Homosexuality and the State: What the Atlanta Murders Reveal

by David Thorstad

Spring 1981. A continuing string of unsolved murders of black children in Atlanta, with mounting media attention and pressure for a solution; suggestions that a "homosexual motive" might be involved; an increase in violent assaults on gay men; anti-sex crusaders riding high on the Reagan election; the unleashing of a post-Watergate FBI anxious to get back to harassing groups it doesn't like.

By late Spring, public frustration over the murders was producing street demonstrations in U.S. cities, and the country was a sea of green ribbons. It was an election year in Atlanta, and such spasms tend to feed hysterics. Was a witchhunt against gay men being prepared?

The fear gripped some homosexuals in 1981. A witchhunt never materialized. Yet the role of homosexuality in the Atlanta murder case bears inspection. An examination will reveal the fragility of gay support among non-gay segments of society. It will suggest the potential ease with which gay men can be turned into scapegoats, despite the gay movement's increasing respectability. It raises interesting questions about sexual liberation—and survival—in a society controlled by a heterosexual dictatorship.

The Homosexual Connection

On March 15, 1981, the New York Times published its first in-depth analysis on the 20 murders then included in the official police investigation list. The Times played up the Atlanta police theory that they were the work of "many killers, acting separately." It noted that the FBI and police "were very interested in the theory that one or more of the killers were murdering for sexual gratification." The theory was appealing "despite the lack of evidence on the victims' bodies of homosexual activity, sexual assault or mutilation."

"We don't have any evidence of sexual abuse," said Dr. John Feegel, associate medical examiner for Fulton County. "but when you find a teenage boy in his underwear, you can construe that there's probably a sexual motive" (GCN, 4/25/81). Future boy killers, take note.

A white gay man from Atlanta who was working with the police gave credence to the theory that a gay man was involved. Frank Scheuren, national president of the gay Catholic group Dignity, told Gay Community News (4/25/81) that there was a "strong possibility" that one of the killers was homosexual.

"From what I know as a gay man, many of the things they are looking at they need to look at." He expressed the conviction that "the gay community is not being manipulated." Scheuren's statement left the impression that there was something about being gay that might lead a man to murder boys.

Prior to the arrest of 23-year-old Wayne Williams, authorities investigated the possibility of pinning the murders on a homosexual "sex ring" involving men and boys. In early April, ABC News reported that police were attempting to link the murders to "organized homosexual activity." Atlanta Police Chief George Napper denounced the report as "irresponsible," but officials stopped short of denying that such an investigation was going on. The authorities and the press also spread the story that some of the victims were "hustlers" who sold their bodies and came from "broken homes."

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Reports of a hunt for a "sex ring" increased following the discovery of the body of 13-year-old Timothy Hill on March 30. Hill, described as a repeat runaway, was said to have been friends with gay men.

In early April, Larry Marshall, a black man, was arrested in Connecticut and extradited to Atlanta. DeKalb County Sheriff Dick Hand reportedly leaked the story that Marshall was to be used as an informant on a "homosexual ring" in Atlanta. The whole thing smelled like a police setup. But after the initial flurry, not much was heard about Marshall.

On May 4, Francis Nathaniel Hardy, a 49-year-old man from a disadvantaged section of Atlanta, was sentenced to 30 years in prison for sex with minor males, all of them white. Authorities claimed he had run a "child sex ring" for at least 17 years. The Atlanta Constitution entitled a pre-trial report "Street Kids Become Victims of City Homosexual Network." Assistant District Attorney Gordon Miller told the Constitution that the boys "appear unharmed, but you can never gauge how much damage is inflicted by this sort of thing." Miller said there were many parallels between the Hardy case and the string of unsolved murders of black children.

But the Atlanta Gazette quoted a 31-year-old resident of the area as saying that sex with Hardy was a tradition among boys. "I've lived here most of my life and I did it, my brother did it and my dad did it. Everybody we knew did it. The men who pay young guys whatever amount for a little play are usually well-known by not only the boys involved but by their families—who are often given money or the opportunity for financial help and the opportunity...

placed on the official list. The two victims Wayne Williams was convicted of murdering were adults, not children.

The City Too Busy to Hate Atlanta has presummptuously billed itself the "city too busy to hate." Two-thirds black, the city is considered a model of the "New

lasting. Curfews, mistrust and fear of adults, increased parental supervision, police checks and surveillance, racial tension, and the numbing series of funerals—how could these not leave a lasting imprint on the city's youngsters?..."
It is standard practice for the authorities to label a gay man's circle of friends a "sex ring." In 1981, the hunt for "sex rings" was in the air. In July, the FBI and police in Nassau County, Long Island, revealed that the North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA), a radical gay rights group, was the subject of an investigation on the grounds that it was a "sex ring." Since then, the closely watched nature of the group's activities has remained high. In 1983, nearly a dozen men were convicted of consensual sexual activities with boys, but no "sex ring." The implication of all the sleuthing is that any gay man who befriends a boy makes himself a possible target of state investigation. None of the press coverage generated by the Atlanta murders addressed this rationale for state harassment of gay male activity.

During Spring 1981, I turned on the evening news with trepidation. Every discovery of another boy's body made me ache. I was horrified by the deliberate precision of the crimes, the widespread official inaction in investigating them (alcohol and drugs, loss of evidence, sloppy procedures, and so on). What kind of animal could be doing this? A "boy-lover" could not be responsible, I reassured myself. Boy-lovers love boys, they don't kill them. Besides, anybody who reads the paper knows that parents and relatives are more prone to harm their own offspring than are men who love boys. But how many people know this?

Were the authorities lumping together unrelated murders in hopes of pinning them all on a gay man? According to DeKalb County Sheriff Hand, inclusion of victims on the child murder list was "an arbitrary decision." (ABC News Nightline, 3/1/81). Thirty cases were lumped together, including one that was not.

The media played the murders like a whodunit, but Atlanta had been suffering for months. The unsolved murders were making it a symbol of repressed racism—the attempt on the life of Urban League head Vernon Jordan, the gruesome mutilation-murders of blacks in New York and Buffalo, the arrest of the Klansman in Klam, the 1979 murder of Communist Workers Party militant in Greensboro, N.C., the beating of a black family in D.C. that had been victims of white hate. A plantation stop.

The issue of community self-defense rose in Atlanta for the first time in the wake of the murders. "The problem is that there was an uprising in Atlanta," says Ben Chavis, a member of the fact-finding commission of the National Black Independent Political Party (NBIPPC) which went to Atlanta in Summer 1981. The commission's report was internal and has not been published. Chavis says it found "enormous disbelief in the black community" that no black man was guilty. Most blacks believed he was a scapegoat, and that if he was involved he did not act alone—a view that has persisted despite Williams' conviction. According to Chavis, the NBIPPC commission found that as a result of the mayoral election campaign, "various forces were using the issue for their own purposes," and that the effect on blacks, especially children, would be long-lasting.

Jekyll and Hyde

The prosecution portrayed Wayne Williams as a black Jekyll and Hyde—a whiz kid, bright, articulate, but also cunning, sadistic, a killer of his own race. His occasional angry outbursts during the trial were said to demonstrate a capacity for murder and violence. He was too bright, too brash, and such people are capable of anything. Anti-intellectualism was an undercurrent, although Williams' IQ was only 100, not more than the 150 it was reported to be at the time he was arrested.

The Jekyll and Hyde theory appeared to lend substance where evidence of wrongdoing could not be produced. It was a theory the media advanced and the jury accepted. Earl Caldwell, who covered the trial for the New York Daily News, became convinced that Williams "was involved in theAtlanta murders" by abrupt changes in the defendant's demeanor and style of dress. "Day Three was to be decisive. Wayne wore old slacks, a worn shirt and a sleeveless sweater. On what was to be his most crucial day in the courtroom, a day of his life, he showed up with a bunny look. Why? Why would he dress that way when he owned so many fine, tailored suits? Wayne knows." (5/2/82).

The Jekyll and Hyde theory was interesting. It might aptly apply to some world leaders. It also describes most homosexuals, who still live two lives. Indeed, the Jekyll and Hyde theory contained an element of anti-homosexuality. You can't really trust queers—they aren't what they appear to be.

Caldwell implied this: "In the view of some, what Atlanta was actually

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becoming was the homosexual capital of the South." The main street, now called Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, was "filled every night with hundreds of men, almost all of whom dressed as women." This was the area "where many victims lived—and where the weirdness was on the streets and wide open." If nothing else, this should at least secure the Daily News reporter's heterosexual credentials. Big-city heterosexuals seem to worry a lot about their town becoming a "homosexual capital."

Williams had been seen at the Mar Quett Club on King Drive. "Once he was linked with the Mar Quett," wrote Caldwell, "he was tied not just to transvestites and homosexuals, but to a particularly violent group that frequents the club" (6/22/82).

The prosecution portrayed Williams as a gay man who preyed on young blacks. To lend credibility to its case, it produced two teenage boys to testify that they had propositioned them. One 15-year-old testified that Williams had given him $2, fondled him sexually (the media never spelled out what this meant, but if true, how was it harmful?), took him to a wooded area, and "asked me if I had ever had sex with boys." The youth claimed that when Williams got out of the car to get something from the trunk (a murder weapon or KY jelly?), he jumped out and ran to a nearby apartment complex. Judge Clarence Cooper refused to allow defense questioning about the youth's criminal background.

"I don't know if they paid any of them or not," said Williams' father. "It seems to me they have put words in the mouths of the poor little street kids."

Other witnesses claimed to have seen Williams with one or another victim prior to their deaths. "The strange truth is, the eyewitnesses did not see anything," noted Caldwell.

"Except for the two teenage kids who said Wayne had propositioned them, not one of the eyewitnesses saw the defendant do anything illegal" (2/26/82).

Nine gay Atlanta figures sent a letter to the district attorney protesting the focus on Williams' sexuality. It read: "We deplore such tawdry maneuvers to prejudice this jury and, in consequence, prejudice the entire community into judging all homosexuals as evil and, because of that, potentially guilty of violent and otherwise heinous crimes" (Advocate, 4/1/82).

"We aren't trying to prove he's homosexual," said District Attorney Lewis Slaton in his final argument. But Slaton reminded the jury that two teenagers had testified that Williams had solicited homosexual acts from them. "We're letting the facts fall where they will. You could have the theory that whenever they agreed to it (homosexual acts), they were snuffed out. He'd have 'em in a pretty good position to snuff 'em out."

The state was suggesting that a sexual proposition by a man to a boy is only the first step to murdering him. In reality, murder of men by hung-up young hustlers—for money, or to protect their heterosexual self-image—is far more common. In state scenarios, the boy is never the one to make the proposition; the boy is always a "victim," if only because he is allowing his body to be pleased in non-heterosexual ways.

Besides painting Williams as a homosexual murderer, the state asserted that he hated black lumpen youths. Williams' light skin, in contrast to that of the victims, who were dark, was regarded as corroboration of this motive. (According to Chavis, black on black racism "doesn't exist" and was a media creation. Even if it does, however, it is quite a leap from that to murder.)

Williams denied being gay. Nor was he accepted as being gay by the Atlanta gay community. Asked if he was homosexual, he replied; "Ain't no way. No, I don't have any grudge against them as long as they keep their hands to themselves but don't come near me." A business associate, Carla Bailey, testified that his dislike for homosexuals was so strong that "he didn't want them nowhere around him." Once, she said, he made a pass at her. Another woman, Gwendolyn Harden, testified that she was Williams' girlfriend and had sex with him. Williams also denied making derogatory comments about dark-skinned blacks.

According to a forensic psychologist from the defense team—who did not testify—Williams was "more sexual than homosexual."

Shifting Theories and Political Pressure

Less than three weeks before the arrest of Williams, the New York Times was still reporting the "many killers" theory. Commissioner Brown and other top law officials in Atlanta, it said, "are generally in agreement that the slayings were not committed by one killer. The deaths are marked by several varying patterns that indicate the involvement of more than one person, probably acting separately. Nine of the victims were found nude or virtually nude in rivers; 19 have died by asphyxiation; two were young girls; five were adults" (6/5/81).

When the trial opened at the beginning of January 1982, the press was no longer referring to the Atlanta "child murders," but to the "missing and murdered young black people." That was because Williams was being tried for the murder of two of the five adults on the official police investigation list, Nathaniel Carter, 27, and Jimmy Ray Payne, 21. But the link was maintained. Talk of "many killers, acting separately" disappeared.

Three weeks into the trial, Judge Cooper allowed the state to intro-
David Thorstad received the highest honor of his career in the April issue of Hustler magazine, which named him Asshole of the Month.

Produce evidence that there was "a plan, scheme, pattern, bent of mind and identity" between the two cases in which Williams was charged and 10 additional cases, nine of which were on the official list. In effect, Williams was being tried for 12 murders, even though he was charged with only two. This may have been the most crucial of Judge Cooper's rulings and probably sealed Williams' fate.

Another ruling quashed defense subpoenas for various officials who attended a seven-hour meeting at the governor's mansion on June 19, 1981—two days before Williams was arrested. The officials included Governor George Busbee, Atlanta Mayor Maynard Jackson, former state Attorney General Arthur Bolton, Georgia Bureau of Investigation Director Phil Peters and Busbee's chief legal aide. The defense claimed that the decision to arrest Williams was made at the meeting, following intense political pressure on DA Slaton. The meeting reportedly received a telephone call from either Vice President George Bush or a high official of the U.S. Justice Department.

At the meeting, Atlanta FBI Bureau Chief Johnny Glover and acting U.S. attorney Dorothy Kirkland were said to have argued aggressively that Williams be arrested and prosecuted. Georgia officials denied applying political pressure.

Did all this official interest stem from white concern for the fate of young blacks? Or did it reflect a desire to show that integration and
The authorities took pains to point out that most of the characters in the drama were black: the victims: the defendant; the defendant's chief attorney; Public Safety Commissioner Lee Patrick Brown, who led the murder investigation; the chief of police; the special agent in charge of the Atlanta office of the FBI; then Mayor Maynard Jackson; and the judge.

According to the New York Times (1/3/82), "At the height of the crisis" Mayor Jackson "met with scores of his black friends and supporters and urged them to tell others that they thought the killer was black in order to dispel myths about the possibility of a white conspiracy and calm any racial tension that might be building." As the trial opened, Mayor-elect Andrew Young told the Times: "Atlanta is one place where we've made the system work where representative government is a reality. And it is clear that the presence and involvement of a black power structure in the city is the reason why Atlanta responded to this, the murders, and the trial, with confidence that justice will be done."

Wayne Williams was convicted on February 27, 1982, for the Payne and Cater deaths, even though the state had not proven that he knew the victims, let alone that he killed them or anyone else. The defense maintained that it could not even be proved that Payne and Cater were victims of murder, but only that they died of asphyxiation. Williams was sentenced to two consecutive life terms.

One outspoken critic of the verdict was Camille Bell, who worked with the Williams defense team. "With this conviction," she said, "Wayne Williams, at 23, became the 30th victim of the Atlanta slayings" (NY Times, 3/1/82).

Two days after the verdict, Commissioner Lee Brown made a stunning announcement. The special task force set up to investigate the murders was being disbanded, and 21 additional murders were being attributed to Williams. In one fell swoop, 23 of the 30 cases were cleared. This, he said, "was a collective decision of all the agencies involved" (ABC News, Nightline, 3/1/82). Less than two weeks later Brown resigned as Atlanta's Public Safety Commissioner to become Houston's first black chief of police. His salary reportedly jumped from $50,000 to $75,000.

Within a few months, enough of Atlanta's Juste had returned for Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands to choose it for the first stop of a 10-day tour in the United States.

The Gay Man as Child Molester
Gay Man=Child Molester=Murderer. This equation encapsulates people's worst fear about homosexuality. Gay men are perverts who prey upon young males, divert them from the straight path, corrupt them in activities abominated by the Judeo-Christian god and, unless checked, kill them urgently asking the reason for the murders. The scenes filled with scenes of boys' bodies being dragged from the basement of mass murderer John Wayne Gacy's house, followed by images of Houston murderer Dean Corll and finally the Los Angeles freeway killings: All involved homosexuality and murder by men of young males, many of whom were hustlers. The reporter refers to sex, torture and death. A barrage of guilt by association. Rather turns to: Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young: "Adults prey on young people. What are you going to do about it?" The implication: Gay men are potential murderers of young boys.

Georgia's crime lab director.

Anita Bryant used the gay-male-as-molester theme to perk up a sagging career in 1977. Homosexuals won the round with Anita because she coaxed far more out of the closet than she drove back in. Still, she may have been more successful than is generally recognized. Her theme can be resurrected whenever it suits the authorities, and hardly anyone will say "Whoa!" Atlanta showed that.

CBS saw this question as the key to the Atlanta murders. It ran a 37-minute special report at midnight the day of the verdict in the Wayne Williams case. Anchorman Dan Rather introduced one segment by saying, "And minor males is child abuse,... even when they want it. Their position accepts fiction of the state as protector of young people and legitimate enforcers of sex laws.

Gay people always fear that major criminals will turn out to be gay. We have been conditioned in that fear by all those "homosexual murder" headlines. I have never seen a "heterosexual murder" headline though I suspect that heterosexuality is more often a factor in murder than is homosexuality. We react as though a truly evil homosexual would reflect badly on all of us. The effort to increase "gay rights" has become a kind of public relation campaign in which the enemy is seduced rather than confronted.

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victims after having sex with them, would the heterosexual public (there is no "gay public") be restrained by racism and the fact that the victims were, after all, black? Or would they start passing castration bills for gay men?

The State and the Fear of Queers

It is in the interests of the authorities to foster fear of homosexuality as a tool of social control. For the American male, the fear of being thought queer can be stronger than the fear of death itself. In Vietnam, for instance, the fear could be manipulated to prod reluctant troops into action. An article in the Village Voice (3/18/71) quotes a GI: "I knows guys in Nam who completely disagreed with the war but would volunteer for dangerous missions as soon as their manhood was questioned."

In the Atlanta murder case, the state combined fear of homosexuality with racism as its main tool of social control. The media played up the notion of "black on black" by stressing that Williams was light-skinned and all victims on the official list were dark-skinned. They heightened the level of inter-generational conflict. They fostered division between gay and straight, between gay and perverted queer. Divide and conquer.

The state also sought to strengthen police powers and to reinforce illusions that The System is fair.

This goal was at least partially achieved. Johnny Fletcher, 21, a friend of 9-year-old Yusef Bell, a murder victim, told Parade magazine (9/19/82): "I learned that we have to come out and work with the police. If we'd done that before, maybe we wouldn't have had the killings." Mayor Young, in the same article, "There is a new respect (in the black community) for law enforcement officers, even among children, and officers have become more sensitive to the needs of children." Atlanta's police force is 45 per cent black.

How the Left Reacted

One of my hobbies is to follow the left-wing press. So I was curious to see how the "alphabet soup" would cover the Atlanta child murders. Would the left recognize and report the anti-homosexual aspects of the state's case against Wayne Williams? Would it advocate the empowerment of children, or would it join in state-orchestrated hysteria about "protecting" children from perversion? It was politically correct to assume that the killer was a white racist. But in the Atlanta context, this seemed improbable. You could hardly expect street-smart black boys to allow themselves to be coaxed into the car of a white man—even a policeman or other authority figure—at a time when the bodies of their age-mates were being dragged out of rivers and woods. They knew it could mean death. The left seemed out of touch with street kids.

A few papers analyzed the arrest of Williams. The Guardian (7/8/81) wondered if he was merely a "fag guy" singed out by the authorities to allow public criticism of their investigation. It noted that the only evidence against Williams appeared to be his presence on a bridge over the Chattahoochee River when a police stakeout team heard a "squeal" two days before Cater's body was pulled from the river, and cloth fibers and dog hairs found in his home and car. It pointed out that the police officer who heard the splash later admitted that he was sleeping at the time. After 10 articles on the case, the paper said nothing more until after the trial, more than nine months later. Most other left-wing papers also turned to other matters until the trial was over.

How to interpret this silence? Was the left caught off guard by the arrest of a black man instead of a white racist? Did it suspect the real murderer had after all been arrested and therefore kept quiet out of embarrassment at its earlier coverage? Were charges of homosexuality in a black setting too awkward a subject?

In order to discuss intelligently the state's case, the left would have had to challenge its theory that gay men are child molesters and potential child murderers. This, evidently, no one was prepared to do. The silence itself speaks volumes about the effectiveness of this weapon.

The closest the left came to dealing with homosexuality was to react to media reports that some of the slain boys were "hustlers" or were involved sexually with older men. These reports were denounced as "racist slanders," "blaming the victims for the crime," and so forth. Revolutionary Communist Youth (March, 1982) said such stories had "a decided depraved character." They were designed "to pin the whole thing on the masses—particularly the black masses."

The idea that any of the boy victims might actually have been involved in positive sexual relationships with older men did not occur to the editors of the leftist—or establishment—press. The Militant, known for its hostility to any homosexuality and man/boy relationships, went so far as to suggest that any white man who might connect with a black boy should be arrested: "A black man was arrested for firing at a car that had tried to pick up another black youth. Yet the white driver was not arrested or even considered a suspect" (5/29/81).

Some of the other newspapers were more cautious. The Militant, for example, warned that Williams was a "violent, homophobic sadist" (6/2/81), and that the state's case was "shoddy" (7/29/81), but when it came to the actual trial, the paper was willing to believe the authorities, even though they failed to confront the real issue. The paper did not rush to challenge the police's theory that Williams was a "fag guy" who killed the boys to cover up his own murder of a black youth (3/31/81). The Militant did not even challenge the police's story that Williams had been arrested for a murder in another city (3/31/81).

The Militant, the Militant, and the Militant.

The left's coverage was disappointing. Its support for "gay rights," apparently, does not mean that it is able to deal with more complex issues of sexuality—even in a highly charged political context where they are relevant. By and large, leftists still regard gay men as expendable, if not perverted. Some still do not reject homosexual scapegoating.

Atlanta was the witchhunt that wasn't. But it illustrated anew how precarious it can be to be gay in a straight society.