

# The Doubly Discriminated in the Land of the Free: Exclusion and Empowerment of Queer People of Color from the 1960s to Modern America

Xiyuan Lin\*

Loomis Chaffee School, Windsor 06905, Connecticut, United States of America

\*Corresponding author: Xiyuan Lin, xiyuanlin55@gmail.com

**Copyright:** © 2021 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

**Abstract:** This paper explores the double ostracization queer Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) endured in history, as an intersectional result of racist exclusion in the predominantly white narrative of the gay liberation movement and homophobia within oppressed racial groups. It describes how this double discrimination led to disproportionate impacts on the community in the AIDS epidemic from 1980s to 1990s. In the process, the paper restores the erased narratives of queer activists of color, showing how this community united to resist the double discrimination and to speak up through literature and alliances that ultimately overcame some of the societal barriers. Looking forward, the paper argues that a similar pattern is emerging in contemporary America with a disproportionate impact on queer and BIPOC people through the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. Drawing on these insights, the paper concludes with the progress the American society has made toward equity for all.

**Keywords:** Discrimination; Exclusion and empowerment; Progress

**Online publication:** October 27, 2022

## 1. Introduction

As Phil Wilson, Founder of Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum (BGLLF) said “When the world beats you up for being Black, then you could turn to your family for emotional strength; but when the world beats you up for being black and gay, you have no place to turn”<sup>[1]</sup>. From the 1960s to the 1990s, various societal advancements propelled progress toward a more equitable America. Before the 1960s, anti-immigration and anti-Vietnam war sentiments as well as prevalent racism strengthened marginalization against Asian Americans, Latinos and they were often considered “invisible” in national politics, and the Black community endured “a time of danger and turmoil” as Jim Crow Laws and segregation plagued America while queer people of all backgrounds suffered in silence as they were afraid to come out of the closet due to potential backlash<sup>[2,3]</sup>.

However, from the 1960s to the 1990s, through the Asian American movement, the Chicano Rights Movement, the Black Civil Rights movement, and the gay liberation movement, voices from various oppressed minority groups shattered their silence and fought against centuries-old injustices<sup>[4]</sup>. Despite this rise in visibility of minority groups, those who identified as queer and as people of color were often neglected by both worlds due to the racism permeating the LGBTQ+ community and the widespread homophobia in communities of color. This paper aims to underscore how the predominantly white narrative in the LGBTQ+ community deterred people of color from the mainstream queer rights movement as well

as the disproportionate impacts that AIDS epidemic in the 1980s and the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* had on marginalized queer BIPOC, ultimately preventing America from becoming the “land of the free.”

## **2. The double ostracization queer BIPOC in early America**

Personal stories from the 1970s to the 1990s reflect this prevalent discrimination and marginalization in queer communities of color, and the intolerance of homosexuality was especially prevalent in churches or other religious spaces — places often considered the core of many minority communities in America <sup>[4]</sup>. For example, having been told “if he did not mend his ways, he would go to hell” by his Christian minister and that he was his parents’ “disgrace” after he came out, Black LGBTQ+ minister Carl Bean encountered homophobia from his church throughout his life <sup>[5]</sup>. Similarly, Muslim leader Louis Farrakhan claimed that “society is on the decline when men start inclining towards other men and women incline towards other women” during a 1989 speech to more than 2,000 followers in California <sup>[5]</sup>. Cleo Manago, an African American activist, mentioned how he grew up hearing from his church as well as friends and family that “homosexuality” belonged to “only scrawny white boys” <sup>[5]</sup>. Cheryl Anne Medoza, a Filipina woman who serves as deputy director of Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center in Hollywood, highlights how she never came out to her parents because homosexuality “is just about taboo” in many Asian families and that Asians “are vehemently opposed to any type of activity that shatters the model minority myth” <sup>[5]</sup>. Her silence was a product of not solely homophobia within the Asian community but also racism within the greater American society. Countless other LGBTQ+ people of color like Medoza encounter the dual effects of their sexuality and race daily. Ultimately, the racism among the LGBTQ+ community hindered not only queer BIPOC from finding their true selves within the queer community but also the progress of the LGBTQ+ movement as queer people of color were seldomly empowered by it.

Neglected by mainstream movements for LGBTQ+ rights and for equity for people of color, queer BIPOC became doubly discriminated against and ignored during the AIDS epidemic from the early 1980s to the late 1990s. Starting in San Francisco, California, with the first American patient Ken Horne, the AIDS epidemic quickly spread through American society while targeting LGBTQ+ communities <sup>[6]</sup>. Viewed as more accepting for white homosexual couples than for queer BIPOC, countless voices from LGBTQ+ people of color became neglected while many “distort[ed] the realities and struggles of those who have died” <sup>[1]</sup>. As 1989 federal statistics highlighted, “43% of all people with AIDS are members of minority groups, and more than 70% of them acquired the disease through homosexual or bisexual affairs” <sup>[5]</sup>. The disproportionate impact AIDS had on society was evident as Black Americans made up of 25% of AIDS patients as a whole, with half of all women and children suffering from AIDS being Black <sup>[5]</sup>. This was a product of the silencing forced upon the queer community as many societal barriers prevented LGBTQ+ people, specifically queer people of color, from speaking out and receiving help. Framed as “a white gay disease,” many queer people of color became silenced and uneducated on AIDS as they did not think the crisis applied to them <sup>[7]</sup>. Lydia Otero, a 32-year-old queer Latina who leads Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos, noted that “it was very hard for [Latiné queer people] to get AIDS information or pamphlets on gay services translated into Spanish because it was not considered important enough” <sup>[5]</sup>. The language barrier as well as the lack of support for queer BIPOC silenced countless LGBTQ+ people of color while the racist, the homophobic society made it difficult for them to become informed and avoid AIDS. Moreover, due to the lack of visibility that plagued queer people of color, the American society as a whole often ignored the intersectionality between race and sexuality as well as gender identity. With the rise in AIDS, however, “people who wanted to think there was no such thing as a gay black man or a gay Latino had a rude awakening,” said Carl Bean, a Black queer archbishop who founded the Minority AIDS Project in South-Central Los Angeles in 1985 <sup>[5]</sup>.

The racism plaguing predominantly white LGBTQ+ establishments and the homophobia prevalent

among prominent civil rights groups as well as traditional systems also led to the disproportionate effects on queer communities of color during the AIDS epidemic. For example, Steve Schulte, one of West Hollywood City Council's two white gay Councilman, said that "minority issues are rarely discussed by the Council" and highlighted that the Council "denied grants to the Minority AIDS Project while it helps finance other mainstream AIDS groups, including AIDS project Los Angeles," an organization with a board that consisted predominantly of white, gay men <sup>[8,5]</sup>. The discrimination of queer BIPOC from organizations that support racial equality was also prevalent. For example, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was a civil rights organization that played a pivotal role in the Black civil rights movement as it aimed to abolish segregation, discrimination, and racial violence <sup>[9]</sup>. However, their activism did not extend to the queer Black community: Althea Simmons, NAACP's chief lobbyist, mentioned in an interview that NAACP has "no position on homosexuality, period" <sup>[5]</sup>. Furthermore, the widespread racism within the healthcare industry in the 1980s further discriminated against queer people of color as companies such as Empire Blue Cross resisted claims surrounding AIDS and prevented queer people, especially LGBTQ+ BIPOC, from receiving the funds they need to restricting insurance money. Since many people of color were systematically prevented from receiving higher education through practices such as segregation, these communities could not fight against the healthcare system like their white counterparts often could and suffered in silence. Ultimately, the lack of support for queer people of color made it more difficult for them to educate themselves during the AIDS epidemic, sparking mistreatment from homophobic civil rights groups and racist LGBTQ+ affinity organizations as well as other societal establishments on a daily basis and becoming doubly disadvantaged.

However, marginalized queer minorities did not succumb to societal pressures from the LGBTQ+ community or the greater American society; instead, they empowered each other in their fight against injustices through performing arts and literature, the creation of affinity spaces, as well as various conferences with the theme of fostering inclusion for LGBTQ+ BIPOC communities. From the 1970s to the 1990s, arts and literature from marginalized minority queer people flourished as newspapers, performance groups, and writing generated awareness among the queer community and others. For example, in this time period, newspapers such as BLK targeting Black queer voices and *Unidad*, which was centered around Hispanic LGBTQ+ voices, were distributed throughout predominantly-Black and predominantly-Hispanic communities, respectively, in Los Angeles to raise awareness and urge queer BIPOC to come out of the closet <sup>[10]</sup>. In 1979, a feminist Asian women's performance group called *Unbound Feet* consisting of Asian lesbians such as Kitty Tsui and Merle Woo strengthened visibility for queer people of color as they gained success despite the program explicitly stating their sexuality <sup>[11]</sup>. Outside of the group, Tsui and Woo highlighted the exclusion they faced from family through writing. As the first Chinese-American lesbian to ever publish a poetry collection, Tsui's 1983 poem *A Chinese Banquet* underscores her struggles with queerness as she wants to "tell her: 'mother, I'm gay...but she will not listen'" and "it is not what she wants to hear" <sup>[12]</sup>. Merle Woo's 1980 letter to her mother also emphasizes her struggles as Woo's mother mentioned that she supports Woo "in everything [she does] except...speaking out" about her sexuality <sup>[13]</sup>. *Black/Out*, a magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, highlights that the "[Gay rights movement] has failed to embrace us" and "the Black civil rights movement seems slow to add gender and sexual politics to its agenda" <sup>[14]</sup>. From struggles in expressing their true selves to their families to societal obstacles, literature within queer communities of color helped these activists shed light on their voices and fight against the predominantly white narrative.

Similarly, from the 1960s to the 1990s, diverse activists around the United States also shed light on the exclusion of BIPOC in supposedly accepting queer spaces and brought marginalized communities together through creating affinity spaces as well as alliances. "[The LGBTQ+ movement] has spread to black neighborhoods in South-Central [Los Angeles], Latino neighborhoods in East L.A. and Asian areas

like Chinatown,” said Deborah Johnson, a Black lesbian activist <sup>[5]</sup>. Between 1975 and 1983, Chicana lesbian Diane Felix led the Gay Latino Alliance (GALA) in San Francisco Bay Area, providing support for hundreds of queer Latiné people who “encountered racism and discrimination in predominantly white spaces...and aspired to organize politically” while wanting to bond with those from similar backgrounds <sup>[15]</sup>. After sensing that gay bars “catered to a white clientele” and “no one wanted to meet people like [him]...they wanted to meet blondes with blue eyes,” Tai Yamamoto, a Japanese American gay man, organized a social group for gay Asian American and Pacific Islanders, gaining around 200 members that met to discuss their gender identities and sexual orientation while exploring the intersectionality between their culture and their LGBTQ+ identity in this unique, accepting space <sup>[5]</sup>. Similarly, groups such as the Latino Lesbian and Gay Organization (LLEGO, meaning “arrived” in Spanish) in Washington and the National Black Gay and Lesbian Leadership Forum in Los Angeles empowered minority groups to lean on one another against both homophobia and racism. “Groups like these,” said Black lesbian activist Deborah Johnson, “allows us to be both Black and lesbian or gay, without having to choose between the two in our activism” <sup>[5]</sup>.

### **3. The current situation of queer BIPOC**

Though many queer BIPOC have broken the centuries-long silence enforced upon them, they are still doubly discriminated by those of the same racial community and the LGBTQ+ community in contemporary America. A 2020 survey highlights that queer people of color “face higher rates of mistreatment in employment, the criminal justice system, and their personal lives than their white LGBTQ counterparts,” with 24% of queer BIPOC reporting discriminatory treatment from a health care provider while 17% of white respondents reported the same <sup>[16]</sup>. Furthermore, in 2017, the AIDS epidemic continues to haunt queer BIPOC as the disease was considered as a white gay disease and many queer communities of color failed to recognize its true impacts <sup>[17]</sup>. And this pattern repeats itself through the overturn of the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) decision, women across the United States obtained their right to receive abortions, or a practice in which a doctor terminates a pregnancy, without excessive governmental restrictions. On December 1st, 2021, SCOTUS heard oral arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, which questioned the constitutionality of Mississippi’s 15-week abortion ban; and on June 24th, 2022, SCOTUS in a 5-4 decision overturned *Roe v. Wade*, thus giving state governments more freedom in executing limitations surrounding abortion and disproportionately impacts communities of color as well as queer communities <sup>[18,19]</sup>.

Even before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, many people already faced countless barriers in obtaining abortion care, from discriminatory insurance coverage bans such as the Hyde Amendment, which prohibits federal funding for abortion, to forced waiting periods during which women must receive counseling prior to abortion. Furthermore, transgender and nonbinary people often have fewer resources and often face stigma in the healthcare system, worsened by the transphobic laws within the states as well as restriction on gender-affirming healthcare <sup>[4]</sup>. In addition, abortion providers could be scarce — six states have only one abortion provider while Oklahoma has no abortion clinics — or unaffordable, leaving those with fewer resources behind as they are forced to give birth.

When *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, these gaps widened. 26 states were certain or likely to move quickly to ban abortion while 13 among the 26 have “trigger laws” that are designed to take effect automatically: Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Dakota, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wyoming. Some states also have multiple bans; for example, 9 states have pre-*Roe* bans, 11 states have early gestational age bans, and some states even prohibit abortion under all or nearly all circumstances, “a tactic widely viewed as an attempt to provide a legal challenge to [*Roe v. Wade*].” In these cases, the state officials will determine which ban to enforce when *Roe* is

overturned. On the opposite side of the spectrum, 16 states had laws that “protect the right to have an abortion up until the fetus can live independently outside the womb” [18]. For example, the General Assembly in Connecticut approved the “safe harbor law” that went into effect on July 1st, 2022, clarifying in statute who may perform abortions in the first trimester and protecting abortion seekers from other states as well as abortion providers [18].

However, the idea that one must cross state borders for abortion conflicts with the American founding ideal of “freedom for all” as the freedom to get abortions are only for those in certain states and those who have the financial capability to travel to other states. Furthermore, many of the states with the harshest laws against abortion are clustered in the Midwest, the South, and the Plains, so the difficulty in accessing abortion varies by geographic region as well since it’s likely that a woman in Louisiana will have a more challenging time than a woman living on the border between Utah and Colorado.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The overturn widens the social and financial gap within American society, especially targeting marginalized groups such as communities of color, queer communities, differently-abled people, and low-income communities in states that have trigger laws and beyond. Approximately 75% of abortion patients have low income, Black patients accounting for 28% of all abortion patients, while Hispanic patients accounting for 25%, and White patients accounting for 39% in 2014 [19]. This means that the majority of abortion patients are people of color who already face constant discrimination, and this gap already mirrors the racial disparities among patients during the AIDS epidemic.

Although sexual and racial minorities rose to visibility with various social movements from 1960s to 1990s, the predominantly white narrative in the queer community neglected queer BIPOC, resulting in disproportionate impacts on the group during both the 1980s AIDS epidemic and overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. Ultimately, the impacts of the exclusion of LGBTQ+ BIPOC from the LGBTQ+ movement still plague modern American society, hindering progress toward gender equity as well as financial and racial equity in American society. However, similar to how queer communities of color bonded and rose above societal barriers when they faced the AIDS epidemic of 1980, protests have sparked across the nation against the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. With enough people in the movement against racism, sexism, and homophobia, as well as more awareness and recognition of oppressed narratives, America will become a true land of the free for all and achieve equity in the healthcare system and beyond.

#### **Disclosure statement**

The author declares no conflict of interest.

#### **References**

- [1] McManus S, 2003, Review: Book Reviews. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3): 979–983.
- [2] Washington DA, 2022, CliffsNotes on *A Lesson Before Dying*, CliffsNotes, viewed August 20, 2022, <https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/l/a-lesson-before-dying/book-summary>
- [3] Nittle NK, 2020, *Understanding the History and Goals of the Chicano Movement*. ThoughtCo, viewed August 20, 2022, <https://www.thoughtco.com/chicano-movement-brown-and-proud-2834583>
- [4] *The Civil Rights Movement and the Second Reconstruction*, 1945-1968, n.d., viewed August 20, 2022, <https://history.house.gov/Exhibitions-and-Publications/BAIC/Historical-Essays/Keeping-the-Faith/Civil-Rights-Movement/>

- [5] Thompson G, 1989, Minority Gays Find Strength in Unity, Los Angeles Times (1923-1995), Apr 30, 1989.
- [6] Markowitz J, 2021, AIDS Crisis Timeline, History, June 14, 2021.
- [7] Royles D, 2017, Race, Homosexuality, and the AIDS Epidemic, Black Perspectives, viewed August 20, 2022, <https://www.aaihs.org/race-homosexuality-and-the-aids-epidemic/>
- [8] APLA Health: History, n.d., viewed August 20, 2022, <https://aplahealth.org/about/history/>
- [9] Bynum TL, 2011, Review of Long Is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the NAACP. *The Journal of African American History* 96(3): 416–419
- [10] Meyer D, 2012, An Intersectional Analysis of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) People’s Evaluations of Anti-Queer Violence. *Gender and Society*, 26(6): 849–873.
- [11] Sueyoshi A, 2016, Breathing Fire: Remembering Asian Pacific American Activism in Queer History 2016, in *LGBTQ America: A Theme Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, National Park Foundation, Washington, DC.
- [12] Kitty Tsui, 1983, A Chinese Banquet, in *The Words of a Woman Who Breathes Fire*, Spinsters, Ink, New York.
- [13] Woo M, 1980, Letter to Ma, viewed August 20, 2022, [https://philife.nd.edu/assets/308441/fullsize/merlewoo\\_lettertoma\\_modelapology.pdf](https://philife.nd.edu/assets/308441/fullsize/merlewoo_lettertoma_modelapology.pdf)
- [14] Gerald G, 1986, Black Pride and Solidarity: The New Movement of Black Lesbians and Gays, in *The Magazine of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays*, National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays, Inc, Washington, DC.
- [15] Cabello T, 2019, Gay Latino Alliance (GALA), in *Global Encyclopedia of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer History*, Gale, Michigan, 587–590.
- [16] Mahowald L, 2021, LGBTQ People of Color Encounter Heightened Discrimination, Center for American Progress, viewed August 20, 2022, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/black-lgbtq-individuals-experience-heightened-levels-discrimination/>
- [17] Spence LK, 2010, Episodic Frames, HIV/AIDS, and African American Public Opinion. *Political Research Quarterly*, 63(2): 257–268.
- [18] Mangan D, Kevin B, 2022, Supreme Court Overturns Roe v. Wade, Ending 50 Years of Federal Abortion Rights, CNBC, June 24, 2022.
- [19] Cross L, Nash E, Guarnieri I, 2021, Resources for Journalists: 15 Points to Consider When Covering Abortion, the Supreme Court and a Potential ‘Post-Roe World, Guttmacher Institute, viewed August 20, 2022, <https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2021/11/resources-journalists-15-points-consider-when-covering-abortion-supreme-court-and>

**Publisher’s note**

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.