

Love and Lubrication in the Archives or rukus! A Black Queer Archive for the UK

Ajamu X, Topher Campbell & Mary Stevens

*Deep in thought and*

*Reading works of white men,*

*I am sometimes forced to sift*

*To give my credence, to my people*

*My mind has to rewrite*

*What isn't there but was.*

From "In Pensive Mood" by Dirg Aaab-Richards.<sup>1</sup>

Mary Stevens:

"Sifting" the past to recover "what isn't there but was" is not just a solitary reflective endeavour for individuals from disinherited groups, it can also be an act of collective rebellion. For the Black queer community (of which in the UK Aaab-Richards can be considered not just a prophet but also a pioneer activist), doubly marginalised by the splintering of activist historiography into the discrete categories of a heteronormative Black history and an exclusive monochromatic queer history, the act of rewriting through collecting and disseminating the evidence of "what isn't there but was" is particularly urgent.<sup>2</sup> Whilst in the United States grassroots Black "queer archive activism," defined by Alexandra Juhasz as "a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology,"<sup>3</sup> dates back to the early 1990s and in some

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<sup>1</sup> In Dirg Aaab-Richards et al., *Tongues Untied* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1987), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: NYU Press, 2005), p. 44; Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, "Memory and Mourning: Living Oral History with Queer Latinos in San Francisco," in *Oral History and Public Memories*, ed. Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 2008), p. 167.

<sup>3</sup> Alexandra Juhasz, "Video Remains: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism," *GLQ* 12, no. 2 (2006): p. 326.

cases before,<sup>4</sup> until artists Ajamu and Topher Campbell came together to create the rukus! archive project in 2005, as Ajamu puts it in the interview which follows below, “nobody had pulled together this thing called heritage or archive” for the Black queer community in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article is therefore to introduce the work of rukus! to an international audience and in so doing to juxtapose it with the Canadian queer collections profiled elsewhere in this issue. According to Stuart Hall, “Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past.”<sup>6</sup> The rukus! archive, in bringing together the creative energy of “an artistic sensibility” with the resistance to monolithic identity categories inherent to Black queer lives, posits a more critical relationship to the mainstream than most. Indeed, in offering competing definitions of the “mainstream” – sometimes the “gay mainstream,” sometimes the “Black mainstream,” sometimes the culture of a dominant elite – Ajamu and Topher’s discourse on their archival practice continually forces us all to question the position from which we speak, especially when we seek to claim authority for that position, for example as academics or heritage professionals.

The call for papers solicited contributions that would present “an examination of a particular queer collection.” For many grassroots practitioners, squeezing thoughts, energies and experiences into the restrictive stylistic norms expected of an academic journal article is not an appealing prospect. This may be particularly true of the “repositories of feelings” that constitute gay and lesbian archives where the excess of affect generated by an archiving practice that is about so much more than the anesthetic process of preservation militates against the dispassionate analysis academic writing is generally felt to

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<sup>4</sup> See for example Roque Ramírez on the San Francisco Latino “Archivo Rodrigo Reyes” (op. cit. p. 178). Public institutions have also been active in this area. The Schomburg Centre for Research in Black Cultures, part of the New York Public Library, has been taking in gay and lesbian material since the early 1990s (for example the papers of poet Joseph Beam in 1991, see Jacqueline Trescott, “Anthology Of a Mother's Grief; By Finishing Her Gay Son's Book, She Came to Terms With His Life,” *Washington Post*, August 17, 1991). The Black Gay and Lesbian Archive Project was founded at the Schomburg in 2000, under the direction of Steven G. Fullwood (<http://www.bgla.stevengfullwood.org/>, accessed March 4, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> The interview was conducted on November 26, 2008 in the context of a UK Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project based in the Department of Information Studies at University College London entitled “Community Archives and Identities: Documenting and Sustaining Community Heritage.” The research team comprises Andrew Flinn, Elizabeth Shepherd and Mary Stevens. The research would not have been possible without the help and partnership provided by our case studies (including rukus!) and many other participants and interviewees. For further details see <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/infostudies/research/icarus/community-archives/>.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart Hall, “Constituting an Archive,” *Third Text*, no. 54 (2001): p. 92.

demand;<sup>7</sup> as Topher comments in a moving meditation on the presence of pain and memory in the archive, “somebody else has to interpret, because we’re too deep in it.” However, to attempt to speak on behalf of rukus! would be to repeat the act of dispossession repudiated by Ajamu and Topher, to “describe and prescribe” (and inevitably to proscribe) like so many others before. Hence the collective decision to use an interview format to represent the work of rukus!. We recognise that this is unconventional, and we celebrate that difference for, as Robert Mills has argued, “translating queer history into the language of public culture will involve a contestation of the very norms in which [...] history narratives are currently embedded,”<sup>8</sup> including, in our view, the publicly marginal form of the journal article.

More pressingly, as the transcriber and editor of over ninety minutes of unscripted three-way discussion I am acutely aware of the extent to which the translator is a traitor. The text that follows conveys only the slimmest indication of the extent to which in their dialogue around the archive Ajamu and Topher are engaged in an intensely social practice, in which each continually prompts the other as they recall names, dates, places and ideas, illustrating in microcosm the process Stuart Hall describes as the “living archive” “whose construction must be seen as an on-going, never-completed project.”<sup>9</sup> Moreover, in the text’s suppression of laughter and gestures it gives even less sense of the joy of the archive so central to the rukus! project; as Topher reminisces about the process of collection, “we had lots of fun, me and Ajamu [...] just talking about them days and whatever happened.” More troublingly, I fear that I have imposed an artificial linearity on a much “queerer” temporality.<sup>10</sup> As Ann Cvetkovich argues, “emotional experience and the memory of it demand and produce an unusual archive, one that frequently resists the coherence of narrative or that is fragmented and ostensibly arbitrary.”<sup>11</sup> Yet here the arbitrary resides purely in the erasure of speech through editing. The

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<sup>7</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, N.C. & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 244.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Mills, “Queer Is Here? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Histories and Public Culture,” *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), p. 261.

<sup>9</sup> Hall, p. 89.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of “queer temporalities” see Carolyn Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ* 13, no. 2-3 (2007), pp. 177-195.

<sup>11</sup> Cvetkovich, p. 242.

distortion is to some degree compensated for by the collaborative nature of the editing process, in which an original text was revised in accordance with Ajamu and Topher's comments, but the orality of the original interview is inevitably lost.<sup>12</sup>

Ajama and Topher's discourse requires little gloss. The interview, as is only to be expected, does not offer a linear narrative of rukus!'s development and various projects; this information is available at [www.rukus.co.uk](http://www.rukus.co.uk), including a useful timeline.<sup>13</sup> Some key themes can however be drawn out. The importance of affect and the characteristic disrupted temporality of queer archives have both already been highlighted; in terms that underline the close relationship between desire and the archive, Topher notes "it came more out of an impulse really, lots of impulses, impatience." The complex trope of mourning is also explored in detail; Eng and Kazanjian's insight that "the politics of mourning might be described as that creative process mediating a hopeful or hopeless relationship between loss and history"<sup>14</sup> provides a way of articulating the complex interplay of mourning and celebration evident in the work of rukus! at the interface between two categories of identity – "Black" and "gay" – both of which have integrated powerful narratives of loss, suffering and resistance. Traumatic archives often generate a strong performative dimension, because of "the need to address traumatic experience through witnessing and retelling"<sup>15</sup> and indeed with rukus! as Topher explains, "everything has a public face." Yet emphasising the archive's performative quality is also a means to transform what could be melancholic into "a newly imagined tracing of possibility: the chance for fresh exchanges, memories, trips, and encounters."<sup>16</sup>

Many of these themes will also be in evidence in Black queer archives in North America, or the Netherlands, testifying perhaps to some alternative "norms" around which queer cultures coalesce. The rukus! archive does however have some distinctly "British" qualities. Indeed, for Ajama, the whole project was about "capturing something about being born and raised here" as opposed to in the U.S..

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<sup>12</sup> The unintended consequences of the intervention of archivist-transcribers in marginalized histories are discussed by Rodney G.S. Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," *Archivaria* 61 (2006), p. 226.

<sup>13</sup> "rukus! Time Line," rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/25/33/> (accessed March 4, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Roque Ramírez, p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> Cvetkovich, p. 242.

<sup>16</sup> Juhasz, p. 324.

Perhaps one of the defining features of that “something,” certainly for “the first out Black gay generation” is the influence of the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and Stuart Hall in particular, whose work has produced “generations” of thought and practice in contexts where traditional modes of cultural reproduction have lost purchase. Much as Stuart Hall fostered a collective rethinking of identity discourses, the work of rukus! (and others whom he inspired) is actively reshaping the public cultures of “Blackness” and “queerness”. In the process “one generation’s yearning” is fuelling “another’s learning” (*and yearning*).<sup>17</sup>

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*Mary Stevens: Tell me about the background to rukus!*

Ajamu: rukus! Federation was formed in June 2000. It was launched at the London Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) as part of the Mardi Gras festival.

Topher Campbell: The original event was commissioned by Valerie Mason-John, AKA Queenie, who was the artistic director of the Pride Arts Festival that year.<sup>18</sup> She was actively trying to diversify the festival. And we were thinking about rukus! or talking about rukus! a lot and this was a way of launching it publicly and very centrally..

Ajamu: I think we had a thousand pounds, didn’t we?

Campbell: We were given a thousand pounds. And we conceived this idea of a club-based arts event. We wanted to create an organization as a way of bringing together a lot of the artistic and political

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<sup>17</sup> Juhasz, p. 323.

<sup>18</sup> Valerie Mason-John was profiled in a booklet produced by Gay Men Fighting AIDS for Black History Month in 2001, *In the Family: Celebrating the Builders of Black Gay Communities* (London: Gay Men Fighting Aids, 2001), p. 39. The booklet can be downloaded from <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices/booklets/pdfs/in-the-family.pdf>. A second booklet, *In the Family 2*, was produced in 2002 and is available from <http://www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices/booklets/pdfs/in-the-family-2.pdf>. Readers are directed to these booklets for additional biographical information on many of the individuals featuring in the interview, since these sources were produced from within the Black LGBT community.

forces that we had embraced up until that point. rukus! became an expression of that at the ICA on June 23<sup>rd</sup> 2000.

Ajamu: It is important to mention that rukus! is about how we present our politics more playfully. So the name rukus! is a derivative of the word raucous. And Rukus is also a well-known African-American porn star.

Campbell: We spelled it R-U-K-U-S because we felt that this would give us a distinctive online identity. The exclamation mark also underlines the playfulness of it all.

Ajamu: Lots of Black gay groups have identified themselves as Black-gay-this, Black-gay-that. With rukus! we wanted our own title: “rukus!” can do anything we want it to. We’re not restricted to other people’s identity categories. Early on I was often asked are you a Black archive, are you a gay archive, are you a London archive? And I’d say actually we’re all these things, at the same time. Our politics have never been about either/or categories.

Campbell: Neither our politics nor our lifestyles. That’s the very thing about rukus!, it’s not a singular thing, it’s about confusing the notion of simplicity. You have to embrace complexity and diversity when you are dealing with the idea of Black, gay or lesbian identity. With rukus! we are building our own identity. The idea was always that we would have something that was set apart from and in opposition to the both the Black and the White gay status-quo, both in terms of the way that we wanted to define the idea of rukus! and in the way we wanted to express it in the public space. rukus! is not about saying we’re victims, we’re very much about redefining and replacing ourselves publicly. And we’re not anti-White or anti-anything, we’re pro.

*Stevens: And so this first event turned into rukus! federation and the archive developed in the context of the federation?*

Campbell: Yes, I think so. But time is a very strange thing, it plays trick on you. The evolution wasn't steady or linear in a very clean way. It came more out an impulse really, lots of impulses, impatience. I always remember it by thinking about what else I was doing it at the time. I remember I was involved in Talawa Theatre company,<sup>19</sup> and creating a manifesto in East London for youth culture and then I went to the BBC. And so there were places and strands of work going in and out of the conversations that we were having. But is difficult to talk about time in terms of chunks, because time jumps backwards and forwards.

Ajamu: At the time I was living in the Netherlands so a lot of the early rukus! work was done in cyberspace. But I was also running the Breakfast Club<sup>20</sup> and I was involved in Gay Men Fighting AIDS<sup>21</sup> as an assertiveness trainer. And I was running sex classes: Bondage for beginners, S&M for beginners. But around the 2000 mark I was getting frustrated with the Black gay scene, it wasn't really happening for me. I just felt that the politics weren't that adventurous, that dynamic, that playful.

Campbell: For the record, the context for a lot of Black-identified non-club-based events was to do with sexual health, research and activism funded by NGOs, or local government, or health organizations. And so the prism was always quite narrow. But we were and still are struggling and battling artists. And we wanted to create something that reflected and sustained the energy of our creative practice. But Ajamu has driven the idea of the archive more than I have

Ajamu: There are lots of points to be made about why the archive started. One is that a well known activist had the builders come in. They saw a pile of papers and magazines and they threw everything out. Also, a friend of mine, Tyrone Smith, had just committed suicide. I was left his doll collection and his porn collection. But the idea for the archive actually came about in 2004, when we got planning our own exhibition, "Family Treasures".

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<sup>19</sup> Talawa is a leading Black British theatre company, founded in 1989. For more information see <http://www.talawa.com/about/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> A monthly group for Black men regardless of sexual preference. See Ajamu's profile in *In the Family*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.gmfa.org.uk>.

Campbell: We got very excited by this idea and we had lots of fun, me and Ajamu and people, just talking about them days and whatever happened. We'd gossip about what happened to this person or that person. And then stories emerge, about that Pride, or this Pride, or that person, or this person, and you start to realize that the collected memory is not getting stored anywhere. We wanted to reclaim the history and put it centre-stage. Reclaiming that history is a political act. Look at James Baldwin, for example. A literary icon, the first superstar writer, arguably. But you still get a complete denial of his sexuality by Black academics and White literary critics who don't think it is important. Then you look at someone like Bayard Rustin. These are easy people to pick out. On a different scale, like lots of people, I've worked in lots of mainstream institutions. But I have a very politicized consciousness around my sexuality and my race, and I'm not the only one. I use myself because I don't want to talk about other people out of turn. We need to find a way of articulating that difference. The archive can find a way of doing that. You want to reclaim the notion that when you look at Black gay and lesbian history, you are not looking at a separate thing. You are looking at something that is integral to all our histories. Black gay history is the story of somebody's brother, somebody's daughter, somebody's son, somebody's sister. Or take Brixton, for example: the people in the shops, in the markets, the parties, the cottage, it's all around us. And places like the Brixton Art Gallery were seminal in terms of the Black and the gay experience.

Ajamu: Around 1994 there was also the issue of the "Murder Music" campaign against homophobia within reggae music. For some people both within our own communities and in the mainstream community that campaign was seen as being led by Outrage!, a White gay group. We wanted to make it clear that this campaign started back in 1992 with Black Lesbians and Gays against Media Homophobia. There was a generational impetus around reclaiming as well. We were the first out Black gay generation. And I, or we, were just approaching forty and that raised lots of questions about identity and age. Today we're dealing with a younger generation, who might never have heard of Linda Bellos<sup>22</sup> or Valerie Mason-John and so forth. There's work to be done there and we need to be having

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<sup>22</sup> Linda Bellos was elected Leader of Lambeth Council (in south London) in 1986. See *In the Family*, p. 14.

public discussions, within our own communities, within the Black community, within the White community.

Campbell: The generational thing is important in the wider Black community too. People in their thirties to, say, fifties who are British, born in the UK, have seen their parents or grandparents dying. They've seen their heritage pass before their eyes, so there is a personal stake in this. The argument about archives is being won by virtue of experience. Our generation wants to see its experiences placed in the mainstream. Black History Month is now an institution in the UK. But we want to move beyond the clichés, beyond Windrush and Notting Hill and Brixton in the sixties.

Ajamu: And in these narratives about Black history and gay history we were just invisible. There was no representation there. Black History Month is an institution, but it had very few things that were gay in it. Even though it was founded by Linda Bellos! Even if you're talking about the Black arts scene, the history of people who came through that as Black and gay is totally missing.

Campbell: So, why archive? Archiving is a way of achieving some sort of visibility. Personally, one way I found the need for this was working as a theatre director. I can sit pitching an idea or working at a conference, and somebody turns around and says, "Where are the black directors, where are they?" or "We don't have any black writers. Who? I don't know anybody." In this context the archive is a deep political intervention. In future when someone says, "Black gay history, what is it? There isn't any," or people from our own community say "we have no legacy" we'll be able to point to the archive and say "this happened or that happened." And share that with friends in our circle or family members who are twenty years younger or twenty years older.

Ajamu: There was a big gap around the Black gay and lesbian experience in the UK. I can tell millions of stories about my family and the Black experience. I can tell a million stories about being gay. But in terms of Black *and* gay a lot of the material I read came from the States. *Brother-to-Brother* and *In the Life*,

those books informed a lot of my thinking around what it means to be Black and gay.<sup>23</sup> But for me, they didn't capture what was happening here. So the archive, or rukus!, was about capturing something about being born and raised here.

Campbell: It wasn't just about invisibility in history. The early 90s was also a time when the whole Black gay scene was invisible, and the White mainstream and the Black mainstream, if there is such a thing, were anti the idea of allowing us any space. There were a lot of conversations around the club scene about how we could counter that. There were some seminal clubs in the 90s, for Black gay men particularly, some of them for women. One was called Queer Nation, one was the Vox, one was the Velvet Room. The Velvet Room was the first major Black gay club to champion R&B. Playing urban music was a big debate in the White gay scene. And then suddenly Tyrone and Chris [McKoy]<sup>24</sup> and various other people who were DJing started to break in. There was a lot of energy happening around the Black gay scene with people breaking out from their own confines in the gay club scene and redefining the possibilities of what a Black gay man could be. And clubs were obviously and still remain the big social spaces. At the same time 1992 was the first ragga music debacle with Shabba Ranks,<sup>25</sup> which Isaac Julian documented in *The Darker Side of Black* (1993). So we are looking at a breakthrough period in terms of Black gay visibility around music within the mainstream in a number of different respects.

What were your other intellectual and political influences?

Campbell: In terms of thinking about memory for me the artistic antecedents were people like Derek Jarman. Isaac Julian was an important figure too. And without getting too academic about it, in the 80s there was a lot of thinking in so-called Black mainstream identity politics around hybridity, and notions

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Beam, ed., *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* (Boston, Ma.: Alyson Books, 1986); Essex Hemphill, ed., *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Boston, Ma.: Alyson Books, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> See *In the Family* 2, p.29.

<sup>25</sup> Jamaican rapper Shabba Ranks called for the execution of gay men on Channel 4's youth show *The Word* in 1992. His comments were condemned by the presenter but the episode caused a scandal.

of difference and diversity, as defined by Black artists, mainly. In publications like *Ten.8*, which we were both reading.<sup>26</sup>

Ajamu: Coming from people like Stuart Hall, Kobena Mercer, and David A. Bailey.

Campbell: And Sonia Boyce. And we aren't disconnected from those kinds of discourses. I asked Stuart [Hall] and Kobena [Mercer] to comment on Ajamu's work [for *The Homecoming*, Black Arts Video Project, 1995] which they did. Stuart Hall's mischievous attitude to thinking about identity, race and social politics is very much in keeping with our approach. He just has a way of articulating difference playfully, mischievously

Ajamu: Playfully yet seriously. He's a very seminal figure. For our first exhibition our banner line was "The past cannot exist without its archives." That was Stuart Hall.

Campbell: And then we've got another tag-line which is "Making difference work," which is also from Stuart Hall. Ajamu was also involved in the Black Unity and Freedom Party.<sup>27</sup>

Ajamu: And Brixton Housing Association.

Campbell: So you had these interminglings of people. And the conversations we had with people who are not necessarily centrally Black and gay have been very important, in terms of how rukus! came about.

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<sup>26</sup> See David Brittain, "Ten.8: A Critical Debate," <http://staff.biad.uce.ac.uk/staff/id003706/ten8/ten8.htm> (accessed March 26, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> On the context in which the Black Unity and Freedom Party developed see Ambalavaner Sivanandan, "Challenging Racism: Strategies for the '80s," *Race & Class*, 25.2 (1983).

You were the first out Black gay generation, but as a generation you were also heavily affected by AIDS. Community archives in gay and lesbian communities have often been linked to trauma. How important was the legacy of AIDS and other traumas in the decision to create an archive?

Ajamu: Some people might argue that the past will always be about mourning and part of it can be traumatic. It is traumatic when I think about Rotimi [Fani Kayode]'s<sup>28</sup> box or Chris [McKoy]'s box, people who we knew personally, worked with, had long-term relationships with or whatever. But then not all the memories that come with a person and or a box are traumatic. Sometimes it might trigger stuff that I've forgotten. So I'm not sure if it's about mourning.

Campbell: I remember part of my impetus was a political relation to AIDS and HIV because a lot of people had died in the 90s. A lot of histories were being lost or forgotten. But I think within the Black experience, to which slavery was so integral for so long, there is a level on which pain and memory are very interlinked. This pain, the pain of lived experience is not recognized and so there's a need to hold it and store it and keep it as precious. It's not recognized because there's no language which allows it to be so. If I think about the way in which we Black people are described and prescribed in the Western canon, it doesn't allow for the kind of space that rukus! has, a space which is owned by us. Within this space the personal is really important. These are very personal endeavours. What that might mean somebody else has to interpret, because we're too deep in it. But people have died. People have died, or been killed, or been forgotten or ignored. Some very fascinating, interesting people in a culture which for lots of different reasons – not just racism, but class and poverty - has denied their existence. It can be very painful to go on about that. So there is going to be some kind of mourning, or trauma, or pain involved in the public examination of all this. We're both quite confident strong individuals in our own right, and we have our own personal stories and scars. But a lot of people don't have the same level of articulation or vision, or connection with any kind of community or past. And I think the archive goes some way to publicly acknowledging the pain and helping people come to terms with it.

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<sup>28</sup> See *In the Family*, p.34. Fani Kayode's work was first published in book form in *Black Male / White Male* (London: GMP, 1988).

*Stevens: In my mind I had set up an opposition between mourning and celebration. But actually they're completely part of the same thing. You can celebrate someone's life at the same time as mourning their loss, can't you?*

Ajamu: Definitely. It goes back to constantly wanting to break down the either/or paradigm. I think historically we bang on always about coming from a position of pain and trauma and not one of pride and celebration. Celebration is a different way into some of the discussions around who you are and what you are.

Campbell: It's a very Black thing as well, I think, bringing together celebration and loss. Although we're at an interesting stage now. With the performative stuff and "Sharing Tongues" celebration is winning out, I think.<sup>29</sup>

Let's go back to how you began to gather a collection.

Campbell: We started from our own collections, because we had photographs and memorabilia from our own collections. I was very much into the club scene and I had loads and loads of flyers for some reason. I used to keep *Boyz* magazine covers,<sup>30</sup> fetish magazines, stuff like that. And I had all these *QX* magazines,<sup>31</sup> if there was a Black person on the covers, you'd generally know who that Black guy was. They were very small, very sporadic representations of Black gay men in mainstream gay culture.

Ajamu: Linked to this, I had always documented Gay Pride, and Black men at Gay Pride, from the 1990s onwards as a photographer. Some people who were photographed are no longer around, and that was another part of the impetus for "Family Treasures".

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<sup>29</sup> "Sharing Tongues" is a rukus! project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, to uncover, record and make available the previously hidden Black LGBT history of London, Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool through recording oral and written histories and the production of a CD, booklet, exhibition and website. For more information visit "Sharing Tongues," rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/26/28/> (accessed March 26, 2009).

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.boyz.co.uk/>

<sup>31</sup> <http://qxmagine.com/>

Campbell: We tried to get “Family Treasures” off the ground by writing to people like Dennis Carney<sup>32</sup> and Dirg [Aaab-Richards] and various other people who had been active. We were asking “what have you got?” And nothing came back. Nothing came back.

Ajamu: Nobody responded

*Stevens: What were you asking for?*

Ajamu: Anything and everything. Anything and everything that had been said about Black lesbians and gays.

*Stevens: Why do you think you didn't get a response? And what changed over time?*

Campbell: There is no one reason. I think you are looking at a maelstrom, you're looking at a kind of conspiracy, circumstances which prohibit you from thinking that what you do and what you have is valuable. Obviously some activists had tapes from when they were on T.V. and others had campaign information. But most people just didn't think their material was valuable.

Ajamu: That's it. As far as I know, this was the first time that we had talked about heritage in relation to our sexual identity, within the context of the UK. So people would say, “it is just a flyer.” And so they would dismiss it. Until we started asking nobody had pulled together this thing called heritage or archive. So we left “Family Treasures” and it turned into the exhibition “The Queen's Jewels”. Ironically, we got money through HIV work, through Terrence Higgins Trust.<sup>33</sup> Because at this point, I was a trainer for Terrence Higgins Trust. And we held the exhibition at Positive East in Stepney Green

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<sup>32</sup> See *In the Family*, p.23.

<sup>33</sup> Terrence Higgins Trust is the leading HIV and sexual health charity in the UK. See <http://www.tht.org.uk/aboutus/>.

[east London], which is an HIV centre. I was doing a Black men's photography workshop and they gave us a room.

Campbell: A group of us helped paint it white for the exhibition. And we hung it ourselves. To gather the material for "The Queen's Jewels" we hounded people. We went to people's houses and sat with them.

Ajamu: I had this black notebook actually and we would walk around asking people to show us what they had and making notes. Our networks were very useful for collecting material. For example Dorothea Smartt<sup>34</sup> and Valerie [Mason-John] helped us get in touch with lots of women that I didn't know so well, who also had material.

Campbell: We went to Steve's [Swindells] house,<sup>35</sup> and sat there for ages, I remember, and Dennis's [Carney]. Again, people would go, "well I don't know, what is it you want? I mean, there's nothing here." And then they'd come out with a box, and we'd go, "Oh wow, that's great!" or "that flyer" or "yeah, I've got some of those flyers, do you have some from the other time when that happened?" What is interesting, remembering it now, was some of the conversations. It's very difficult to articulate, but people were working in a very minority maelstrom. A maelstrom which had no mainstream recognition at all. It is very tiring to work in that way, whether you are a community activist, or a DJ, or a club promoter. And then you move on, you get older, and somebody comes along and says "that was really valuable what you did" but at the time nobody was telling you it was valuable.

*Stevens: Did you have the feeling that going through the process from talking about archives to seeing items on public display changed people's attitudes towards their material and their heritage?*

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<sup>34</sup> See *In the Family*, p.52.

<sup>35</sup> Steve Swindells is a musician, journalist and club promoter.

Campbell: Yes, definitely. I remember having a long conversation with Dennis [Carney] and he was quite overwhelmed by the transformation of something that was stuck in the bottom of a box in his kitchen into something slightly iconic. We also went to the *QX* office and we picked out all the *QX* covers up until 2004, which were Black.

Ajamu: Yes, at this point *QX* was almost on their 500<sup>th</sup> edition and twenty nine of its covers were Black.

Campbell: For *Boyz*, we used the covers that I had. They didn't respond to our request for covers. *Gay Times*, I had loads of covers already and Ajamu had some and various other people had them. "The Queen's Jewels" evolved into an archive by virtue of the material we had. Because we said, okay, we've got media and campaigning, we've got club-based stuff. We've got activism, we've got theatre. For me it was interesting because we had three big panels of club flyers over twenty years, from 1983, which was incredible because people are always complaining that there is nowhere to go!

Ajamu: We had something from the first Black gay play in 1986. And we also had an obituaries section, with some of the men who died as well. There were forty three pieces.

[insert image: deeper love 1994.jpg]

Campbell: We suddenly had all this stuff. We had no publicity machine, we sent out a small press release. And there wasn't very much take-up on that. Obviously *QX* said something and I think, *Boyz* said something? Because we had their covers so they were interested.

Ajamu: And there was a line in the *Pink Paper*.

Campbell: No photographers came out. In a way we were "victims," we were treated as if it were some sort of minority issue that doesn't really matter, by both the Black and the gay press. We never expected

*The Voice* or *The Nation* to turn up. But I think for me the frustration remained that we didn't reach out beyond the minority.

Ajamu: *The Voice* had had an article on Black Gay Pride in the States. And their offices were just down the road from Stepney Green. And there was nothing in there whatsoever about what we were doing.

Campbell: But the launch was a huge event, a big landmark event. I filmed it and we invited keynote speakers. It was a very moving exhibition for those people who hadn't had a sense of the history. It was an indication for a lot of people about the strength of the archive and the possibility of it. It was exciting to think about what it could be or how it could be. It was a landmark because everybody we had struggled to get involved or who didn't know really what our vision was suddenly saw this array of forty three pieces in this big room and saw the wealth of history there. How it connected both deep within personal stuff, like the obituaries, and into the mainstream, with people like Justin Fashanu<sup>36</sup> and Isaac Julian. And I think there was a ripple effect.

Ajamu: And from there we started the process for rukus! to become a charity. At this point we had lots of arguments around using the word queer.

*Stevens: Why was that?*

Ajamu: We wanted to become a charity because we thought that people would take us more seriously. And we wanted to call it the Black, lesbian and gay queer archive. And the charity commission wrote back saying they didn't think the word "queer" was an appropriate wording because some people might find it offensive. They told us they thought the word was seen as a derogatory term. It's a different world. [To Campbell] We had a meeting about whether or not to use the word queer at your house, I remember.

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<sup>36</sup> Justin Fashanu was Britain's first million pound Black soccer player and remains the only top level player to have been publicly open about his homosexuality. He committed suicide in 1998. *In the Family*, p. 34.

Campbell: We had a board meeting that went on forever. And we dropped it.

Ajamu: We dropped it formally in terms of the objects [of the charity]. But in our publicity it's still "queer".

Campbell: Yes, the charity commission thought it wasn't in keeping with the image it allows or something. But I personally don't really care one way or another about queer or not. I think it is a quite funny word to use. I think there was a time when it was important, but I think my personal discourse around it is not that interesting. I'm more interested in bisexuality. The focus on the whole notion of queer just betrays our generation. Queer politics was late, early '90s, in the UK anyway. There was quite a big sense in which the gay mainstream communities were identifying themselves and reappropriating difference, in a positive way. But I think for anybody who is between fifteen and twenty five now, it wouldn't have any meaning whatsoever. Personally, I don't mind saying Black, queer archive, or Black, gay, lesbian, bisexual trans archive. There might be people who might mind. But as long as the energy of the archive is there, it doesn't bother me personally.

Ajamu: Me neither actually. And of course at some point, we might get rid of "LGBT archive" label, and just have "the rukus! archive".

Campbell: The charity issue also raised all sorts of questions about how do we set up an organization, do we want an organization or is an organization going to tie us down? That is something that we are still struggling with. I'm very anti the notion of being institutionalized by any kind of organization, even by our own organization. There's no building, there's no core funding. We now have an editing suite in my house and an office in Ajamu's house and lots of the stuff is stored there. We have meetings in both places. We're registered as a company and we're a charity so we have all the legal stuff going on and that's all we need really. The struggle obviously is for money, always. We're not paid for rukus!, it's not a paid job. But I always go on about the other practices that we do, about the kind of

work I'm doing and I want to continue doing that. If rukus! was to subsume everything that would be unsatisfying for me. The kind of infrastructure and "capacity-building" stuff that comes with an institution is not something that I'm interested in doing. I have a freelance career and Ajamu has his own other interests and career. It is really about looking at it holistically, in terms of one's life. rukus! is more of a brand than an institution, and as a brand it's really strong.

Ajama: I think for me, when the archive idea started I did have the idea of a centre that would house the archive. But then seeing how other groups run with a building and all the infrastructure that goes with that, it becomes so top-heavy. I guess I like the idea of something being a lot more flexible and more fluid. Otherwise the creativity is lost. For me the notion of an institution also sounds quite serious, although at the same time we are building an institution. But in a different kind of a way, around another kind of a model. I think central to what we do is that we're artists first and foremost. An artistic sensibility is woven into everything. If I think about an archive, on the basis of things I've seen, it's not pretty, it's not interesting, it's not sexy. How to bring in a community of people who might share this view is a big question. Approaching the archive with an artistic sensibility is one way into that.

Campbell: There is a vision that somehow the Black gay and lesbian presence would be more "instituted," but that's not the same as us wanting to be an institution. It may be that one day we might do a project with somebody like the Museum of London and have an office there part-time for six months, but that's it.

*Stevens: It seems to me that the way you think through your organizational model is similar to the way you think through Black queer identities. These things are mobile and they're fluid, and they're there to take on what already exists, whether those are concepts or labels, or physical spaces. How did you take this fluid model forward?*

Ajama: We're very much about being very public; exhibitions and events, that's how people hear about rukus! and the archive. People see and hear what we are doing and that it makes it a living archive and

not just stuck in a corner, not doing anything. Putting on events about the archive is very central to what we are doing.

Campbell: I agree. rukus! is a public organization. The archive is important and continues to be, but everything has a public face. “The Queen’s Jewels” and “Outside Edge,” which Ajamu curated [at the Museum in Docklands in 2008], are public things.<sup>37</sup> Our focus is on events because each event is a political act, an intervention in its own right. So we did “The Fire This Time” which we called “queering Black History Month.”<sup>38</sup> It was a way of saying we’re in Black History Month. I’m doing, we as rukus! are doing a stage play called “Mangina Monologues.”<sup>39</sup> I’m cutting a film which is a documentary that archives the “In this our lives” project.<sup>40</sup> I hope to make another short biography film, which is a gay film. We’re doing the Zami conference next year.<sup>41</sup> One day we’ll probably have to apply for a grant to archive rukus!.

[insert image: In this our lives 1987.jpg]

Ajama: The thing with “The Queen’s Jewels” and “Outside Edge” is that they were very much about campaigns, activism, public stuff. And too often that personal voice was missing from that: who’s behind that, how do they think, how do they feel? Our new project “Sharing Tongues” is about capturing the other side to our experiences. You tend to hear or see the same kind of people time and time again. What we wanted to do in terms of “Sharing Tongues” was to try to collect the voices of people that nobody would have heard about. Their stories and experience are just as valued. Some

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<sup>37</sup> “Outside Edge,” Museum in Docklands, [http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/Outside\\_Edge.htm](http://www.museumindocklands.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/Outside_Edge.htm) (accessed March 27, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> A festival that took place on October 21, 2006. <http://www.firethistime.co.uk/> (accessed March 27, 2009).

<sup>39</sup> “Mangina Monologues – stories of love and lubrication,” rukus!, <http://www.rukus.co.uk/content/view/29/1/> (accessed March 27, 2009).

<sup>40</sup> *In This Our Lives: The Reunion*, dir. Topher Campbell, documents a reunion of the original participants in the first and only national gathering of Black gay men in the UK, the 1987 National Black Gay Men's Conference, was screened at the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival on April 2, 2009 ([http://www.bfi.org.uk/llgff/our\\_lives\\_reunion\\_panel\\_discussion](http://www.bfi.org.uk/llgff/our_lives_reunion_panel_discussion)).

<sup>41</sup> The Zami conference was a national gathering of Black Lesbians which took place in 1985. rukus! was planning to document a reunion, similar to that organised for the Black Gay Men’s Conference.

people might not be out publicly. And yet, they still might want to contribute in some shape or form. Trust and positivity are very key.

*Stevens: And you've recently decided to deposit your collections in London Metropolitan Archives [LMA]?*

Ajamu: Well I'm personally not an archivist and I am not necessarily interested in the professional side of things. I think that is probably a good thing. Because it means I can approach archiving without being restricted to a professional frame of reference: "this should be done like this" and so on. Yes, what we do has to be up to a professional standard and for me I think our material is better placed with an organization that has a history around collecting a community. We thought about this very carefully; I had to ask is which organizations out there have a history of dealing with Black material and gay material? The Hall Carpenter doesn't have a history of dealing with Black material. The Black Cultural Archives doesn't have a history of dealing with gay material. London Metropolitan Archives now has the Jessica and Eric Huntley archive which is a major Black archive. They've got that and they've got other gay archives there. So I think they are best placed to house what we are collecting. And then they can conserve it and preserve it. And that makes it more accessible publicly. Because I think if you are building up an archive and people ask you "where's it held?" and you say, "well, you know, it's under my bed," people won't see it seriously. It's dismissed as "well, that's lovely, great," but actually it's not serious because it's in your house.

Campbell: I agree. I mean Marx said get your hands on the means of production. We're not holding it at Conservative central office now are we? We are holding it somewhere which has got the facilities and resources to maintain it. LMA is a huge place and they've got facilities for storage at the correct temperatures and so on. And it's our archive; they're not owning the archive. They've been very, very

accessible in terms of our conversations. They gave us an award!<sup>42</sup> And you want to be aligned with the best of the bunch. So there are all sorts of reasons for depositing there.

Ajamu: Also we've been given people's materials and so naturally, we have to keep them at the best place; it goes back to respect.

*Stevens: That leads on to the question of how you position yourself in relation to more mainstream heritage organizations.*

Ajamu: I've contacted a few lesbian and gay archives just to say "we're rukus!, we're here, what do you have and can we have a record of it?" For some places, their file over a twenty-year period about the Black and Asian experience is not even one folder. The Black Cultural Archives, they've done nothing whatsoever in terms of the Black gay and lesbian experience. But that may be a generational thing. Some of the younger generation are more open, so we are talking with them. Basically we'll work with any group as long as they're interesting and genuine and they're not ticking boxes. Because I've been in involved with some groups who want to have their funky little black projects at the end of it. And I thought "Well [pause] no."

Campbell: We are open to anybody. Because there is a level at which we want to make sure our archive is representative and reaches people. We're open to anybody as long as the agenda is ours. We're depositing our archive at LMA, we've worked with the Museum of Docklands. But we do things in our own way. Exhibitions like "Outside Edge" borrowed from classic ideas of how to make an exhibit, from memorabilia to audiovisual material. But we don't want it to be too safe. Because we're not safe, or at least I don't think so. We're not massively anarchist, but we're not safe.

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<sup>42</sup> rukus! was one of the 2008 winners of the Archives Landmark Award. The award (ALA) is given by the City of London, London Metropolitan Archives (LMA) and Archives for London Ltd (AFL) "in recognition of innovative and original projects which make creative use of archive material and which make a real contribution to the community," [http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/LGNL\\_Services/Leisure\\_and\\_culture/Records\\_and\\_archives/The+Archives+Landmark+Award.htm](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/Corporation/LGNL_Services/Leisure_and_culture/Records_and_archives/The+Archives+Landmark+Award.htm) (accessed March 27, 2009).

Ajamu: We're not anarchists but I think we've got a kind of punk attitude. A kind of do-it-yourself ethos.

Campbell: And we're also quite subversive. I mean in the first exhibition at the Museum of London ["Queer is here," 2006]<sup>43</sup> we just put our logo there, didn't we?

Ajamu: And some of the sex club flyers.

*Stevens: And you could have submitted anything?*

Campbell: We could have submitted a nice portrait of the first Black couple to have a civil partnership or a cover of Justin Fashanu but we submitted the logo because we didn't want to be easily categorized. With "Outside Edge" they gave Ajamu a lot of rein. But he still subverted it. We couldn't get the Black Perverts Network archive posters in the exhibition, but he put them in the symposium as part of a display and so unfortunately for them they were now fifteen feet high! There's always a bit of mischievousness in us. rukus! is the finger up at the same time as the embrace and the kiss. "Love and lubrication" is our sign-off at the same time as "Fuck off, we'll do what we want." We're not far away from the punk generation of the seventies, so there's a kind of shiftiness and abrasiveness about the way that we are.

That abrasiveness is important, because part of our history is a very unpalatable history and that needs to be recorded. The history of Brixton cottage, the sex parties, of violent and difficult relationships, of relationships between different Black communities, and of what's now been called gay racism, which is what the White community has done, systematically, to disempower Black clubs and to stop the Black presence happening. There's a lot of stuff which isn't nice, which doesn't sit easily in museums and community events. And doesn't sit easily with our memories either. It was not some kind of halcyon trajectory from invisibility to visibility. It's born out of a struggle, from being refused entry

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<sup>43</sup> <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/English/EventsExhibitions/Past/QueerIsHere.htm> (accessed March 26, 2009). The exhibition is discussed in more detail in Mills.

to clubs, to clubs being closed down because they're Black. And you don't get money for talking about that sort of thing. Although perhaps "Sharing Tongues" will bring some of that to light, in terms of the earlier struggles.

*Stevens: It can be argued that there are risks associated with keeping difficult memories alive. Paradoxically, archives and museums have often been seen as places where you put things so as not to have to deal with them.*

Campbell: Yes. That's interesting territory, I think.

Ajamu: Yes, very interesting territory. One of the other dangers of the archive is that you carry all this stuff in your head. You can tell people their lives. You can say, "we know you were there" because we've seen a photo or a document.

Campbell: Yes, people say certain things about where they were and where they were not, in a good way and a bad way.

Ajamu: Although some people in their forties will just naturally have forgotten things, and for some people the archive fills in the gaps.

*Stevens: What would you like to see rukus! achieve now?*

Campbell: I think I would like to see these histories and these stories emerging in "mainstream" teachings about Black history in schools and colleges and in higher education. It doesn't need to be such a mystery.

Ajamu: That's why a CD and a booklet from the "Sharing Tongues" project will be going out to schools. I have this vision that some years down the line, there's a teacher talking about Black history

and gay history. And he's talking talking and this one Black kid goes "well, what about this sir? Because this happened too."

*Stevens: Is there anything else you'd like to say?*

Ajamu: Love and lubrication.