REGARDS CROISÉS
sur le monde anglophone

DISSIDENCE ET IDENTITÉS PLURIELLES

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Identity, Dissidence and Urban Boundaries
The Making of an African American Gay Nightlife in Bronzeville (1935-1965)

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On December 31st, 1936, Clarence Johnson (pseud.), a 22 year-old Chicago southsider celebrated the New Year at The Cabin Inn, one of the most popular lounges of his neighborhood. Female impersonator by night, dishwasher at the Wabash YMCA by day, Clarence had become a fixture in the numerous homo-friendly venues of Bronzeville, the predominantly Black neighborhood of the Chicago's South Side. On that particular night, Clarence had been hired by Nathaniel Ivy, the White northsider who owned The Cabin Inn, to perform with a host of female impersonators on the club's famous stage. Entertaining the mixed crowd of homosexuals, heterosexuals, local Blacks and White northsiders (who had "slummed" to Bronzeville's homo-friendly cabarets in order to seek interracial sexual encounters), "Carol Lee," "Joan Crawford," and "Nancy Kelly" (Clarence Johnson) performed in front of the club's habitués. Though homosexuality was not accepted by America's mainstream culture, Bronzeville's club owners often turned a blind eye to non-normative sexual manifestations, which often occurred across the color line.

Almost thirty years later, on a hot summer evening in 1965, dance instructor and female impersonator Jacques Cristion, visited Bronzeville's homo-friendly Kitty Kat Club, owned by an African American southsider. The differences from

the Cabin Inn were stark. Unlike its ancestor, the Kitty Kat Club never presented reviews of female impersonators; Jacques Cristion therefore always attended the performances dressed "as a man." Furthermore, Whites had deserted the homo-friendly clubs, following African American heterosexuals who had also left these venues a few years earlier. Since these trends left the patronage almost entirely Afro-Homo, the Kitty Kat Club was considered to be Bronzeville's "first Black gay club." In a thirty year time period, Bronzeville's homo-friendly nightlife had shifted from an "integrated" to a segregated culture.

This paper sets out to explain the emergence of a racially segregated homo-friendly nightlife. I argue that this nightlife was regulated by a complex interplay of acts of dissidence originating from both White and Black neighborhoods and aiming at redefining racial, sexual and urban boundaries. First, the transgression of urban boundaries initiated by Whites in the 1930s bore the seeds of the coming segregation by revealing the incompatibility of Black and White homosexual discourses. Second, the emergence of a racial segregation in Bronzeville's gay nightlife was not only a natural outcome due to the development of an autonomous homo-friendly culture in a progressively hostile environment, but also one actively sought by African Americans and Afro-Homos who vigorously rejected Whites' privileges. Third, the sustainment of this racially and sexually segregated culture within Bronzeville's boundaries was made possible by the emergence of a distinct and autonomous Afro-Homo folklore, developed by the community as a form of resistance.

Despite its critical role in gay male culture and politics, the history of the African American gay homosexuals has been under-documented. However it does merit scholarly scrutiny, not only because of its relevance to the recent work of cultural critics interested in the expressions of resistance and dissidence within the Black community but also because this history is interwoven with the redefinition of racial, sexual and class identities in the urban environment.

Most historical scholarship in American gay history ignores race, and therefore naturalizes whiteness by assuming that the experiences of Whites are applicable to other homosexual subgroups. For example, in *Sexual Politics, Sexual*

Communities, D'Emilio describes how, after World War II, the emergence of a gay bar culture enabled homosexuals to gain a measure of independence from their families. However, the author ignores that many African Americans frequently maintained their roots within Black communities and led their social lives within Black neighborhoods. In a similar way, *Gay New York*, limits discussions of race to its treatment of Harlem and rarely extends this analysis to the rest of the city.

However, more recent developments in gay historiography underscore the importance of using race as a lens to understand the construction of urban gay cultures. For example, cultural critic Brett Beemyn has examined the growth and change of gay communities in Second World War-era Washington, D.C., coming to the conclusion that one of the many impacts of migration was "the entrenchment of race, class and gender segregation among gays in Washington." Although the number of gay bars grew during the 1940s and 50s, this expansion took place in "increasingly segregated spaces," has noted Beemyn (Beemyn 183). In a similar way, in his study of Chicago's South Side's drag subculture, historian Allen Drexel has also written about the significance race played in determining public and private spaces in Bronzeville's gay world. While, in most studies, African American homosexuals are mainly analyzed in their interactions with White gays, I take here a different stand by defining Afro-Homo culture through acts of dissidence that occurred mainly within the boundaries of Bronzeville. This article will therefore reexamine the previous limitations of discussions of race and racial difference in gay history, in order to provide a sharper analysis including all components of nightlife culture.

Urban boundaries and dissidence : limits and discontents (1935-1940)

The recreational lifestyle Bronzeville offered was one of the numerous wonders that captured the attention and imagination of African American migrants at the beginning of the twentieth century. Bronzeville was home to the most popular Black theaters and lounges in the nation : the Savoy and Metropolitan Theaters featured top Black entertainers and orchestras; at Club DeLisa, Dreamland Café

and the Pershing Hotel, one could find the likes of Joe and Marva Louis, Eartha Kitt or Nat King Cole mingling with the "sporting crowd." In these venues, while jazz music provided a musical signature for the neighborhood, it was also the soundtrack to an atmosphere wherein a certain "vice" culture could prosper. Bronzeville's inhabitants would attend these clubs and lounges to listen to musicians like King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton, while being aware they could be solicited by the numerous male and female prostitutes who worked at nearby brothels.

The "vice district," around 35th street and State Street in Bronzeville, was an integral part of the lives of African Americans who developed Afro-Homo activities and identities in the anonymity of the city. While researching Chicago's Afro-Homo subculture, University of Chicago graduate student Conrad Bentzen claimed that most "Negro boys" he interviewed "start[ed] early in life in going to gambling and vice houses," explaining that "the community in which [they] live[d] [was] infested with red light houses, and houses for vice, gambling, drinking, and dope" (Bentzen 2), which contributed in the student's mind, to the construction of the boys' non-normative sexual preference. While Bentzen's explanations now seem dubious, they were widely disseminated at the time as the social reformers of the Vice Commission of Chicago were also quick to point out how the anonymity of the city encouraged the growth of "illicit sexual outlets," and the difficulty of "controlling sexual behavior in a city the size of Chicago." In their report, they concluded that an individual living in Chicago could essentially "live any life he pleases, so far as his personal habits are concerned, and no one to be the wiser" (Vice Commission of Chicago 218). The vice district implanted in the heart of Bronzeville thus facilitated the establishment of several homo-friendly lounges in which African American homosexuals could, before constructing a community, sell themselves, exhibit their identity and occasionally establish social networks.

Bronzeville's Afro-Homo social world was therefore very different from Towertown's Near-North Side White gay neighborhood, where a distinct "gay community" had already emerged in the late thirties. As historian David K.

Johnson showed, the White "gay" world of Chicago's bohemian district was very active during the day, when homosexuals would frequent diners and cafes, the most popular of which was a branch of the Thompson's cafeteria chain. The fact that gay culture only revealed at night in Bronzeville marked a clear difference between Towertown's White gays and Bronzeville's African American homosexuals can be explained by the sociology of both cultures. Many White homosexuals had the possibility to move to Towertown from other Chicago neighborhoods because of the sexual freedom on display there. On the contrary, Bronzeville's Afro-Homo night-culture emerged from an economic and social milieu that prevented Afro-Homos from moving outside of their neighborhood. In Towertown, the willingness to construct a "gay community" with "gay institutions" was apparent but impossible in Bronzeville since African American homosexuals did not enjoy the freedom of a special enclave.

In the 1930s, Bronzeville's most popular homo-friendly lounges were Club DeLisa and the Cabin Inn, which catered to two different clienteles. Club DeLisa, also known as "Chicago's Cotton Club," was home to the most celebrated African American jazz musicians of the 1930s. The club appealed mainly to a mixed crowd of upscale heterosexuals, but Rudy Richardson, one of the entertainers and an openly gay pianist, brought a sizable gay audience. The Cabin Inn was a less respectable establishment than DeLisa and accepted its status as a homo-friendly club by presenting a daily review of female impersonators. Owned by Nat "Big" Ivy, the Cabin Inn appealed to working-class Whites and Blacks as there was no admission fee.

Female impersonators were nevertheless even more prominent at the famous Drag Ball extravaganzas that took place each Halloween in the neighborhood. But by the late thirties, balls for cross-dressing men had become a popular and familiar part of Bronzeville's nightlife. Their enormous popularity encouraged African American entrepreneurs to sponsor a number of similar events in Chicago and Drag Balls quickly spread across Bronzeville, thriving in the rich environs of the Ritz Pavilion and the Eighth Regiment Armory. Soon Dick Barrows's "Mae West" and Sam Fouchee's "Peggy Hopkins Joyce" joined "Marlene Dietrich,"

"Lila Lee," "Dixie Lee," "Gloria Swanson" and the most famous impersonators in the cabarets' chorus lines, becoming well known among habitués of these balls. Notably, officials not only sanctioned these balls but also dispatched police officers to guard them. As a result, Myles Vollmer, another University of Chicago student, described the Drag Balls as "the one occasion when official Chicago put its approval on the public appearance of its intermediate sex." Since they took place on Halloween and New Year's Eve, they were however able to pass as conventional masquerade balls (cross-dressing was allowed on Halloween). According to participants' recollections and contemporary reports in *Ebony* and *Jet*, these events became extremely popular in the forties and were frequented by Whites and Blacks, gays and straights, female and male impersonators. Although they were not understood to be "gay events," Afro-Homosexuals could be found in the audience, as well as on stage.

White "slummers" were drawn to Bronzeville's homo-friendly nightlife and Drag Balls in search of Afro-Homo performers who, as historian Chad Heap noted, had "reinvigorated the *primitiveness* and *exoticism* of Blackness and cross-racial sexuality." Responding to this demand, Bronzeville had developed a circuit of homo-friendly venues where African American homosexuals performed in racially mixed, hetero- and homo-social spaces. Numerous spectators were surprised by the racially integrated crowd they would find in these venues. Conrad Bentzen, for instance, noted that "every night, the place (was) crowded with both races, the Blacks and the Whites, both types of lovers, the homo and the hetero" (Bentzen 2).

The fact that Bronzeville's nightlife crowds were racially mixed is surprising for several reasons. Firstly, Chicago's authorities were overwhelmingly concerned with race mingling in these venues (more than with homosexual display). As the commission on race relations asserted, the police raided "*Black-and-tan* resorts because they [were] frequented by an interracial clientele" and the police chiefs regularly ordered that "colored saloon keepers keep [kept] White men out of their saloons and that White saloon keepers prevent[ed] colored men from entering their places of business" (Chicago Commission on Race Relations 323).

Secondly, Bronzeville's African American population was often reluctant to interact with Whites. In *Black Metropolis*, many of Drake and Cayton's interviewees confessed being cautious of a White person making "friendly overtures" and viewed him or her "with suspicions" (Drake and Cayton 36). Drake and Cayton assumed that even "the friendliest approaches by Whites are hedged by reservation and hesitancy, if not actual insecurity" (Drake and Cayton 67). Finally, views on interracial sexual relationships and interracial marriage were also quite radical. Several of Drake and Cayton's interviewees acknowledged not understanding why people would intermarry as "people get along better when they marry with their own race" (Drake and Cayton 133). At first sight, races seemed to mingle more freely in Bronzeville's homo-friendly venues than would be expected in mainstream Bronzeville.

Whites therefore dissented urban boundaries without disapproving of racial boundaries. This pseudo-integration was rendered possible by the limits of interaction between races in Bronzeville's nightlife. Homosexual Whites usually did not come to the South Side out of solidarity to their African American counterparts. Conrad Bentzen thus noted that "some of the customers [were] just there to watch and ridicule the homos," but that "many of the young homosexual men in the audience of this lounge seemed to relish their role as surrogate entertainers." According the sociology student,

> once the staged revue had drawn to a close, they [Afro-Homos] leapt from their chairs to dance with each other and began to wear makeup, even going so far as to put on artificial eyelashes. They camped it up, trading jokes and arranging sexual encounters with each other, while simultaneously and deliberately entertaining the cabaret's more staid patrons as part of an extended floor show. (Bentzen 2)

A surprised Bentzen further observed that some of these African American homosexuals were "inordinate exhibitionists," as "they attempt[ed] to attract as much attention as possible and keep [kept] walking from table to table between numbers talking to everyone in a very animated manner, placing their hands on their hips and fluttering handkerchiefs." According to Bentzen, "they seem[ed] to

feel that attention even in the form of ridicule is highly desirable" (Bentzen 2).

This situation did not encourage the formation of interpersonal connections or social networks among Afro-Homosexuals and therefore precluded the formation of an Afro-Homo community. As Jacques Cristion recalls, "Nobody knew about each other's day business" which can certainly be explained by the fact that queer entertainment generated a certain amount of competition among Afro-Homos who frequented the venues. Bronzeville's queer entertainment was a business regulated by market laws, responding to demand that originated mainly in White neighborhoods and by 1937, Afro-Homo performances had become so prominent and profitable in Black neighborhoods that many Afro-Homos had capitalized on the performance of their identity. During the Depression, professional drag entertainers like Clarence Johnson and Jacques Cristion indeed stood out thanks to their relatively well-paying jobs, which often enabled them to provide for their families' needs. At Joe's Deluxe, female impersonators would be paid "$50 for a seven-day week and were assured of steady year-round work." Clarence Johnson could earn up to forty dollars a night as a club dancer, compared to the twelve dollars a week he brought home from his job as a dishwasher at the Wabash YMCA.

In this racially mixed audience, one stratum of Bronzeville's society was however missing. The Black bourgeoisie, Bronzeville's upper class sought to improve the collective fate of African Americans though inculcating middle-class values among the Black majority. They therefore thought it was their duty to present themselves as exemplary role models and avoided any public controversy that would diminish the standing of the race in general and its upper classes in particular. As a result prominent African American homosexuals had to be extremely careful about acting on their sexuality in Chicago, or limit their sexual relationships to other cities since they could not risk cruising in Bronzeville's homo-friendly venues. Thus, even if Afro-Homo elites chose to pursue same sex relationships in Bronzeville, they were cut off from one of the primary means by which other African American homosexuals met sexual partners in the thirties. At the same time, leading Black men and women could not assume an active role

in Bronzeville's developing Afro-Homo community, knowing that they would endanger their social position and possibly bring disgrace to their race and class. Consequently, house parties, the Cabin Inn and Club Delisa seem to have been patronized almost exclusively by working-class African Americans and Whites.

Dissenting from Whites' views on homosexuality, African Americans allowed Whites to transgress the widely accepted urban boundaries of the city. While both of these acts of dissidence reinforced racial and sexual identities in Bronzeville (by highlighting the "entertainer" status of the Afro-Homo), it precluded the African American gay community from forging their own specific identity, which explains the racial segregation to come. Whites indeed transgressed urban boundaries but never jeopardized their social and racial status. Therefore, this privilege participated in the emergence of a distinct African American gay community, which in itself constituted an act of resistance and dissidence within the socially and economically constrained boundaries of Bronzeville.

Transgressing class boundaries/Shaping sexual identities (1940-1960)

As E. Franklin Frazier concluded in his landmark 1949 study, *The Negro in the United States*, "the great concern of the upper class with respectability has arisen from its great desire not to be identified with the masses of Negroes and partly from the manner in which it wants to appear before the White world" (Frazier 299). Paradoxically, while African American homosexuals found it increasingly difficult to be accepted into elite social circles and easier to fall from grace, many middle-class Blacks had access to the upper class by cabaret-owning, as Whites owners abandoned the venues they operated in Bronzeville in the thirties.

As soon as the early forties, several Bronzeville Black entrepreneurs realized the revenue-generating potential of queer entertainment and many middle-class African American heterosexuals saw the potential for financial reward in the presentation of Afro-Homosexuality. After witnessing the popularity of Chicago's Drag Balls, Hughes, a former fur salesman, invested in a new venue at 5524 South State Street with the idea of staging a review of female impersonators.

"Joe's Deluxe" opened its doors in 1938 and enabled Hughes to preside over forty employees and soon to own the entire building in which the club operated. As a proof of the Hughes' respectability, *Ebony Magazine* stated that they were friends with the Eddie 'Rochester' Andersons and the Joe Louis, along with other celebrities, proving that Afro-Homo entertainment was recognized as financially rewarding but also a way to access the upper class. Several prominent upper-class African Americans decided it was not disgraceful to sponsor homo-friendly events and make money from them, and Hughes, taking advantage of the powerful status that cabaret-owning had conferred him, had no problem advertising in the *Chicago Defender* and *Ebony Magazine*. His success in the homo-friendly circuit allowed him to rise to the top of Bronzeville's hierarchy by being elected "Mayor of Bronzeville" in 1941, easily winning the election with 231,000 votes to 166,800 votes for his opponent, Mr. Roosevelt Phillips. By holding his "coming inaugural" at Joe's Deluxe, and presenting a female impersonator review that night, several members of the upper class enjoyed a homo-friendly event, drawing a new crowd to the club.

Joe's Deluxe therefore quickly became Bronzeville's most popular homo-friendly nightclub in the late forties, as DeLisa and the Cabin Inn declined in popularity and eventually closed. Famous female impersonators in the circuit, including "Petite Swanson" (Alphonso Hersley), "Dixie Lee" (Robert Beck), "Sandra" (Chester P. Frederick) and "Nancy Kelly" (Clarence Johnson) performed in this "impersonator's mecca," as a *Chicago Defender* journalist claimed. Valda Gray, the 1930s pioneer of drag shows on the South Side, served as producer of the popular review of four impersonation shows – all introduced by gay comedian Calla Donia – that were presented per night. As White northsiders visited the club less and less frequently, the crowd consisted mainly of Black working-class and middle-class women and men. Heterosexuals attended the female impersonators' performances en masse but still outnumbered African American homosexuals in the audience.

However, Afro-Homo performers were moving beyond the stage to which they had been confined in the 1930s and into direct interaction with the crowd at

Joe's Deluxe. While it was still illegal for a man to be dressed as a woman outside of a performance, Black proprietors were more willing than 1930s White proprietors to let their female-impersonating employees interact with their clientele. As a result, photographs in *Ebony Magazine* depict clearly female impersonators mingling with each other and the crowd at the bar. Clarence Johnson and Jacques Cristion remember "flirting with patrons at the bar" since "[Hughes] didn't mind about [them] [mingling] with the crowd" (Johnson, interview) at Joe's Deluxe, while Mike DeLisa, Italian owner of Club DeLisa, had always prevented them from "leaving the club in women's clothes." As White patronage of the clubs declined, the threat of race mingling decreased and Chicago's authorities patrolled bars on the South Side less frequently, allowing for less concern by the mostly Black club-owners over obvious displays of homosexuality in their venues. Thus, homosexuality as a more normal manifestation could also be put on display as it became not uncommon for gay men dressed as men to dance with each other in Bronzeville's lounges and balls. Myles Vollmer, for instance, wrote of seeing "two young men in street clothes dancing together, cheek to cheek, holding one another in close embrace, as any girl and boy would at any dance, save, perhaps, that the two youths were much more intense in their forbidden roles" (Vollmer 1). Jacques Cristion also remembers dancing as a "boy" in a "totally gay show" (Cristion, interview) at Joe's Deluxe. In addition, more and more Black patrons attended Bronzeville's homo-friendly lounges to gain access to homosexual partners.

However, the numbers of White "slummers" at homo-friendly lounges quickly fell from the early fifties on for several reasons. First, "Whiteness" turned into a spectacle for the Black audiences. Black middle- and working-class couples buttressed their positive self-image as urban African Americans by contrasting themselves to their less "civilized" White counterparts. Many working-class Bronzeville residents viewed themselves as respectable Black patrons in contrast to the ill-mannered White customers. As gay veteran Douglas Smith recalls, "we thought they were uncivilized and soon we simply kicked them out" (Smith, interview). In the *Chicago Defender*'s coverage of the Drag Balls, Whites became dramatically absent from the pictures in the early fifties. Although the presence

of Whites seems to have fluctutated in some years due to publicity on the North Side, they had no reasons to come to the South Side anymore as Drag Balls were now happening on the North Side and because they were increasingly unwelcome by African American homosexuals.

Since most people in charge of Bronzeville's nightlife were now Blacks, the homo-friendly culture developed a distinct sense of race. This shift was originated by the well-known Bronzeville gay hustler Alfred Finnie, who took over the organization of the Drag Balls in the early forties. With the help of his successors, Finnie stopped publicizing for these balls on the North Side of the city. Communication between the gay populations of the North and South Sides thus deteriorated. Jim Marks remembered that in the fifties, northsiders had trouble obtaining information about gay events on the South Side, while Bronzeville events were widely publicized within the neighborhood. Racial codes had also shifted dramatically, driving White and Black crowds farther apart. Jim Marks recalled specifically that African American gays emphasized their clothing while "Whites would always look so dull next to them" (Marks, interview). Clothing styles differed between the Drag Balls of the North and South Sides, creating tense competition when both groups mixed. In the fifties, clothing became a means of resistance for all African Americans, not just African American homosexuals, but the shift was certainly more noticeable among African American men. In a thesis submitted to the University of Chicago's Department of Social Sciences in 1958, Jack Schwartz showed the importance of men's clothing as a "communication medium for Chicago's Negro Male." While this thesis contains no mention of African American homosexuals, it explores specific details about Black male clothing and argues that "Black male[s] used clothing as a symbol of consumption to a greater proportion than Whites in similar socio-economic positions" (Schwartz 132). Schwartz noted that "if a Negro male's clothing seems eccentric to the White visiting a Negro neighborhood, this does not necessarily mean that the clothing is perceived as eccentric to the Negro peers, since this attire may be the accepted and expected clothing worn there" (Schwartz 145). Both heterosexual and homosexual Black males favored bright colors and severe cuts which differed greatly from the White taste.

Most Afro-Homos had lost their sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the White gay crowd and became more aggressive. The sense of pleasure many White homosexuals had associated with cross-racial sex was increasingly replaced in the late fifties by a sense of danger. For instance, one of Gregory Sprague's interviewees noted that although he was attracted to Black men, when a handsome working-class Black man he met on the El asked him to come back to his place, he "didn't go because [he] was afraid [the Black man] would steal [his] coat." As Clarence Johnson recalls, "The North Side queens got scared… because we scared them." By the late 50s, the northsiders were often booed and mistreated. Banyard recalls that Whites "quit because people were so hostile toward them," concluding : "You wear a $300 or $400 gown, and someone going to tear it off you and you aren't going to want to wear it anymore ? I don't blame them, I would have quit coming myself" (Marks, interview).

By staging Afro-Homo performances, many African American entrepreneurs transgressed Bronzeville's class boundaries. However, by dissenting from Bronzeville's class system, entrepreneurs reinforced the sexual and racial boundaries of the neighborhood, making them almost impossible to violate. Whites became unwelcome, and Afro-Homos, confined to a realm of performances, became progressively isolated from the Bronzeville's mainstream culture. An act of dissidence could render impossible another one, proving the complex interplay between racial, class and sexual identities in 1940s/50s African American neighborhoods.

Sustaining a segregated "life" : an act of resistance ? (1960-1965)

In the sixties, White gays and African American homosexuals had created two different discourses. Due to the nearly complete absence of African Americans from their personal lives, White gay males grounded their identities in racial exclusivity. Few of the White gay men interviewed by Gregory Sprague had any Black gay friend in the sixties. The only exception were Whites like Jim Marks who specifically sought out Black men as sexual partners by frequenting the Kitty Kat Club and other places where African Americans gathered. But in terms of

their attitudes towards race, these men were often no more critical of racial exclusion than those who equated being gay with being White. Contemporary accounts by Black gay men, for example, have pointed out that Whites who looked for African American sexual partners at night typically "ignored them when the sun rises." Consequently, many Whites were "not seriously concerned with the existence of Black gay men except as sexual objects" (Marks, interview).

Bronzeville's Afro-Homo culture had also undergone other, more positive, changes. Since "the Negro population of Chicago doubled between 1950 and 1960," African American homosexuals enjoyed a heightened degree of anonymity in the bars they frequented, which had all moved –with Bronzeville's business center – from 47th Street to 63rd Street. The business, cultural, and economic nerve center of Bronzeville, as well as most homo-friendly clubs, was now located around 63rd and Cottage Grove. Although Afro-Homo culture was still associated with the neighborhood's commercialized culture, it progressively developed apart from Bronzeville's heterosexual group : the two realms no longer interacted as they had in the fifties. Bronzeville now had straight clubs and gay clubs.

In Bronzeville, "acceptance of male homosexuality was mediated by material privilege," in accordance with bell hooks' claim about homosexuality in the Black community of the 1960s : "Homosexual men with money were part of the materially privileged ruling Black group and were accorded the regard and respect given to that group." Commonly called "Preacher," Reverend Clarence Cobb was the leader of the First Church of Deliverance, the most popular church in Bronzeville. While he never publicly revealed or discussed his homosexuality, neither did he hide it. Cobb's homosexuality was well known within the Bronzeville community : activist historian Timuel Black claimed that "Cobb was gay," adding that "everybody knew about it" (Best 205). Bronzeville old-timers remember a choir filled with gay men and vacation trips that Cobb would take with his male "assistant;" which led historians such as Wallace Best to claim that Cobb "lived openly, yet silently" (Best 205). As female impersonator Pearly Mae noted, the man was "more powerful than Harold Washington," as "he could bring the votes," and "politicians always spoke of him favorably" (Mae, interview).

On Sundays, after the 11 p.m. broadcast, Reverend Cobb was often spotted at the Kitty Kat Lounge with his gay friends. The club, operated by an African American, had opened its doors in the mid-fifties, as the popularity of Joe's Deluxe had declined. Located at 63rd Street and St Lawrence Avenue, the venue was frequented by African American homosexuals, such as Reverend Cobb's friends. As Best argues, "some of them drew little distinction between what occurred in the First Church of Deliverance and what took place in local gay clubs." The club and the church had indeed become "both kinds of sacred spaces." Best also claims that "[the club] was a religious space that had similar goals of transcendence, ecstasy, praise, and worship in an accepting community, which was precisely what [gays] were seeking at the gay clubs" (Best 205). Several witnesses recall that the Kitty Kat Lounge became "one of the hot spots for Black gays in the sixties." Pearly Mae recalls that "everybody knew what kind of people went there." But the club differed greatly from Delisa, The Cabin Inn or Joe's Deluxe; it did not feature a female impersonator revue, and was mostly frequented by African Americans interested in homosexual encounters. Focusing on the relationship between the Black gay nightclub and the Black church, cultural critic E. Patrick Johnson suggested that, in the 1990s, "Black gay men transformed the supposedly solely secular solely sexual, wholly insightful, utterly perverse club into a space where the identities of African American, homosexual and Christian no longer compete." This crossover between sexual and spiritual is considered a characteristic specific to contemporary African American gay culture. In Chicago, this transformation did not occur in the nineties, but rather dates back to Bronzeville's Afro-Homo nightlife in the early sixties.

With the disappearance of Whites, Afro-Homos began to create a night culture of their own, one that was deeply linked to the churches, businesses and other institutions of the neighborhood and to an emerging sense of segregated community. Afro-Homosexual culture grew into a more consequential culture, in which Whites had no place. Jacques Cristion recalls, "there was a sense of freedom when Whites went away. We [Afro-Homos] started talking. We were friends" (Cristion, interview). Douglas Smith claims, "It is only in the early sixties that I made my first Black gay friend [...] I started to give gay parties, not for sex, not

for drag [...]" (Smith, interview). As the competition instilled by the show industry and imposed by the White gaze disappeared, Afro-Homos started to engage in interactions that had not been possible before. White northsiders simply stopped frequenting Bronzeville nightlife, creating a space for an authentic Afro-Homo culture to thrive, and thus preventing them from coming back.

It is important to emphasize that Bronzeville's segregated Afro-Homo nightlife of the 1960s was not entirely accepting and beneficial to all Afro-Homos. As Afro-Homo culture developed, the boundary between nightlife and day life became blurry, African American homosexuals were more visible, which made those who displayed obvious signs of homosexuality (drag queens and effeminate men) more vulnerable to attack. Ebony Carr remembers that "being too visible had become a disadvantage." After Carr won a drag contest at Finnie's Ball and his picture appeared in *Jet*, "one of the fellows who worked at the hospital with [him] took it around and was showing [it]." Carr already worked as a male nurse, a job coded as "gay," and when his co-workers found out that he was "a transvestite or something like that [they] made it even worse" (Carr, interview). Quickly, Afro-Homos' night persona had merged with their day persona : Bronzeville Afro-Homo became a single identity, no longer relegated to the night only. As Carr was made to feel unwelcome at his workplace, he decided to drop out of school and find another job. Sparrows, a North Side drag bar, hired him and Carr became a professional drag queen. The disintegrating boundaries surrounding Bronzeville nightlife left the effeminacy of the Afro-Homo intensely visible and could thus lead to his exclusion from the neighborhood.

Epilogue

In the seventies, acts of dissidence were less obvious, subtler. Jacques Cristion continued to give Drag Balls in Bronzeville, especially at the Grand Ballroom. While African American female impersonators went on being dramatically persecuted, they however had not lost their entertainment value in white neighborhoods, and continued to appear on T.V. and in North Side venues. With the opening of new clubs such as the 430 and the Parkside, the segregated nightlife

continued to thrive, beyond Bronzeville's boundaries. This kind of segregation has actually been sustained in Chicago until today, as Afro-Homos still gather in places different from those Chicago's White homosexuals attend.

Analyzing acts of resistance and dissidence in Chicago's Afro-Homo history can therefore explain the current sociological landscape of the Windy City's gay community. It also shows that cultural critics and historians will need to develop a more comprehensive understanding of African American gay history. It is indeed essential to pay careful attention to the vexed relationship between that community and the African American community at large to produce a revisionist history of dissident cultural identities, which historians have often failed to examine in political terms. However, this article shows that historians cannot consider Whiteness as neutral. Challenging the invisibility of African American lesbians and gays should not imply reinforcing the dominant racial order, rather it should contribute to a better understanding of how acts of dissidence regulated and generated each other, across the color line.

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