, however spaces function already as a party venue with the one night being associated with the party promoters. Another observation that brought me joy is that although New York has more parties catered to specific ethnicities. The scene is more aware of people with different abilities and thus makes an effort to label its accessibility. The previous quote does not mean that underground parties in Los Angeles are non-accessible to people with different abilities, I believe that they are in most instances. However, in New York they make it known and offer elevators specifically for people who may need them. The reality of this could potentially be a result of location because the majority of parties within Los Angeles that are underground are normally ground level. One final aspect is that in looking at how parties are arranged in Los Angeles there are more themed based events with fun scenarios to create an outfit such as science, boxing, and winter themes. In New York, I felt the parties were more focused on constructing a brand known for the aesthetic of the event revolving around who comes, what music is played, and what type of night one is looking to have. In dressing for New York events people are given free range and allowed to create themselves.

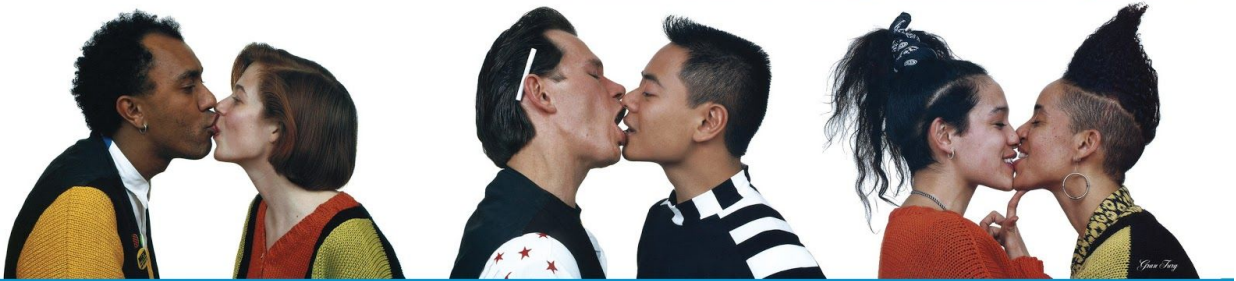


The dancing, the conversations, and the energy within the room all contribute to creating beautiful spaces to decompress. The venues sometimes will sage a venue beforehand so that participants walk in feeling calmer and also as if the negativity of the day has been uplifted. I am grateful to have found and been a part of this community creating art. In concluding my project I would like to acknowledge that the information is from my personal perspective as an African American cis-gay male and due to this my work tends to lean towards black and male individuals. Midway through my research I realized that I unconsciously would make images that did not depict the full spectrum of underground nightlife and queer sexuality. The feat is near impossible, however after acknowledging it I decided to focus my efforts on initializing more diversity within my work. The representation of the underground queer community is being brought to global attention through photographers and videographers, however I feel it is important for other diverse artists to contribute to the representation from the perspective and find ways of preserving this community in a positive light that beautifully shows the strength and resilience of the underground queer community in its finer details.

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KISSING DOESN'T KILL: GREED AND INDIFFERENCE DO.



CORPORATE GREED, GOVERNMENT INACTION, AND PUBLIC INDIFFERENCE MAKE AIDS A POLITICAL CRISIS.

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Kissing Doesn't Kill, 1990, ink on vinyl, 2' x 2'

Gran Fury ( Lola Flash far right)  
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