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We Been Here, We Live Here, We Love Here: Black Lesbians' Performance of Presence in Chicago's Southside

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In 1923, Robert S. Abbott, founder of the prominent black newspaper the *Chicago Defender*, formed the Bud Billiken Club whose aims were to celebrate the black boys who sold his newspaper, instill them with lessons of civic responsibility and appropriate behavior, as well as increase youth readership. Bud Billiken, a young mischievous boy who becomes socially aware and racially proud through his boyhood adventures, represented the newspaper boy and soon, came to represent the black Chicago community at large. In 1929, Abbott and his managing editor decided to hold a Bud Billiken Day picnic. "The overwhelming success of the event gave 'underprivileged children a chance to be in the limelight for one day by wearing costumes, marching in a parade and being seen,'" and every second Saturday in August the parade has since been held. Currently, the parade has grown to 1.2 million spectators and is televised in 25 million homes, becoming the largest black parade in the nation.¹

In 1993, Lisa Marie Pickens, Karen Hutt, Stephanie Betts, Julianna Cole, Sandra Johnson, and Karen Long decided that it was time for black lesbians to march openly in the Bud Billiken Parade. The women sent in an application stating their intention to the *Chicago Defender* to march behind a banner marking their homosexuality and were denied permission. Feeling that they were denied due to homophobia, the women sent in

¹ "Bud Billiken Parade History: How It All Got Started," *The Chicago Defender*, August 6, 2008, <http://www.chicagodefender.com/article-1511-bud-billiken-parade-history-how-it-all-got-started.html>.

another application, which had the same information except they titled their group “Diverse Black Role Models”. The second application, turned in late and crumpled, was accepted.

In this paper, I show that during the 1993 parade march, community members discursively created two exceptional sets of black bodies: black children whose innocence needed protection, and black lesbians who posed a threat to that innocence. These discursive subject formations within the context of a parade, I argue, reveal dialogic tensions within the community as it comes up against being the object of national spectacularity. I argue these points by drawing upon political theorist Wendy Brown’s conceptualization of security walls such as those along the U.S.-Mexico border that, as Brown declares, “function theatrically, projecting power and efficaciousness that they do not and cannot actually exercise,”² to think about the work the parade does for the black Chicago community. Thinking through the Bud Billiken parade as a mobile, physicalized wall that performs the desires and potentiality of the community enables the various parade participants to be read as constitutive parts that operate in the machinery of a desired black South Side community that actively polices who is part of that imagining, and who belongs in the final imagined picture.

This paper explicates what the parade signifies for black Chicagoans who seek to counter notions of black families and communities being rife with dysfunction and aberrance. I examine how adults have mobilized black children as devices to fight against black inferiority, along with the ways children have been used to cement particular lines of unacknowledgement in the black community. I use a community

² Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), p. 25.

member's warning against allowing gays and lesbians to march in the parade as a launching point to grasp the complicated relationship black lesbians had with their neighbors who at once, viewed them as part of and antithetical to the community.

Bud Billiken and the Reclamation of "Black Innocence"

Taking a moment to provide social context, the Bud Billiken parade began just before the nation was shook by the Great Depression. During the 1920s, black Chicagoans "gained unprecedented access to city jobs," were able to "expand their professional class, and won elective office in local and state government." Although blacks were overwhelmingly relegated to the Black Belt, a "30 block stretch along State Street" filled with "aging, dilapidated housing," the black community still had avenues of economic and political mobility.³ However, the Great Depression unraveled many of these economic advancements, leading over 50 percent of blacks to depend on government assistance due to massive layoffs that initially targeted minority workers to make any possible room for whites.⁴ Set against this backdrop, Bud Billiken, the parade and character, became symbols of a black solidarity and pride that were under immediate threat.

It is significant that a precocious young boy functioned as the symbol of racial pride and progress for a community plagued with the realities of economic and racial stress. In an essay examining how the early public health establishment used racial and

³ Christopher Manning, "African Americans," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*,
<http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/27.html>.

⁴ The 1930s, ironically, became a period of intense artistic production by black writers. Dubbed the Chicago Renaissance, writers such as Richard Wright, Willard Motley, Margaret Walker, and Gwendolyn Brooks, shifted attention from the rural black subject heralded in the Harlem Renaissance, to the inner city black subjects produced by economic strife and triumph (Manning, "African Americans").

class prejudice in the “mid-to-late 1980s media coverage of young people’s relationship to HIV,” anthropologist Cindy Patton discerns how the media configured young black bodies as premodern—a configuration that invoked the pathologized “matriarchal-led families” and thus “broken homes” of urban black youths. The association with the premodern, Patton argues, marks young black subjects as “missing both childhood and adolescence,” causing the public to view “street kids and teenagers of color in general [as] ‘hardened’ adults.” Divorced from the innocence of adolescence and youth, “young people of color are held partially culpable for their fate. They are not *innocent* victims, either because they are said to act like (to ‘be’) adults at much younger ages, or because they live in the harsh inner city, a premodern world in which ‘primitive’ behaviors are expected.”⁵

Whites’ relegating blacks to being culturally temporally frozen to justify notions of black inferiority began during the African Slave Trade. Blacks were naturally inferior and mentally stagnated; therefore, it was a state of being that began at the moment of conception. Innocence denotes possibility and being stripped of that, blacks were then stripped of futurity, rendering their lives meaningless. Abbott’s publishing a trouble-making, but wise beyond his years, black boy (in other words, a black version of Dennis the Menace) to symbolize the community and its pursuit of progress situated black boys as beings of possibility and in effect, reclaimed “youth” for blacks that afforded them futurity. Possessing the innocence of a child and the wisdom he has accumulated by having to navigate the urban sprawl of Chicago, Bud Billiken exists at the threshold,

⁵ Cindy Patton “Between Innocence and Safety” *Deviant Bodies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), p. 353.

operating as a kind of trickster figure—similar to the Legba, a Haitian Vodou god but not quite god, that is the intermediary between the divine and humanity. The evocation of childhood precociousness is indeed beautiful, but as I will illustrate later in my paper, that evocation also becomes a technology of control that polices bodies and the politics of inclusion.

The Parade and the Possibility of Lesbian Danger

Pickens, Hutt, Betts, Cole, Johnson, and Long, along with other gay advocates, formed the Ad Hoc Committee of Proud Black Lesbians and Gays (APBLG) and sued the Chicago Defender Charities Inc—the parade’s organizational sponsor since the late 1950s — for discrimination based on sexual orientation. Michael Brown, a spokesman for Chicago Defender Charities, claimed that the denial of the first application had nothing to do with homophobia and discrimination but rather with a lack of space. Eventually, the case was settled out of court and the APBLG was allowed to march.⁶ The APBLG realized that the fight just to march was a signal that sustained presence in the community they called home was of the utmost importance.⁷ One particular comment in the “Personal Views” section of the *Chicago Defender* is illustrative of this fact. After the settlement had been reached, one reader named A.L. Reynolds wrote:

Many have used the parade to make statements such as ‘just say no to drugs’ or ‘stop black-on-black crime,’ while many others have tried to give uplifting messages—all for the sake of the children. ‘This is what we want you to be,’ or ‘This is what you can be...’ are the messages. Gays

⁶ Tracy Baim, *Out and Proud in Chicago: An Overview of the City’s Gay Community*, (Chicago: Tracy Baim and Prairie Avenue Productions, Inc, 2008), p. 187.

⁷ Lisa Marie Pickens along with some other women formed Affinity Community Services in 1995. Located in Hyde Park, it is currently the longest running black lesbian run organization in Chicago.

and homosexuals who want to march in the parade also send out a message loud and clear. This is not a message that most blacks want their children to hear or see, and it is certainly not an image that most blacks in Chicago embrace. The black community not only judges gays and homosexuals in terms of morality and value judgments, as does the white community, but also sees them as a castrating influence in a community that already has black men threatened as an endangered species.⁸

In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* political theorist Wendy Brown maintains that “Political walls have always spectacularized power—they have always generated performative and symbolic effects in excess of their obdurately material ones. They have produced and negated certain political imaginaries. They have contributed to the political subjectivity of those they encompass and those they exclude.”⁹ The performance of political walls latch onto the performance of community parades because similarly, they mark the contours of the community, albeit, in different ways. In parades, the floats, vendors, entertainment, and even spectators to a certain extent represent who belongs to that community, what is special about that community, and the ultimate desires of and for that community.

Reynolds’ comment explicitly pinpoints the brick and mortar that, in his opinion, represent the Bud Billiken parade and how those representations extend to the actual community. As the largest parade of its kind in nation, Bud Billiken casts visions of the bodies of black Chicagoans far and wide. Taking place in Chicago’s South Side, an area whose reputation is mired in crime and poverty in the national/municipal imaginations, Bud Billiken is one of the few times that a large collective of black residents can be seen

⁸ A.L. Reynolds, “Give Black Kids a Break at a Parade,” Personal Views, Editorial Section, *Chicago Sun-Times* 5 Aug 1993.

⁹ Wendy Brown, p. 39

in a celebratory and positive light. Thus, the policing of the kind of floats and marchers in the parade is critical and in this way, it functions as a kind of mobile wall that constitutes the pearls of the community and the big bads the community wants to keep out. Criminality and “immoral activity” are to be kept out; strength and possibility are to be protected and promoted. Because Bud Billiken is a character based on a black boy whose body and subjectivity is used as a type of billboard that the entire community writes its desires upon, Reynolds’ comment illustrates the desires and fears he has for the lives of the city’s black male children whose futures, predestined by their very surroundings to enter into a life of crime, imprisonment, and early death (all modes, by the way, that figure black men as an endangered species), are bleak.

It is important to note that while Reynolds talks about the messages to black children, he ultimately lands on the threat queer visibility poses to black young men. Reynolds’ turn to projecting the damaging effects of homosexuality on boys who grow to be men demonstrates how black lesbians as women are marginal in the representational politics of the black community at large. And the fact that they are lesbian positions them as exposing the lifeblood of the community—the children—to a gateway of further detriment. As black lesbians, they are outside of the normative heterosexual family practices. According to Reynolds, attachments to these familial normatives are critical in the performances of the Bud Billiken parade that is not just about celebrating the South Side community, but to show others that it is a *normal* community that cares for its children. Fighting against stereotypes of the absent black father, emasculated by the overbearing black mother that then produces aberrant black children, the South Side

black community must continually fight against notions that its “refusal” to maintain nuclear family structures is the reason why the southern neighborhoods of Chicago is filled with dysfunction. If “independent” heterosexual black women were part of the project of black male emasculation and disempowerment by not allowing “a man to be a man,” then black lesbians commit an even worse malfeasance by engaging in lifestyles where men are not featured in the family at all. In this conception, black lesbians do not run their homes in a way where black men are absent, for black men are never accounted for in the first place. While this rendering completely devalues and divorces black lesbians from the relationships they have with their fathers, other male family members, friends, and the fathers of their children, it positions them as being in collusion with the state (imaged as white men) to disintegrate the black community (imaged as black men). The parade simultaneously performs the community it desires to be while keeping in check (i.e. hiding) any groups of residents who will possibly undermine the picture of that desired community. Black lesbians, along with drug dealers and gang members, are one of the groups that undo the seams of the desired community. Under these logics, black lesbians are not simply immoral people, but they are regarded as having the power to rip at the already fragile black family—a unit viewed as under attack by the psychological trauma of slavery, the state’s active failure to distribute funds to poor communities of color, and institutional racism.

The lesbians who marched as part of the APBLG also felt the pangs of these assaults on and vulnerabilities of the black community. Like their heterosexual counterparts, black lesbians’ bodies were also marked as potential criminal targets. By virtue of their

race, gender, place of residence, and sexuality, they were also outside of the imagined ideal white, middle class, heterosexual American and thus, were denied equal access to the benefits and protections of U.S. citizenship. The recognition of their subjectivities being made by, and of their bodies as still belonging to, the community was revealed during the actual 1993 parade march. Having reached a settlement with the Chicago Defender Charities, Inc., APBLG marched behind a banner that included “Proud Lesbians and Gays,” and they were warmly accepted.

A reception where black lesbians were unmolested by a crowd that had, rhetorically, lambasted them for exposing children to further social ills does not seemingly make sense. On the one hand, some straight identified blacks place black lesbians’ queer sexuality on par with destroying black family units in ways that mirror drug activity (both are conceived as eventually absencing the black father from the home, with drugs leading men to either prison or death, and lesbian homes being deemed as antithetical to a “strong” male presence in the first place). On the other hand, the same critics and many more let the APBLG march in peace, allowing them to become part of the representative fabric of the black Chicago community. Sociologist Mignon Moore notes that this ambivalent relationship between heterosexual and queer blacks can be explained through political scientist Michael Dawson’s articulation of “linked fate,” which is the belief “that what happens to Blacks as a whole affects one’s own life chances.”¹⁰ Moore goes on to write that “Many black sexual minorities who live and spend time socially in Black communities do so because they have strong, cemented identities around race, and this

¹⁰ Mignon R. Moore, “Articulating a Politics of (Multiple) Identities: LGBT Sexuality and Inclusion in Black Community Life,” *Du Bois Review* (2010), p. 4.

sense of linked fate can be at odds with a sexual identity status that is a source of division and disagreement within the community.”¹¹ Looking at black lesbians’ relationship to the larger black community from this perspective answers the question of why the APBLG were not satisfied with being able to march in Pride parades where queerness is ethnicized. The concept of linked fate also highlights the complicated relationship the black community has with its queer members. While blacks have justified their homophobia on moral and religious grounds, there still exists moments of unity when they and their gay/lesbian counterparts meet challenges from outside of the black community. This does not excuse or dismiss black homophobia, but it does highlight the entanglements, the collisions, and the moments of dislodgings that animate black queer and straight relations in predominantly black urban spaces.

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