

The Invisible Man: Distribution of Blame for the Spread of HIV in African American Communities

Debby Cheng

In a Tortoiseshell: *In her paper, Debby Cheng utilizes her **thesis** to roadmap her text to explore the nuances surrounding the distribution of blame within the black community during the AIDS epidemic prior to the introduction of an effective treatment. Using enriching and **creative sources** to provide **evidence** to her claims, Debby efficiently asks the reader to question, just as she does, the role of the heterosexual black man as the “invisible” force that perpetuated the spread of HIV in the United States during the last two decades of the 20th century.*

Excerpt

To see whether the women’s comments also mirrored the Black community’s public sentiments surrounding HIV transmission, I also analyzed the way AIDS was portrayed on the nationally televised Black program known as *Tony Brown’s Journal*. This television program, hosted by the African American producer William Anthony (“Tony”) Brown, was a pioneer in Black television at the time, dedicated to addressing the most pressing issues of Black communities (Perlmutter 1). I chose to analyze this program because the setup of the program was that Tony Brown positioned himself as representing the most prevalent views of the Black community, while engaging these perceptions with guest speakers who were considered leaders and experts on the topic. Thus, by focusing on Tony Brown’s comments, I was able to better understand the general Black community’s sentiments surrounding the issue of AIDS. Again, I found that heterosexual Black men were referenced only as potential victims of HIV infection and did not seem to be considered active transmitters of HIV. On the other hand, Black women and gay men were clearly considered complicit in spreading HIV in Black communities.

Specifically, I chose to analyze the 1985 episode “Blacks and AIDS,” which discussed the increasing prevalence of AIDS in the Black population. In this episode, guest speaker Craig Harris, a gay activist, started off the discussion with a brief overview of the issue: “Well, the figures show that nationally, 20 to 25 percent of the victims of AIDS are Black. Uh, that’s the adult number... For pediatric AIDS, what’s very interesting is that the figure is running around 54 percent for Black children, so this becomes more than a homosexual issue now” (00:06:10 -00:06:35). To this, Brown immediately interjected, “Now, are these children born to prostitutes who are drug addicts? For the most part?” (00:06:35 - 00:06:40). Harris denied that he was able to give him

the statistics to support this assumption (00:06:40 - 00:06:55). The second guest speaker, Eddie King, an activist dedicated to HIV education, went on to enumerate the ways in which HIV had entered heterosexual Black populations: primarily through men who secretly engaged in homosexual sexual contact as well as through intravenous drug users (00:20:20 - 00:21:15). Again, Brown immediately interjected, “And through prostitutes. Seems to be a high incidence of heterosexual men who get contact from prostitutes” (00:21:15 - 00:21:20).

What I find interesting about Brown’s discussions with his guests is his fixation on the role of “prostitutes” and “prostitutes who are drug addicts” in spreading HIV to the heterosexual community, especially to children and heterosexual men. First, he automatically blamed the problem of children with AIDS on “prostitutes who are drug addicts.” His condemning tone of voice and the label “prostitutes who are drug addicts” suggests that he generally considered HIV-positive mothers to be sexual and moral deviants of society who should be held responsible for the issue. However, although it is true that most children contracted HIV through mother-to-child HIV transmission (CDC, “Achievements”), Brown failed to consider that the mother may have contracted HIV through the child’s father. Secondly, his concern about the high incidence of heterosexual men who contracted HIV from prostitutes posed heterosexual men as victims. He failed to acknowledge that heterosexual men were also complicit in spreading HIV through their own sexual activity and voluntary participation in the sex work economy.

Although King briefly mentioned drug users, which presumably included heterosexual men, Brown did not discuss this issue any further. He seemed much more concerned about the role of women in potentially spreading HIV to Black children and heterosexual men. While Brown did not deny King’s acknowledgement that drug users as a group contributed to HIV transmission, the only time he mentioned drug use was when he singled out women as the drug users in Black communities. The only time he singled out heterosexual men in the entire episode was when he considered them as potential victims of HIV-positive prostitutes.

Continuing on with the episode, Brown then proceeded to single out the role of closeted gay men, or men who publicly identified as heterosexual to avoid being stigmatized but who had sex with other men outside the knowledge of their female sex partners. Specifically, he pointed out that these HIV-positive gay men were “the bridge between the high incidence in the gay community and the potential high incidence in the heterosexual,” a comment to which both guest speakers confirmed was likely the case (22:20-23:05). Thus, in addition to women’s roles in transmitting HIV in the epidemic, Brown seemed evidently aware of the role that gay men played

in spreading the virus in the Black community. Overall, the only group he did *not* single out as potential transmitters of HIV was heterosexual Black men.

From reading the women's and Brown's comments, one would think that heterosexual men played a minimal role in HIV transmission and that women were the primary transmitters of HIV to men. However, when we look at the national statistics of AIDS cases for which risk was reported to the CDC at the time, we can see that this was not the case. In 1994, of all AIDS cases among Black women, approximately 42% were attributed to sex with a heterosexual man (CDC, "Cases Reported" 12). That same year, only 16% of all AIDS cases among heterosexual Black men were attributed to sex with a woman (CDC, "Cases Reported" 11). In addition, heterosexual Black men accounted for 64% of all AIDS cases among African Americans that were attributed to injection drug use (CDC, "Cases Reported" 11-12). Furthermore, scholars have shown that heterosexual Black men were more likely than women to participate in illicit drug use, to have multiple sexual relations, and to keep these drug-using and promiscuous behaviors a secret from their partners, all of which positioned heterosexual men to be major transmitters of HIV (Berger 25; Gilbert and Wright 19). Thus, considering that they played an extensive role in spreading HIV, it is astounding that heterosexual Black men were not held more directly responsible.

Author Commentary

Debby Cheng

Before I started writing this research paper, I spent a *long* time reading sources I thought could potentially be used as primary and secondary sources. I also spent a really long time planning out the structure of my argument. I completely mapped out what points I wanted to make, how I would support each of my points, and how each point would relate to the broader thesis of my paper. When I finally started writing, I thought it would be smooth sailing from there, but I found that I often had to make adjustments to my plan. For example, as I started the actual writing process, I began to realize that there were certain holes in my argument or certain counterarguments that I hadn't previously considered. I jotted all these new thoughts down, reshaped my plan for the paper, and often scrapped or rewrote parts of my essay. This was a long process, and it was definitely painful to throw out writing at times, but it ultimately made my paper stronger!

Looking back, one thing I struggled with was keeping track of all my sources and pieces of evidence. For example, I would find great pieces of evidence in my readings but then completely forget where they came from. I would then have to spend a long time trying to find these pieces of evidence again. My advice to any writer who is working with many sources is to keep a separate document that keeps track of quotes (and their page numbers) that you may potentially use as evidence for your argument. Even if you aren't sure whether you will end up using the quote in your paper, having this list is super helpful to refer back to and can ultimately save a lot of time.

Editor Commentary

Doruntina Fida

The first time I read Debby's paper, I was struck by how eloquently she crafted a story of the disproportionate blame encountered by the Black community during the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the United States prior to the introduction of a viable treatment. There are many things that can be highlighted about this piece of work, including the way in which Debby frames and synthesizes her thesis in light of her motive; more specifically, she builds upon a pre-established discourse to investigate the role heterosexual Black men had in spreading HIV, a population of the Black community that was largely ignored by previous scholarship.

Despite the level of command Debby displays in her commendable usage of lexicon terms to develop her paper, her utilization of evidence is what is particularly captivating to me in the excerpt of her paper above. Indeed, through emphasizing the significance of creative sources like a series of interviews conducted by Michele Berger and an episode of television from *Tony Brown's Journal*, Debby illustrates just how hard it is for writers to escape the paradigm we often find ourselves in when searching for intriguing sources of evidence. Moving away from solely using the binary composed of academic monographs and journal articles (which she still makes use of), Debby expertly crafts a narrative that intersects primary and secondary sources to showcase how heterosexual Black men were the invisible transmitters of HIV.

This is evident in the section of Debby's paper presented above; taken from the middle of her paper, it interposes analysis and evidence seamlessly to lay support to her assertion that the distribution of blame for the spread of HIV in the Black community was misguided. Using exemplary orienting to ensure the relevance of utilizing a TV episode from the time period to indicate how the Black community conceptualized the transmission of HIV, Debby pervasively reminds the reader of her argument. Moreover, Debby frames the excerpt above with paragraphs that establish the pertinence of the episode from *Tony Brown's Journal* in conjunction with statistics from the CDC to compose a compelling argument.

Works Cited

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Bios

Debby Cheng '20 is a senior in the Psychology Department. She works as an undergraduate researcher at the Neuroscience of Attention and Perception Laboratory and is also part of Princeton's Belly Dance Company. She volunteers at a clinic for patients with HIV/AIDS, which is what motivated the topic of her paper! She wrote this paper as a senior.

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