



ROLE CALL

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Clash of Denial: Black Homophobia and Gay White Ghettos

BEDFORD-STUYVESANT-BROOKLYN, NEW YORK: Pictures of knobby-kneed black children playing in streets littered with broken glass and lined with abandoned buildings; the inner city run amuck, crumbling under crime wave after crime wave and white flight born on thoughts of the new hopes to be found in the nearest suburb; timbs and sweat suits, sagging jeans and backwards turned baseball caps, sitting atop the doo rags or brightly-colored scarves on the heads of rod-straight black bodies bent to swaying, floating on the sounds of a rapper's lyrics matched to a heart-thumping bass beat. "Do or die, Bed-Stuy." These images do not emerge from a fictive perspective, but these are not the only images of Bed-Stuy that exist. These are the popular ones, warped into hyper-stereotype, the ones that make it into the mainstream of American consciousness.

Seventh Avenue, Chelsea, Manhattan, New York: Bodies, male bodies, white male bodies in unabashed lust for each other; block after block of pale-skinned, blond-, black-, or brown-haired male effeminacy moving in a world exclusive unto them; cropped hair and Log Cabin Republicans, combat boots and nipple-rings, spiked heels and grotesquely muscular bodies, swirling in unison to voices screeching club songs under a disco ball called the sun. "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" Across millions of TV screens in America, an alarm sounds and the consciousness of an invisible minority erupts: How did those people get like that and how do we keep people like them from coming here? And these images, too, while derivative of the truth, may owe their final presentation to a retooling on the hotbed of American me-

dia; certainly "those people" are a bit cartoonish and are not representative of male, same gender-loving (SGL) people everywhere—particularly us black ones. But in a society that is quick to congratulate itself about the homage it pays to the image of diversity while still being very homophobic, these are the images that take root, evolving into a feeding frenzy of the ignorant and gaining a fantasy life all their own.

Lay these two worlds, one on top of the other, and they clash. Cumbersome does not begin to describe their imbalance to each other; the reality of one is inseparable to the other.

I find the circumstance of the gay white (male) movement interesting—it is a conundrum of white male dominance, more about continuing the uninterrupted privilege of a particular subset of the population rather than the pursuit of

universal rights for all. I find it problematic that the gay white (male) movement would dare to compare its struggle with what African Americans had to endure to secure (limited) civil rights; before I decide whether to announce the way I love, people can see the fact of my blackness and my maleness. In a racist America that fears blackness first, and black maleness most of all, the fact that I am a black SGL man—and that I chose not to prioritize any part of myself over another—figures prominently in my choices of where I live; how, where, and when I reveal myself to others; and how I interact with my community, family, friends, and acquaintances.

For the record, I grew up in Bed-Stuy, in a different Bed-Stuy than the one I've captured here that figures far too mythically in America's imaginings of the inner city. I hold two degrees: an undergraduate degree from Morehouse College and a graduate degree from Columbia University. My parents, my brother, and most of the relatives with whom I am very close know how I love. I still live in Bed-Stuy and I'm real comfortable moving through my neighborhood in my timbs, baggy jeans, and oversized hoodie—but I doubt anyone would confuse me for a "thug." As of this writing, I have not announced the way I love at work—I find no need and, strangely enough, I seem to have been excluded from general office speculation about my weekend's conquests or my dating status or the other usual musings that colleagues can have around one's bedroom activities. Strangely enough, too—especially for an office of eight colored folk (six black men, one black woman, and a latino woman)—whenever questions of which way so-and-so might swing or rumors about

who-might-bring-who to an office event do arise, they've been refreshingly pc. No mention of "faggot" this or "punk" that or "dyke" the other thing. And I'm hyper-tuned-in for it, ready to take offense and defend a reality I know is mine. If anyone at work ever asked, I'd answer honestly, but no one has, and I've found myself wondering whether or not that makes me "closeted," or "hidden," or on the "down low."

Most of anything I have to do is either right here in Bed-Stuy or a short distance away: The gym I go to is in East New York—Starrett City to be specific—and I've never felt uncomfortable amid all the hyper-masculinity expressed there either. Again, in a place that is filled with more than its share of black and Latino people, it's interesting to note the lack of overt verbal expressions of heterosexuality that usually take the form of braggadocios conversations about tits and ass, punks, sissies, and faggots. It's not that we aren't there. I've caught my share of eyes and I hooked up with one brother from there (and I'm no towering pillar of testosterone, one of those types who turn the heads of anyone everywhere I go), and I definitely don't think anyone is consciously monitoring their behavior so as to be less offensive, whether it's at work or the gym. There's a pharmacy within walking distance of my house, for those incidentals I might need, and I shop for groceries at the Pathmark at Atlantic Center (just about the "gayest" place I find myself these days). About the only times I venture into the city are to hang-out at the movies or grab a drink with my boys. I consider myself adequately equipped with enough intelligence, looks, and personality to accomplish what I want to get done. However, I do think I'm atyp-

ical when lined up against that word "gay." But then again, I think most black men are—at least to those who see that word as the construct of a reality and identity not of our own machinations—and as I move through my daily reality, watching brothers just like me do the very same thing, I wonder: in a racist America where perceptions about the inner-city can morph into a surreal concoction of the truth, where white gay culture is promoted as the exclusive playground of a hedonistic few, who decides what homophobic is and how did the African American community get slapped with the label, "Most Homophobic"?

I don't mean to suggest that the black community isn't homophobic or gloss over the reality that there is a definite stance within African American culture that is as virulently homophobic as it is misogynistic. However, the question must be asked: In context of what I've already stated, who defines black masculinity, its function within the black community, and how does its definition and function impact a mainstream American interpretation of "homophobic"? I point to the evidence of the sacrificial type slaying of Matthew Shepard, the rape, hunt, and subsequent execution of Brandon Teena, and the bombing of the popular Atlanta lesbian club, The Otherside, not as a way of exploring in whose community—black or white—lies the greater pathology, but as a way to examine what the mainstream means by the word "homophobic."

Whether it is a wild night of college white boys out on a nightly terror ride by a gay club or an epithet shouted at an unsuspecting individual from within the safety of a group or bashing the "right" individual caught in vicinity of the

"wrong" place by a marauding band of perpetrators, there is a physical dynamic associated with the mainstream interpretation of homophobic. It is an active engagement in which one or, more accurately, a group of bodies prey on the perceived sexual difference, real or imagined, of another body without regard to bodily injury or the loss of life. The perceived sexual difference is the key here because it is the trigger: the meek and effeminate man, the butch and aggressive woman, the seemingly normal individual in close proximity to what is considered to be an abnormal place; all of these individuals require swift and exacting remediation. And these responses are irrationally violent physical reactions to the perception of a misunderstood sexual reality. This analysis can even be elevated to the anti-gay policy-making activities of the government and employers, albeit, they are less physical in execution, but the intent and overall effect is no less severe.

The black community requires a more psychic analysis of its interpretation of the word homophobic. In a country where the presentation of a black body, whether male or female, is already complicated by a media that expresses obvious fetishes only for certain aspects of both, the possibility that that community might have its body reflected back at it through the lens of a racist society under the influence of various exclusionary factions—themselves obsessed with the satisfaction of their own hedonistic pleasures—must be an intolerable idea. In short, as a friend put it, "I think that the black community is homophobic of a gay white effeminate construct that is associated with the term 'gay.'" I think it stems from a fear that same sex behavior automatically makes

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us akin to them." The question almost asks itself, "Are you black first or gay first?"

I look back at my own life, to the moment when I told my parents about my connection with men. I'd been living in Birmingham (yes, Alabama) for a year or so after I'd graduated from Morehouse. My banking career was steaming right along—I had a phat apartment, my own car, was beginning to live less like a college student. I'd graduated and begun to expand in the role of "Dutiful Son" as had been laid out for me since birth. At that time—1991—Birmingham was still the south in the most conservative ways one can imagine: still grappling with its problematic history concerning race; class division between a black lower class that was collapsing into the decaying structure of the inner city, a slightly better-off black middle class that was striving to get to the next level, and a black upper-middle to upper-class that was doing its best to will the other two out of existence was so distinct as to be tangible; and the mention of anything "gay" or "lesbian" was met with blank expressions, whispers, or a stone wall of silence. Luckily, being the recent college graduate that I was, my jaunts back and forth to Atlanta, my frequent (male) visitors, my lack of a committed relationship, my exploration of the entire southeastern United States with my carousing bunch of (male) friends was seen as nothing other than the perpetuation of that fraternal rite of passage known as sowing one's wild oats by family and colleagues both. I had a rousing good time for almost two years until my mother noticed the absence of women from my conversation and women—their presence, the friendships, the few relationships—had been a consistent

part of my life throughout college. She couched her question in what she thought was a joke, "I don't hear mention of any girlfriend—don't tell me you don't like women anymore." And my response: "Not like you think, Ma." I don't remember the rest of our conversation but I do remember my father was out of the house and Ma said she'd have to tell him as soon as he returned home.

There are a few things to understand about my father: First, he's a big man. Sure, I mean he's physically big, but he has a presence that matches his size. Big voice. Looks you in the eye when he talks and expects you to do the same when responding. Takes large strides when he walks and is as heavy-footed as he is heavy-handed. Thoughtful man in that he is intelligent, but a thoughtful man also in that he's considerate. There're numerous charities, both formal and informal, which have benefited from his generosity. Excellent provider—my brother and I wanted for nothing growing up. My father would describe himself as a country boy from North Carolina. I will go one step further: My father is a country boy who learned the games of the city kids and became very, very successful at them. His understanding of black manhood can be short-handed to this: A black man is the head of his family, he is both provider and protector and he makes all necessary commitments and sacrifices to ensure that his children have a significantly better start in life than the one he experienced. Period. As black men, that is how he raised my brother and me. As the eldest child in a family of six children, who succeeded challenging circumstances without resorting to drugs, violence, or any other crime, and produced his own family, that his eldest

could grow up to have an intimate connection with men was indecipherable. Period.

My revelation to my parents came a few months before Christmas and right before I was to leave Birmingham to return to Brooklyn for holiday vacation, I wrecked my car. Given that I didn't have the money to return home and fix my car, I thought it best to spend the holiday in Birmingham, perhaps visit relatives down in Montgomery instead of returning to New York. Instantly, my father sent money for car repairs along with his demand that I was to return home immediately. He needed to see me with his own eyes—he needed to see how I looked. At that time, for that moment, that was enough for me to return home and him to see me and recognize that I had not become physically different from the person he knew.

Not only did my father and I not speak for a year, we did not try to speak to one another. My mother later described that time in our family as one of incredible anger. "We were some pissed people." When my father and I finally did speak, there were things he made me understand about his childhood, about his own father, about his extended family and the promises that he made to himself and the way he'd raise his children. The way he knew he raised his sons. He did not raise a son to be a woman. He did not raise a black boy in America to be anything other than what he knew a black man had to be.

My father and I have an incredible relationship now and I am not being idealistic. There is still a lot about me he does not know, but I know he knows what matters: That I am the son he raised. When I think about what my family and I have been through, the is-

sue of black masculinity, how it is structured, and how black men have to move through the daily reality of America, I don't think any of us were conscious of labels and blanket misnomers; we were in a deeper place, a place where we had to analyze the circumstances of realities based on very real, lived experiences. It is a place where, intuitively, I know millions of black families, whether they are fathers and sons or mothers and daughters or brothers and sisters and regardless of their sexuality, have to travel to each day. As easy as it would be to buckle under the collective identity of the "most homophobic," I know that is not what we're doing—that is a foreigner's unsupported hypothesis. Too many of us live in too close a proximity to each other and even in places such as Clinton Hill and Fort Greene where large numbers of the black SGL community have amassed, it is still a different collective than a gay white enclave such as Chelsea. That the black community is more homophobic than the rest of America is conjecture by a siege mentality that has not ever sought to understand anything about African American culture save that which it could co-opt for its own purposes. It is a distraction that keeps us from understanding who we truly are and the myriad of strengths and weaknesses that encapsulate our multiple realities. And the gay white ghetto is the sideshow circus that makes that distraction possible.

Doug Jones