

thINKingDANCE

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Photo: David Andrako

Queer Artists of Color: Why Their Works Matter

by Gregory King

Dressed in an outfit I'd rather forget, and standing amidst the sea of scantily clad revelers on the corner of Christopher Street and 7th Avenue in New York City, I remember hordes of people whistling, screaming, clapping, and marching as they watched colorful floats drive by. I also remember feeling like I was a part of a community where weirdness and differences were not shunned but embraced, where "boy meets girl" was not the only beginning of a love story, and where I no longer had to try to fit in because I already did.

It was my first Gay Pride parade and I was 19.

The recent ruling from the Supreme Court to legalize gay marriage is a reminder that since then we've come a long way, with activists continuing to advocate for the rights of queer* identified individuals and with scholars working to broaden the discourse on queer identity and sexual politics. Additionally, the works of queer artists are offering supplementary viewpoints, expanding the visibility of the community and providing historical, cultural, and social perspectives to this still-marginalized community. With all this visibility, there remains a cultural imperative to create representations for queer people of color (QPOC), even as the works of Tracy Chapman, Alice Walker, Bill T. Jones, RuPaul, Sapphire, Big Freedia, Staceyann Chin, Mia Mingus, and Laverne Cox, among others, are creating a noticeable oasis in a desert of representation.

Twenty-one years after my first parade, many cities host [Black Prides](#), where QPOC can celebrate the duality of being black and queer, engaging in health seminars, educational workshops, artistic events, and festivities and hoping to overcome barriers created by stigmas and homophobia. Similar to the history of African Americans, black queer history has been plagued with prejudice and underrepresentation, strengthening the resolve of Black Prides organizers to bring visibility to black queer experiences. With programming like “Unbothered,” a symposium built around the uncensored narratives of resilient QPOC at the seventeenth annual [Philadelphia Black Pride](#), it was easy to see why representation is important and visibility is key.

At the Ethical Society of Philadelphia, as part of “Unbothered,” queer performance artist Nikki Powerhouse strutted down the aisle with a red scarf in hand, singing, “There’s something about that beat bitch.” Freely moving her hands, she vogued while reciting her story, grooving with ease, uttering advice given by “The Phantom”—someone she met in a Philadelphia nightclub—who became a key figure in her coming of age story.

“Get your mothafuckin’ life,” she recalled him saying. It was an urge to acknowledge her fierceness, a reminder never to settle, and an assertion of her power, standing unapologetic in her womanhood, her blackness, and her queerness.

Powerhouse spoke of the club becoming her sanctuary of security, where her truth always felt supported. This was her story, but it was also the story of so many queer teens who, ostracized by their families, found havens at the dance clubs. The only difference is that, for queer teens of color, watching a black queer body telling the story made it relatable in ways it wouldn’t be if told by a queer white body.

Powerhouse gave a first-person narrative of her lived experiences in Philadelphia, while in New York queer playwright Nia Witherspoon penned a complex story, *The Messiah Complex*, breaking open the prism of black lives that grew out of her own grappling with the messages that align black radical movements with queer history.

Walking into the performing space of [BRIC](#), which identifies itself as “the leading presenter of free programming in Brooklyn,” the cast was already engaged in jovial celebration similar to the club scene of Powerhouse’s memory. The revelry was reminiscent of a Harlem house party where bodies moved to familiar beats. With a predominantly queer, black, and trans cast and creative team, *The Messiah Complex* is a play about the interrogation of violence against black, queer bodies. It tells the story of Young Messiah; a sixteen-year old on the trans spectrum who creates DJ Messiah, an alter ego who challenges norms and desires freedom, as he navigates a world of heteronormativity.

An orchestra of voices and themes, *The Messiah Complex* was a reminder of the ideological parallels between the Black Civil Rights and the LGBT movements, showing Messiah’s struggle to assert his identity and liberate his queer black body amidst systematic subjugation. A key moment unfolded as Young Messiah transformed into DJ Messiah by removing his tank top and shorts to don a men’s button-down shirt and trousers. DJ Messiah’s transformation, though seemingly trivial, was paramount in the declaration of his maleness as Messiah transformed from wearing female clothing with a masculine appearance to clothes that were made for a male—whether others could tell the difference or not.

In the essay “My Gay Problem, Your Black Problem,” Earl Ofari Hutchinson stated, “Black gay men carry the triple burden of being Black, gay, and male. They are rejected by many Blacks and barely tolerated by many white gays.” He continued by saying, “Black gay men thus feels alienated from the Black community, from the white gay community, and from the broader society.”

It is in acknowledging this unpleasant reality that Witherspoon’s script intersected the junction of queerness and blackness, keeping in mind the histories of QPOC, still overlooked and under-narrated. These works by Powerhouse and Witherspoon were not just about queer pride, but about rejecting white heteronormative dominance by using the queer black body to illuminate queer black experiences.

** [The term queer is used as an alternative to the label LGBT \(lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered\), and to assert identities adopted by those who reject traditional gender identities.](#)

Philadelphia Black Pride, Nikki Powerhouse, "Unbothered," Ethical Society of Philadelphia, April 28. *The Messiah Complex*, Nia Witherspoon, BRIC, Brooklyn, New York, May 20, 21, 25, 26

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