LOVE: THE MIX-TAPE

Love Stories of African-American Gay Elders Living in New York City

By

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CONTEXT

One of the generationally consistent challenges of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (GLBTQ) human beings is the appropriation of Love. In addition to the minimal presence of non-stereotypical inclusions within popular culture, this dilemma is further exacerbated by the hegemony of hetero-normative narratives regarding family and gender roles articulated by religious organizations, mass media outlets, and political as well as legal institutions. For individuals who develop and display the courage necessary to outwardly proclaim intimate attraction and desire for members of the same sex, ultimately a complicated journey begins. En route, the old glue of tradition quickly become a series of subconscious traps for which the reconciliation between, reformation of, and translation into the meaning, structure, and execution of one’s psychological framework or worldview for interpersonal Love must be freed.

If not the most complicated, certainly one of the more daunting obstacles to overcome as one forms a definition of Love occurs in the mediation of racial and sexual identities of those who are double or triple minorities. As an example, GLBTQ African Americans struggle to establish positive self-esteem through a socio-historical lens that is both deeply and continually scarred by violence and trauma as well as a religious lens that maintains highly stigmatized views of homosexuality. In other instances, the remnants of slavery and institutionalized racism, work on multiple psychological levels and proliferate cycles of internalized racism (e.g. light-complexion versus dark-
complexion), internalized homophobia (e.g. receptive/"bottom"/feminine versus insertive/"top"/masculine), and a pervasive level of sexual conservatism to seemingly combat internal fears of publicly reinforcing stereotypes of African American people as promiscuous and lewd sexual predators.

Given this context, as a thirty-something, African-American, gay, male I was interested in the ways in which older men with the same characteristics distinguished their prior and current understandings of Love. Based on the ways in which these men desired, learned, achieved, maintained, and even lost Love, I sought to reveal any applicable wisdom that would be of value to their cultural progeny—those who, like me, are still very much consciously and subconsciously working to develop the ability to sustain successful intimate relationships. Additionally, I wanted to determine a way to use the wisdom I collected as a means of preserving the legacies as well as the voices of men that are often unheard and forgotten. As Henry Louis Gates wrote in Authenticity, or the Lesson of the Little Tree, “No human culture is inaccessible to someone who makes the effort to understand, to learn, to inhabit another world.”

METHODOLOGY

Using oral history interviews as the methodology, I interviewed ten African American men whose formative years were situated within a chaotic context in which social issues such as Civil Rights, Gay Rights, Women’s Rights, and the Vietnam War were often in competition with one another for the attention and empathy of fellow citizens. From November 2011 to May 2012, men ages 60 to 81, residing in Manhattan...
(5), Brooklyn (3), and Queens (2) were asked to discuss Love in and out of the aforementioned context during two interview sessions (approximately 2 hours each) in either their home, business office, or on campus at Columbia University in the City of New York. Narrators were identified mostly through word of mouth referrals from social networks and leads from non-profit organizations who serve same-gender-loving men of color such as Gay Men of African Descent, Griot Circle, ADODI, ALLGO, BMX, BGRG, Harlem United, In the Meantime, Men of all Colors Together, Rukus!, Unity Fellowship Church, and Us Helping Us. Approximately 45 hours of interviews were collected using a Tascam digital recorder and subsequently have been preserved digitally. With written consent via individually signed releases, the full interviews will be archived at the Black Gay and Lesbian Archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, New York.

As Portelli writes in his essay, *Oral History as Genre*, “… at the core of oral history, in epistemological and in practical terms, lies one deep thematic focus which distinguishes it from other approaches and disciplines also based on interviewing and fieldwork, such as anthropology, sociology and folklore: the combination of the prevalence of the narrative form on the one hand, and the search for a connection between biography and history, between individual experience and the transformations of society, on the other.” Because of this, oral history is particularly effective in collecting first-hand testimony documenting the subjective ways people construct stories to make sense of their lives and addresses the need for an “enhanced historical sensitivity to the
power of emotion, of unconscious desire, rejection, and imitation, as an integral part of
the structure of ordinary social life and of its transmission from generation to
generation.” (Thompson, 2000, p. 177)

Rather than exclusively eliciting narrator responses from a pre-determined series
of interview questions, follow-up manifested in a fairly extemporaneous manner—
allowing the interview to tread its own course. However, all questions and/or prompts
typically explored four main concepts: Early Love (e.g. Tell me about your earliest
remembrances of Love or Tell me about some of the people who shaped your ideas about
Love), Love in Social Context (e.g. Describe what it was like to walk into a gay bar
when you were younger or Describe the first time you saw another gay black male),
Love Lessons Learned (e.g. How has aging impacted your relationship to romance? or
What has surprised you the most about Love?), and Abstractions of Love (e.g. What
does Love smell like? or What does Love taste like?)

After the interviews were completed, excerpts representing recurring themes as
well as unique moments were selected based on a relatively intuitive check-list. I
listened for moments in the interviews that either exhibited a strong emotion or message,
a unique telling or re-telling of a moment in history, and/or a perspective unique to an
individual’s own lived experiences. Once edited (i.e. eliminating verbal false starts,
fillers, and self-corrections) these excerpts were paired with music, specifically Love
songs, to create a sound portrait. The listening experience begins with a brief exchange
between myself and a narrator who was much more comfortable asking rather than
answering questions and then transitions into interview excerpts paired with one of my favorite songs, “Beautiful Love” sung by Shirley Horn and featuring Toots Thielemans on harmonica. After this, the listener is guided from the House music of Osunlade’s “Mama’s Groove” to the electrical rock/blues of Jimi Hendrix’ “Born Under a Bad Sign” to spoken word poetry from the “Love Jones” soundtrack paired with “Adagio for Strings” by Samuel Barber to “The Look of Love” by Kenny G and all of the highlighted interview excerpts and additional music selections situated in between them. The result, *Love: The Mix-Tape* (approximately 1 hour and 43 minutes) is both a tribute to one of the oldest forms of oral history (song) and a meditation on the continued need to document and preserve testimony from the uncelebrated and the unheard voices that exist in contemporary society.

**REFLECTIONS**

When I was about twenty or twenty-one years old, I visited New York City for the first time. During the last night of that trip, I both found and lost myself at the *Esquelita* nightclub located in Times Square. From the Latin music I’d never experienced in Chicago to the unmistakable swagger of the two-legged unicorns known as “New York City gay boys” to the unique smell of collaboration between marijuana, cheap drinks, cigarettes, too-much-cologne, and all-male sweat—I knew that, even amidst all of the newness around me and despite the cliché I assumed I would never invoke, the music from that night would never stop beating in my heart. After a few hours of body to body dancing, flirting, and yes, repeated hand to mouth tequila-shot-swigging, it was time to
return to the temporary resting space that, even for NYC, now seemed distinctly small compared to the expanse in which my thoughts and emotions wrestled in preparation for my very unwanted flight back home.

As I stood near the bar finishing what had been an alien thing to me that night—a bottle of water—my eyes met with a man who seductively motioned for me to come to him. And while I now know him to be about five-foot-eight or five-foot-nine, the romantic part of my brain firmly denies that he was any less than twenty-feet-tall. The conversation, as I would later learn that all conversations in nightclubs occurring near exit doors do, quickly progressed from “Why are you leaving so soon?” and “Why don’t you come home with me?” to “Let me tell my friends” and the coy and feigned selflessness of “You sure?... You won’t mind?”

After we situated ourselves inside of his car, he turned on the radio, grabbed my hand, and our bodies remained parked on the streets of NYC all-the-while zooming on the not-so-well-lit and speed-bump-riddled road to what I thought could only be Love. My first question and his last, “How old are you?” provided each of us a power that would be realized in subtle but tangible ways. Our twelve-year, age-gap, shined cabaret lights on the interesting juxtapositions that only experience, knowledge, style, location, and Love-history can bring. Our minds and bodies kept very occupied that night in an exploration of difference but what would keep me consumed during the next few months was a singular, and perhaps self-indulgent, idea that I’d somehow found Love. I believed, because my compass of reality wasn’t very well calibrated at that point in my
life, that this established, older, gentleman who lived a mere 834 miles away from my
dorm room would lead me to the rejuvenating waters of endless and everlasting Love.

Once back at the University of Illinois I was constantly thinking about ways to
show and share how much our one night meant to me. It started with a few sappy poems
(that I pray have disappeared) and eventually as the novelty of our encounter waned and I
sensed his boredom with the college Junior who had not been very accepting of the hint
that one-night-of-fun does not guarantee a relationship (especially a long-distance one), it
became clear that it was time for a new strategy. And while at a mall, I walked past a
Sam Goody record store where I had a twenty-year-old’s epiphany—I would send him a
mix-tape!

I went through my arsenal of Love songs, which then included songs like
Xscape’s remake of the Jones Girls classic “Who Can I Run To?” and Aaliyah’s remake
of the Isley Brother’s hit “At Your Best (You are Love),” and compiled one hour of
music that I knew without question would bring my distant-lover back under my spell or
at the very least force him to utter something vague and meaningless that only a twenty-
year-old Lamar would firmly behold as positively magical. And while the mix-tape,
adorned with his hand-written name and the light graffiti of a smiling heart via bright-red
Sharpie marker, was received warmly and my aural-gay-witchcraft had worked as
intended, a young sorcerer such as myself didn’t quite understand that the very nature of
a spell predicates that it will, almost always, be short-lived.
Although I would never make another mix-tape for my now good friend Allen, I was constantly reminded of both the process and the inspiration as I interviewed the ten men for this thesis project. I found myself listening to Love songs before as well as being reminded of Love songs during, after, and between our interview sessions. There was such a rhythm to the way each individual narrator spoke about their experiences with Love that it eventually seemed very natural and appropriate to incorporate one of my earliest tools to express Love as the creative and core element of this thesis project.

*Love: The Mix-Tape* is not an exhaustive or definitive portrait of all that was important from my narrators but rather an open invitation to all who listen to examine and re-examine their own understandings of Love. I’m often asked to share what I learned from the project as well as what this project means to me. And now that a year has passed since my last interview was collected, I have at least one answer that I know to be at least 98% true: Love, is listening.

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SOURCES


