

DOCUMENTATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora

**October 7 - 8
CUNY Graduate Center**

Origins and Aims of the Conference

Over the last two decades, Black lesbian and gay people, particularly those of us living in North America and some portions of Europe, have experienced a blossoming of cultural and aesthetic work that directly reflects our experiences; we have developed and solidified political networks within our own organizations, including Black lesbian and gay organizations; we have challenged traditional institutional practices that have supported class hierarchies, racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia; we have, moreover, pushed ourselves into the consciousness of a large portion of the world's community, becoming, at times, primary "topics" of debate and inquiry. Still, with the rise of large scale conservative and fundamentalist movements, the reassertion of various nationalisms (even while the idea of "the nation" has been altogether called into question), neocolonialism, entrenched poverty and, of course, a variety of natural, political and economic disasters--AIDS, famine, war, domestic and street violence and so on--it seems imperative that we engage in collective discussion about the meanings of race, sexuality and nationality among the various peoples of the African Diaspora. To this end, we will sponsor, under the auspices of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies of the City University of New York, a two day conference, Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora, to be held on October 7-8, 1994 at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

Black Nations/Queer Nations? is the end result of a series of meetings which have taken place over the past several months of a distinguished organizing committee. The committee members encompass a variety of occupations, sexual identities, races and ages. From the very beginning, we have been concerned not to replicate the form of an academic conference, or the process by which academic conferences are planned. So while there are a number of university professors on the planning committee, there are also lawyers, AIDS workers, political activists, video-makers, poets and students, all of whom have long-standing commitments to both the Black and gay movements. As a consequence, the conference that we have planned is a model of hybridity. It combines roundtable discussions, panel presentations, workshops and cultural events. Our concern in each of these settings will be on the

without lesbianism or lesbianism without Blackness reflect long-standing beliefs about the one-dimensional nature of "marginal" or "subaltern" subjectivities. One might ask, for example, why almost all of the recent work produces in the last two decades that addresses the topic of the lesbian and gay past, including the ancient past, looks exclusively to the West for answers. Why do "gay" and "white" continue to be conflated in the imaginations of so many persons, Black, white, straight, gay and otherwise? Still, it is certainly not the case that these issues remain static throughout our society. On the contrary, they are addressed continuously by a variety of "cultural workers" and others. We are particularly interested in investigating the fundamental challenge this work poses to regnant understandings of sexual and racial identities.

3. How are these questions regarding racial and sexual identities articulated in cultural and aesthetic work? In political debate and decisionmaking? In intellectual discourse? In daily life?

Once again the focus is not simply on the post-Stonewall era, but on the long history of the Black engagement with Western modes of rationalism, particularly canonical Black literature and art. Moreover, the question of how "Blacks" and "sexual minorities" were constructed by--and in relation to--scientific ideologies figures centrally here. Indeed, once one recognizes that many of the structures by which "Black" subjects are produced--and policed--it becomes necessary to ask how, if at all, the various struggles to resist these apparatuses connect, or overlap.

4. What is the relationship between anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-colonialist and anti-heterosexist political struggles?

We ask this question precisely because we hope the Black Nations/Queer Nations? Conference will foster dialogue across a range of identities, ideologies, and political concerns. We do not, however, offer any prescriptions for coalition, or even a narrative that would suggest that there has always been cross-fertilization, or a sort, between whites and Blacks, heterosexuals and homosexuals, men and women. Instead we simply offer this as a goal, one to which the conference will contribute. And yet we realize that there are other "progressive" tendencies, both within and without the African diasporic community that might not, perhaps rightfully so, be so sanguine about the prospect of integration or coalition.

5. What has been the impact of cultural nationalism on the formations of lesbian and gay identities?

For the first time, we are asking a variety of scholars, activists and educators to come together to address the manner in which homosexuality figures in the production of a variety of cultural nationalisms: Afrocentrism, Negritude, the Black

Aesthetic movement and so forth. In this way, we hope to recognize, on the one hand, the great good that cultural nationalism has done for a variety of Black communities, while encouraging critique of the anti-homosexual, anti-woman, anti-sex ideas sometimes articulated by prominent cultural nationalists. This is all by way of our asking what Black gay and lesbian political and cultural activity can and should be.

6. Is a global political movement among lesbians and gay men in the African Diaspora possible or desirable?

The seeming straightforwardness of this query ought not hide its centrality. To our minds, it raises one of the most pressing issues with which the participants of the conference will be confronted. By the end of Black Nations/Queer Nations?, conference participants will have spent two days interrogating and unsettling received notions of Black gay and lesbian identity, history and culture. This collective project will remain incomplete, however, unless we challenge our conferees to address a difficult, but decisive question, namely, "Where do we go from here?" In posing and seeking answers to this question, we underscore our belief that meaningful reflection on the lives of gay and lesbian people within the African Diaspora can and should lead to concrete organization and action.

Rationales and Strategies for Documenting the Conference

The organizers of Black Nations/Queer Nations? are altogether aware of the exceptional nature of our endeavor. Nothing like it has ever been attempted before. Indeed, we are persuaded that this two day gathering may well shape the direction of debates around race, gender, sexuality and sexual practice for some time to come.

Given the undoubted significance of this conference, we hope both to videotape the proceedings and publish them in an edited volume. In order to capture the texture of the event, the documentation project will proceed in four discrete, but related parts.

(a) The first component of the documentation project will entail taping the meetings of the Organizing Committee and its sub-committees during the final eight weeks leading up to the conference. Our goal here is to give viewers and readers of the documented conference proceedings a sense of the collaborative spirit which has marked this project from its inception. In the many months that we have worked together, the members of the Organizing Committee have found that the collaboration across diversity which has characterized the planning of this conference has led us to new and deeper understandings of ourselves, both as individuals and as a community. Indeed, in taking concrete decisions about the shape and substance of the conference, the Organizing Committee has sought to make what we have learned about forms and styles of collective work in the planning stages of this

conference a model for, and object of the conference itself.

(b) The second and most ambitious component of the documentation project will entail the production of video and audio recordings of the conference proceedings themselves. In order to avoid a monochromatic picture of the conference sessions, we shall be work with at least two (if not more) video cameras, the tapes from which will be edited later to produce the final master copy. By having more than one camera available to us, we shall also be able to generate videotape recordings of the conference workshops. The smaller and less formal workshops will be closely linked to the roundtables, panels and cultural events, and provide an opportunity for extended conversation among conferees of the issues addressed in our various plenary sessions. In our view, the workshop discussions are an integral part of the conference as a whole, from which we expect to glean important insights.

(c) The third component of our proposed documentation project will be a series of videotaped interviews throughout the proceedings--some formal, many less so--with conferees and conference presenters. Again, our desire here is gather recorded materials for use in the master tape which will convey the passion and dynamism of the conference. We will deploy our videocameras as "roving eyes" to record fresh impressions of the roundtable discussions and readings, snatches of excited conversation near the elevators between workshops, impromptu caucuses over coffee in conference rooms and the like. Our aim in gathering this material is to record the spontaneous moments that make up the "daily life" of a gathering such as this, which cannot be capture through more formal documentary methods. We expect, too, that these videotaped interviews will serve as a helpful supplement to the written responses to the conference that will be included in the registration packets and collected for later use.

(d) The fourth and final component of our proposed documentation project will be the publication in book form of selected papers, and the transcription and publication of all the conference roundtables, together with excerpts from the workshop discussions, cultural events and interviews and still photographs from the videotaped materials. The publication will reach an audience which reflects the diversity of the conference organizers, presenters and expected conferees. We expect that the book will not only appeal to individual readers, but will also be of interest in larger settings such as study groups and college and university classes, in such fields as women's studies, African-American studies, cultural studies and gay/lesbian studies. The projected length of the book is between 300 and 400 pages, ~~and will be collectively edited by members of the Organizing Committee.~~

The conference organizers believe that these materials will provide a rich resource for future consultation, study and use. We are confident that a record of Black Nations/Queer Nations? will act as a catalyst for ongoing investigation of the character and significance of gay and lesbian sexualities within the African Diaspora. To that end, we are pursuing ~~our members'~~ contacts at a number of film/video distribution and publishing companies, ~~that might market our documentary work to universities, gay/lesbian and black community centers, and affiliated organizations, and individuals.~~

as well as investigate outcome to

colleges & universities gay & lesbian

CONFERENCE ORGANIZING COMMITTEE

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