

## **Black Gay Worldmaking of the Global 1980s: Brazil and the United States**

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**Abstract:** When Black gay activist-writer Joseph Beam declared, “Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 1980s,” he foreshadowed a decade of bold Black gay worldmaking. Across national contexts in Brazil and the United States, Black gay men faced political and public health turmoil as they faced down a waning military dictatorship in Brazil and the deadly AIDS crisis in the United States. The dire nature of these contexts gave rise to innovative Black gay community building and creative output in both countries along the decade of the 80s. This paper delves into this Black gay activism of the 1980s, focusing on the creation of the first Black gay organization Adé Dúdu in Salvador da Bahia, Brazil in the early 1980s and the publication of *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, two of the first anthologies of Black gay writing from the United States in the latter half of the 1980s. This paper argues that as Black gay men use this decade to figure out what home means to them and where they can find it, creating space for themselves to be full and free amongst one another, while also negotiating an end to their silence about their sexuality within the larger Black community spaces. Reflecting on the connections between the struggles of these two groups of Black gay men split across two countries, this paper finally outline the patterns of worldwide Black gay resistance that the 1980s shows in Brazil and the United States.

**Keywords:** Intersectionality. Activism. The Brazilian Military Dictatorship. AIDS. Black Diaspora

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*My battle doesn't die, it avenges  
So that I can break through the wall  
And see your Black smile  
Your Black look  
Feel your Black heat  
Taste your Black sweat  
Feel that I am you  
And you are me.*

Adé Dúdú, 1981

*“What is it that we see within each other that makes us avert our eyes so quickly? Do we turn away from each other in order not to see our collective anger and sadness?”*

Joseph Beam, 1986

### **The Black Gay 1980s**

In 1986, in a summer issue of *Black/Out*, the Chicago based magazine for the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Black gay activist-writer Joseph Beam boldly declared “Black men loving Black men is the revolutionary act of the 1980s” (BEAM, 1986, p. 9, minha tradução). Beam spoke out in the midst of a devastating global epidemic of HIV ravaging gay and trans communities worldwide and beginning to disproportionately affect Black gay and trans communities due systemic barriers faced by the community in accessing healthcare resources and compounded discrimination (COHEN, 1999). He boldly claimed that Black gay men cannot depend on the state’s institutions to save them, but instead they must save one another. Beam’s declaration presents a strong critique specifically at white led gay organizations working to support gay men living with HIV for their ignoring of the needs of Black gay communities. For Beam, Black men knowing, understanding, organizing, and loving one another was essential for their survival in the face of this global health crisis on top

of the everyday racial, heteropatriarchal, and capitalistic violence that Black gay men faced, even from within gay communities.

Seven years prior, in another part of the Americas, *O Lampião da Esquina*, the groundbreaking gay magazine based out of Rio de Janeiro, ran their August 1979 issue entitled, “Negros, Qual é o Lugar Deles?” (Black People, What is Their Place?) featuring an interview with Abdias do Nascimento, Black activist, artist, and founder of the *Teatro Experimental do Negro* in 1944 (BITTENCOURT; SILVA, 1979). The interview discusses in-depth Black people’s history in Brazil, the intricacies of racial violence in Brazil, and the goals of a budding Black movement of the late 1970s and early 1980s. At one point in the interview, after discussing the importance of creating alliances between the gay movement and the Black movement, as well as with other movements of oppressed groups, Eliane Guerreiro, daughter of renowned Black sociologist Guerreiro Ramos, insist that gay people “are not discriminated against like Black people” (BITTENCOURT; SILVA, 1979, p. 12, my translation). In *O Lampião*’s issue from the following October, a reader responds to Guerreiro through a letter to the magazine published in the issue. The letter entitled “Um negro-negro” (A Black-Black Man) from Pedrão, a Black gay student and somewhat infrequent participant in São Paulo’s gay movement, briefly responds to Guerreiro at the end of the letter, saying, “Tell her, if she doesn’t know, that there are also Black homosexuals, and how!” (PEDRÃO, 1979, p. 19) While Pedrão celebrates the inclusion of the Nascimento’s issue which focused heavily on the Black movement, his seemingly simple response points to those who are forgotten in a conversations between the Black movement and the gay movement: Black gay people.

While Beam and Pedrão’s statements are separated temporally and geographically, they both engage in the same conversation. Both men point to the state of erasure that Black gay men face within their own race and sexuality-based communities. Pedrão’s response to the insistence that homosexuals do not face the

oppression that Black people do begs the question of how that analysis of Black experience might shift if it included Black homosexuals? How would the goals and tactics of the Black movement be different if they acknowledged the existence and specific oppressions faced by Black homosexuals? Beam's answer to the continual state of erasure and negation by white-led gay organizations is for Black men to love and remember themselves. But, in a society that refuses to see and accept Black gay men, what does forming an autonomous Black gay community look like? What does Black men loving Black men entail in theory and in practice? Finally, does Black gay men loving one another mean divesting from (heterosexual) Black communities and (white) gay spaces?

This paper focuses on these efforts towards Black gay men loving one another through the creation of community spaces and literary production that centered their experiences in the global 1980s. In the first part of the paper I outline the creation of the first Black gay organization in Brazil, Adé Dúdu, in the midst of the latter end of Brazil's military dictatorship. Initially beginning as a subgroup of Salvador da Bahia's chapter of the Movimento Negro Unificado and later breaking off to form their own autonomous organization, I argue that their refusal to abandon Black community spaces, even as these spaces questioned their existence as Black gay men, shows the central importance of a Blackness in their collective consciousness as a Black gay organization. In the second part of the paper, I focus on Joseph Beam and Essex Hemphill's Black gay literary production from the United States in the two edited volumes, *In The Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (BEAM, 1986), and *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (BEAM; HEMPHILL, 1991). During the height of the AIDS epidemic, Beam and Hemphill boldly refused to allow Black gay men to continue to die in silence. They worked to make space to amplify Black gay men's creative voices to force their communities, heterosexual Black and white gay alike, to reckon with their existence. I argue that in their call for Black gay men to return "home," they highlight the

ambivalent feelings Black gay men hold in relation to Black community spaces and gay social spaces. However, Beam and Hemphill's call insists that while Black gay men loving one another in community is essential to their survival, they cannot thrive without their extended community. Finally, in my conclusion I synthesize the connecting threads through the community and literary space-making that these two groups of Black gay men launched. Both groups were directly responding to somewhat disparate political moments across differing national contexts. Yet the process of constructing of spaces to uplift Black gay men when there were few prior models of how to do so, as well as grappling with how to shift the consciousness of larger Black communities and gay spaces to include Black gay men, led to rich connected theorizations of Black gay life across the Black queer diaspora.

### **Adé Dúdú: A *Black Gay Movement***

After almost ten years of political repression under threat of imprisonment, torture, or death, Brazil's military dictatorship led by Ernesto Geisel began a transitional period of slow re-democratization in 1974 which became known as the Abertura (Opening) period. The years before had violently disbanded democratic political activity and gave the military sweeping power to silence any types of community activism as a threat to the military regime (SKIDMORE, 1990). Although political activity in no way completely ceased during this period of the dictatorship (GREEN, 2010; LANGLAND, 2013; SERBIN 2000), the Abertura period allowed activism driven underground to resurge with less fear of political repression. Community organizing of Black movements, LGBTQ movements, and feminist movements began to rise near the end of the decade (ALBERTO, 2011; TREVISAN, 2018; ALVAREZ, 1990).

In 1978, The Movimento Negro Unificado Contra Discriminação Racial (Unified Black Movement Against Racial Discrimination) held its first action at the Viaduto do Chá in São Paulo protesting the military police torture and assassination of Robson Silveira da Luz at the farmers market where he worked and the barring of four Black youth from the Tietê Yacht Club (GONZALEZ, 1985). Throughout the year, chapters of the Unified Black Movement (MNU) sprouted up throughout states in Brazil as organizers prepared to protest and call attention to the 90th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, and the failed promises of the Brazilian government to its Black populations.

In the northeastern Brazilian city of Salvador da Bahia, known by many as the center of Black life and culture in Brazil, the Unified Black Movement gave rise to the first known Black gay organization in Brazil and throughout Latin America, Adé Dúdú, in 1979. In 2018, after months of attempting to contact different cell phone numbers and mutual contacts to get in touch, I finally found my way to Wilson Mandela and Ermeval da Hora, two of the original founding members of Adé Dúdú. During my interviews with them, Mandela, then living in Rio de Janeiro, and Hora, still living in the Salvador da Bahia area, were incredibly generous with their stories. Mandela shared with me his excitement to be able to tell this story about the first Black gay organization in the country. Despite our separation by birth country and age, amongst other things, my own social position as a Black queer scholar-activist provided a point of connection between myself and these two veteran Black gay activists. Mandela told me that he had received various requests to talk about the history of Adé Dúdú throughout the years, but he insisted that he was waiting for a Black researcher for him to tell the full story to. I was incredibly honored by the trust they both granted me to share the history of Adé Dúdú and how, in these early years of Black activism, they argued for the acknowledgement of Black gay men within the Unified Black Movement. While both Mandela and Hora insisted that the journey of creating Adé Dúdú through the Movimento Negro Unificado

was a complicated and tumultuous battle, both emphasized the importance in having a frank conversation about Black sexuality within the larger Black movement. As Wilson Mandela continually emphasized to me before and during our interview, Adé Dúdu was a Black gay movement, as opposed to a gay Black movement, emphasizing the hierarchical importance of Blackness for the founding members of this Bahian organization.

When the Unified Black Movement began, it arose out of a need to speak up about histories as well as current realities of racism and anti-blackness within Brazil. These conversations that had been silenced through the military dictatorship during which the military regime upheld the longstanding myth of racial democracy in Brazil. However, despite providing a space to speak up about issues concerning Black communities in Brazil, the Unified Black Movement had difficulty addressing intersectional analyses of Black experiences. Speaking on being a Black gay man in the Black movement during the Abertura period, Ermeval da Hora begins by saying:

It was in the Black movement that I found my belonging as a Black person. And, after some time, as a Black homosexual, because in the beginning we Black homosexuals in the Black movement faced difficulties in having our fellow activists talk about the topic of Black homosexuals. There was even those who said that there were no Black homosexuals because homosexuality was a sickness of capitalism, and that was devastating to us.

This sense of belonging within the Unified Black Movement that Ermeval da Hora mentions was echoed by Mandela in our interview and in the writing of scores of other activists within the early years of the organization (COVIN, 2015). His assertion highlights how for activists participating in this budding Black movement, the MNU represented a homeplace where they could create a sense of belonging for one another through Black community activist work. However, these homeplaces were still wrought with conflict when it came to topics of non-normative Black genders and sexualities. The “sickness of capitalism” statement Hora hears within the Unified Black Movement

shows that despite serving as a home of sorts for these Black gay activists, this homeplace embraced cultures of homophobia that were dominant in larger society on both the left and right of the political spectrum.

Rather than abandon the Unified Black Movement, Black gay men decided to stay within the organization and challenge their fellow Black activists on questions of sexuality, giving rise to Adé Dúdu in Salvador, which began as a subgroup of the MNU. According to Mandela, conversations led by the outspoken organizer and musician Edson Santos Tosta, affectionately referred to by his community as Passarinho, started as early as August 1979, shortly after the founding of the Unified Black Movement. Mandela describes hearing and participating in these conversations at his first meeting at the Salvador MNU chapter:

Shortly after I sat down and introduced myself, there was a woman organizer in the group who began speaking out against the machismo in the chapter, in the larger Black movement, and amongst Black people in general. After she spoke, [Passarinho] continued by speaking out, speaking against [homophobia], complaining about the lack of space [for homosexual men], and rebuking the discrimination that homosexuals faced and still face in the Black community and amongst non-black homosexuals. He spoke of the necessity of the Black movement to take up this subject and insert the issues of Black homosexuals in the goals of the Unified Black Movement.

As shown in Mandela's statement, the initial conversation that sparked the creation of a group for Black gay men within the MNU is tethered to a conversation about fighting sexism and the oppression of women in MNU spaces. Mandela's anecdote shows that the lack of integration of an intersectional analysis by the MNU's leadership in Salvador did not only affect Black gay men, but scores of Black people whose lived experiences of oppression necessitated a power analysis that went beyond simply racial discrimination. The Black woman activist in Mandela's story that brings light to the struggles of Black women in the Unified Black Movement gives space for Passarinho to speak to the struggles of Black gay men as well. As Mandela points out,



both activists critique the movement to ensure that the group lives up to its promise to all Black communities in Salvador and Brazil. Passarinho's statement ended with a call to revisit the goals of the organization and to include the concerns of Black gay men.

While the contributions of this Black woman's intersectional analysis in the MNU are essential in igniting the creation of a subgroup for Black homosexuals, Adé Dúdu chose to focus on Black homosexual men, instead of a coalition of Black homosexual men and women. Mandela insisted that this lack of Black lesbian and bisexual women was not intentional on the part of organizers, but rather reflected the specific difficulties for Black women of the time. He says, "We weren't able to attract [Black] women. There's everything that makes it so that for women it was and still is more difficult. If for [Black gay men] it was difficult to come out, imagine for women, for Black women." Adé Dúdu faced an uphill battle finding a group of Black homosexual men capable of and willing to be openly associated with a group that put their sexuality on display, but eventually pulled together a small inaugural group of 12 in 1981. In a violently homophobic era of Brazilian history, these Black gay men risked emotional and physical violence to fight for full inclusion in the Black movement. The combined experiences of racial, gender, and sexual oppression for Black lesbian and bisexual women in Salvador who would be able and willing to also put themselves and their sexuality in the limelight fell to zero, speaking to the higher risk and levels of violence that Black homosexual women faced compared to men. Mandela's assertion about the increased difficulty for Black women to come out and more so be associated with a group that centers Black homosexuals shows how who is able to speak up is oftentimes limited by the oppression and societal violence one faces. Mandela, Hora, Passarinho and the other 9 founding members of Adé Dúdu did not possess more courage than their Black homosexual women counterparts, but the different gendered expectations they faced as Black men provided different conditions that facilitated their leadership in the creation of a group for Black homosexuals.

Following Passarinho's passionate plea in this conversation to re-think the agenda and goals of the Unified Black Movement, in late 1979 and early 1980, Black gay men continued their organizing as the "Homosexuals of the Unified Black Movement," a subgroup of the MNU of Bahia. While the group faced many conflicts within the Unified Black Movement and objections from other members who insisted that homosexuality was a white problem or that the subgroup was attempting to turn the Black movement into the homosexual movement, the Black gay activists held fast and used these conflicts as moments of education for non-homosexual members of the MNU. Mandela explains,

For some people it was a question of their framing and the fear that [Black gays] would cause damage. It wasn't what we would name today as homophobia. And other people [in the MNU] had a large dose of homophobia...and used these moments to antagonize us. It's important to note that we always responded by taking the high road.

As opposed to taking the bait of the hateful rhetoric about homosexuals by some members of the Black movement, Mandela insisted that the Black gay members of the subgroup continually pushed back to educate fellow activists or demand respect. Mandela recounted how Passarinho served as an example for other Black gay men in the MNU by always challenging the arguments rooted in homophobia by others and insisting that Blackness is not restricted to a few archetypes. Passarinho's insistence on standing up for himself and other Black gay men led to moments of emotional and physical violence. Mandela remembered various times seeing Passarinho arrive to MNU meetings with bruises and scars from defending himself from physical homophobic attacks from passersby.

Passarinho's openness about his sexuality and defense of Black homosexuals marked him as an easy target for anti-gay antagonism in the Unified Black Movement. However, Mandela's educational class and more normatively masculine gender

expression led to different experiences and expectations around what types of conversations he would bring up. Mandela explains,

In the MNU there was the expectation of some that I wouldn't provoke these questions...In the minds of people...I didn't have the appearance of a homosexual, so they tolerated me more and thought I wouldn't provoke this. One person told me, 'You all can't be openly homosexual in the events with the larger public because you're not just any activist.' I was part of the leadership [of the MNU]. But I said no, I'm not going to repress myself for any reason. One day the MNU will understand this issue.

The expectations of Mandela in comparison to other Black gay men in the MNU stemmed from what he understood as a difference between their and his gender expression and educational class. Mandela insists that his “non-homosexual” demeanor and his college education in economics led people to believe that he could not be a homosexual. The image of a homosexual in their minds did not fit Mandela, and therefore the expectation of him was that he would hold up the image of a heterosexual Black person that they imagined him to be, especially when representing the MNU. Mandela's image allows him to step into leadership roles in the Black movement without being perceived as a leader who would cause problems with controversial questions regarding Black gay men. However, just as Passarinho worked to challenge the idea of what a Black activist could be by being openly gay, Mandela challenged people's ideas of what a homosexual could be. Despite differences in educational class and gender expression, both Mandela and Passarinho openly fought to deconstruct gender and sexuality stereotypes within the Black movement.

As the subgroup sought to create a Black homosexual movement within the larger Black movement to address the gaps in the agenda created by the MNU related to sexuality, Mandela, Hora, Passarinho and other members of the group also participated in and played central roles the founding of Grupo Gay da Bahia (Gay Group of Bahia). However, despite playing a role in the creation of the group, the members of the

Homosexuals of the MNU left Grupo Gay da Bahia shortly after its creation due to conflicts regarding issues of race in the group. Grupo Gay da Bahia, founded in 1980 in Salvador, is hailed as the longest continually running gay organization in Latin America (DE LA DEHESA, 2010; MOTT, 2003). Both Mandela and Hora spoke to their participation in the founding year of the organization but insisted their participation was fraught with conflict. Just as the MNU subgroup members spoke out against homophobia in Black communities and in the Movimento Negro Unificado, they similarly spoke out against racism or the lack of an anti-racist practice in Grupo Gay da Bahia. However, both Mandela and Hora were adamant in their claim that while a few future members of the Homosexuals of the MNU played a role in GGB, the group did not begin as nor later become part of Grupo Gay da Bahia because these members ultimately decided to leave the group. The activists stressed the importance of their subgroup continuing its link with the MNU despite conflicts with homophobia in the Black movement. However, the organizers of what would become Adé Dúdu were less invested in occupying space in Grupo Gay da Bahia, a gay movement organization that did not center questions of Blackness and racial discrimination. Hora says, “When we began to notice that GGB did not want to enter into this conversation or avoided the conversation about Black homosexuals, we decided to leave, we who were conscious as Black people and homosexuals.” Mandela builds on Hora’s statement saying,

We [subgroup members] were always the warriors against racism, but it would have been a waste of time to stay in a space that wouldn’t lead to anything. This conversation wouldn’t have brought any changes there...We left, not because of fear, but because we need to take advantage of things. You can’t waste your energy. So we left and were able to form Adé Dúdu and develop a bigger and much better project for us.

Both Mandela and Hora, as well as other subgroup members from MNU, attempted to bring an intersectional lens to Salvador’s gay movement by playing a part in the beginning organizing meetings for Grupo Gay da Bahia. The activists from the

Homosexuals of the MNU were drawn to Grupo Gay da Bahia in its budding moment because it brought visibility to their struggles as gay men. However, they abandoned the newly formed organization because of an unwillingness of the GGB to take up a racial liberation fight in their battle against homophobia, despite the group's creation in the city with one of the largest Black population ratios in the country. These Black gay men's abrupt and final exit from GGB due to racism within the group shows that this gay movement did not serve as much as a homeplace for these activists as the MNU did. Mandela and Hora and the others from the MNU who participated in GGB still saw themselves as Black gay men from the Black movement, as opposed to Black gay men from the gay movement and considered their viewpoint as much different than those Black gay men who chose to stay in GGB.

In the Black movement, continual conflicts with the MNU over how the Homosexuals of the MNU subgroup could speak for or represent the group led the activists of the group to desire more autonomy over their decision making. After a little more than a year of organizing under the banner of the Homosexuals of the MNU, in March of 1981 the group decided to become an autonomous group separate from the MNU while still remaining part of the larger Black movement. The group took the name Adé Dúdú - Grupo de Negros Homossexuais (Black Homosexual Organization). The group chose the name due to Salvador's strong Afro-Catholic and Candomblé religious traditions that utilize cultures passed down through communities of enslaved Africans in Bahia from West Africa. That same month, at a performance of the Ilê Aiyê, a famous Black carnival bloco (performance group), Adé Dúdú decided to release their first pamphlet promoting the group. Adé Dúdú's name which was roughly translated by the founders who understood it to mean Black homosexual in Yoruba, had intrigued attendants at the Ilê Aiyê performance. As Mandela recalls, many people asked in response to the group's allusion to Black homosexuals, "that [homosexuality] exists among Black people?" Adé Dúdú's decision to debut the group at an important Black

cultural space such as Ilê Aiyê and provoke these sorts of conversations returns to their goal of deconstructing what Black is and what the goal of a Black community organization should be, bringing Black gay people into that spectrum.

That year the organization decided to produce a research study looking at the struggles of Black homosexuals and their interactions with groups within the Black movement and the gay movement to highlight the importance of declaring an autonomous group for Black gay men. In their study “Black Homosexuals: Study Conducted by Adé Dúdú,” (DÚDÚ, 1981) they state,

Our first big task, which we expect will continue for much time, would be to explain, to make it clear to people why a group for black homosexuals, when there are already various Black groups and various homosexual groups. Moreover our hypothesis turned out to be right: many people questioned the autonomy of the group. “Why not be part of another group?” (DÚDÚ, 1981, p. 1)

The organization’s experience with the silencing of intersectional analyses in both the Movimento Negro Unificado and Grupo Gay da Bahia evidenced the need for the organizers of Adé Dúdú to separate into their own autonomous group. However, the lack of visibility of Black homosexuals and the discrimination they faced within social movements and in the larger Brazilian society led Black and homosexual people to question the necessity of an autonomous group, given the existence of Black and gay movement groups. In the study they showed that even within these community spaces that are theoretically places of belonging for them, their own existence is questioned or met with hostility. Their study argues,

We think that the fight of Black people, homosexuals, women, and other stigmatized sectors are transient (until when?), being that if we are fighting for liberation it is because we believe that liberation will come. And the fight for Black homosexuals is also a transient fight, especially inside liberation movements. As we see it, the end of oppression inside of liberation movements should not wait for the end of racism, machismo, sexual prejudice, and economic exploitation. The self-liberation of the oppressed

should be a quick task, immediate, through questioning and systemic reflection. From there we insist in the necessity of periodic discussions broaching the specificity of each oppressed sector, which will help us obtain general comprehension of what is oppression and the necessity of first eliminating it amongst ourselves. (DÚDÚ, 1981, p. 2)

This declaration from the organizers of Adé Dúdu serves as a bold declaration of the necessity of a group autonomous from the MNU and without ties to the GGB, but it also serves as a call to all social movement groups to examine the ways in which they uphold and reproduce the systemic oppression they fight against. Instead of using their study to denounce the discrimination they experienced within the Black movement and the gay movement, they offer it as a template to better their struggles and expand the movements' reach. Adé Dúdu argues that as movements struggle for a freer world for oppressed groups, they are obliged to do auto-reflexive work to not reproduce oppression. Adé Dúdu's work of creating space for Black homosexuals within the MNU and in the GGB before and during the creation of their autonomous group is continually invested in the infusion of an intersectional lens that deconstructs all the oppressions that affect the people in the space. Adé Dúdu understood that to agitate at the intersection of different axes of oppression meant to make space not only for themselves, but all those who are oppressed by different systems of power. Just as the space to think through homophobia within the Black movement was opened up by a conversation about patriarchy in that same movement, Adé Dúdu sought to transform the Black movement not just for themselves, but for all those who experience oppression similar and different from their own.

### ***In the Life and Brother to Brother: The Black Gay Literary Renaissance***

In 1986, during the height of the AIDS epidemic and US president Ronald Regan's administration's refusal to acknowledge the devastation of the crisis (COHEN,

1999), Joseph Beam published the first edited volume of writing from Black gay men in the United States: *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (1986). Beam, a Philadelphia based Black gay HIV positive activist and writer, spoke out about the need for spaces of belonging for Black gay men and the constant trauma of exclusion, rejection, and loneliness Black gay men face, both within Black community spaces and gay social environments (MUMFORD, 2016; ROYLES, 2020). Years prior in 1984, Beam addressed these exclusions in the Philadelphia Gay News saying, “We ain’t family. Very clearly, gay male means: white, middle-class, youthful...and probably butch; there is no room for Black gay men within the confines of this gay pentagon” (BEAM, 1986). For Beam, white gay men’s erasure and rejection of Black gay men necessitated a literary space to celebrate the contributions of Black gay men and to document the emotional struggles of rejection by their communities. These experiences of rejection for Beam and the Black gay male contributors to the edited volume paralleled the impact of the AIDS epidemic on their lives. Themes of loneliness and abandonment in a time of great need for Black gay men frequent Beam’s anthology. Through writing, he provides this first public forum to call attention to the struggle of Black gay men as they navigate community spaces that reject them or only accept them if silent about other parts of themselves. Beam worked on a follow-up anthology in the late 1980s, but he died of HIV-related complications in 1988. Black gay poet and friend to Beam Essex Hemphill completed the anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, and it was published 1991. Together Beam and Hemphill played a crucial part of what Darius Bost classified as the Black Gay Cultural Renaissance of the 1980s and early 1990s (BOST, 2018).

“Home” was theorized by both Essex Hemphill and Joseph Beam as integral to the mental and physical health of Black gay men. For Beam and Hemphill, “home” as a concept went beyond the physical spaces for biological families. Home, for both men, meant Black community spaces where Black people can find familiar cultural traits and



shared community uplift. Essex Hemphill's construction of home concerns the people and ideas that make up the communities that Black gay men come from or insert themselves into. However, while these homes provide partial stability for Black gay men, Beam and Hemphill both theorize that they do not deliver full acceptance to them. Black gay men's insertion into these Black homeplaces is riddled with erasure and silencing. Beam writes,

When I speak of home, I mean not only the familial constellation from which I grew, but the entire Black community: the Black press, the Black church, the Black academicians, the Black literati, and the Black left. Where is my reflection? I am most often rendered invisible, perceived as a threat to the family, or am tolerated if I am silent and inconspicuous. I cannot go home as who I am and that hurts deeply (BEAM, 1986, p. 231).

To prevent the loss of homeplaces, Beam insists that Black gay men sacrifice their full selves to fit within these homeplaces. They place the religions and cultural norms of their Black communities above the truth of their sexuality to be able to exist within these spaces because, as Hemphill argues, to be separated from their homeplaces would mean a quicker death. In the 1980s and 1990s, HIV's severe infiltration of Black gay communities combined with the ousting from Black homeplaces ensured a lonesome death for many Black gay men in the United States (Cohen 1999). Therefore, Beam highlights the impossible choice Black gay men faced: self-exile from Black homeplaces or perpetual silence about their intimate lives. Beam's mention of reflection points to the ways that seeing oneself in others is a central part of Black community spaces. In Beam's eyes, Black gay men gain conditional access to Black communities without the opportunity to see themselves reflected fully in their truths.

Brother to Brother and In the Life is filled with stories of Black gay men who faced the choice of suppressing, rejecting, or silencing their sexuality and open expressions of intimacy to return home. For those who searched for a new home within

the gay community, they were not spared these conflicting pulls of silence required by Black gay men. Hemphill explains,

The contradictions of 'home' are amplified and become more complex when black gay men's relationships with the white gay community are also examined. The post-Stonewall white gay community of the 1980s was not seriously concerned with the existence of black gay men except as sexual objects. (HEMPHILL, 1991, p. xxxix)

Here Hemphill echoes Beam's passionate critique of white power in gay spaces and insist that reflection is also not available for them within these white dominated gay spaces. For Hemphill, entering the gay community could provide another form of conditional access for Black Gay men. This partial existence within gay spaces could challenge the qualms of loneliness and silence around sexuality, but the white hegemony of these gay spaces and unchallenged racism demanded other types of silences from Black gay men. Neither white dominated gay communities nor heteropatriarchal Black homeplaces delivered a place of open and full acceptance for Black gay men. The conditional acceptance of Black gay men in both spaces disallowed full existence within either space. While being part of either community brought the benefit of avoiding physical loneliness, it required another type of mental loneliness through the constant negation of self.

However, Hemphill doesn't insist that there is no hope for the successful return of Black gay men to Black homes or gay spaces. In analyzing these spaces critically to look for solutions, Hemphill insists that one of the causes of the kind of loneliness and silence Black gay men are subjected to in communities that should represent them comes from the lack of interrogation of power dynamics by white gay and lesbian people. Hemphill argues that gay and lesbian community spaces, while representing groups of people oppressed by heteropatriarchal systems and requiring great courage in being open about their sexuality, fall into the trap of being spaces of other types of

domination along racial and class lines due to leaning too heavily on sameness and not enough upon critical solidarity. Reflecting on the radical potential of gay and lesbian spaces, Hemphill acknowledges the possibility of communities to think beyond issues that affect only themselves:

Coming out of the closet to confront sexual oppression has not necessarily given white males the motivation or insight to transcend their racist conditioning. This failure (or reluctance) is costing the gay and lesbian community the opportunity to become a powerful force for creating real social changes that reach beyond issues of sexuality. It has fostered much of the distrust that permeates relations between black and white communities. And finally, it erodes the possibility of forming meaningful, powerful coalitions. (HEMPHILL, 1991, p. xi)

Hemphill here offers a scathing critique of the radical potential of coming out. Countless activists in the aftermath of the Stonewall rebellions from 1969 argued that coming out was a revolutionary act because of how it required heterosexual people, through openly knowing their proximity to gay and lesbian people, to reckon with their upholding of heteropatriarchal hegemony (BRONSKI, 2012; SEDGWICK, 2008; SHILTS, 2022; STEIN, 2019). However, Hemphill here recalibrates the argument about coming out as revolutionary, and insists that without a connection of an examination to the gay and lesbian person's relationship to power of all kinds, coming out is stripped of its revolutionary potential. Hemphill insists that to access that radicality and enact change that transforms society gays and lesbians must not just come out, but openly analyze how systems of power both oppress them and allow them to play the part of oppressor. Gay and lesbian community spaces in Hemphill's view, beyond simply providing space for those who share the same sexuality, should also work across racial, gender, and class difference through the work of solidarity. While gay and lesbian spaces provide important critiques to the heteropatriarchal structures in society, Hemphill insists that if gay and lesbian community spaces also challenged their

relationship to power as it pertains to race and other systems, the transformative effect they could have on society would be much greater. Therefore, the essential role of Black gay and lesbians in these community spaces can provide a challenge to their white counterparts to be self-critical of their relationship to power to work towards making solidarity central to the formation of gay and lesbian spaces. The potential of Black LGBT voices, unsilenced and unfragmented, within these gay and lesbian spaces help to bring forth those “real social changes” Hemphill addresses.

Returning to Beam’s aforementioned proposal for Black intra-community love, in the introduction to *In the Life* Beam clarifies that his call goes beyond Black gay men, but is a call to all Black men, as well as all Black people, to interrogate their relationships with one another and reflect on their shared struggle. Beam argues,

This is not an easy time to be a Black man, nor a Black woman. Just recently, Philadelphia city officials led by Black Philadelphia Mayor Wilson Goode served an eviction notice in the form of a bomb which killed eleven Black men, women, and children who were members of the "radical" sect known as MOVE. And, as I write these words, the tensions and death toll rise in apartheid South Africa. We are dying in prisons, on drugs, in the streets, by the hands of the state and by our own. (BEAM, 1986, p. xxii)

In this quotation, Beam lays out the social position Black people collectively find themselves here, both locally and globally. In the local context, Beam invokes the recent 1985 police bombing of a Cobbs Creek neighborhood in West Philadelphia, Beam’s hometown. The MOVE organization was an environmental and Black nationalist cooperative whose members lived together, seeking to protect nature and approximate themselves to their African roots (SANDERS; JEFFRIES, 2013; THOMPSON; SLAUGHTER, 2021). Members of MOVE were constantly seen as a problem by the city, and this led to constant confrontation with the police, including a 55-day siege in 1978 initiated by the city and shoot out between the members of MOVE and the police. This confrontation led to the death of a police officer, and the

imprisonment of nine members of MOVE. Following this confrontation, move members moved to the Cobbs Creek neighborhood further west in Philadelphia, and a subsequent confrontation with the police led to the police bombing of almost an entire city block in the predominantly Black Cobbs Creek neighborhood and the death of 11 people from MOVE, five of them children. Many in Philadelphia saw this bombing as blatant anti-Black violence due to the pathologizing of MOVE as Black radicals (THOMPSON; SLAUGHTER, 2021). MOVE inherited this tragic legacy of anti-Black violence and hostility towards radical Black organizations which led to the death and imprisonment of many of their members. At the global level Beam cites the growing tensions between Black South Africans seeking an end to apartheid and the South African police state. Since the 1950s, South Africa had employed a strict legal system of separation between white, Black, and Coloured racial groups, meant to enshrine inequality and raise up white South Africans as the ruling power in this majority Black African country (CRAIS; MCCLENDON, 2013). The white South African police force served as a violent enforcer of apartheid, imprisoning and killing any Black South African that dared to act against the system (CRAIS; MCCLENDON, 2013; MARTIN, 2020). In the 1980s, Black South African organized resistance to apartheid grows with organized boycotts civil actions leading to deadly encounters with South African police forces (TRABOLD, 2018; MARTIN, 2020). The heightened violence of the all-white police force toward Black South Africans was put on global display, as international movements to boycott apartheid South Africa grew stronger than ever (KLEIN, 2009). Beam's citing of both of these instances of violence against Black people that he witnessed nationally and internationally shows the necessity of intentional Black community. Beam does this to not simply take for granted the community homeplace that Black people form with one another, but to outline why this homeplace is necessary. In a world that actively creates systems that work to attack Black well-being globally, Beam argues that it is only through collective community support that they

will find an escape from these anti-Black realities. Therefore, despite the homophobic realities that exist for Black gay men in their return to Black homeplaces of all kinds, Beam insists that they “are coming home with our heads held up high” (BEAM, 1986). This return home to Black community spaces is essential for Beam because it opens the potential for collective struggle against an anti-Black world.

Beam continues to ponder on this call for Black community love, and delves deeper into what interior and exterior work that requires for Black people. Beam writes,

Black men loving Black men is an autonomous agenda for the eighties, which is not rooted in any particular sexual, political, or class affiliation, but in our mutual survival...Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgment of responsibility. We take care of our own kind when the night grows cold and silent. These days the nights are cold-blooded and the silence echoes with complicity. (BEAM, 1986, p. 191)

The love that Beam speaks of is not necessarily romantic in nature but rooted in a familial and communal connection. He suggests that the return home for Black gay men should reject the normalization of one Black subject and embrace and fight for a plurality of Black subjectivities. This sort of love requires an acknowledgement of a shared destiny and acceptance of the fight of your sibling as your own. Hemphill and Beam chart a path home to Black and LGBT homeplaces that rejects the fracturing of self to provide for a love that fights for the freedoms of all Black people and all LGBT people. While Hemphill never suggests that the journey to this kind of open interaction is easy, he acknowledges the importance of this journey home for Black gay men, saying “There is no place else to go that will be worth so much effort and love” (HEMPHILL, 1991, p. xliii).

While both Beam and Hemphill emphasize the importance of the transformation of black homeplaces to be supportive and inclusive of Black gay men, the central goal of Beam and Hemphill’s work is for Black gay men to find community in one another. Understanding that the process of change and acceptance amongst the larger Black

community is a long and ongoing process and that Black gay men do not have the time to wait for that change, Beam and Hemphill insist that looking inward to their own community and fortifying intra-community support is crucial to beating back the loneliness of silence and death. Essex Hemphill insists,

What is most clear for black gay men is this: We have to do for ourselves now, and for each other now, what no one has ever done for us. We have to be there for one another and trust less the adhesions of kisses and semen to bind us. Our only guarantee of survival is that which we create from our own self-determination. (HEMPHILL, 1991, p. xlii)

Hemphill returns to Beam's argument that romance and sexual intimacy is not the central structure which will rescue Black gay men from loneliness. Hemphill writes this as death caused by the AIDS epidemic continues to quickly and painfully rob Black gay men from their lovers (COHEN, 1999). And even amongst those who were lucky to not lose romantic partners, Hemphill acknowledges the anti-Black cultures prevalent in gay male social spaces that leave many Black gay men lonely without the chance to find intimate partners. These issues surely structure Hemphill's analysis that romantic love is not what will save Black gay men from isolation, but rather community love built upon mutual survival. Hemphill continues his argument, saying, "We cannot continue to exist without clinics, political organizations, human services, and cultural institutions that we create to support, sustain, and affirm us" (HEMPHILL, 1991, p. xlii). Hemphill's message here is clear: while romantic intimacy might spare Black gay men individually from the ravages from anti-Black and homophobic state violence, collective organization is the only way to work towards community preservation. The work of cultivating a Black gay literary space and resurrecting the community's archive is done to hold a mirror up to Black gay men in a world that refuses to reflect their likeness. Beam and Hemphill do this not simply for Black men to see themselves, but for them to

see the importance in building Black gay community support. For Beam and Hemphill this imperative is a matter of the life or death of their community.

### **Conclusion: The Connections Between the Black Gay World of the 1980s**

Through tireless organizing, the founders of Adé Dúdú and the authors of the edited volumes *In The Life* and *Brother to Brother* make space for Black gay men's existence and rescue their voices from the silence of erasure. During the waning years of a military dictatorship in Brazil that for many years violently sought to crush any kind of politically democratic engagement by the masses, especially organizing which sought to undercut the racially democratic image of the Brazilian nation-state, Adé Dúdú bravely organized to create a collective for Black gay men to speak out against anti-Blackness and homophobia in Brazil. In the midst of a devastating epidemic affecting gay and trans communities in the United States in which a conservative government refused to acknowledge and seemingly welcomed the rising deaths in these communities, Black gay men collectively resurrected their voices from death and obliteration through the edited volumes produced by Beam and Hemphill. These moments of 1980s Black gay activism across two nations charted a path toward collective visibility where little visibility existed prior. The connected themes across the Black gay activism in both countries outlines global praxes of Black gay organizing and resistance.

In Mandela and Hora's retelling of the story of Adé Dúdú as well as Beam and Hemphill's writing in *Brother to Brother* and *In the Life*, both outline the importance of Black gay men's collective connection to the larger Black community while pushing a critical interrogation of how Black gay men interact with these Black homeplaces. The founding of Adé Dúdú within the Movimento Negro Unificado was essential to their identity as a Black gay organization. Evidenced by their seeking to continually dialogue



with the larger Black movement, originally forming themselves as a subgroup of the Movimento Negro Unificado and publicizing their organization at Black cultural events like performance events of the afro-bloco Ilê Aiyê, they sought to find ways to remain part of the Black movement while pushing the movement to deconstruct dominant ideologies of homophobia and adopt progressive ideas around sexuality. For Mandela and Hora, even the fight against homophobia within the Movimento Negro Unificado was hierarchically more important work than working to deconstruct anti-Blackness within newly formed Grupo Gay da Bahia. Similarly, the importance of continued connection to Black communities for Beam and Hemphill was evidenced through their construction of home and the continual call for a return home. Beam and Hemphill construct the concept of home beyond the physical location of familial housing to see a homeplace in all Black community spaces that provide refuge from an anti-Black world. Both Beam and Hemphill write about the difficulties of silencing their identities to return to these Black homeplaces, and instead push Black gay men to come home fully and openly to force Black homes to deal with the question of sexuality. Replacing silence as a dominating force that has controlled Black gay men's interactions with home, Beam and Hemphill call for love to replace that silence, insisting that acceptance by Black homeplaces of Black gay men is a question of mutual survival. Neither Beam, Hemphill, nor any of the members of Adé Dúdu push forth an uncritical view of the struggles of remaining within Black communities. However, they all insist that to struggle with one another, gay and straight alike, to grow together is distinctly advantageous to the alternative of growing (or dying) apart.

While these two groups of Black gay men in Brazil and the United States sought to maintain their connections to the larger Black community, both saw the importance in Black gay autonomy through collectivity and visibility. Joseph Beam's bold insistence upon the revolutionary act of Black gay men loving one another serves as a call for Black gay unity to fight lonely deaths many Black gay men faced during the AIDS

crisis. As Darius Bost (2018) argues in his analysis of Beam and Hemphill's writing, US-based Black gay writers of the 1980s felt the intense urgency to form literary communities to resurrect a Black gay archive and save themselves from social death while facing down the threat of physical death that the AIDS epidemic posed. Constructing Black gay literary communities meant mutual Black gay physical and psychic survival for Beam and Hemphill. Similarly, after their split from the Movimento Negro Unificado, Adé Dúdu continually fought to show the necessity of an autonomous Black gay collective. The pushback they encountered from people who insisted that there was no need for a separate movement when there already existed the Movimento Negro Unificado or Grupo Gay da Bahia showed the importance of Black gay men articulating their own struggle. Adé Dúdu's research study on the plight of Black gay men to justify their own collective shows the lengths they were willing to go to educate their communities about the importance of an autonomous Black gay movement. Above all, these two groups of Black gay men sought to construct a new era of Black gay visibility to reject the silence demanded of them by homophobia and anti-Blackness.

In their search for autonomous visibility as Black gay men, one glaring question remains across both Adé Dúdu as well as Beam and Hemphill's two edited volumes: where are the (lesbian and bisexual) women? Both in my interviews with Hora and Mandela, and in the writing of Beam and Hemphill, all of these gay men point to the importance of Black women in helping to creating space for Black gay men to articulate the specific intersectional struggles they faced. Mandela points out how the Black woman activist who critiqued patriarchy in the Movimento Negro Unificado helped to give voice to Black gay activists like Passarinho. Mandela insists that moments like this allowed space for Adé Dúdu to argue for a Black gay men's subgroup in the MNU. And yet the question remains why this group pushed for a Black gay men's organization, instead of one that embraced all non-heterosexual Black people, regardless of gender.

Black Brazilian women's leadership was incredibly important in this second wave of Black activism during the Abertura period. The work of women like Lélia Gonzalez, Beatriz Nascimento, Thereza Santos, Sueli Carneiro, and many others was crucial in the founding of the Movimento Negro Unificado and led to the creation of a Black women's movement alongside it (GONZALEZ, 1985; CARNEIRO; SANTOS, 1985; NASCIMENTO; RATTIS 2021). This Black women's movement articulated the specific interlocking oppressions Black women faced, responded to both sexism in the Black movement and racism in the feminist movement, and proposed policies that worked to free Black women in Brazil from the chains of domination (CALDWELL, 2007; NASCIMENTO, 2007). Yet, as Flavia Santos de Araujo shows in her work on the writing from Miriam Alves, an active participant of the Black women's movement, promoting an understanding of the intersections of race and gender did not always include making space to allow conversations about sexuality as well. Araujo outlines how when Alves sought to write about homoerotic intimacy between women in a Black movement literary journal *Cadernos Negros* she felt pressured to write these stories under a pseudonym (ARAÚJO, 2017). While the journal welcomed stories about Black (heterosexual) women, these stories submitted under a pseudonym about non-heterosexual intimacy between Black women were seen as causing problems. This story goes to show that, while a budding Black women's movement worked to give voice for Black women to speak for themselves like never before, Black lesbian and bisexual women were still largely without a platform to speak on their sexualities, very similar to the struggles Black gay men felt in the Movimento Negro Unificado. While Mandela outlined the attempt at inviting Black lesbian and bisexual women to join the subgroup and highlighted the specific difficulty Black non-heterosexual women faced, different than Black gay men, the question remains as to how these women sought refuge from the silencing of their sexualities in this moment of Brazilian political resurgence.

Likewise, Beam and Hemphill both point to the importance of Black lesbian feminist literary communities in shaping the push for these two Black gay men's edited volumes, but they also make the choice to make these volumes solely structured around Black gay men's writing, devoid of women's participation. Different from the context of Brazil, the 1970s and 1980s served as a renaissance of sorts for Black lesbian and womanist poetry and literature in the United States led by authors like Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, June Jordan, Jewelle Gomez, Alice Walker, and many others writing both solo pieces and collective works (FERGUSON, 2004; ARAÚJO, 2017). Beam and Hemphill insisted that the edited volumes produced by Black feminists and Black lesbian feminists of this generation that reconstructed an archive of Black women of varying experiences inspired them to do the same for Black gay men. Despite the fact that Black lesbians feminists had made ample literary space for non-heterosexual women to become visible and work through questions of Black women's sexuality, the absence of women in the pieces in *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* begs the question of how these works might have looked differently if they worked to tell a larger Black gay and lesbian story.

Despite these questions, the work of the creators of *Adé Dúdu* as well as *In the Life* and *Brother to Brother* remains an incredibly important turning point in the archive of Black gay history. All of these works across both national contexts created space for collective Black gay subjectivity when there existed no prior blueprints on how to do so. They dared to create Black gay spaces and worlds in spite of the risks of rejection and isolation. These Black gay worlds they sought to create and document, both upon the page and in human interaction, sought to provide refuge to Black gay men, but also worked to challenge Black gay men to think about the varied ways white supremacy and heteropatriarchy works to oppress them and allow them to oppress others. Beyond community space making and archival work they sought collective transformation to

create worlds where Black gay men, and others oppressed similarly and different to them, would not be forced to face community exile and lonely deaths any longer.

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**“Homens negros amando homens negros”:  
militância gay negra dos anos 1980 no Brasil e nos EUA**

**Resumo:** Quando o escritor e militante gay negro Joseph Beam declarou: “Homens negros amando homens negros é o ato revolucionário da década de 1980” ele previu ousadamente uma década da criação de mundos gays negros. Em contextos nacionais no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos, gays negros enfrentaram turbulências de política e de saúde pública ao enfrentarem uma ditadura militar em declínio no Brasil e a crise mortal da AIDS nos Estados Unidos. A natureza terrível desses contextos deu origem à construção inovadora de comunidades e literaturas gays negras em ambos os países ao longo da década de 80. Este artigo investiga essa militância gay negra da década de 1980, com foco na criação do primeiro grupo gay negro Adé Dúdú em Salvador da Bahia, Brasil, no início dos anos 1980 e na publicação de *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* e *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, duas das primeiras antologias da literatura gay negra dos Estados Unidos na segunda metade da década de 1980. Nesse artigo eu mostro que os homens gays negros usaram esta década para descobrir o significado do lar para eles e onde podem encontrá-lo. Eles criaram espaço para serem plenos e livres com outros homens gays negros, enquanto tentaram acabar com seu silêncio sobre sua sexualidade dentro os espaços da comunidade negra mais ampla. Ao fim, refletindo sobre as conexões entre as lutas desses dois grupos de gays negros divididos em dois países, este artigo delinea as culturas interrelacionadas da resistência gay negra mundial que a década de 1980 mostra no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos.

**Palavras-chave:** Interseccionalidade. Militância. A Ditadura Brasileira. AIDS. Diáspora Negra.

**Submitted: Nov 17th 2022**

**Approved: March 8th 2023**