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Black Women Who Loved Women Before the Harlem Renaissance

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Abstract

When Black queer women's history is discussed, the story usually begins with the Harlem Renaissance. Figures like Gladys Bentley, Ma Rainey, and Josephine Baker are often treated as the beginning of visible Black sapphic life in the United States. This paper argues that Black queer women existed in public and private life long before the 1920s, but their relationships and forms of intimacy were documented in fragmented, coded, and often distorted ways. Through personal letters, poetry, institutional records, and performance history, this paper examines how Black women expressed same-sex desire throughout the Victorian era and the 1910s, during a period when modern categories like "lesbian" and "bisexual" did not yet structure social identity in the ways they do today. Addie Brown and Rebecca Primus reveal deeply intimate emotional and physical attachment through their letters during the Civil War and Reconstruction era. Angelina Weld Grimké and Alice Dunbar-Nelson expressed longing for women through poetry, diaries, and correspondence at the turn of the century, while Lucy Diggs Slowe and Mary Burrill built intellectual and domestic lives together within Black academic spaces. The paper also examines figures whose identities remain more ambiguous, including Mary Fields, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, and Adah Isaacs Menken, whose lives complicate contemporary understandings of race, gender, celebrity, and sexuality. By reading these women through the framework of sapphic intimacy rather than fixed modern labels, this paper argues that Black queer women were never absent from the nineteenth century. They have simply been overlooked by archives and historical narratives that were never designed to preserve them.

(FYI, this paper is a work in progress and will continue to expand to include these additional figures)

Keywords: Women, Sapphic, Black American, Lesbian