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Sexual Difference and Black Communities

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Rockefeller Residents Reflect on Year

Lifestyle and Erotic Nonconformity

Editor's Note: During his residency at CLAGS as a Rockefeller Fellow in the Humanities, Eric Clarke continued work on his project entitled "The Invention of 'Lifestyle': Sexuality, Modernity, Citizenship." He was also instrumental in the planning and organizing of this year's Local Politics/Global Change conference. What follows is a summary by Clarke of his year with us.

My project this year has focused on the following question: When, and why, did the term "lifestyle" become attached to erotic nonconformity? Today the term "lifestyle" has a noxious triviality to it. The common notion of "the homosexual lifestyle" has become an offensive one to many lesbians and gay men, often used by those who would denigrate queer life as unnatural and perverse. Additionally, the term's association with conspicuous consumption has made it contemptuous to those who would oppose the values of consumer culture. Yet "lifestyle" was also an absolutely central category in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century social thought. It was central to social theorists who wanted to understand and describe the revolutionary changes brought about by what has come to be known as modernity. For thinkers like Georg Simmel and Max Weber, "lifestyle" was virtually synonymous with modernity. If "lifestyle" was not only an important category to describe but also a privileged sign of modernity, of what significance is it that erotic nonconformity has become so indissolubly linked to this term?

My research over the past eight months has attempted to go beyond lifestyle's contemporary triviality, and to see what historical and cultural forces are at work in the connection between erotic nonconformity and lifestyle. Two have been uppermost: first, the elaboration of what I call "indeterminate erotic expression" within the historical and cultural horizon of western modernity; and second, the historical affiliations between indeterminate erotic expression and the socio-cultural aspects of capitalism.

These research goals have thus far yielded some surprising results, not the least being the importance of the philosopher Immanuel Kant—both in his life and thought—to the connections between lifestyle and modernity. In addition, my research on early social theorists, particularly Marx, Simmel, and Weber, has brought out a number of unforeseen affiliations among the components of lifestyle (especially what I call "socialized consumption"), indeterminate erotic expression, and the macro-dynamics of a mature money economy.

Let me say here that I'm extraordinarily grateful to the Board of Directors of CLAGS for providing me with the opportunity to do this research, especially in a city like New York, in many ways itself a capitol of lifestyle.

Eric Clarke
University of Pittsburgh

Sexual Difference and Black Communities

Editor's Note: Also a Rockefeller Fellow in the Humanities at CLAGS, Barbara Smith continued work on her current project, "Family Ties: Exploring the Histories of African American Lesbians and Gay Men Within Black Communities." She too was instrumental in the planning of Local Politics/Global Change, and she was a panelist on one of the plenaries. The following is a description of Smith's findings so far.

During my fellowship year I have had the opportunity to deepen my understanding of Black lesbians and gays' historical relationship to large Black communities through interviews with a variety of informants. I have especially made progress in my research concerning Black lesbians and gays in Cleveland, Ohio (which was the focus of my CLAGS colloquium) and in my documentation of Black educational institutions as identifiable locations of lesbian and gay life.

Interviews with a former Cleveland resident confirm that there was an active Black gay social network in the city as early as the 1930s and that particular sites including Karamu Theater, prominent black churches, and even a well-known funeral home, as well as bars and cruising areas, were places where people could find each other. Because of racial segregation, Black lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender persons shared the same neighborhoods, frequented the same businesses, and participated in the same institutions as others in the Black community. The larger Black community frequently seemed to accommodate its non-heterosexual members by simply not acknowledging their sexuality differences. Closeting and the prevalence of sham marriages aided this silence.

This pattern of ignoring or at least downplaying lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender existence also applies to Black academic settings. A variety of factors made Black schools, colleges, and universities places where both men and women were able to negotiate same-gender professional, social, and sexual lives. On the whole, my research reveals a more complex reality than the current, popularly held perception that African Americans are less tolerant of homosexuality than other groups.

Barbara Smith
Independent Scholar