

IN THE LIFE ON THE DOWN LOW: WHERE'S A BLACK GAY MAN TO GO?

KEITH HARRIS

“Now understand that this descriptor, ‘in the life,’ was not a negation, perhaps a self segregation, but not a negation. By this, I mean that the dialog of being in the life was not with whiteness, in opposition to or negation of ‘gay,’ as much as it was in dialog with black communities. Being in the life signified a collectivity, a subtle way to unquiet sex and life practices kept quiet by larger community strictures, kept quiet for the sake of survival.”

Author’s Note: This essay is a provocation, an experiment in rhetoric, and, by all means, at this point, it is a work in progress.

This essay was envisioned as a polemic, an elaborate exercise in argumentative controversy.¹ The title suggests that identitarian politics would have been at play. Instead, I decided to keep the title and temper the rhetoric in order to elaborate the problematic of being that is identified in the title, “In the life on the down low.” What is of concern to me is how is it that being on the down low, how is it that this descriptor, this way of life, how is it that this has become the image of black gay men? Let me begin by way of a quick contemporary literary history of things.

In 1986, the anthology, *In the Life*, edited by Joseph Beam was released. This anthology was subtitled, *Writings by Black Gay Men*, and served to launch, in retrospect, a black gay renaissance. *In the Life* introduced the young, curious, somewhat clandestine audience to some voices that resonated

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throughout the late 80s and into the 90s, voices like Essex Hemphill, Craig Harris, Blackberri, Donald Woods, Assotto Saint or already heard voices like Melvin Dixon and Samuel Delaney. Some never heard before and some never heard again.

Beam’s anthology emerged when Gay Related Immune Deficiency (G.R.I.D.) had fast become the AIDS crisis and was both perceived and received as white, back when ACT-UP had to be integrated. *In the life* was dedicated to those who were “in the life,” a community identity in which men, specifically black gay men, or homosexuals, were known as such, lived as such, and contributed to the communities at large as such. These men had devised ways, albeit not easy ways, in which their sexual identity was acknowledged, respected for what it was because it was about community, because if one were “in the life,” one was in a community. Now understand that this descriptor, “in the life,” was not a negation, perhaps a self segregation, but not a negation. By this, I mean that the dialog of being in the life was not with whiteness, in opposition to or negation of “gay,” as much as it was in dialog with black communities. Being in the life signified a collectivity, a subtle way to unquiet sex and life practices kept quiet by larger community strictures, kept quiet for the sake of survival. In the late 80s, early 90s climate of *In the life*, work like the anthology of poetry, edited by Assotto Saint, entitled *The Road Before Us*, the anthologies *Tongues Untied* and *Brother to Brother*, the journal *Another Country* or the video poetry of Marlon Riggs, or the stories of Randall Kenan, or more work of Hemphill or Melvin Dixon appears voicing a timeliness, an urgency in the need to be heard, an urgency in the need for community acceptance and an urgency in the need for cultural and community action, because most of these men would be dead by 1995.

In August of 2003, “Double lives on the down low” appears in the *New York Times Magazine*, but before I address that, let’s look at the “in between” of 1986 and 2003. I want to use the release of *In the life* and the publication of “Double lives on the down low” as markers, as bookends to an admittedly constructed period of time and cultural production.

Therefore, in quick summary, not exhaustive summary, in summary of the happenings between 1986 and 2003:

Crack has a pop cultural black face by 1986
Rockefeller drug laws bring it home
and the levels of incarceration among black folk
reaches new highs

Easy E
Arthur Ashe
Max Robinson
Patrick Kelly
Willi Smith
die from complications
due to AIDS
Magic Johnson reveals his HIV status

Pam Grier is back and “better than ever”
Thelma Golden scores twice
Will Smith does not kiss the white boy
in *Six Degrees of Separation*,
on the advice of Denzel
The Cosby Show delimits the black televisual future
New Black Cinema and the hood film rise and kill each other
Spike Lee’s *She Gotta Have It* to *Bamboozled* become
the markers of a generation
Eddie Murphy, Martin Lawrence and Wesley Snipes get paid for doing drag
Issac Julien looks for *Langston* and gives us a queer look with *Young Soul Rebels*
Marlon Riggs, Marlon Riggs
Paris burned, we cried for Venus, and then we laughed
Spin City and *Six Feet Under* have black, gay characters
HBO becomes the site of the visualization
of sex, sexual difference and indifference
but let’s not forget Mapplethorpe
and what he did to us
Papa Bush’s “Man in a Leisure Suit” was Willie Horton
We went digital but the cops were still analog:
Rodney King, over and over again

Time magazine’s was O.J. Simpson
who we should have seen coming
following Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas and
that damned high tech lynching
with desktop publishing
the zines, *Thing*, out of Chicago, and *BLK*, out of LA,
let us know what was going on in black gay communities
and a Million Black Men
march on Washington
Pan Africanism goes Diasporic
and who can forget House music
and the arrival on these shores of dance hall
Oprah builds an empire
and the 2000 census told us that
the black population was shrinking:
I came out during the time of “the endangered black man,”
the speciation of race and gender
in the statistics of death and incarceration
RuPaul, oddly enough, introduced me to Zen
there was that brief moment in NY when
men wore skirts
Brad Pitt appears on the cover of *Vanity Fair*
in a sequenced cocktail dress
Nixon
Reagan
Jackie O
are finally put to rest
Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Peace Prize
Meshell Ndegeocello asked for *Peace beyond Passion*
and in a familiar fashion there was a marked migration
pattern of black folk from the north to the south
Jesse ran twice and Clinton was the first
black president
hip hop diversified and commodified
Tupac
Biggie
Pat Parker
Audre Lourde
June Jordan and
Barbara Christian
they all die

Prince became a slave
 transmogrified into a symbol
 and Michael Jackson became our problem
 Jeffrey Dahmer ate white hustlers, latinos, black men,
 and two Laotian boys
 memory will never serve that correct
 Dinkins tells us that the melting pot
 is a mosaic
 New York crumbles and burns, like something out of the movies, with faces
 of the dead and missing plastered on the subway walls
 from Chambers Street, all the way to Penn Station
 Baby Bush turns on his constituency, friends and the world
 the talented tenth becomes home
 for the new black public intellectual
 Apartheid ends
 Georgia enforces its long forgotten sodomy laws
 Abner Louima is sodomized by the law
 Amadou Diallo mis-interpellates and reaches for his id
 Halle Berry
 and Denzel Washington
 win best actress and best actor
 at the Academy
 this is just a sample
 a few of the things that happened
 between 1986 and 2003

I give this rough and ready sampling to demonstrate that there were things—some good, some bad, some indifferent—happening at the end of the long century and the beginning of the new millennium. Black folk, we were as always, in our given cultural, national state of being, in the field of vision, as it were, still operating in the visual poles of endangerment and entertainment. What is of interest to me is that in this quick summary, we see, particularly in the late 80s and early 90s, a visual cultural presence of black gay men that arguably does not exist anymore. Part of the reason for this, as I mentioned earlier, is that two generations of black gay men, mine and the one before me, have been decimated by AIDS. Another reason may be that in the political climate of the gay and lesbian movement, with its

heterosexualization of homosexuality in domesticity, domestic partnership, the language and imagery of marriage, family and equality—black gay men cannot be representative. By this I mean that when we think of the visual rhetoric of things like gay marriage, gay families and partnerships, the legacies of the endangered black man, the always already dysfunctional black family, these things disallow the articulation of gay black men, coupled or not, as the gay and lesbian neo-liberal norm.

Another reason for this decrease in visual presence may have to do with black men's entrée into the men's movement in the 90s, most representative in the Million Man March. Both the political and visual rhetoric of the march were straight (though arguably not intentionally or exclusively straight), but inevitably in the religiosity and spirituality of the Million Man March, men's movements, etc., again, the black gay male as image is disallowed, unable to signify within the political agenda of "unity, atonement and brotherhood." And the religiosity of black folk, perhaps in response to the AIDS crisis, perhaps in the recuperation of black masculinity as family responsibility, has no place for black gay men like me. It is in this miasma of presence, absence, and permission that the communitarian, cultural production of the "in the life" identity is lost and the down low rises.

In August of 2003, I sat in my kitchen reading my email, sifting through any number of forwarded emails containing this exposé. I did not read the article for a number of days. I was familiar with the "down low," with being on the down low, this identity of discretion, privacy, and secrecy, as is often self-described. I remember it first came to my attention with internet and chat rooms in the mid-90s. I would find myself in chat rooms, speaking to black men talking about being on the down low, and when I would ask, "What is 'on the down low,'" rightfully so the response would be, "If you don't know, then you're not on the down low." I, therefore, had no involvement with it, which is not to say that I have no involvement with black men who did not identify as gay or that I was always willing to be a black man that identified as gay. However, I had no interest in reading this

article because I had been out since I was twenty, and very simply, at forty, I really did not have the time or energy to deal with it.

But then my mother asked me about it. And she asked me about it because she read it as being about gay men (and also because the article begins with the discussion of men on the “down low” living in Cleveland, and I had just moved to Ohio). So I read it. And I followed it on the news. I watched J.L. King, the author of the bestselling exposé *On the down low: A journey into the lives of “straight” black men who sleep with men*, watched him on *Oprah* and *CNN* and became increasingly infuriated by the willful participation, willful life and living of these black men in the discursive (and at this point typical, if not traditional) space of the pathological. Gone was the passionate, political, progressive poetry of black gay men and the black gay renaissance; instead we have the language of ethnography in an article like “Double lives on the down low” or the contradictory, often times confusing, faux jeremiad, faux journey of self discovery, return and redemption found in J. L. King, saying things like:

DL men cannot and will not be associated with anything that would raise questions about his [sic] sexuality. They will not say they are gay, because those three little letters evoke so much fear. Those three letters have them afraid of being ostracized by their community, by their church, by their family. If they tell the truth and say they're gay or bisexual, they will be called a 'fag.' That's the worst word you can call a black man. When a man is called a fag, it hurts. It basically strips away his manhood (21-22).

King is disingenuous at best. What is basically received from this description is an identity of denial, admittedly, but also one of victimicity, deliberate victimicity, and intractable pathology. Furthermore, King's DL is positioned quite violently in opposition to other men, other black men who may reveal them or, worse yet, who may identify themselves as gay or queer or same gender loving or bisexual or simply sexual freewheeling without the internalized burdens of race, without the pathology of blackness and with the courage, fortitude and integrity of self awareness and self definition and

political intention. And herein lies the problem: the opposition laid out between black gay men and men on the DL is one that has to be violently maintained because it is a question of manhood, of black manhood, of masculinity and the maintenance of that masculinity.

Now I am a very simple man about certain things: I remember being beaten up, me and a friend of mine, one night on Fulton Mall in Brooklyn, New York, running into a late night chicken joint, asking someone to call the police, being followed into the chicken joint by this young black kid who's trying to kill us, having another black man intervene, trying to help out, only to step aside, when our pursuer turns to him to say, “But they are faggots,” and then this black man sits down, watches me take a bottle in the face. Again, I am simple about certain things: a fag bashing comes with the territory; the attacker, was a young kid, as was the friend with whom I had been walking, and really the exchange was between them. But when I saw that motherfucker that had gotten up to help and then sat down to watch, when I saw that motherfucker in a porn shop in Times Square, maybe a week later, in a booth in a porn shop, with his dick hanging out, I asked him why he sat down, and quite frankly he told me, and I quote, “I didn't want to help no faggot”: a statement which really did not make any sense to me: my identity was not that of a faggot, and both of us were standing in the porn shop—he exposing and me looking, for the same thing: on the down low is straight up low down.

That incident happened about six or seven years ago, and I have not yet let it go, because in the recent, spectral appearance of those on the down low and the death and disappearance of those in the life, I, and so many like me, remain. I am not arguing that we are excluded from black communities, that we have it harder than other groups in black communities, but I do want to suggest that we be careful how we assess, represent, and interrogate this down low phenomenon—a phenomenon and identity in which there is the negation of pleasure. Because of the amount of disavowal, the sexual identity of someone on the DL can only be about risk, not about community, not about collective politics, not about progressive self-determination. And I do

want to suggest that, at best, the DL, being on the down low is perhaps the greatest act of cowardice in contemporary identity politics. Do we really think that the worst thing that can happen to a black man is that he be called a faggot?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Keith M. Harris is an Associate Professor in the Departments of English and Media and Cultural Studies at the University of California at Riverside. His book length manuscript, Boys, Boyz, Bois: An Ethics of Black Masculinity in Film and Popular Media was published by Routledge in 2006. His poetry has appeared in Corpus, 6 (<http://www.apla.org>), Queen: A Journal of Power and Rhetoric, 1 (<http://www.ars-rhetorica.net>), Poetry USA, My Brother's Keeper, edited by Michael Datcher, and The Road Before Us, edited by Assotto Saint.