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“Within the Ashes of Our Survival” Lesbian and Gay Antiracist Organizing in New York City, 1980-1984

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**“Within the Ashes of Our Survival”  
Lesbian and Gay Antiracist Organizing in New York City, 1980-1984**

This paper began as an investigation into a violent yet relatively obscure police raid on “Blues,” a gay bar in midtown Manhattan frequented by “black gays and transvestites” on September 29, 1982.<sup>1</sup> I focus on the virtually-unstudied political thought and activism of two of the groups coordinating the response to the raid: Dykes Against Racism Everywhere (DARE) and the NY chapter of Black and White Men Together. Although LGBT historians have characterized the radical moment of gay liberation as decisively “over” by the mid 1970s, this assessment eclipses an extraordinary proliferation of queer of color activist, artistic, and social groups in the latter half of the decade.<sup>2</sup> As such, the historiographical aspirations of this paper are twofold: First, I have attempted to heed Roderick Ferguson’s admonition that queer studies’ fixation on Foucault has “driven conversations about sexual formations... away from considerations of race” and elided women of color feminism as an alternative genealogy for theorizing racialized sexuality.<sup>3</sup> Second, my project is conversation with an important and growing body of scholarship on what Lisa Duggan has termed “homonormativity.”<sup>4</sup> This body of critique has been centrally attentive to the race and class exclusions engendered by contemporary LGBT movements’ collusions with neoliberalism. However, due in part to this literature’s emphasis on identifying normative projects, and due to its tendency to cast homonormativity as a primarily post-1990s development, it has at times sidelined discussions of resistance, especially the activist histories of queer and transgender people of color. Here, I suggest that both homonormativity and its discontents have longer genealogies than we have been wont to acknowledge. Though understudied, the period I am addressing (the late 70s and early 1980s) is critical to queer movement history because it is in this period that both neoliberalism and

women of color feminism are ascendant formations. I posit the antiracist gay organizing of this era both as an initial site of resistance against an emergent neoliberal regime, and as an important activist counterpart to the intellectual work we know today as women of color feminism.

Formed within months of each other in 1980, DARE and BWMT—despite their notable differences—shared a commitment to combating racism in gay communities and placing queer people of color at the center of their work. Originally organized to bring a lesbian contingent to an anti-Klan march in North Carolina, DARE advanced a multifaceted, intersectional analysis of racism, sexism, imperialism, and capitalism that placed the state firmly at the center of its critique.<sup>5</sup> DARE drew notably from women of color feminist thought emerging at the same time, an influence evinced in its members work in collecting and editing *Top Ranking*, one of the first anthologies featuring the writings of women of color, which included contributions from Audre Lorde, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and members of Salsa Soul Sisters, The Azalea Collective, the George Jackson Brigade, and the Combahee River Collective.<sup>6</sup> By summer of 1980, DARE had formalized four committees: Racism in Media, Police Brutality, “Housing [and Gentrification]”, and “Fight the Right” (which coordinated DARE’s efforts against New Right attacks on social minorities, women, and the poor).<sup>7</sup> DARE also used its participation in “nongay” activities to bring intersectional critiques to lesbian and gay publics on issues such as gay gentrification and reproductive rights.<sup>8</sup>

DARE’s emphasis on gentrification and police brutality pointed to a recent development in gay popular discourse, one that these groups worked intently to push back against. As Christina Hanhardt points out, though queers had resisted police violence since before Stonewall, it was “not until the 1970s that activists began to design response strategies to violence perpetrated by people *other* than the police.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, between 1979 and 1982, police departments across the country began for the first time to formulate various *pro*-gay initiatives. The gay press, departing from a prior concern with state-derived violences, had become saturated with racially coded accounts of

anti-gay “crime” –accounts which both affirmed the racialized discourse of the “criminal” and produced gay identity as implicitly white.<sup>10</sup> This new discourse was perhaps best encapsulated in a 1980 *Advocate* piece entitled “The Police and You,” which lamented the difficulty of being a “gay crime victim,” encouraged criminal prosecution as an act of pro-gay civic engagement, and urged compliance and respectability in dealing with law enforcement. “Don’t flaunt your sexuality,” the author cautioned, “don’t constantly demand your rights.”<sup>11</sup> DARE’s literature indicates it was acutely cognizant of these shifting attitudes, and they warned against the danger of the issue in fomenting racism and driving a wedge between queer and antiracist movements. Members wrote,

We think it is important that lesbian and gay male issues not be seen in opposition to the struggles of Third World communities, particularly considering questions currently being discussed... such as police violence vs. police “protection” and increasing gentrification in Third World neighborhoods (often by white lesbians and gay males).<sup>12</sup>

New York’s chapter of Black and White Men Together, formed by a multiracial group of gay men after seeing a classified ad for a similar group in San Francisco, shared much of DARE’s intersectional vision, though they often paired “political” activities with informal socializing events—part of a strategy to build “a safe, intelligent, and often more secure” alternative to the gay bar scene.<sup>13</sup> BWMT emphasized engaging racism on a personal and interpersonal basis, a commitment reflected in its frequent Consciousness Raising sessions, which covered topics ranging from sexism and capitalism to family and “How I Feel about Cocks.”<sup>14</sup> Referred to by one member as “the backbone of the organization,” the CR sessions gestured both towards the group’s interest in building safe, affirming spaces for black gay men and its “personal is political” ethos rooted in second wave feminist strategies.<sup>15</sup> CR sessions were also part of a larger project of community education: like DARE and others, BWMT was working not just for measurable material change, but to gather and cultivate a critical body of thought that would help them reconcile the complexity of their lives—a complexity that was yet unintelligible to larger movement politics.<sup>16</sup> Finally, a

significant portion of BWMT's organizing stemmed from its "Discrimination Documentation Project," created in 1981 to identify and challenge racist door policies at local gay bars.<sup>17</sup> The project garnered substantial local press coverage and led ultimately to successful campaigns against three bars.<sup>18</sup> Again, beyond its immediate successes, this work also represented a larger demand for white gay accountability as well as a disidentificatory effort to productively remake extant counterpublics through critique.<sup>19</sup> As one member noted, "I think that things like the Discrimination Documentation Project move [us] forward in the direction of building coalitions, of drawing up links between all community members and saying it's [all] related."<sup>20</sup>

DARE and BWMT would converge perhaps most significantly at the end of 1980 during their work with the Coalition Against Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism (CRASH),<sup>21</sup> a group of lesbians and gays committed to creating "awareness of and opposition to racism and sexism within the lesbian and gay communities [and] encourag[ing] united action with other progressive groups to combat the right-wing."<sup>22</sup> CRASH merits particular mention for its work around a piece of New Right legislation called the Family Protection Act (FPA), which the group used to demonstrate the necessity for coalitional responses to the retrenchment of the welfare state.<sup>23</sup> As BWMT's newsletter observed, the FPA constituted a "clear example of how the issues which affect Lesbian and gay people can be linked to the concerns of women, workers, people of color, adolescents, and recipients of social services."<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup> CRASH's analysis of the FPA was remarkable in its linking of the economic and social discourses authorizing and abetting the nascent neoliberal regime. As member Maxine Wolf remarked at a Hunter College teach-in, the Right's attack on social minorities was not "simply diversionary" but part and parcel of a larger "ideology of privatism."<sup>26</sup> She added,

The New Right focuses on these areas which still have the appearance as 'private' or 'personal' in our culture even though they aren't. And the politics of racism and fiscal conservatism become disguised and much more acceptable when put into this context... [The New Right] is seeking to reprivatize every domain of social public intervention that has been created through the struggles of working people, people of color, the poor and women for the last twenty years... It says that what is wrong with busing, Medicaid, abortions... [and] the schools is that the federal government is

meddling in our private business... But while the traditional conservative American right focused on *individual* privacy, the New Right focuses on the privacy of *corporate bodies*... And, while it promises non-intrusion, in actuality it intrudes more than ever.<sup>27</sup>

Wolfe concluded by cautioning activists that “liberal” ideologies, in their single-issue frameworks and disarticulation of the economic from the social and political, lie dangerously vulnerable to neoconservative attacks.<sup>28</sup> Although CRASH disbanded after the FPA teach-in, its existence is remarkable not only because it anticipated currents in critical queer work on neoliberalism that developed years later, but also because it helped build and fortify radical LGBT activist networks in the NYC area.<sup>29</sup> These connections would be critical in effecting an organized response when, months later, the NYPD executed its violent raid on a bar called Blue’s.

James Credle of BWMT, who visited Blue’s the morning after the raid, recalled, “I had never seen such total destruction since my days in Vietnam. Blood was everywhere - spattered on the floor, on the walls, on equipment - a total wasteland.”<sup>30</sup> Although no arrests were made, twelve of the bar’s patrons were hospitalized by police’s beatings, and \$40,000 in damages was inflicted on the establishment.<sup>31</sup> Witness reports stressed the police had deriding patrons as “bulldaggers” and “nigger faggots,” and the manager on duty recalled that the police “hit the women the hardest, then the drag queens, then the more effeminate men.”<sup>32</sup> A press release by The NY Prostitute’s Collective echoed much local news coverage in connecting the raid to Mayor Koch’s “racist gentrification” of midtown and heightened harassment of area sex workers.<sup>33</sup> Two weeks later, DARE, BWMT, the Metropolitan Community Church, Salsa Soul Sisters, and others organized 1,100 protestors to march down 42<sup>nd</sup> Street.<sup>34</sup> Speaking at the rally, Credle and Joan Gibbs of DARE castigated the mainstream press for snubbing the incident, the NYPD for its lack of response, and stressed the importance of recognizing the attack as motivated both by homophobia and racism.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, despite momentary interest by the NYCLU and the FBI, legal efforts against the city eventually fizzled.<sup>36</sup> Although the investigation succeeded at subjecting the police to

intense scrutiny and bar raids reportedly declined in subsequent years, many expressed frustration with the investigation's outcome.<sup>37</sup> However, it was DARE and BWMT's efforts outside the formal investigation that merit most recognition. Activists used organizing efforts—which included speakouts, actions, and the creation of an ad-hoc Anti-Police Brutality Coalition in 1984—alongside their established media contacts to claim positions as spokespeople within the larger gay movement and to keep the incident alive in New York's progressive press.<sup>38</sup> James Credle was eventually invited to speak before thousands at the 1983 NYC pride march, and later appeared to testify in Brooklyn at the Congressional Hearings on Police Brutality.<sup>39</sup> This work represented not simply the activists' success in raising consciousness around police brutality—which challenged the presumption of the police as de facto gay allies—but evinced a larger feat of bringing issues of race, gender, class, and intra-group difference to the center of gay popular discourse. Furthermore, APAC placed Blue's in a larger context, connecting the raid to recent police murders of several African American New Yorkers, and continuing activist efforts to link local forms of policing and gentrification to “part of a rising tide of right-wing violence directed against Black, Latino, Asian-American and native peoples, women, Jews, unionists, undocumented workers... transvestites, transsexuals, Lesbians, and Gay men.”<sup>40</sup>

APAC, like CRASH and the other groups discussed here, was short-lived—no records indicate activity after 1984. Similarly, the paper trail suggests that DARE was markedly less active after its APAC-related organizing,<sup>41</sup> and the same can be said for BWMT: although the group incorporated as a 501(C)3 as “Men of All Colors Together” in 1984 (which still exists), it likewise seems to have undergone a decline in activity in the following years.<sup>42</sup> Nonetheless, these groups comprised a unique moment in queer movement history in their ability to complexly engage and articulate multiple valences of power and in their ability to bring this critique to the wider arena of gay rights politics. Furthermore, the resonances of their work with contemporary anticapitalist,

women of color, and queer of color critique particularly indicates their salience in performing the alternative genealogical work prescribed by critics like Rod Ferguson. For I hope that in the moments I have elucidated here, women of color feminism, queer of color critique, and LGBT activism reveal their shared history. That this history remains yet so unexamined highlights the need for those of us engaging race, sexuality, and gender to labor towards the production of broader, more radical archive. Following on the work of Ferguson, I would then append only the following: that while we work to center women of color feminist genealogies, we also remain vigilant in troubling these genealogies as coherent, fully realized, and self-evident objects.

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Bell “Black Tie and Blood” *Village Voice*, October 12, 1982: 1.

<sup>2</sup> Beginning with the founding of Third World Gay Revolution in 1970, by 1980, New York alone had seen the emergence of Salsa Soul Sisters (the first lesbian of color organization), the Committee for the Visibility of the Other Black Woman, the Blackheart Collective, El Comité Homosexual Latino Americano, Women Free Women in Prison, and Azalea (of which Audre Lorde and DARE cofounder Joan Gibbs were both members). Historians who have characterized gay liberation as “over” by the mid 70s include John D’Emilio, “After Stonewall” in *Making Trouble: Essays on Gay History, Politics and the University* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Elizabeth Armstrong, *Forging Gay Communities: Organizing Sexuality in San Francisco, 1950-1994* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002)

<sup>3</sup> Roderick Ferguson, “Of Our Normative Strivings: African American Studies and the Histories of Sexuality,” *Social Text* 23 (Winter 2005): 86.

<sup>4</sup> See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> “Dykes Against Racism Everywhere” flier, date unknown, DARE file, LHA. The march was organized in response to an upsurge in KKK activity and to commemorate Greensboro’s Civil Rights history. See “3500 March To Protest Klan.” *Boston Globe*, Feb 3, 1980, 1, First Edition. See also “Lesbians Unite to Defeat the Klan,” DARE file, LHA.

<sup>6</sup> See Joan Gibbs and Sara Bennett (eds.), *Top Ranking: a Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community* (New York: Come! Unity Press, 1980). Despite being one of the first collected works featuring the writings of lesbians of color, *Top Ranking* never achieved the renown of some of the anthologies published in the following years (e.g., Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls* or Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back*). Nonetheless, the anthology is remarkable both in content and in its showcasing of the members’ extensive activist connections

<sup>7</sup> For examples of early organizing activities, see “Support the Laurel Mississippi Strikers” flier, DARE file, LHA; “Dear Friends” letter, February 15, 1982, DARE file, LHA. “International action for Reproductive rights” *Off Our Backs*, Jul 31, 1981 p 12.

<sup>8</sup> DARE was in particular responding to a great increase of national gay press coverage debating the relationship between gay communities and gentrification. See, e.g.: Third World Market Fund, “Gentrification: Speculation on Gay,” *Gay Community News*, July 14, 1979: 5; “Wave of Violence Against Gays Sparks Frisco Public Hearings” *The Body Politic*, November 1980: 19; Larry Goldsmith, “Forum on Gentrification Tackles Gay Responsibility,” *Gay Community News*, February 13, 1982: 1; David France, “New Yorkers See Sharp Rise in Homophobic Violence” *Gay Community News*, May 15, 1982: 1; Aurora



Levins-Morales, “Cross Currents: Multi-Cultural Spirit in San Francisco” *Gay Community News*, August 7, 1982: 6. . In response, DARE rallied support for local anti-gentrification efforts and publicized their own stance, enumerating the dual role gays played as forerunners of gentrification and as amongst the most vulnerable to displacement, see “DARE- Dykes Against Racism Everywhere” letter, DARE file, LHA.

<sup>9</sup> Christina Hanhardt, “Bells, Whistles, and Fists: Gay Safe Street Patrols and the New Gay Ghetto” *Radical History Review* 100 (Winter 2008): 64, my emphasis.

<sup>10</sup> See Handhart’s article for enumeration of racially coded language in gay anti-violence work in this period. For further press coverage of antigay “crime:” “Wave of Violence Against Gays Sparks Frisco public Hearings” *The Body Politic*, November 1980: 19; “Pacific Gays and Lesbians Rally to Combat Rising Street Violence” *The Body Politic*, September 1979: 8; “Latinos and Gays Joint to Halt Gang Violence,” *The Body Politic*, April 1981: 24; “Greenwich Village is the Scene of a Gang Rampage,” *Gay Community News*, January 19, 1980: 3; “Street Gang Attacks Increase in Chelsea,” *New York Native*, March 15, 1982: 8; “Meeting on Violence Draws Cops and Gays,” *New York Native*, April 26, 1982: 6; “The Hot Spots: Danger Zones for Gay People,” *New York Native*, July 5, 1982: 18.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Willenbecher, “The Police and You: What’s Behind the Badge? Force of Bigotry or Rule of Law?” *The Advocate*, May 1, 1980: 13-14

<sup>12</sup> “Why an Anti-Racist Lesbian Group?” in “DARE” pamphlet, DARE file, LHA. DARE continued to engage the issue in their forum “The Lesbian Community and the Police,” which stressed the “history of police brutality against, lesbians, women, and Third World people,” and grappled with their own position as antiracist feminists and anti-rape activists. See “DARE Lesbian Pride Week Forum: The Lesbian Community and the Police” flier DARE file LHA.

<sup>13</sup> “Black and White Men Together-NY: History” in BWMT-NY file, IGIC. *The Advocate*, curiously, takes credit for this classified, though I have deferred to the organizational papers on the matter. See “Breaking the Color Barrier: A New Group Grapples with Racism” 17. Press release, June 30, 1980, BWMT file, LHA.

<sup>14</sup> *Black and White Men Together Info Bulletin*, September 28, 1981: 1; October 25, 1980 and July 26, 1982 respectively.

<sup>15</sup> “Speakers Bureau Report” *Black and White Men Together Info Bulletin*. October 26, 1981: 3.

<sup>16</sup> Henry Wiemhoff, “A Preliminary Bibliography and Resource Guide: Race, Racism, and the Gay Male Community,” BWMT file, LHA.

<sup>17</sup> “Gay Interracial Organization Fights Racism” press release, BWMT file, IGIC.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid; See also “None of Us Are Free Until All of Us Are Free,” letter, BWMT file, IGIC; “Ice Palace Update: the Freeze-Out Continues” *Black and White Men Together Info Bulletin*, December, 1981: 3.

“Pickets Force Decision at Ice Palace,” *New York Native*, January 3, 1983: 9; David France, “Union Club Signs Agreement with BWMT” *New York Native*, November 7, 1983: 11.

<sup>19</sup> I am indebted to José Muñoz’s concept of “disidentification,” especially as a means for describing DARE and BWMT’s engaging with “mainstream” gay public cultures through critique. See Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)

<sup>20</sup> Charles Michael Smith, “Discrimination and Its Discontents: the Proper Response to Gay Racists,” *New York Native*, New York: Sept 26, 1983: 17.

<sup>21</sup> Maxine Wolfe, untitled document, March 26, 1987, CRASH file, LHA

<sup>22</sup> “Statement of Unity” CRASH file, undated, LHA.

<sup>23</sup> “Crash Announces ‘Fight the FPA’ Conference/Teach-in” press release, CRASH file, IGIC.

<sup>24</sup> “Crash Report,” *Black and White Men Together Info Bulletin*, October 26, 1981: 3.

<sup>25</sup> As one blurb in the BWMT newsletter summed up, “the FPA demonstrates what many have been claiming all along – IT IS ONE STRUGGLE!” in “Crash Report,” *BWMT Info Bulletin*, December 1981: 3.

<sup>26</sup> “Talk given by Maxine Wolfe, at the Conference on the Family Protection Act...” April 17, 1982: 5. CRASH file, LHA.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 6. The above quotation draws from the work of feminist activist Rosalind Petchesky, who is cited earlier in Wolfe’s remarks.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfe, untitled document, CRASH file, LHA, *ibid.* Wolfe's statements resonate in particular with Lisa Duggan's work, especially "Downsizing Democracy" and "The Incredible Shrinking Public" in *The Twilight of Equality?*: 22-66.

<sup>30</sup> James Credle "Police Brutality: the Continual Erosion of Our Most Basic Rights" *Gay Community News* Boston: Jan 14, 1984 p 5.

<sup>31</sup> See Caroline Ayres, "Fractures in the Gay Community," *Off Our Backs*, Washington: Nov 30, 1982: 15. Bob Nelson. "Indiscriminate Beatings Leave 12 Hospitalized; Cops Stage Violent Attack on New York Bar" *Gay Community News*. Boston: Oct 16, 1982: 1. Eric Lerner, "Police Enter Blue's Again; Investigations Opened *New York Native* Oct 25, 1982: 8.

<sup>32</sup> "400 New Yorkers Protest 'Brutal' Bar Raid" *The Advocate*. Los Angeles: Oct 22, 1982: 10. Andy Humm, "Midtown Cops Go Berserk in Gay Bar" *New York Native* Oct 11, 1982: 7.

<sup>33</sup> "The NY Prostitute's Collective Demands a Public Inquiry Over the Police Riot and Armed Robbery at Blue's" press release, Blue's file, IGIC. Another article charged, "Intent upon creating an environment 'favorable to investment,' the city has unofficially authorized police and landlord harassment designed to rid the neighborhood of what it considers 'undesirables.'" It was, in fact, eventually revealed that the raid was likely precipitated by a scuffle earlier in the week, in which a white police officer was physically overpowered by a black transvestite who refused to obey his command to "move on." That the NYPD targeted Blue's in retaliation, even though reports disagreed as to whether transvestites were in fact regular patrons of the bar, suggests both the interchangeability of the queerly racialized other in the minds of the police and the ability of that otherness to trump the protections typically afforded by private property. Lionel Mitchell "Gay black-n-blue at Blue's after Bluecoats." *NY Amsterdam News* November 20, 1982, p 54.

<sup>34</sup> Caroline Ayres. "Cops Raid Blues Again, Third World Lesbians and Gays Protest Violence" *Off Our Backs*, Washington DC: Dec 31, 1982 p 4. Ironically, on the very same night of the raid, the recently-established Human Rights Campaign Fund held a black-tie, \$150 per plate fundraising banquet, suggesting the extent to which the national tone of queer politics had split off from the concerns of such constituents

<sup>35</sup> As MCC Rev. Renee McCoy remarked, "It is vitally important that we see the significance of a *black* gay and lesbian bar, if racism were not the bottom line, any gay bar would have worked." Eric Lerner "Militant Blue's Rally Draws 1,100" *New York Native* Nov 8, 1982: 8.

<sup>36</sup> Eric Lerner "FBI Enters Blue's Investigation" *New York Native* May 9, 1983: 7.

<sup>37</sup> Jim Levin "Blue's: Bottom Line" *New York City News*, Dec 14, 1983: 5. "Insufficient" witness testimony was cited, along with dwindling fiscal resources, lack of support from the bar's owner, and faltering commitment from the DA's office. Even Blue's attorney conceded, "These were not your best kinds of witnesses... Most of them are afraid of the courts in general." The inability to garner support from the communities that patronized bars like Blue's speaks to the limits of BWMT's legal approaches to justice. See Lerner, "FBI Enters Blue's Investigation;" Peg Byron "Blue's in the Night," *New York Native* Sept 10, 1984: 9; and Christine Guilfooy, "'Lingering, Bitter Aftertaste:' Blue's Raid Inquiry: a Police Whitewash," *Gay Community News*, Sept 15, 1984: 3.

<sup>38</sup> In May of 1983, DARE organized a speak-out with panelists from BWMT and Salsa, which received gay media coverage even outside of New York. Sarah Schulman, "Forum Examines Police Role," *Gay Community News*, June 4, 1983:1. See also "Dear Friend" letter, undated, APAC file, IGIC.

<sup>39</sup> Credle, "Police Brutality" *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> "APAC Statement of Purpose" APAC file, IGIC. See also, "Police Brutality: What Lesbians and Gays Need to Know" APAC file, IGIC.

<sup>41</sup> "Not Yet Censored" flier, for event dated March 12, 1991, DARE file, LHA. Although records indicate the group organized events as recently as 1991, these were extremely few and far between

<sup>42</sup> "Men of All Colors Together" pamphlet, MACT file, IGIC.