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Black Women's Intellectual History

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Rev. Brenda Howard Tapia, the AIDS Quilt, and Beyond

The Climate at Davidson College

On a morning in 1995, the Chaplain of Davidson College, Rob Spach, arrived at his office door to find a printed letter with the heading “Vermillion Press.” The letter proceeded to describe how Scott C. Vermillion, a pastor from Davidson’s InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, “denied a gay student a leadership position in the chapter because his pursuit of a gay lifestyle was inconsistent with God’s call to obedience.”¹ Spach responded to the letter by denouncing Vermillion’s position on the matter. He proceeded to champion love as a means to respect and care for *all* Davidson College students: a sentiment that he and his fellow religious leaders had shared with the college community for several years. On October 31, 1994, just one year prior to the “Vermillion Press” incident, Spach expressed his frustrations with a friend in 1985 whom he previously assumed had a “gentle, kind-hearted, [and] faithful spirit.”² According to Spach, this woman claimed that the AIDS crisis was sent by God to punish queer people. Her statement saddened Spach and then inspired him to later publish his thoughts on the matter in the *Davidsonian* that October. His article praised the NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, an event that other religious leaders like Assistant Reverend Brenda Tapia played integral roles in

¹ Scott C. Vermillion, *Vermillion Press* (Davidson College Archives, 1995), 1.

² Rob Spach, “Aids and Religious Faith: Preparing for the Quilt” in *The Davidsonian*, (1994), 8.

bringing to campus. He called for religious students to reflect on their responses to those whom the AIDS crisis had affected. In 1996, now a year following the “Vermillion Press” incident, Rob Spach reaffirmed his respect and love for LGBTQ students. He, as well as others in the religious department such as Rev. Brenda Tapia continued to do so throughout their Davidson career. Such was the climate of the college from the 1980s to the 1990s. It was a time colored by a mixture of outward homophobia and progressive LGBTQ activism.

The relationship between queerness and religion has long been contentious. For centuries, religion has been a space of persecution, rather than liberation, for the LGBTQ community. Despite the odds, Reverend Brenda Tapia demonstrated enormous amounts of love for her students and for queer individuals. In the early nineties, she supported Davidson’s very own AIDS Memorial Quilt project which simultaneously aimed to fundraise for and bring awareness to AIDS causes. The project honored and preserved the memories of those who had passed away from the disease, including Gary Mason, Davidson’s Assistant Dean of Administration. He was a friend to many, including Rev. Brenda Tapia. This project aims to not only trace Tapia’s legacy of queer activism on Davidson’s campus, but underscore how Tapia’s faith and personal connection to racism and prejudice guided her love and support for the queer community, rather than discouraged her acceptance of it. Her public intellectual work extended beyond the AIDS quilt and had a lasting impact on the cooperation of religious and queer life at Davidson.

Reverend Brenda Tapia’s Work

Although 1986 marked her first full year at Davidson, Rev. Brenda Tapia quickly contributed to a movement dedicated to making the college a safer place for all students. On September 4, 1986, the Assistant Dean of Admissions, Gary Mason, sent a document to the

Davidson College President that outlined the creation and goals of the Standing Committee on Pluralistic Environments (SCOPE). The SCOPE was established to “promote healthy racial attitudes”³ on campus by constructively using the first five weeks following freshman orientation to limit carousing “activities sponsored by the Patterson Court eating clubs.”⁴ Among others, Assistant Chaplain Brenda Tapia was a member of the committee. By 1986, she had already identified a fault in the White institution for which she worked, one that she had the power to alter and improve. The first week of the SCOPE program was titled “Celebrating Differences/Finding Common Ground.”⁵ Freshmen were called to participate in discussions on how races can find understanding between one another. Tapia knew that in order to reduce prejudice on campus, the college needed to facilitate conversations on crucial topics such as race and sexuality. By lending her time, thoughts, and leadership skills to the SCOPE project, Tapia not only assisted in establishing an orientation program that spread basic ideals of respect within the campus community, but also established herself as a public intellectual from the moment she came to campus.

Rev. Brenda Tapia and the SCOPE organization did not only take a stand against racism, but also fought for basic forms of respect between heterosexual and homosexual people. The second week of the SCOPE program was named “Human Sexuality/Emotional and Physical.”⁶ Initially, under the SCOPE’s initial outline of week two, the committee had listed “homosexuality” as an important topic to discuss. Of course, in the late 1980s, many Americans retained homophobic mindsets and continued to pathologize queer people due to the rising media coverage of the AIDS crisis. By July, SCOPE altered the programming to encompass *all* sexual

³ Gary Mason, *Standing Committee on Pluralistic Environment (SCOPE)*, (Davidson College Archives, 1986), 1.

⁴ Gary Mason, *Standing Committee*, 1.

⁵ *Standing Committee on Pluralistic Environment Minutes*, (Davidson College Archives, 1986), 1.

⁶ *Standing Committee [...] Minutes*, (Davidson College Archives, 1986), 1.

orientations. Dean Gary Mason emphasized that “the focus should be the total sexual experience as opposed to zeroing in on one or two aspects, i.e., homosexuality.”⁷ The committee likely realized that if they had singled out queer people in their discussion, they might not have been able to reach the mindsets of all students, therefore failing to form a bridge between hetero- and homosexual people. Additionally, according to the committee’s meeting minutes, the “Human Sexuality” week would also discuss Gay Support Groups, a resource that would help queer students find community, deal with homophobic hardships, and process the destruction that the AIDS crisis was wreaking around the world.⁸ Therefore Rev. Brenda Tapia and the rest of the SCOPE leadership team sought a balance between honoring and supporting the unique story of queer people, while also working to change the minds of those who were prejudiced. The ultimate goal was promoting a healthier public environment for all.

SCOPE was one of many queer-centered committees that Rev. Brenda Tapia joined during her time at Davidson. She again affirmed her acceptance of LGBTQ individuals through her volunteerism on the Davidson College AIDS Memorial Quilt Committee. In a 1994 pamphlet inviting Davidson students, faculty, staff, and community members to participate in the four day event, Tapia was listed as one of the Panelmaking Co-Coordiators.⁹ The college had received approval to house 70 to 80 panels of the Project AIDS Memorial Quilt in the Johnston Gym.¹⁰ Rev. Brenda Tapia was in charge of coordinating and facilitating four workshops that allowed Davidson students and community members a chance to make their own quilts. Importantly, quilt making was not only an important practice for the queer community, but one celebrated by communities of Black women for decades. According to Stephanie Beck Cohen, “Quilt histories

⁷ SCOPE Minutes, (Davidson College Archives, 1986), 1.

⁸ *Standing Committee [...] Minutes*, (Davidson College Archives, 1986), 1.

⁹ *The Davidson College AIDS Memorial Quilt Committee [Pamphlet]* (Davidson College Archives, 1994).

¹⁰ Susan Warren, “Campus Prepares for Aids Memorial Quilt” in *The Davidsonian*, (October 17, 1994), 5.

are a material, tangible expression of ideas and experiences by women, interconnected through artistic practice.”¹¹ Much like the quilt making of Gee’s Bend, the Project AIDS Memorial Quilt strives to honor and preserve the histories of queer people who no longer live. It is a practice of bringing communities together. It is a practice of activism and raising awareness about both racism and sexual prejudice. Rev. Brenda Tapia’s work and efforts to host quilting workshops provided a safe public space for students, faculty, and community members alike. They gathered to share their memories and their experiences as a means to grieve the loss of so many individuals, as a means to enact public good and change.

In October 1994, nearly a decade after Brenda Tapia began her work at Davidson, and nearly a decade after the establishment of the SCOPE program, the Reverend would honor queerness on campus once again. According to *The Davidsonian*, the theme of that year’s annual faculty/staff talent show was “Panels of Reflection,” the “brainchild of Rev. Brenda Tapia.”¹² The event showcased both serious and humorous acts alike, all with the mindset of honoring those who had passed away from HIV/AIDS related illnesses. The talent show was held in accordance with the AIDS Memorial Quilt project and additionally worked towards a fundraising goal of \$15,000. At the event’s conclusion, Tapia took the stage and dedicated the show to her friend and colleague Gary Mason who died from AIDS in September 1989.¹³ Mason was the originator of the Faculty/Staff Talent show. In the face of the medical and cultural crisis of HIV, Brenda Tapia rose before a crowd to honor queer voices, both alive and dead. She shared that “during [Mason’s] time nearly everyone had been touched by [him] in some way or another and marked with sadness [at] his tragic passing.”¹⁴ She shared his history so that his memory, as well as the

¹¹ Stephanie Beck Cohen, “Stitched Networks Liberian Quilters, Transatlantic Diplomacy, and Community” in *To Turn the Whole World Over*, (University of Illinois Press, 2019), 150.

¹² Matthew Eirich, “True Talent: Moonlighting for the Names Quilt,” in *The Davidsonian*, (October 3, 1994), 1.

¹³ Matthew Eirich, “True Talent,” 12.

¹⁴ Matthew Eirich, “True Talent,” 12.

joy and work that he brought to campus, would not be forgotten, proclaiming his legacy as a reflection of his contributions to the Davidson community, regardless of their sexuality. Despite certain religious attitudes that fought against queer people, Tapia radically asserted through her memorial to Mason that religion and queerness could in fact coexist.

Tapia Beyond Her Work

It is important to note that while the SCOPE organization was taking shape and as the leaders of the AIDS Memorial Quilt project were later in the works of building the event, Davidson College as an institution was coming to terms with the global AIDS crisis alongside its students. The first mention of the disease in *The Davidsonian* appeared a year before SCOPE was formed, in a September issue from 1985.¹⁵ The article was titled “The Outside World in Brief” and highlighted current global events such as an earthquake in Mexico City and South Africa’s withdrawal of troops from conflict. AIDS was mentioned at the end of the article and not in the context of a pandemic. Instead, the virus was mentioned as an announcement from the Defense Department that “to test all military personnel going overseas for the AIDS virus.” It was not until 1988 that the college trustees had even begun to consider the “institution of an AIDS policy.”¹⁶ Yet, in the middle of it all, Rev. Brenda Tapia and the other committee members of SCOPE and the AIDS Memorial Quilt Committee were adjusting the landscape of Davidson College to more appropriately reflect and cope with the changing times. Her work held student well-being at the forefront, always.

Even when Rev. Brenda Tapia was not actively involved in the AIDS Memorial Quilt Committee, she continued to speak on AIDS several years after the event as, if the crisis had

¹⁵ Jane Aurell, “The Outside World in Brief,” in *The Davidsonian*, (September 27, 1985), 3.

¹⁶ “News Shorts,” in *The Davidsonian*, (March 11, 1988), 2.

been embedded in her psyche. In several interviews, she mentions AIDS, not with a tone that scorned the disease, but a tone that balanced hope with a critique on how the world responded to the outbreak. For instance, on September 21, 1992, in an interview by a student on her Love of Learning program, she casually acknowledged AIDS. The interviewer asked Tapia to discuss the possibility of taking a contingent of students to “a third world country.”¹⁷ Tapia emphasized that such a trip would be a wonderful way to expose students to a wider, diasporic lens of Black life, challenging the narrative of “behavior problems and attitudes that [were] common in Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools.”¹⁸ But rather than solely framing a trip as a means for American students to witness the hardships of those abroad, she explained that both parties could benefit from the trip. On the topic of AIDS, rather than suggesting that many people were suffering and that that suffering could effectively show an American student all the privileges *they* have, she suggested that “some young boy or girl in one of our classes might be the scientist who has the cure for AIDS.”¹⁹ Rather than dwelling on the destruction of the disease and its rampant nature, Tapia framed the issue within a light of hope—a light of hope not just for finding a cure to AIDS but with an aspiration that one of her students may go on to do so. Once again, she shifted the framework of the disease to encourage the public to do good for queerness and the AIDS epidemic more broadly.

Similarly, even after the AIDS epidemic had somewhat subsided, Rev. Brenda Tapia had integrated the term ‘AIDS’ into her everyday speech and metaphors. As seen in a 2007 interview, then again in 2017, Tapia deployed the phrase “dripping with AIDS” to describe instances when she was othered based on her race or class. At first blush, a phrase like this may appear outdated

¹⁷ Katrice Shuler, “Love of Learning Program Strives to Break Down Barriers,” in *The Davidsonian*, (September 21, 1992), 4.

¹⁸ Katrice Shuler, “Love of Learning,” 4.

¹⁹ Katrice Shuler, “Love of Learning,” 4.

and hyperbolic, however it reveals Tapia's empathetic understanding for AIDS victims. She first used the phrase to describe the desegregation of North Mecklenburg High school, discussing how the Black athletes were quickly accepted into the culture because they helped the sports teams rise to championships that year, but how the non-sporty Black students, like herself, were shunned and ran away from.²⁰ She stated: "me, and others of us who weren't athletes, they ran from us like we were dripping from AIDS and if you got too close they would catch it."²¹ Ten years later, Tapia further stated: "And then you get to North [Mecklenburg High] and you're invisible. And you were either invisible or you feel like you're dripping with AIDS because people see you, *ahhh*, and run."²² In a similar vein as the first quote, Tapia uses this metaphor, despite its anachronistic qualities, to describe a particular kind of racism that propelled White people to avoid her and similar students in her secondary school experience. At the height of the AIDS crisis, fear stimulated homophobia within many Americans; it was terrifying to touch a queer person regardless of whether or not they had even been infected with the disease. She again experienced this fear and shunning when Gary Mason contracted AIDS and left the college to live out the rest of his life in some semblance of peace. When describing Tapia's high school experience in the 60s well before AIDS had been discovered, Tapia's deployment of short quotes like these reveal her innermost beliefs, how even when she was not explicitly fighting against or discussing homophobia, she nevertheless spoke to change the way the greater public, listening to her, might.

Today, Davidson graduates continue to reflect on the campus culture during the 80s and 90s and remember the generosity of Rev. Brenda Tapia. A year after Tapia passed away, two

²⁰ Jojo Hurt, *Reverend Brenda Tapia (Interview)*, (2007), 8.

²¹ Jojo Hurt, *Reverend*, 8.

²² Clarence Fox, *Shared Stories: African Americans in North Mecklenburg (Interview with Brenda Tapia)*, (2017), 20.

Davidson students interviewed alumnus Thea Princewill (nee Nathea Rhinehardt) '93 for the *History of Love and Sexuality at Davidson Project*. Princewill is a queer Black woman who identifies as asexual. She was in the pilot class for the Love of Learning program in the summer of 1987, but when she attended Davidson she had considered herself “stunted.” In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the social culture of romantic relationships at the college existed within a binary: one was either slated to be married immediately following graduation, or one was “hooking up” with others within their own race.²³ Mixed-race relationships were seldom tolerated, proving a unique challenge for Black women. First, according to Princewill, the population of Black students compared to white was much smaller. Second, nearly half of the Black men had already had girlfriends. Finally, she found some of the students in the BSC (an organization many white people had expected her to participate in based on her race) to be exclusionary and mean at times. In fact, it felt easier to befriend a gay white man than to date a Black man which is precisely what Princewill did. Her asexuality, another form of queerness or sexual deviance—a deviation from dominant heteronormative standards—was never a consideration in her mind. The early 1990s was not a simpler time but “an ignorant time,” Princewill claimed, marked by racist structures that suppressed Black women and especially Black queer women.²⁴ She was taught to not consider her identity in education and to instead ignore her intersectional qualities. Moreover, when the two student interviewers asked if Princewill had ever considered African American or Women’s Studies, she said that she had been so “groomed into assimilating into whiteness that [she] didn’t want to be associated with African American studies. And [she] didn’t want to be associated with Women’s Studies.”²⁵ Sadly, Thea

²³ Emma Shealy, *The History of Love at Davidson Project (Interview with Thea Princewill)*, (2021), 11.

²⁴ Emma Shealy, *The History*, 16.

²⁵ Emma Shealy, *The History*, 15.

Princewill felt that no faculty or staff at Davidson cared about her with the exception of Professor Magdalena Maiz-Pena and Rev. Brenda Tapia.

Throughout her time at Davidson, Rev. Brenda Howard Tapia used her position of power to advocate for the safety of queer students through constructive discussions, teachings, quilting events, queer resources, speeches and interviews. During a time when queerness consumed the minds of millions of Americans for better or worse through the AIDS epidemic, Tapia saw herself—her experiences with segregation, racism, fear, and shunning—reflected in the queer story. She leveraged her empathy to bridge the divide between religion and queer sexuality as a means to instill tolerance and acceptance into the Davidson College community. Tapia was a public intellectual who loved her community enough to alter it for the better by hosting events like the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt. Today, outside the Davidson College Presbyterian Church and the Chaplains' Office in the Student Union, pride flags mark the religious spaces as sanctuaries for queer people. They are welcoming symbols that began with the work of Rev. Brenda Tapia and continue to reflect her bravery today. Arguably, these flags would not have flown as confidently today if she had not been there to assist in bringing that welcoming spirit to campus nearly forty years ago now.