If We Have To Take Tomorrow

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To Rashawn Brazell and to the ancestors lost to AIDS.

If We Have To Take Tomorrow

HIV, Black Men & Same Sex Desire

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A Collaboration Between:

AIDS Project Los Angeles	www.apla.org
Black AIDS Institute	www.blackaids.org
Gay Men's Health Crisis	www.gmhc.org
National Black Justice Coalition	www.nbjcoalition.org
New York State Black Gay Network	www.nysbgn.org

For My Own Protection
Essex Hemphill

I want to start
an organization
to save my life.
If whales, snails,
dogs, cats,
Chrysler, and Nixon
can be saved,
the lives of Black men
are priceless
and can be saved.
We should be able
to save each other.
I don't want to wait
for the Heritage Foundation
to release a study
stating Black men
are almost extinct.
I don't want to be
the living dead
pacified with drugs
and sex.

If a human chain
can be formed
around missile sites,
then surely Black men
can form human chains
around Anacostia, Harlem,
South Africa, Wall Street,
Hollywood, each other.

If we have to take tomorrow
with our blood are we ready?
Do our S curls,
dreadlocks, and Phillies
make us any more ready
than a bush or conkaline?
I'm not concerned
about the attire of a soldier.
All I want to know
for my own protection
is are we capable
of whatever,
whenever?

from *Ceremonies*

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Introduction

George Ayala & Colin Robinson

It is with great pride that we present *If We Have to Take Tomorrow*, a collaboratively supported publication, produced by The Institute for Gay Men's Health in partnership with the New York State Black Gay Network, the Black AIDS Institute, the National Black Justice Coalition, Gay Men's Health Crisis, and AIDS Project Los Angeles. *If We Have to Take Tomorrow* is a follow-up to *Think Again*, published in 2003 by the Black Gay Network and APLA. The success of *Think Again* and a thirst for meaningful black and gay and black, gay perspectives in the AIDS industry compelled us to repeat and expand partnerships that bring varied voices to bear on our work to address HIV/AIDS in the United States.

Tomorrow's arrival is timely. It reaches us at a cultural moment in which "gay" identity is being critiqued and deliberately re-articulated by Black men and other men of color who practice same sex desire. Because gay is still equated with being white, having buying power and, in some people's minds, can only be legitimized through marriage, this re-articulation should be understood as nothing less than a rejection of the ways that mainstream "gayness" pressures us all to conform to heteronormative American life.

Tomorrow's arrival is heartbreaking. It comes after learning that 46% of Black men who have sex with men may be living with HIV – a figure that should have started a firestorm but instead raised a couple of eyebrows (at best). The disproportionate impact left by HIV/AIDS on Black men who practice same sex desire has less to do with how, where, or who Black men are fucking and more to do with the cold, hard realities of racism, homo-negativity, gender violence, and HIV/AIDS stigma faced by Black men everyday.

Tomorrow's arrival is welcome. It punctuates a political moment when the window of opportunity for democratically developed, "homegrown" responses to the sexual health and wellness needs of gay and other homosexually active men is quickly closing. *Tomorrow* holds open space for the co-existence of sex-positive, relationship-minded, and open-ended responses to HIV/AIDS. It is asks us to remain forward thinking while urging us to reminisce about our past. *Tomorrow* is about today and the things that matter in the lives of Black men.

Frank Leon Roberts & Marvin K. White

Editors' Preface

If We Have To Take Tomorrow is a communal project. "Communal" in the sense that it grew directly out of the desires and concerns of various black and gay, and especially black gay men living in the United States in a particular moment of tremendous cultural, political, and social crisis. Communal in the way that holiday dinners are communal. We all hope that Aunt Lavada offers up her version of the macaroni and cheese but that Uncle Leroy does not bring out the blues records and the Boone's Farm. Communal in a way that discord and feasts go together, in all of their under-and-over-seasoned, still-cooked unapologetically-with-pork-ways, but we are gathered, and it is good. Burnt edges of cornbread are forgiven. That we put our toes and titties into it, that we know what we bring will feed someone, and that we have unique tastes to contribute, is what holds importance. And we pray for those still here and those gone. And we eat.

This collected work speaks in even greater volume to and from black gay men and black men who practice same-sex desire about the intersections of family and social value. In *If We Have To Take Tomorrow*, personal narratives, poetry and cultural criticism speak to how black gay men and black gay men anchored in various communities of same sex desire, construct, are denied, and (re)imagine notions of kinship and belonging as well as the social value of their lives, practices, and performances in the age of the global AIDS pandemic. *If We Have To Take Tomorrow* is a gathering of diasporic black voices, re-locating our (dis)located bodies, minds and spirits to these pages, the family album of our dreams. This publication is a landmark conversation about same-sex marriage, the "down low" and black masculinities in the age of AIDS as well as the institutions of black cultural belonging (church, "home," etc.) to which same sex desiring black men are often excluded.

As two black gay men coming from diverse positions – these essays reflect the shared vision, the middle ground and the collaborative give and take, for a compilation of works that explicate, that throws a light onto the veritable smorgasbord of black/gay/identity options that the men of our communities currently occupy. Here, inside the treasure trove which is this book, you'll find it all: "gay" men, "queer" men, "straight" men, tops, bottoms, freaks, "anti-marriage" radicals, radical married men, and all those (literally) in between.

Committed to reaching broad and multiple (counter)publics, we would hope that this book finds itself nestled comfortably in a few of the varied and infinite spaces, that we as black men who practice same sex desire find ourselves: from churches to clinics, dance clubs to prisons, corporate offices to classrooms, porn shops to university halls, villages to barrios. We hope that this book becomes as sacred as the recipe-filled notebook handed down to some of us, that from this book, flavors and palates are challenged, and that you, the reader, are heavy handed with the Lawry's of your imagination – liberal in your sprinkling. Make it of your own tastes. Know how it can be done differently, what could be added or taken away, remembering always, it is a meal that we have long prepared for.

Thandiwe Thomas

Pussy, Pass It On (How the Detroit Public Schools Made Me Queer)

I was in the 2nd grade when I taught everyone in my class "Pussy, Pass It On." What started, as innocent mimicry to liven up an overcrowded, under-funded classroom in Detroit became a sensation that ended, as most sensations do, in misunderstood pain.

My first experience with Pussy was in Kindergarten. Grace Christian School had 7 kids in the class and I was the smartest. During naptime, a somewhat blurry chain of events caused my lips to fall on Brain Johnson's face. Under the covers, the 5 year old whispered, "Give me some Pussy." Instinctively, I kissed him again and again until it felt like forever, until I felt like the women in my grandmother's soap operas and until our teacher snatched my Transformers sleeping bag off of us, sent me into the hall and put a ruler to my hand. Most students received 4 or 5 smacks; I got at least 11 or 12.

I felt unclean in the hallway, not because of what transpired in the classroom, but because I was shoeless on the cold and foreign floor. I remember looking at my socks, wondering what happened to Brian, my new lover. Had he been beaten as much as I had? Was he relegated to the corner for the rest of naptime? Our outraged instructor, in her religious beating frenzy, never explained to us our transgression, so I assumed it was for the same reason everyone else got paddled: for not sleeping during naptime.

In the 2nd grade things were spelled out for me. Just when I was certain Pussy was the best thing in the world and I was perfecting my naptime nookie with boys and girls at sleepovers and play-dates, my mother took me out of parochial school and planted me in a public school. Suddenly I was thrust into a world where exceptionally high numbers of unfriendly children lined the walls of outdated classrooms. During an archaic practice touted as "silent reading time," My only friend and fag hag Tiffany McClain handed me a book that would change my life, *Pussycat, Pussycat Where Have You Been?* She giggled as she exaggerated the word "Pussy". I followed suit, merely playing along to a joke I barely understood, but my delivery was better that hers. Throughout the day I was Mr. Pussy. A recess that usually consisted of shielding myself from a myriad of insults had become a crowd of 2nd graders surrounding me, and laughing with me for once. By lunchtime I had written two songs and composed a limerick about this Pussy thing.

"There once was a boy with a Pussy,
Who lived in a house made of Pussy,
When Pussy is gone,

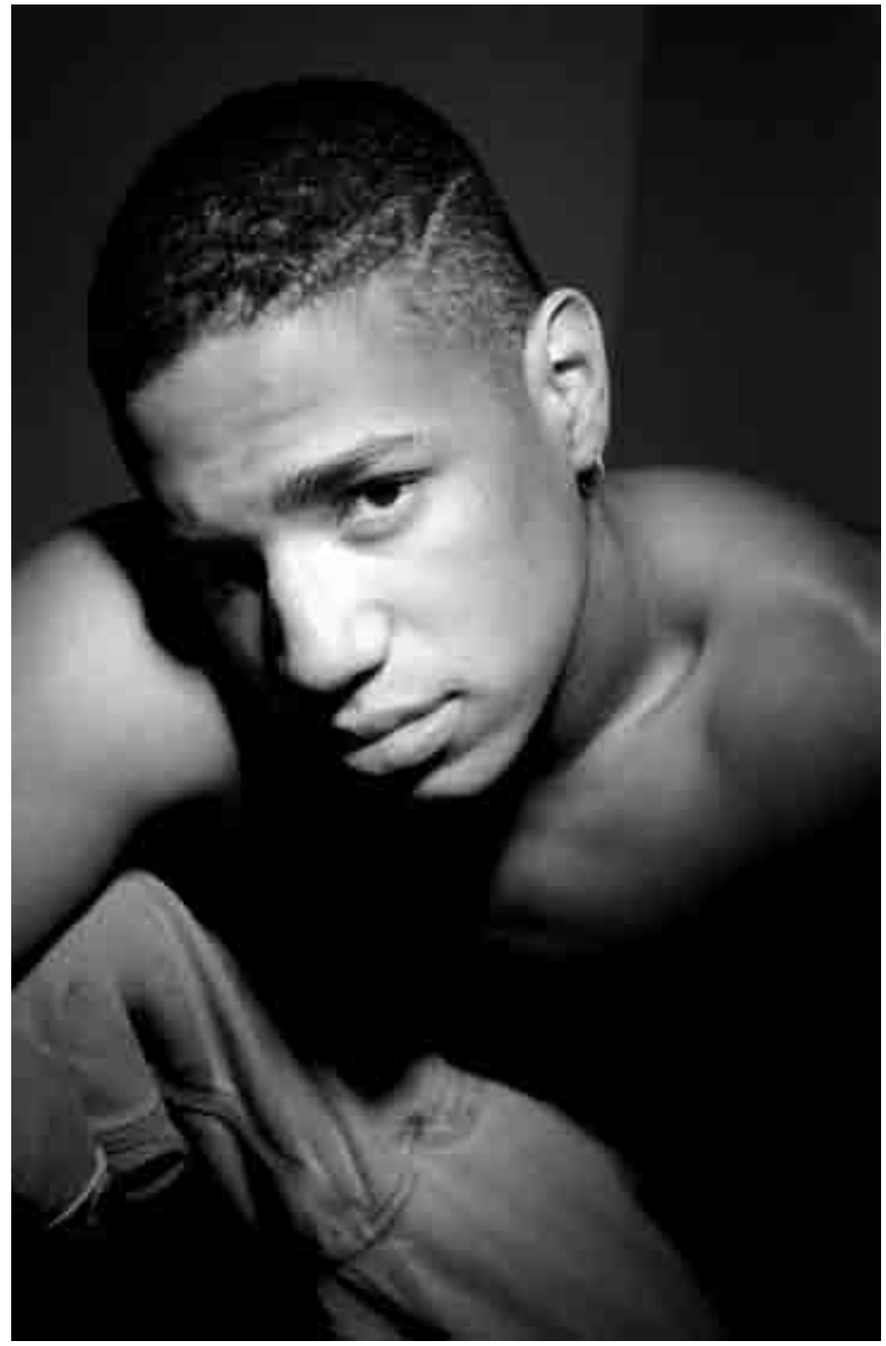
He calls on the phone
So he can get more Pussy."

Because comedy is more fun with audience participation, I tapped the boy next to me and whispered, "Pussy, pass it on!" The Pussyphone contacted Tomeka, Kevin, Devon, Marquezz, light skinned Damon, dark skinned Damon, retarded Damon (we still used "retarded" then), Denita, Laquita and 37 of my classmates. When Pussy reached 38 I knew from the look on uppity Amber Cotton's face my Pussyparty was over.

Uppity Amber had it out for me. Earlier in the year, I beat her in the spelling bee and told the entire class she had a weave. Amber yelled to our overweight, apathetic teacher, Miss Carr, who happened to love uppity Amber and wasn't too fond of me, "Somebody's passing bad words round the room." Miss Carr interrogated everyone in the class and consequently they ratted out the person sitting next to them. My lousy game of telephone had been disconnected and it was time to pay the bill. Miss Carr waddled over to me with her hands behind her back and used a 4-inch wide paddle with holes in it. The entire class, except for Amber, had to keep their heads down for 35 minutes (which was probably more stimulating than the assigned curriculum).

A blue note was given to me for my parents to sign. It read: "*Yet again, your child has interrupted my classroom. He has been taking the "Pussy" off of "Pussycat" and saying it around the school -even encouraging others to take the 'Pussy" off of "Pussycat" and creating a frenzy in my class. Please inform your child that his behavior is inappropriate, inexcusable and unacceptable."*

I was confused, Pussy turned on me before I figured out what or who she really was. For two young boys face to face under a cozy sleeping bag, Pussy meant freedom, playfulness and discovery. For the limpwristed child performing on the kickball court, Pussy was acceptance by his peers. Under the influence of one jealous girl and a bad teacher, Pussy invoked humiliation and corporal repercussions. I sat there rubbing my arm and realized the power of words and that Pussy may be many things to many people but it might not be for me.



Tim'm T. West
The Invisible Men I See: Keeping It Real For Real

I have a secret: I see POZ people. It's not quite a sixth sense, but on occasion, when I'm cruising the yahoo and/or Adam4Adam sites for a good cuddle, they show up for me. They don't show up the same for most people. Many of them claim to be negative in the profiles they create, but they reveal something different to me. I suppose it's because I'm one of few brothas who doesn't seem to give a damn about people knowing I have HIV. I wear this badge of integrity in eyes that I am told look either sad or sexy. There's not much of a difference between sad and sexy to me. They are impressions that emanate from me that remain strange bedfellows: sexy but dis/eased can lead to many lonely a night – especially when you're comfortable with being single and aren't looking for some redemptive relationship to prove you're only putting one generous, gracious loving person at risk. I still believe I have rights to a healthy, fulfilling sex life, with men negative or positive, and have refused to let statistics scare me into adjusting what I think is possible for me. But that's not altogether true. See, I'd never indicated that I was positive in those personal ad "fields" that ask the question. I don't want HIV+ to be used as a discriminating tool. I rationalize that placing it in the narrative as text, is a way of not being among an understated group of men who will identify as POZ and who, in doing so, won't even make brothas' first cut. If brothas are trying to avoid HIV, then avoiding its agents leads to a discriminating, stigmatizing world where we scheme ways to avoid the virus. This is true even when some agents of HIV might otherwise be the best things on the market. I don't want to be avoided. In spite of the guise of bravado and confidence I try to maintain, I am often sad, lonely, and feel invisible. Not so much because of what's happening in my body, but because the idea of a community of brothas (negative and positive) who can speak candidly about AIDS with honesty is not something I can really imagine. And it is because *of this* that the rates will continue to soar.

Upon moving from Oakland, CA to Washington, DC in the Fall of 2004, the anxiety about being HIV positive and "out" about it, intensified. My life as a self-identified gay black man can be characterized in two phases: being negative during my life on the East Coast in Raleigh/Durham, NC, New York City and DC, and testing positive shortly after moving to the Bay Area of Northern California. I don't know how other men in their 30s who "came out" as teens divide their "gay lives" but HIV became my thin line between the rock and hard place: from *running* from it to trying not to let it *run* me. Having been negative and becoming POZ has presented different but difficult challenges to being a black gay man; and as controversial and taboo as it may be to suggest this, I can't say I prefer my life before to my life now. *I don't miss HIV tests. I don't miss the anxiety after most sexual encounters. I don't miss feeling I got lucky*

this time, or that maybe it just hasn't shown up yet. But I do miss not having to take medication twice a day and having better sex. I miss being able to flirt without approaching the inevitable conversation about my POZ status or not having a guy I am trying to holla at respond to my status by either feeling he is being gracious by continuing to speak to me or instead offering me one of those awkward rejections (sometimes because some well-intentioned friend has disclosed my status before I've had the chance to). So I'm clear: it isn't easy for any of us, on either side; and it's a low down dirty shame that we don't talk about it. The epidemic can be blamed on lots of things, situations, and conditions, but I mostly blame our silence, our invisibility, our failure to *keep it real for real* and honor those who do. If no other institutions grant any more money to fight this epidemic, and the brothas continue dying in shame and silence, then it's all because we have refused to be seen, be heard, be angry, or become mobilized around a crisis that has about half of us infected (according to some statistics).

I remember feeling a bit relieved that I found out I was positive in the Bay Area, a place that for me seemed to have a great deal more social awareness and tolerance for its POZ brothas than I remember being the case anywhere East. I remembered being HIV negative and the warnings my friends would give each other about who to "watch out" for; as if we should not have been watching out for *ourselves,* all the time. We were so consumed with a false sense of power to avoid this thing called HIV, maximize our fun, and make minimal adjustments to sexual carelessness by making "safe" choices. It should have been of no surprise that the cycle of stigmatizing helped to fuel increased rates among black men. But we "negatives" don't often think about this when we create rationalizations about ways to avoid it; or act like dating someone POZ is some sort of selfless, courageous, Nobel Peace Prize-winning action. I'm speaking from experience. I was one of those "open-minded brothas" who—in my attempts not to "stigmatize"— felt pity for men who were POZ. When I think about the things I've heard said about people who are known to be HIV positive, it's not surprising to me that we black men living with HIV remain invisible. The black men I came out with seemed to lie to even their best friends about having the virus. They seemed to die mystery deaths in isolation and shame – their deaths attributed to everything but The Thing itself.

For all of my optimism about the positive change that moving back to the East Coast might have provided, I was clear that I was not returning the negative man that I was when I left; and that people might treat me accordingly. I even contemplated going back into the HIV closet, as ridiculous as that would be for a man who has written extensively about HIV and who has made "poster boy" appearances at AIDS events as evidence of men unseen. I had to reconcile my memories of my life as an HIV negative man and the privileges that came with not having "it", with the reality of a new self—perhaps all the more confident and resolved about being black and gay – but terribly anxious about the rejection I'd receive from my brothas. There's nothing quite like the invisibility one feels when the double jeopardy of homophobic blacks and racist gay folks can be potentially magnified by the aidsphobia of black gay men in your supposed "safe haven."

Nostalgia provided some pleasant thoughts. My memories of my HIV negative life back East were of youth, naivety, insatiable curiosity, boundless energy, as well as the double bind that describes the ironic self-congratulation one feels when HIV hasn't yet "gotten" you yet but is always already "after" you. I came out at 19, a boondock bohemian from Taylor, Arkansas whose knowledge about anything gay or HIV was reduced to tragic television specials that conflated the two: gay was white, was sissy-boy, and had AIDS. When I arrived at Duke University as an undergraduate and experienced the black gay club scenes along the East Coast, I quickly found out that this was not the case. Well… I found out that "gay" was more than white sissies. The AIDS stuff—none of us could avoid.

In college, I'd moved from holding a notion that the black gay scene was a space of invisible men to jokingly wondering if there were *any* straight men in DC on Memorial Weekends. In the early to mid 90s, a four hour trip with a car load of banjee boys from Carolina to DC's Tracks on a Sunday afternoon was nothing short of black gay heaven. There was tons of eye candy, and we were younger and seemingly more invincible than many of our mentors who spoke about their heydays with a haunting sense of nostalgia for all the free-love they'd experienced, albeit complemented by a terrible sense of loss for all those brothas who were no longer around to remember with them. These men were my mentors; and while grateful for their lessons, I could not truly identify with the magnitude of the losses most of them had probably experienced. With increased levels of tolerance and more social visibility—gains made by many of those warriors who'd gone before us but were no longer around—we experienced the joys of mediating black and gay rather comfortably. We were a "post-protease" tribe of b-boys who had a great deal more hope for being able to avoid predecessor pitfalls or manage this tragic dis/ease if we did get it. Discussion of our sex lives were one-dimensional tales of joyous exploration without mention of the incredible fears we had of becoming infected or peers who may have already sero-converted. AIDS was a big pink elephant on our dancefloors and in our bedrooms. HIV remained as fierce a boogeyman for negative brothas as any cinematic Jason or Freddy: "You won't escape it. It's always out to get you." And despite the efforts—short of becoming a HIV hypochondriac—one has to try to "live the life" understanding the reality of HIV means that few of us will go untouched. Either we got it, are trying not to get it, or at least know somebody who has it.

In Oakland I felt as if had brothas around me who, while mostly HIV negative, were very open to conversations about what it was like for me to be positive; and who honestly disclosed their attempts to negotiate what to do with whom. I attributed my strong health and confidence to the community of people there who, contrary to making me feel invisible, honored my presence and participation in the community. This isn't to suggest that the rates in Oakland aren't ridiculously high or that there aren't some of the same issues, but during my time there, I found spaces of advocacy and visibility that didn't seem available in other places where I'd lived. Interestingly, I came to DC aware of the magnitude of the epidemic here, and felt that my work in this HIV community might provide some examples of how we might build community and solidarity between those infected as well as those who we want to keep safe. What I have found is a bureaucratic AIDS system and administration choking on its own failure to have an impact; a lot of angry black women pointing fingers at "down low" men they can't seem to find; and a whole host of brothas running from bareback sex party to party unwilling to challenge the magnitude of their (in)action. It's a very negative scene.

I've come to the conclusion that as long as even the most aware of us continue to stigmatize and shame our POZ brothas, in sometimes the most subtle ways, that someone saying "I'm negative" will continue to mean:

- I don't know or don't want to know my status.
- I'm POZ and can't deal with rejection in lieu of the absence of a community to hold my pain.
- I've never been tested, or have never tested positive, though I can't remember when I was last tested.
- What I don't know about myself, can't hurt you.
- I'm a negative, HIV negative, self-righteous sex prude who wants to "get busy" with only disease-free, professional, gym-rats who couldn't possibly pose a risk.

Okay… so I'm a little bitter about this issue. Stigmatizing those who stigmatize won't help matters. But I do know what I'll have to create in DC for my own survival: a community of brothas who keep it real *for real*. And I'm doing a pretty good job of being clear with the brothas in my life about my expectations. I want people to feel comfortable saying they've slipped up or made mistakes. I don't want people feeling that HIV represents death for them. Fear-based prevention doesn't work. People just mask their fear with alcohol or lies and this dis/ease continues to get more uncomfortable; and with fewer federal resources to fight it.

I am looking to create the community that will help to save my life and the lives of others. It's not necessarily the kind of activism characterized by protests and screaming that reminds some of groups like ACT UP. It's a movement based in the truth of our experiences so that we create more spaces between the rocks and hard places to breathe better, hold one another better, make love with one another more responsibly, and not be so damn scared of the HIV boogeymonster! We are grown ass men, for goodness sake! Being invisible will not protect us, especially from each other. But there is a conversation waiting to happen, between two brothas, or at a potluck social, or poetry reading, or sex party that someone might be bold enough to forge. We can save ourselves where others have failed. And while I expect to reach a ripe old age, I dare say I'll die trying.

Road Work Ahead

There are signposts left for us to find our way. Signposts left by men – Joseph Beam, Assotto Saint, Essex Hemphill who knew that if they didn't make it that surely the story of them would. Joseph Beam wrote and edited *In the Life* with warning "Visibility is Survival." In this life, he says, visibility is survival. Essex called for an organization that will save our lives in "For My Own Protection". Joe Beam says *In the Life* is the start of that organization. Assotto Saint, In *The Road Before Us* believed, not in the destruction of America, "...but in a reconstitution that recognizes our fully participating gay Black voices. Silence=Death. Writing=Life. Publishing=Survival." And again Joe Beam said "Black men loving Black men is a call to action, an acknowledgement of responsibility." There is expectancy on our lives as Black gay men. It says that we will read the map given to us. It says that we will make in-roads to other Black men who have yet to hear a story that reflects their lives, empowers them, embraces them, makes them brave. It says we must tell our truths. We must see through healthy visioned eyes the distortions we often live by and re-vision these thoughts, we are worthy. We are valuable. We are capable and deserving of healthy love. Neither the charge nor the course has changed. We owe it to our existence and to this world as Black men, as men who can love men like no one else, as human citizens, to draw on our capacity to care for our wounded to rebuild our lives and our communities and to vision this world full of victories and possibilities to love. And the men that I come from, the men in this broken royal line of griots, and tall tellers, and story spinners, the men who I called to and who responded in these pages, can all retrace their blood and their inks in perfect literary lineage to Joe, to Assotto and to Essex who knew, said it, expected it, this is not far enough, there is still "the road before us."

One Drop Of Sugar

Much has been made of black gay men's management of their sexual identities and lately I have been called on as an expert on identity, identity management and sexual dysphoria. Me.

> "It is my opinion that the emergence of the black DL man from his Lochnessian dark has piqued the interest of so many. Unlike the flow of African descended people's names that went from colored folk to Black to African-American, we are being told that there is an exclusivity claimed by men on the DL - not everyone is getting in. Not everyone can call himself or herself DL. It is the old 'One drop of sugar' code all over again. It is clearly written on the door of this social club 'No Queens Allowed!' Call it subversive or call it resistance, Black gay men have taken to passing. Black gay men are going out of their way to butch it up."

I'm spending less and less time worried about who does not want to identify with gay and more time gathering who is left of the tribe who still does. I'm worried that the day might be gone where being masculine, being a man, was about if you were ready to "throw down for yours," whatever "yours" was. And be clear if "yours" was unbuttoned down to your navel and knotted at your waist, your bravery was never questioned. I'm worried that the day might be gone where manhood was measured by how you carried yourself, how you cared for, protected even, who you loved. What do I do with my hands when they are only used to approximate the size of my penis? I'm worried that the measure is no longer what you're building with your hands – a safer block or a better world but in what dap, fist pumping, jaw connecting punch, how unclockable you are. How undetectable your homosexuality is. Gone is the style you were born with as gay birthright. Today, you just have to have the "look" which usually means you have to have the money to buy the accoutrements of DL"ness"; saggy jeans, baseball cap, Timberland boots, the latest tennis shoes, the hardest raunchiest song rocking from your CD player, maybe a Tampa or a Black and Mild pushed behind your ear. Don't forget the ubiquitous "wife beater." I am sure Nike, Roca Wear and Sean Jean are all capitalizing off of the DL. The DL is news. But it should be in the business section as well as the public health section. Did you say shopping? Did you say sale?

Gay is the new gold

Okay, so maybe I am a little more invested in the conversation than I'm letting on. I'm a little mad because it's supposed to be this big old secret. Well guess what? Somebody told. Some tongue slipped. Somebody put it in the news. Somebody got it on Oprah. Somebody told Jay-Z, and somebody even told the CDC. Now from barbershop chairs and basketball courts, from hip-hop magazines to major metropolitan newspapers, everyone is suspect. Your gear will not protect you. DL men, as reported or misreported are the vectors of HIV infection. The secret is out. Black women want to know how to spot you and Black men are looking for the queerest eye in you. "Look, there's one now." Or as my brother put it in reference to the former Mr. Terry McMillan, Jonathan Plummer, "He wasn't a stand up guy." So many implications in his statement, it even quieted me. There's no way he could "discover" he was gay. My brother is also an authority. He is a Black straight man. The knock, the handshake, the nod up, the dap, the licked lip, the limped wrist, the switch, even if you memorize the DL manual with SAT preparation prowess, the price of this membership is high-is burdensome. Be careful what you ask for. But as much as I want to be on Oprah, I will not be called on as an expert witness for the prosecuting media. I will do what I came to do, gather stories, first hand accounts, truths and find men who are willing

to claim and write from the identities that make them flesh, make them whole and I will bring them to you. Gay is the new gold. I continue to discover myself, strike veins of Black gayness that contain a wealth of stories.

"Little Willie Horton, Is That You?"

What else besides a discussion of the DL will be sparked like its necessary accessory, the Philly Blunt? I want to gather work that surprises and relieves, work that ungirdles, frees, leaves you feeling that your body is loosed, unconstrained and one still loves oneself. I want other themes to explode. I hope that someone has returned from this quixotic journey and brought back and wrote about who they passed, who they left behind and who they found when they got to DL Land, "She got in too?" In addition to being characters in an E. Lynn Harris novel someone will write about being a millionaire NBA rapist or LeVar Burton (*Roots* not *Reading Rainbow*) no wait, *Reading Rainbow* too. We are still getting confused for Blaine or Antwoine. Madonna still is looking at us from the corner of her Kaballahed eye for what we will do after vogueing. We are the "Is he or isn't he?" whisper under Carl Lewis' cleated heels. Oh my god we are Jermaine Stewart and we do Oprah's hair. WE DO OPRAH'S HAIR. We are still salving our childhood wounds. We are working out our "survivors' guilt" and we are still looking for someone to tell our story to. We are looking for someone to tell our story. We hope that there is fortune still to be read in our palms, prayers yet answered and wishes yet granted. We are a snapping discourse in Miss Academia's face. And the discussion of the DL is ours to have as Black gay men. As Black gay writers. All we must ask of it is "Now are you my mama's cousin sister or my daddy's uncle aunt?" It is our inheritance. Our family tree. And we must embrace this countrified, misportrayed, sensationalized, stereotyped, misrepresented child as ours. "You might as well come on in. Have you met your cousin, your father's side, once removed, Willie Horton?"

I am a writer who hopes to gather other writers who are also writing about, through and beyond this phenomenon, as we always have. I am hoping that someone takes the necessary stance of lining up all of our stories with the ones being forced fed to us. I am hoping that from some writer's inappropriately seasoned Spring into Summer Hello Kitty journal and pencil set, we read that we are not afraid that the DL culture doesn't reflect us or that the barebacking community or the gay mafia is gonna stop us from being us: boys when we wanna be, queens when we wanna be, as under as we want, as out as we need, as butch as he needs, as bitch as I need "What Nigga? What?" I am looking for stories that show us that we will be who ever we need to be to get in that door, to get in those draws, to get in that book, to not get mugged, to be acknowledged by another Black man, to write it all down, we will do anything to write you all down. We will use all of our accessories. We will re-mix it into something that fits us: cowries

with throwback jerseys and pearls with G-Unit headbands. We are many things and of them, the DL story. I want to hear the story crafted from languages that sound foreign outside of bars or balls or chat rooms. I want writing to start doing the work of holding up the mirror to me. And have you heard? I am still looking, reading, hearing, fabulously. I am waiting for what our prancestors readied us; the road was before us.

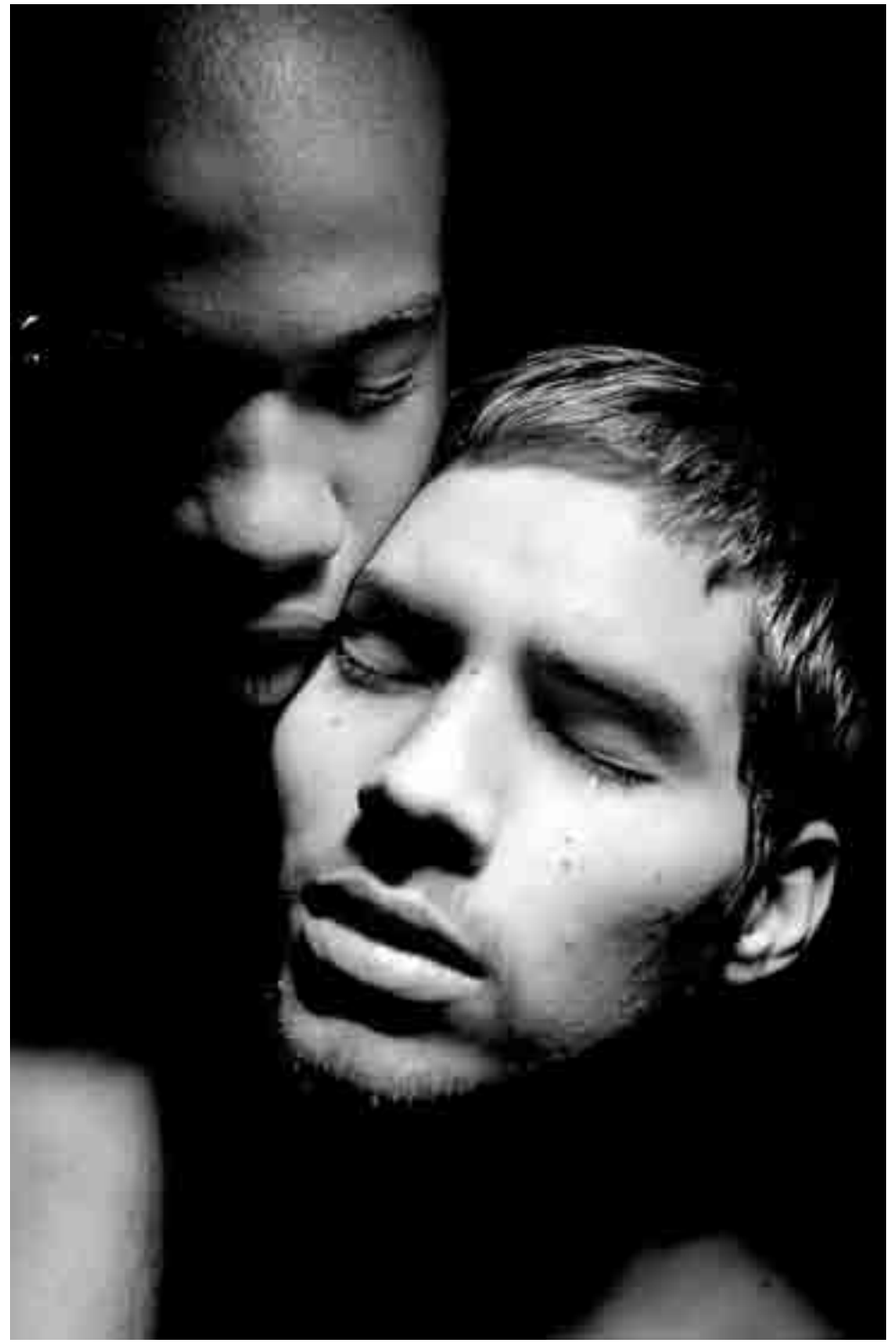
The G Spot

I have a condition. Its called A.D.D. (Attention to Dick Disorder). There is no medicine or cure for it. At the gym recently I pulled my fitted baseball cap down over my eyes. I am retraining my eyes. Not looking is treatment. I think I probably started exhibiting signs of A.D.D. when someone that I was seeing romantically told me that my eyes gave me away. The way I looked at other men, the way I searched their faces for dimples, scars, laugh and frown lines, all made me and my sexuality questionable. I remember as I bench press my personal best 250, someone asking me to spot them. In the gym it is a badge of honor when someone asks you to spot him. There is a concentration on them that they are asking for. They are saying if the weight gets too heavy for me help me lift it. In the spotting they are asking to be seen. They are asking to be seen as someone who is trying his best but who remains unsure of the weight of it all. And if he should fail, spot him. Stop him from hurting himself.

I imagine being distracted by the Black man that I can see through the strategically placed mirrors doing squats. I imagine the weight dropping and crushing the spot-ee's skull. I imagine myself mustering the butchest "my bad" that I can before I go back to my bench press, I have much work to do, I if I am to squeeze into Friday night's shirt.

I am made uncomfortable being asked to be there for men who I am not sure would be there for me.

It is that space where writing is liberating. Writing for the man who you really don't know is down for the liberation of your love. I want to collect writers who "spot" more than their share, whose writings are the lifting of the weight before it takes your breath/your life, the recording of your worst and your best. I want writing that shakes and trembles along with the muscles you are trying to grow. Writing that says, "I see you growing and your attempts will not go unnoticed/unrecorded." It is in the brilliance of being Black, gay and writing these stories that I imagine a recasting of the tragic closeted figures into heroes of epic proportion. It is the same road.



Frank Leon Roberts

Why I Hate Gay Marriage, or, Notes on Queering Black Gay and Lesbian Politics

The time has come to talk about *queering* black gay and lesbian politics. And indeed, I even use the term "queer" without fear of "losing" my blackness. As a 22-year old black man who is invested in efforts to dismantle racist and patriarchal institutions rather than simply incorporating himself into them, lately I've found myself slightly disgusted by the current brand of gay and lesbian activist rhetoric that is more focused on proving that "gay people are normal too" rather than *challenging "normalcy" itself* as a socially, politically and historically specific construction.

In a moment when black gay and lesbian activist efforts have increasingly been organized around a uncritical push for inclusion into the institution of "marriage" it seems as though such politics have failed to provide a radical political critique of the very apparatuses and institutions which have historically been used in the service of patriarchy, U.S. capitalism and imperialism, and white heteronormativity. "Marriage" as a political and legal institution has always been grounded on the assumption that heterosexual monogamy and a "long-term commitment" between two individuals are "natural" goals toward which all people should aspire. This of course comes in spite of the well publicized fact that marriage is statistically on the decline and nearly half of all current marriages end in divorce!

As Kenyon Farrow's essay "Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?" suggests, as activists mobilizing black people who practice same-sex desire, we need to seriously re-think and re-shift our investment away from the institution of marriage per se to instead an expansion of the rights and benefits traditionally associated with this institution. At present, sectors of the black gay and lesbian political gamut have been so invested in obtaining the "right" to marriage, they have completely missed the opportunity to actually challenge some of the problematic fundamental principles underlying this institution.

In other words, given our current political, social, and economic climate, isn't it time for us to re-think some of our most basic assumptions about the effectiveness of marriage as a legal institution? Indeed, why are we not asking questions such as: *Why should "married people" (regardless of whether or not we are talking about gay marriage or traditional marriage) be the only types of couple arrangements that the State recognizes as legitimate and worthy of certain benefits? What if I want or need my health care benefits to go to my HIV positive mother rather than my gay spouse? Moreover, why is universal health care, regardless of ones' marital status, not a viable option at this political moment? Why should the State use "marriage" to decide where my social security benefits will go, or who is allowed to visit me in the hospital or plan my funeral? Why can't "marriage" become a religious or symbolic exercise for those that are interested without it being the only means through which certain legal benefits are distributed?*

The current push for "gay marriage" puts no pressure whatsoever on these fundamental principles. And indeed it is *these issues*—the material *benefits* traditionally granted from marriage—rather than the institution itself that our activist efforts needs to be organized around.

What does "gay marriage" do for the homeless gay black man with HIV/AIDS who wants his benefits to go to his Aunt whom he's temporarily staying with rather than his spouse? What does "gay marriage" do for the illegally immigrated Haitian lesbian and her illegal immigrant spouse – neither of whom will ever qualify for substantive insurance of any kind or federal assistance? How would the State or "gay marriage" recognize the social status of the 19-year old house/ballroom kid that is living with his gay house mother who is also his boyfriend? How would "gay marriage" address the social reality of the many black "gay" identified men who are in relationships with men on the "Down Low" that do not identify with any of these terms? Or should the social and political circumstances of "DL brothers" be once again systematically vilified, demonized, and/or ignored altogether in this discussion?

The true political challenge would be fighting for some of the "perks" currently associated with marriage without the obligation of buying into the actual institution. And no, simply jumping on the gay marriage bandwagon would not be a natural "first step." How can we eighty-six the institution while still keeping the "goods" (i.e. health care, adoption privileges, etc.)? Our political challenge as black queer activists is to fight with and for all of those kinship arrangements that do not adhere to the mom/dad; woman/man; and now "(white) gay boy/gay boy" model.

I think the real challenge for contemporary activists is how to fight the homophobic impulse behind most anti-gay (marriage) legislation without *reinscribing* the *marriage norm* as the *only* legitimate, State sanctioned or viable arrangement for queer people.

How can we engage in a meaningful critical conversation on how we might re-think what this means for all of us, especially those like me, that won't be getting "married" anytime soon?

Kenyen Farrow

Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?

Why Marriage?

I was in Atlanta on business last year when I saw the Sunday, Feb. 29, 2004 edition of the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* that featured as its cover story the issue of "gay marriage." Georgia, as the article explained, is one of the states prepared to add some additional language to its state constitution to solidify bans on same sex marriages. What struck me about the front page story was the fact that all of the Atlanta citizens pictured that opposed gay marriages were *black people*. While the news article suggested that gay marriage was an important civil rights issue that transcended racial difference, the carefully placed photographs of seemingly "progressive" (white) gay marriage "supporters" juxtaposed with homophobic, loud-mouthed black "anti-gay (marriage)" opponents suggested that there was (and is) an underlying racial politics bubbling beneath this contemporary debate. So is gay marriage a black/white issue? Are the Gay Community and the Black Community natural allies or sworn enemies? Why has "marriage" as a social institution become so important at this particular political moment? Do all black people and/or gay people think the same and want the same thing? And what kind of space does that leave for a brother like me: a black gay man who *does not want* to get married?

Civil Rights/Gay Rights – Black Communities/Gay Communities: Natural Allies or Sworn Enemies?

As the mainstream gay community of the late 1990s and new millennium has begun to increasingly align itself with conservative Right Wing politics, it has also increasingly and continuously promoted the problematic concept of "Gay Rights as Civil Rights." Today's gay marriage debate has offered the context in which I have heard countless well-groomed, well-fed white gay men and lesbians refer to themselves as "second-class citizens." Jason West, the white mayor of New Paltz, NY, who started marrying gay couples was quoted as saying, "The same people who don't want to see gays and lesbians get married are the same people who would have made Rosa Parks go to the back of the bus." Not surprisingly, it is comparisons like these that have tended to piss black people off. While the anger of black heterosexuals is sometimes expressed in ways that are in fact homophobic, in truth black folks are tired of seeing other people hijack their shit for their own gains, and getting nothing in return. Black non-

heterosexuals share this anger of having our blackness and black political rhetoric and struggle stolen for other people's gains. The hijacking of Rosa Parks for their campaigns clearly ignores the fact that many white gays and lesbians who lived in Montgomery, AL and elsewhere *gladly* insisted that many a black person go to the back of the bus.

These comparisons of "Gay Civil Rights" as equal to "Black Civil Rights" really began in the early 1990s, and largely responsible for this were groups such as the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) and a few other mostly-white gay organizations. This push from HRC, without any visible black leadership or tangible support from black allies (straight and queer), to equate these movements did several things:

1) Piss off the black community for the white gay movement's cultural appropriation, and making the straight black community question non-hetero black people's allegiances, resulting in our further isolation.

2) Giving the (white) Christian Right ammunition to build relationships with black ministers to denounce Gay Rights from their pulpits based on the HRC's cultural appropriation.

3) Create a scenario in their effort to go mainstream that equates gay and lesbian with upper-class and white.

Not surprisingly, this has meant that the only visibility of non-heteroseuxal poor people and people of color have come from their appearance as minstrels on shows such as Jerry Springer, where non-heterosexuals who are poor and of color are encouraged (and paid) to act out, and be willfully represented as dishonest, violent, and pathological.

Given this difficult history and problematic relationship of the black community and the gay community, one wonders how and why the gay community, in its most crucial hour, would expect large scale support of same-sex marriage by the black community when there has been no real work to build strategic alliances with us. Though a new coalition has recently been formed comprised of black people, both non-hetero and hetero, to promote "marriage equality" support in the black community, and to effectively bridge that disconnect, the tension between these two seemingly disparate communities has continued to linger. While groups such as the National Black Justice Coalition have organized their political agenda around the concept that "gay marriage ain't just a white thing" – given our current political climate, we still might need to ask ourselves: *But is it?*

Is Gay Marriage Anti-Black?

I, as a black gay man, do not support the current push for same-sex marriage. Although I do not claim to represent all black gay people, I do believe that the manner in which this campaign has been handled has put black people in the middle of essentially two white groups of people, who have no interest in the upward social, political, or economic mobility of black people – period, regardless of their sexual identities. The Christian Right, which is in fact quite "anti-black", has tried to create a false alliance between themselves and blacks through religion to push forward their homophobic, fascist agenda. The white gay civil rights groups are also anti-black, however they want black people to see this struggle for same-sex unions as tantamount to separate but equal Jim Crow laws. Yet any close examination reveals that histories of terror imposed upon generations of all black people in this country do not in any way compare to what appears to be the very last barrier between white gays and lesbians' access to what bell hooks describes as "christian capitalist patriarchy." That system is inherently anti-black, and no amount of civil rights will ever get black people any real liberation from it. For, in what is now a good 40 years of Civil Rights, nothing has intrinsically changed or altered in the American power structure, and a few black faces in inherently racist institutions is hardly progress.

Given the current white heteronormative constructions of family and how the institutions of marriage and nuclear families have been used against black people, I do think that to support same-sex marriage is in fact, anti-black (I also believe the institution of marriage to be historically anti-feminist and anti-woman, and do not support it for those reasons as well).

Given the contemporary white queer movement's insistence on incorporating itself into already existing patriarchal and racist institutions (rather than attempting to dismantle these apparatuses altogether) it is no surprise that in our current political moment we are battling over a dubious institution such as marriage (and heteronormative family structures by extension). Debates over "family values," no matter how broad or narrow, always have whiteness at the center, and as such are almost always *anti-black*. As black social historian Robin D.G. Kelley has argued in his book *Yo Mama's Dysfunktional*, the infamous Patrick Moynihan report of the sixties stands as one of the most egregious of examples of how black kinship structures have been portrayed as dysfunctional – an image that still has tremendous influence on the ways in which black families are discussed in the media and controlled by law enforcement and public policy. Since black families are in fact presented and treated as dysfunctional, this explains the large numbers of black children in the hands of the State through foster care, and increasingly, the prison industrial complex (most often through so-called "youth detention centers"). In many cases, transracial adoptions are the result. Many white same-sex unions take advantage of the state's treatment of black families; after all, white queer couples are known for adopting black children since these children are considered to be "readily" available and are often not thought to be as

attractive or healthy as white, Asian or Latino/a adoptees. If black families were not labeled as dysfunctional or destabilized by prison expansion and welfare "reform," our children would not be removed from their homes at the numbers they are, and there would be no need for adoption or foster care in the first place. The fact that the white gay community continues to use white images of same-sex families is no accident, since the black family, *heterosexual, same sex or otherwise*, is always already portrayed as and understood to be *dysfunctional*.

While I am unsure at this point as to whether or not I am completely opposed to the institution of marriage altogether, seeing the ways in which the same-sex marriage campaign is currently devised, I struggle with this campaign because, given the level of homophobia in our society (specifically in the black community), and racism as well, it seems overwhelmingly likely that even if same-sex marriage does becomes legal, in effect *white people* will access these privileges far more easily than blacks ever will. This is especially the case with poor black people, who regardless of sexual preference or gender, are struggling with the most critical of needs (including housing, food, and gainful employment to name just a few) – issues which would not be sufficiently met by the current call for same-sex marriage. Also, we need to be cognizant of the fact that some black people (black men in particular) might be removed from or unmotivated to access same-sex marriage because they do not even identify as "gay" in the first place. In other words, the contemporary push for "gay marriage" places no emphasis on re-thinking how the current construction of "gay" is increasingly alien to many black people who practice same sex desire because white queer people continue to dominate the public discourse of what "gay" is the first place.

I do fully understand that non-heterosexuals of all races and classes may cheer this effort for they want their love to be recognized, and may want to reap some of the practical benefits that a marriage entitlement would bring – health care (if one of you gets health care from your job in the first place) for your spouse, hospital visits without drama or scrutiny, and control over a deceased partner's estate. But, gay marriage, in and of itself, is not a move towards real and systemic liberation. It does not address my most critical need as a black gay man to be able to walk down the streets of my community with my lover, spouse or trick, and not be subjected to ridicule, assault or even murder. Gay marriage does not adequately address homophobia or transphobia, for same-sex marriage still implies binary thinking, and transgender folks are not at all addressed in this debate.

What does gay marriage mean for all Black people?

But what does that mean for black people? For black non-heterosexuals, specifically? Am I supposed to get behind this effort, and convince heterosexual black people to do the same, especially when I know the racist manner in which this campaign has been carried out for over ten years? And especially when I know that the vast majority of issues that my community – The Black Community, of all orientations and genders–are not taken nearly this seriously when it comes to crucial life and death issues that we face daily like inadequate housing and health care, HIV/AIDS, police brutality, and the wholesale lockdown of an entire generation in America's grotesquely large prison industrial system. How do those of us who are non-heterosexual and black use this as an opportunity to deal with homophobia, transphobia and misogyny in our communities, and heal those larger wounds of isolation, marginalization and fear that plague us regardless of marital status? It is the undoing of systems of domination and control that will lead to liberation for all of ourselves, and all of us as a whole.

In the end, I am down for black people who oppose gay marriage – other folks "in the life" as well as straights, feminists, Christians, Muslims, and the like. But I want more than just quotes from Leviticus or other religious and moral posturing. I want the truth – painful or otherwise.

Reginald Harris
Notes in the Margins of a Family Album

"What I Brought to the Family Reunion"

A box of chicken
    and a case of beer.
Homemade banana bread.
A dozen "House" music tapes
    and Motown on CD.
My camera, loaded,
with three extra rolls of film –

And my Lover of ten years

So that later, after pictures
of The Matriarch and oldest connection to the past,
when we "The Grands,"
the brothers, sisters, cousins gather
to form our lines and pose,
those with arms full of infant will not ask me
where my wife is, or whisper that my hands
are empty.

I have a "thing" for photographs. Images of all kinds, but particularly photographs, speak to me in a variety of ways. They evoke moments that, I feel, long to be translated into words, or raise emotions in me that I am moved to express. Many of the poems and stories I've written have had their start in an image that resonated in me, setting off a series of vibrations that bid me speak.

Photographs have tremendous power, bringing back memories of important people and events in our past, capturing special moments in our lives. Carrying a photograph, putting one up at home or on the job, placing it in an album, means we attach a special weight to the image it captures. It is a window into what is important to us, what things, events, times, which people we value. Looking at the photographs a person keeps around them gives us insight into who they are. Although I once met someone who didn't carry photos around in his wallet – "Why would I want to sit on someone I cared about all day?" was his thinking – many people carry photos of either children or spouses with them all the time: I, too, sit on a couple of shots of my partner and myself for most of the day. For gay and lesbian people, the question of whether or not to have a photograph of their Significant Others displayed on their desk at work can be a major issue. A man having a photo of another man displayed in his office cubicle can be tantamount to his flying a rainbow flag in there, or wearing a "Yes I am" t-shirt. Displaying an image of your same gendered partner at work speaks volumes about the nature of your workplace, and also the comfort level of the person whose photograph it is. It is a quiet but firm declaration of who you are, of whom you value in your life.

In 1998, I saw a retrospective of the work of black gay artist Glenn Ligon at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. One piece in particular was extremely fascinating to me. Displayed in a specially sectioned off, "Adults Only" portion of the museum's space was Ligon's *A Feast of Scraps*. In this work, the artist takes a familiar thing, the family photo album, and gives it a "homosexual twist" with the use of captions ("Momma Knew" under a photo of a teenager smiling at the viewer perhaps a little too broadly), and the incorporation of images from gay pornography of the 1970s into the expected mix. A group family portrait, for example, sits on one page opposite a graphic scene of interracial man-sex on the other. In another section, a black man, naked but for a ten-gallon hat, trench coat and belt looks out from a page filled with various (fully clothed) men and women. Viewers are prompted to contemplate the many layers of meaning within the caption for that photograph, "Daddy." As Richard Meyer notes in the catalog accompanying the exhibition, *A Feast of Scraps* "renders visible that which must be kept hidden, left unspoken, or otherwise repressed within traditional records of domestic and familial life."

Family albums capture private moments and validate them. As a black gay man, the heterosexual world has attempted to teach me what can and can't be said, what photographs are and are not supposed to be linked together. We are taught that, if we feel we really must have a record of the shameful same-sex portions of our lives, then we should do so by having two albums, dual collections, one for blood relations and one for our same gender loving brothers and sisters. And they should not be allowed to intersect. Our orientation is meant to be isolated, separate from and alien to the lives we live with our 'real' families. Far too often, however, within this constellation of the 'real,' black gays and lesbians wonder if we will even be in the viewfinder when the family portrait is taken.

If, like Glenn Ligon, we were to create our own, un-bifurcated, "tell-all" family photo album, what images would it contain? Who would we include?

My own collection of photos would happily and haphazardly defy the dichotomies between my "two lives." It would flow from relatives to friends and photographs of former lovers to candid, "I can't believe you took my picture with me looking like this," snaps of my Other Half. The men I loved, some of whom I remain in contact with, others I've not seen in years, would sit nonchalantly across from images taken before my birth of my grandparents and other relatives in their youth.

Sadly, there would have to be holes, gaps, spaces in the pages, for the photographs I want to have but don't. My sister, for example, has an image of one of my uncles on my mothers' side of the family, rumored to have been gay, looking all spit shined and perfect in his Army uniform, back from a tour of duty in Korea. I wish I had a photograph of the two of us together, as I listened to him share stories of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" 1950's style.

I doubt that I would be brave enough to include images reflecting my otherwise uninhibited fantasy life. True, I have taken photos of men I've found attractive in the past, and I'll slip them in there between the shots from various vacations, but how many others, stars of music and the movies, television and sports would I include? And how many images from the spools of porn that have unfurled beneath my eyes over the years? (Hmmm…maybe I need to move that autographed photo of Robert Maplethorpe model and XXX-film star Joe Simmons a little further away from the shots of my 21st birthday party…) I might even need a couple of volumes just for my fantasy life. One problem perhaps many of us would have might be how much cross-referencing would we do between this "Album of Desire" and the others? Where, for example, do I include the now fading photograph of my second cousin from New York, my first teenaged crush?

I am incredibly lucky that both my and my partners' families have integrated us into their lives. After being together for 17 years, people now expect to see the two of us together. His relatives ask after me, mine ask after him. I'm convinced that my sisters get along with him better than they do with me, just as I seem to tolerate his "black sheep" brother better than he does – most of the time. One of the most moving moments of my life was when my grandfather said that he thought of my partner as another grandson. To our in-laws our relationship is no big deal. Mark and his cousins, all of whom are around the same age and used to run the streets together when they were kids, even got together for an "intervention" when one cousin said he no longer wanted to hang with them any more because my partner's heretofore "theoretical" homosexuality had suddenly become real when we moved in together. So I'm sure our picture shows up in their family albums, as they are featured in mine.

And yet: one night the Other Half and I went to a party with one of his cousins, not the one with problems. Late in the evening he began to talk to other guests about his daughter, grateful that she is too young to be interested in boys – "Just so long as she's not interested in girls either, if you know what I mean." He looked at me as the heterosexuals surrounding us laughed. He'd become so used to us that he can include us in their casual homophobia, and think we won't mind, so comfortable, in fact, that we are 'no longer gay,' just as certain African Americans are 'no longer black' to some in the mainstream culture.

How do are families deal with us, really? How well do we fit in with them, or do we at all? I wonder sometimes if straight people feel more at ease if they have a narrative they can put us into: I'm sure I make my partner's family more comfortable because I usually do most of the cooking when they visit us. It makes them think they have a neat little frame to place around our lives.

Here's a shot of the Mark and I with another couple at DC Black Pride, years ago when it was held outside, on one of the years it didn't rain. What value does our community place on each other, our chosen family of friends? I hope my image will appear in the albums of my same gender loving friends, just as theirs does in mine. How will I be represented? Would my friends' images only be of the (yes, surprisingly hot) younger version of myself, or would they also have shots of the thicker (it's called "Bear-like," thank you) older version. Why is it that images of older gays and lesbians are difficult to find in public gay culture, it is as if we disappear after a certain age? This is a difficult fantasy to maintain since we cannot remain 25 forever. I hope my friends would have a more realistic vision.

Do we knock people out of our vision because they become coupled while we remain single, or vice versa? I always notice when my straight friends ask me how my partner is, and when the gay people I know do not. We need non-X rated images of couples in our family albums and our lives, particularly same sex couples of color, to counter their almost total absence in public visions of same-gender-loving life.

I have far too many photographs of men and women who are no longer with us. I can't even begin to list the names of friends and relatives lost to old age, cancer, AIDS, alcohol, a litany of losses. Where do I put my ghosts? Constructing this album reminds me of how haunted I am, how haunted most of us are, by people we continue to hold in our hearts but can no longer hold in our arms. Going through these pages is difficult, but essential. We cannot move forward without mourning and remembrance, honoring those that shaped our past. Our culture urges us, "Onward, ever onward," "Don't look back!" Everything surrounding us says, "let go," unless we can turn our collective memories into a holiday with attendant sales at the mall. In a rush to

"move on" beyond our sadness, without properly mourning, we hold our grief tightly eating away at us from the inside. As a man, trained not to betray any emotion, as a gay man, who daily carries the loss of an ocean of friends, these are the pages I need to linger over most. I want to recognize how wounded I am, how wounded we all are, and how much I loved the beautiful faces of those no longer here. Looking at their photographs I honor and value them, and can begin to properly grieve for them.

Coming to the final pages, I suddenly notice how often I am absent from my album. Why am I more comfortable behind the camera, the reflection of a flashing light in the eyes of others? If the saving of an image is a reflection of importance, value, worth, what does it mean for this not to contain any self-portraits? How much do any of us care about ourselves? Would we engage in risky behavior, drugs, excessive drinking, unprotected sex, if we trusted ourselves, loved our bodies and ourselves enough to want to take a photograph of the person we see every day in the mirror? How can we create the world we want to live in until we can turn a critical but loving lens upon ourselves? What caption would we place under such a photograph?

Charles F. Stephens

Performing Black and Gay: Butch Queen Radicalism

As a young black gay man searching for a space outside of hetero-patriarchal masculinity and heteronormativity, the home I have built for myself is in a community of Butch Queens. A Butch Queen, loosely defined, is a configuration of black gay identity that challenges essentialist notions of race, gender, and sexuality. If a Femme Queen is to be seen as a gay man who lives his life as a woman and "Trade" is viewed as a heterosexual "masculine" man who occasionally engages in sexual activity with gay identified men, then a Butch Queen is somewhere in between. He is a gay man that assumes the appearance of a "man" (relatively speaking) and predominantly desires other men.

"Trade" poses an interesting dilemma because of the unstable nature of the definition. Most people think of trade as a trick (i.e. a heterosexual man who is paid to have sex with another man). In my community things are slightly different. Trade more often than not is on a continuum of masculinity. The starting point perhaps is a heterosexual sex worker who occasionally gets down with men and extends to the noncommercial straight pleasure seeker.

Nonetheless, I see myself as a *Butch Queen*. A Butch Queen for me is a radical act of resistance to normative black subjectivity, and mainstream gay homogeneity. Further, it has been a very useful weapon to counter the fetishized masculinity so alive in black gay sexual/social networks. That is not to say that this cult of masculinity is particular to black gay men, rather it is one more example of the multiple dimensions of heterosexism and sexism.

It was somewhere in black gay vernacular that I realized a strategy for subverting the sexism inherent in language. At the time I fell in love with French Feminist Theory and became fascinated with how power intersects with language. Through the problematization of language, and the impossibility of "Woman" I found myself rethinking the gendering of bodies, of discourse, and specifically language. This actually held up well against my previous assessment that for a man to refer to another man in the feminine (i.e "Girl you so crazy!" or "Ms. Thing you tryin it.") was at best a reduction of his masculinity, and at worst blatant sexism. But then again, I was left to beg the question of why the investment in masculinity in the first place. And referring to myself, or other men, in the feminine neither assumes a denial of male privilege, nor a castration.

I found in the vernacular of black gay men an exaggeration of gender, a stylized and satirical posturing with radical potential. Of course this is not without its problems, for there are considerations such as social position, privilege, intent, and location. However, I knew that the

space of language would be a field that could match what was familiar to me and beautiful with what was political and potentially radical. Also, using language as a space for resistance created an epistemological revolution within me that I have yet to awake from.

Thus, as a black gay man/Butch Queen, speaking in a particular voice, I could be engaged in my own act of resistance against the sexism of language. In a way I could perform a perverse masculinity, one in full recognition of my male privilege, and a willingness to step away from it through de-centering masculinist language. As I have said before, I have little use for masculinity in language. "She" may have a penis, or may not.

This gendering process which privileges the masculine becomes destabilized when I speak myself as a black gay man/Butch Queen into existence. Through the use of vernacular, and the claiming of a Butch Queen identity, a particular kind of performance of masculinity becomes available as a space outside the thrust of masculinity.

I think of these things as I play on web sites. I read the ads of men, shirtless and muscled, speaking in a language not quite foreign, but familiar in its alienation. These men participate in a discourse of black masculinity, and construction of desire, and I remain isolated. I question my feminist politics as I think of my own desirability to these men behind these pictures, which may or may not be them, hitting me up on instant messenger in voices that may or may not be theirs. Am I their brother after all?

But rather than feel shitty because of my reluctance to embrace the problematically contrived and painfully exaggerated masculinity, I reaffirm my commitment to who I wish to be in the world. Not that I too have not indulged in my own contrived, performed, hip-hop, "sup nigga?" kind of masculinity, however I eventually found it a little too stifling for the radical feminist, queer shit-starter, black gay revolutionary in me. But to be honest I am often ambivalent, the muscle boy is more desirable in most black gay sexual cultures than the radical intellectual Butch Queen.

Nonetheless, I challenge my pro-feminist male friends. So when I say "Girl, what's the tea?" the offense is immediate and harsh. I push their thinking, their gender boundaries. Funny how one can be deeply invested in the very thing they seek to challenge.

As for its history there has been a long debate at least amongst my friends and I, about where the term originated. My suspicion is that an on-going conversation has taken place between the house/ball community and other black gay communities which facilitated the circulation of the term.

As the DL is increasingly becoming one of the few available configurations of black male-male desire, I find my Butch Queen self more and more disruptive in a world that does not recognize black, gay, male, feminist, radical, thinkers. It is in this space where I find the most productive and effective way, though I use capitalist metaphors reluctantly, *to bring the parts of myself home*.

Through being a Butch Queen there is a space to play with gender that I find really exciting. From the "girl" vogueing in Timbs, serving the kids the illusion of boy but the performance of femme, to the constant back and forth my friends and I engage in from dense theoretical discussions to the fingers snapping and affirmations of "Girl, you tried it!" or "Work, bitch!"

Most importantly in negotiating a identity, a way of being in the world that is set against white supremacy, heterosexism, and male dominance, and at the same time resisting essentialist notions of race, sexuality, and gender, one walks a very tight rope of identity politics. The communities that I have found hope in, black gay communities, have consistently turned me off with their worshiping of a destructively fashioned Butchness that has become increasingly standard. Nonetheless, I resist leaving them, because I need them desperately. My solution has been to carve a space and fashion an identity that brings my theoretical interests in line with my lived experience.

I exist in a matrix of ironies, one where the fictions of identity are constantly challenged, questioned, and fictionalized, and approached through a performed self that is constantly changing and shifting. Thus, I perform black and gay, assuming a Butch Queen self, that allows me to see clearly the world I want to live in. This world acknowledges the multiplicity of power, the very real violence of oppression, recognizes the productive and suppressive elements of domination, and yet combats this with tactics that bring the illusion of power by assuming a self that is constantly changing and in flux.

Rev. Osagyefo Uhuru Sekou
Who's Going to Direct the Choir?

Our fundamental message of healing and hope for African-Americans is as significant as ever, but we need to connect it to the issues that most affect our community now and will affect us in the future. – W. Franklyn Richardson

During a book signing at Washington University, E. Lynn Harris, author of *Invisible Life*, was asked about being gay and Christian. He responded with deep conviction, "I see no contradiction between my sexual orientation and my faith." E. Lynn Harris' proclamation speaks to the ongoing struggle in the lives of gay brothers and sisters as they attempt to reconcile their sexuality and spirituality. Many Christians, who are very vocal in their opposition to gay and lesbian lifestyles, create barriers that make this journey for inner peace quite arduous. Contempt often drips from their lips as they describe homosexuality as an abomination. When I hear such comments, I always wonder if they know that in the Book of Leviticus the Bible also calls eating shrimp an abomination.

As a Black Baptist preacher, I have had to come to grips with my own homophobia. One day I received an energetic call from my ex-girlfriend. "Hey baby, James and Alfred invited us to meet them at 'The Club.' Do you wanna go?" I hesitated. My sense of trepidation was not mediated by the fact that I am a licensed Baptist minister who would seriously be looked down upon by many church folk for going to a "den-of-sin-club." As a matter of fact, I could not have cared less about what church folk thought or think of me because heaven and hell are God's questions, so God is the only one who can answer them. It was my homophobia. You see, James and Alfred are gay brothers who have come to be good friends of ours and "The Club" is an African-American gay space.

First and foremost, I did not want the brothers at The Club to think I was "like them." In a matter of seconds, my brain was flooded by all the sermons I had heard demonizing gay and lesbian lifestyles. Nonetheless, I decided that I loved James and Alfred more than the preachers who preached those sermons. And I went.

The Club is precariously nestled in an unassuming building amidst a ghetto, a warehouse district, and an affluent neighborhood. As we opened the door my heart sank deep into the abyss of religious homophobia. Again, I heard Muslim and Christian ministers blaming gay folk for the problems within the Black family.

There was silence on the outside of the front door but the air lit up with music and conversation on the other side. I felt like the "entering-in-of-the-straight" silenced the lively voices of these brothers. All eyes were on us. I do not know if it was because we were new faces or what.

This silence was only momentary. It was probably a figment of my heterosexist imagination. The first part of The Club is a bar area where there is socializing. This room is a sea of ebony brothers from all walks of life. Italian suits, designer jeans, overalls, and khakis adorned these men as they enjoyed their space.

While looking around for James and Alfred, I saw a brother I knew from back in the day. Now, I heard that this brother was gay but never had observed any behavior, subtle or blatant, to confirm the rumors. I spoke to him. He responded with an effortless wave and that was it. A wave? A nonchalant wave from this brother I used to be so cool with? This brother was someone that I use to kick it with. We went to parties, talked about which sisters were the finest, and who had the most *game*. Based on that history, I thought I deserved more than a half wave. It also seemed as though the brother was "hiding" behind someone. He acted as though he did not want to be seen. I did not care if he was gay, I just wanted to catch up on old times. It was strange.

Anyway, my girlfriend suggested that we go into the dance area of The Club. We did and saw James and Alfred immediately. We hugged them and they introduced us to their co-workers. Surrounding the DJ was a bar and bar stools. We sat there. James and I went and got drinks in the social room and talked about work. All of a sudden I felt someone touching my dreads. I got really nervous.

Slowly, I turned around and saw it was a sister. My sense of relief was shattered by the fact that if my girlfriend saw her playing in my hair it was going to be "on" if I did not stop her. Before I could say anything, the sister apologized and said that she liked my hair and wanted to know how long I had been wearing my hair in dreadlocks. I thanked her for the complement and told her six years. James and I got the drinks and returned to the dance area.

In the corner, adjacent to the bar/DJ, I noticed a minister of music from a local church. I did not speak. He looked like he was getting his *Mack* on. The music in The Club was hard hitting. The bass throbbed with an electric energy. The DJ, a tan brother with baby doll eyes, was grand. As he spun an eclectic mix of house music with gospel intrusions, he danced, laughed, and rolled his eyes ever so fiercely. As we exchanged causalities he made flippant comments about whomever and whatever. He was a joy!

My girlfriend and I danced. As the evening progressed, my body became weary. Equally, I don't like house music. As we prepared to leave, I noticed another familiar face. In addition to directing the church choir, we sang in a group together during my high school years. He had recently become a Baptist Minster.

After the initial "Hello," I asked him, "Well, how's the ministry?"

His face dropped. He answered with what I sensed was shame. "Fine," he mumbled.

As we exited the building, the walk to the car became laborious. My head was flooded with the familiar faces, the "normalcy" of the ebony sea of my brothers, and the "ministry" comment to my old friend. I shared with my girlfriend that I should not have asked about the ministry. He seemed too put off by my question, which was asked in a most genuine manner. "Why"? I wondered. If the brother was gay, why did he have to hide it from the church?

There is contempt for gay brothers and sisters in a variety of theological appropriations in the Black Church. Yet, the choir stand has been a space where some gay brothers, in particular, could express their God-given talents. In fact, the minister I saw at The Club used to direct a choir. Even then, it was always rumored that he way gay, but he was allowed to lead one of most viable traditions of the black church – the choir. It is often noted the musical performance and choral leadership of a gay man can uplift an entire congregation and usher in a deeper sense of spiritual presence. Perhaps, when he serves in the capacity of choir director, all of the reviled emotions and stereotypical behaviors

associated with gay men become tolerable. Aside from the gay choir director, who is retained for convenience's purpose, any acceptance of homosexuality within the church is non-existent. Yet other lifestyles are complacently sanctioned by the membership.

We are silent when it comes to issues of class, gender, and undemocratic leadership in the Black Church. Why would a brother in a monogamous relationship with another gay brother be shunned while the promiscuous preacher is celebrated Sunday after Sunday? Is it because American idolatry demands that the criterion for manhood and legitimacy depends upon the conquering of women? The controversy surrounding Henry Lyons and the National Baptist Convention is a glaring example. During his tenure as president of National Baptist Convention, Rev. Lyons stole hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars from the coffers of the National Baptist Convention. He brought a beachfront home in the name of the church and housed his girlfriend in the church's house. There were every few dissenting voices in the National Baptist Convention concerning Rev. Lyons behavior. When he was arrested the leadership defended him inside the Convention and outside to the public. Hence, the preacher-player is still allowed to preach, pastor, and be defended by his peers.

It has to be noted that Rev. Marcia Dyson's essay in *Essence Magazine*, "When Preacher's Prey," which deals with the role of sexism and penis politics in the black church, is the most requested essay in the history of *Essence*. There are a number of sisters abused at the hands of preachers who use their power to have their way with them. There is an uneven critique of sin, particularly sins that stand in contradiction to patriarchy and pastoral accountability.

Clearly, there are so many contradictions within the unspoken laws of the Black Church regarding homosexuality. Some gay people are alienated while others appear to be accepted for their God-given gifts. Nonetheless, the contradictions are evident. At bare minimum, if the homophobic contempt perpetuated by the Black church persists, it begs the question, "Who's going to direct the Choir?"

E. Patrick Johnson

All in the Family: Queering the Projects

I became queer in the projects – or at least the projects became the fertile ground upon which to nurture my journey into the life. Although I now live in Chicago, I am a child of the South – Hickory, North Carolina to be exact. And unless you've bought some fierce furniture, you've probably never heard of this sleepy little town in the foothills of the tarheel state. I am the youngest of seven children (six boys and one girl) raised by a single mother. We lived first in a one-bedroom apartment in which my five brothers and sister slept in three beds crammed into the one bedroom and my mother and I slept on a pullout sofa bed in the living room. Then for twelve years we lived in public housing. While the housing projects we lived in were not as "hard" as those found in big urban cities like New York and Chicago, those who lived there had to develop "street smarts" to survive the deleterious conditions in which we found ourselves. This meant finding creative ways to access the material goods and knowledge we needed to exist or, in some cases, rise above our lot in life.

It was in the projects where I absorbed the knowledge that my family, extended family, and community folk shared over meals at the dinner table, at the local barbershop, on the front porch, and at church. These social and cultural spaces and institutions taught me about politics, manners and social etiquette, "The Man," (black) history and about queerness.

The first site was literally our home – the four-bedroom housing project we moved into when I was in the second grade in 1974. After having to share the pullout sofa with my mother, I thought we had really "moved on up." But more importantly, I only had to share a room with one of my brothers because my sister and two eldest brothers had moved out on their own. Given the fact that I grew up the youngest of very masculine brothers who all played some sort of sport, one might find it hard to believe that queerness was in my home, but there Miss Queerness was – all up in the house. She first arrived in the form of my mother's wigs. My mother first dressed me in a wig at the age of three as a form of amusement – she thought it was cute. But she didn't think it was so cute once I started sneaking into her bedroom and putting the wig on my head for myself. There was something about the feel of all that curly hair on top of my head that freed me. Before long, I was experimenting with mama's lipstick, necklaces and high heels. Her room became a playhouse for me to experiment and relish in my budding homosexuality. Now, I'm not trying to equate gender and sexuality. I'm much too smart for that now that Judith Butler and all the other queer theorists have taught me that it isn't so. All I'm saying is that at the early age of three, donning my mother's wig and later her lipstick, necklaces, earrings and shoes became a precursor for my own gendered performances of a

stylized femininity, specifically my mother's femininity. In some early photos of my mother for example, she stands hand on hip, in a pose that would give Bette Davis a run for her money. I found similar photos of myself as a youngster, mimicking that same pose. Consciously or subconsciously, I had acquired my mother's "drag," donning her brand of femininity like a freshly laundered shawl or perhaps something more bourgeois like a mink stole.

Due to my socialization into (southern) black masculinity, I soon traded in the wig for a football helmet. It was, indeed, a poor substitute. The only "joy" of playing football as a pre-teen was the fact that I got to see my other male friends naked. We would often stand in the locker room and count how many pubic hairs we had. While conducting this comparison one afternoon, one of my friends told me, "You know if you fuck a girl with hairs you'll get hairs." Not very likely, I thought – on both counts. I was smart enough to know that only a good hair grease would make your hair grow (cause that's what I heard Mama tell all of the women whose hair she did in the kitchen) and that I was not going to be "fucking" no girls – playing house with them maybe, but definitely not fucking them.

My foray into sports didn't last long. It couldn't, for I was too much of an intellectual to engage in such "brutish" activities. In other words, I was a mama's boy. Unlike my brothers, I loved hanging out with my sister and my mother. And because I was so much younger than my brothers, they didn't want me to hanging out with them, so by default I stayed around the house with my mother. I learned many things about the ways of the world by sitting around the kitchen table listening to my mother and her friends gossip while they snapped beans, while my mother gave a press-and-curl, or baked cakes and pies. Sex was a part of the conversation on many occasions – especially when my Aunt Mary Lee, my mother's only sister, was visiting. Aunt Mary Lee LOVED to gossip and especially about who was doing what with whom and where. Aunt Mary Lee, like my mother, had a very high voice that pierced the air when she laughed. You could always here her coming to the house because she wore an armful of bangles and bracelets. She loved her fat nephew. In fact, her nickname for me was "Pug" because she said I looked like one of those pug dogs – not a compliment, but endearing nonetheless. When she walked in the door she would always greet me with a kiss and say, "Hey Pug. Auntie want you to run to the store for me a little later, ok Baby?" which really meant me going to Bojangles and getting her a three piece wing dinner. She was about 4' 11'' and seemed to be dressed up all the time – often in stiletto heels. When I knew she was coming over, I would make sure that I found something to do around the house so that I could catch up on the latest gossip. While Mama, in general, denounced gossip, she always, interestingly enough, instigated Aunt Mary Lee's telling of it. Mama would start off with something like, "You know Beautie Mae is ho'in' around with Sweet Thang's youngest boy and plan on shackin' up down there on 8th Avenue Drive at her mama's old house. It's a scandal and shame." Aunt Mary Lee would perform

surprise by saying, "Sarah, you better shut up. Girl, you lyin'," before coming in with her own zinger: "They better give that boy some Saltpeter 'fo he get Beautie Mae pregnant. You know he done started to smell his pee." Now, it took me years to figure out what this latter phrase meant, but at that time I just thought it was disgusting. Aunt Mary Lee would pick up an apple or some other fruit, take a bite and then look at mother across the kitchen table, smack her lips and then drop the gossip that she had come to tell in the first place: "They say that that last youngin' Beautie Mae had is John Ed's. I was lookin' at him the other day and he sho' do look like him. But you know I also heard that John Ed is funny." Inevitably, Mama would look up from whatever she was doing and shout, "Mary Lee! You oughten be saying stuff like that. That's how stuff get started. You don't know nothin' 'bout them peoples." Not the least bit phased, Aunt Mary Lee would end the conversation with, "Well, Sarah I'm just tellin' you what I *heard*. If it ain't true it ain't true," and then roll her eyes. I would tingle inside from my ringside seat to the gossip. Aunt Mary Lee took pouring tea to another level and became my skilled trainer in the intricacies of the art form.

While Aunt Mary Lee trained me how to dish, my Uncle Johnny taught me about gender fucking and exposed me to the DL. Now, Uncle Johnny was a natural born playa. I don't remember a time when he wasn't hitting on a woman—any woman: old, young, fat, skinny, dark skinned, light skinned, short, tall, toothless, etc. As long as she had female genitalia, he was interested. Uncle Johnny called all of his nieces and nephews by their first names followed by "Baby Doll," regardless of gender. So, he always greeted me with, "How you doin' Pat, Baby Doll?" I always found this strange, but also cool because my older brothers HATED when he added Baby Doll to their names. I'm sure it was his way of infantilizing us all, but I found it cool nonetheless.

Uncle Johnny was always taking pictures with a Polaroid camera. He had trash bags full of pictures that he had taken over the years, mostly of women that he had met at the barbershop, where he hung out everyday after work and on the weekends. One day my mother asked him to bring some of the pictures he had taken to the house so that she could go through them to find ones of past family reunions, for she was going to make a collage for our upcoming reunion. Uncle Johnny arrived with two trash bags of polaroids and dumped them on the kitchen table. Mama, my sister, Pam, Aunt Mary Lee, Uncle Johnny and I sat around the table looking through the pictures. (I was horrified to find pictures of some of my classmates in the pictures, but that's another story.) The number of women in the pictures was mind-boggling. Some I recognized, while others I had never seen before in my life. Aunt Mary Lee stumbled across a picture of Uncle Johnny with a woman named Sylvia who most folks in the community believed to be a lesbian. Ever being the trickster, Aunt Mary Lee turned to Uncle Johnny and asked, "Johnny, ain't this a picture of Sylvia?" Uncle Johnny took the picture from her, studied it for a minute, seemingly became lost in a reverie and began to grin a devilish grin before replying, "Yeah,

that's Syp. You know she's half and half." I couldn't believe my ears. Mama pursed her lips and clutched her pearls disapprovingly (church lady that she is), while Aunt Mary Lee snatched the photo from Uncle Johnny's hand and retorted, "Well, if she half and half, what YOU doin' wit' 'er then?" Not to be undone, he coolly replied, "I was with the half I could be wit'." We howled. At that moment I realized that Uncle Johnny was the coolest (and queerest) dirty old man I have ever known.

It would be my Grandmother Mary, however, who would teach me how to "read." Like many black grandmothers, mine was full of mother wit, advice, and was known to give you a good knock upside the head when you needed it. Grandmother's use of colorful language (e.g. "She gets on my nerves so bad it makes my ass want to cut stove wood") was second only to her ability to size people up – in other words, to *read* people. She may have been illiterate in the literal sense of that word, but she could call a person out in a hot minute. In fact, my grandmother gave me my first lesson in gaydar.

While visiting with her years ago, we were sitting on her front porch drinking sweetened iced tea while she poured it about her neighbors. After a while, one neighbor, David, an elderly white man who had a soft voice, walked by and spoke to us. After he passed by, Grandmama watched him as he made his way to his apartment. Satisfied that he had entered and closed the door, she said to me, "You know he's a quare." Now, admittedly, I had no idea what she was talking about at first and then came to understand that she was saying "queer," but in her black southern dialect it sounded like "quare." "Yeah, he's a homalsexual," she continued. "A what? I asked. My grandmother said, "You know, one of them homalsexuals." "Well, how do you know the man's a homosexual, Grandma?" "Well, he gardens, keeps a clean house, and bakes pies." Given that I was not out to her, Grandmama was reading me too.

Before she passed away, she continued to read me. I remember speaking with her over the phone about a year after I moved to Chicago. I had moved to Chicago with my partner, Stephen, who my grandmother only knew as my "roommate." During the very brief conversation (old black folk don't do long distance) she only asked me three questions: "Pat, honey, how you doing?" "How's your roommate?" Does he have a job?" After I replied positively to her inquiries she was ready to get off the phone. She knew and I knew that I had been read. But more to the point, she had gotten the information that she needed to feel ok with my "roommate." I was happy. He was happy. He had a job. Enough said.

My lessons in how to be queer didn't just happen to come from my family members or occur only in my house. There was the community that provided pedagogies of the same gender loving kind as well. For instance, we had several "models" in our neighborhood – over-the-top queens

who gave greater femme performance. These "girls" would use the street as their imaginary runway as they sashayed and twirled down South Center Street, smacking gum, throwing shade and reading those who dared to toss a homophobic remark their way, which was something that rarely happened – at least in earshot, for haters would surely get a beat down. These queens were fierce. And while I had not come into my own (homo)sexuality back then, I both admired and hated their self-confidence in who and what they were. It would be some twenty years later before I would fully embrace that kind of self-love or come close to working a runway the way they did.

The other training ground for my queerness was the church. My mother dragged me to church every Sunday the Lord sent. And believe me, I got tired of Him sending them. Like most of the folk in my community, we were Baptists. I remember the first time I saw someone "get happy." It scared me to death. And because I was an inquisitive child, I would often ask my mother why people were jerking their bodies, waving their hands, and dancing in the church. Without looking down at me she would pat me on the leg and say, "Shhh. They feelin' the spirit." Her explanation meant very little to me, but folks "felt the spirit" so often that I began to accept it as a part of church service.

Unlike some of the churches in the South where the pastor gay-bashed from the pulpit, my pastor never did. In fact, in all of the years that I attended Morning Star First Baptist church, I cannot remember the pastor ever preaching a homophobic sermon or even mentioning homosexuality at all. Church was genuinely a fun and nurturing place for all of us budding sissies, especially for those of who sang in the choir.

For many years, the choir was my saving grace. It was in the choir where I felt free to express myself and where I felt appreciated. I would catch the spirit myself at times, especially during my solos. The little queen was begging to show out and I had a captive audience. By the time I was 12, I had made quite a reputation for myself as "the little fat boy with the high butt and high voice that could sing." (Besides my voice, my ass was my signature. My ass was so big and so high when I was kid that I could literally reach over my shoulder and get my wallet out of my back pocket. I looked like the letter "b" that first graders make when they are learning to write: a vertical line with a circle drawn in the middle of it and to the right.) I was the only male soprano and I could out-sing any of the girls in the soprano section. I was this fat, boy soprano with a big butt and big voice who got the church to shoutin' every Sunday by singing the solo originally sung by Yolanda Adams with the Southeastern Inspiration Choir out of Houston, Texas. The song is called "My Liberty" – how prophetic.

We had one of the best children's choirs in the area and I garnered quite a reputation as the little queen who could sing soprano. Although folks marveled at my soaring melismas, I was teased about my high voice, as I got older. When I reached 15 and was still singing soprano . . . well, let's just say it seemed a little "quare." But the diva would not be dismissed as I kept right on twirling in my robe and singing my soprano, until at age 17, much to my chagrin, my voice changed and I could no longer hit those high notes and Sherri Shade took over the solo to "My Liberty." Me? Bitter? Nooooooooooo. Heifer.

These memories of the projects and of the South in general remind me that I have not "overcome" just because I live in a big city now. In fact, it was my southern black community in the projects that was the site of my coming into knowledge about the world, the site of my first *coming*. It is because of those experiences that I can now honestly say that "I'm living my life like it's golden." And so are those queer brothers and sisters who remain in my community and others like it all over the South. On a recent trip down south to collect the stories of black gay men who were born, raised, and continue to live there, I was forced to confront some of my own biases about the South since leaving. Listening to their stories not only grounded me, but it also took me back to placed I have only visited in the crevices of my mind's eye. They were telling my story while narrating their own – stories that take me back to Mama's bedroom, the kitchen table, Aunt Mary Lee's laughter, Uncle Johnny's cunning, Grandmama's front porch, and the choir stand. I can't wait to get back home again.

Laurens G. Van Slaytman

Hush . . . Shhh

My silence about my identity is built upon the bodies of men who have died of HIV and AIDS during the last twenty years. It has been twenty years, no? It is housed behind the rough-sawn latticework of the fences erected during the last twenty years of disease. But perhaps it is more like five hundred years. The amount of time seems unremarkable. We, the them, the those over there, the men you close your eyes and point with your chin to, stand peering ahead waiting for our opportunity to answer the questions which unlock the secrets of our behavior. Repeatedly we have been asked to explain why we do or don't use condoms, share needles, have multiple partners and act in other manners which jeopardize not only our lives but also the lives of our community. Repeatedly we have answered, " 'cause, I gonna die anyway."

"'cause I have no one."

"'cause I am afraid to say no."

"'cause I like the way it feels."

"'cause it is the only thing I get to say yes to."

"'cause it is the only thing I get to say no to."

Sometimes we say, "just because."

And sometimes we say nothing, only tears.

Still and all, the scientists continue to seek the answer to behavior, which has been branded deviant. The science of it all has never been interested in the conditions under which behavior develops. Science is only interested in sanctioning the behaviors. And now they are scrambling to define faith. Because all of sudden it pays to believe in gods, goddesses and higher powers. Not to mention smaller welfare rolls, marriage and democracy in the lands of other brown men. Honestly I have lost my own faith much like Afghanistan has lost the Buddha statues. And more and more frequently I find myself talking louder to myself. In a recent conversation with me I started, "So, maybe the question is wrong? Maybe the question is, … tell me your story."

And I answered, "But that's not a question at all. Maybe I should tell my story instead of intellectualizing away my fear that you will turn away. Maybe my story starts when faith returns and when I believe that if I can't go on you'll say, 'Hush… shhh. Here. Here. Put your head here. It's going to be all right. They can't hurt you anymore. I won't let them.'"

But let the reader beware, I am no mere narrator. I have been known to shout, "I don't believe you," into the night. And at other times I have yelled, "Why?" Maybe the next time I'm gonna scream, "No!" But tonight you ask me for my story and I will tell you one about family. Since it is within this matrix that I determined that sexuality has nothing to do with orifices and protuberances, rather it was about identity, power, control, and mastery. I learned these things from my brothers. I want to tell you about my brothers. Men.

I should say, there have always been men, men who thought that I was odd. "Freak!" There were men who thought that I should be subdued. "But you have different options than they do." Men who thought I could shine for both of us, as their fires dimmed. Men who thought my arms could carry us both to safety. "'Cause, I don't want you to use one." Men who thought that my shoulders were bridges to their submission while others thought of my back as a shield from arrows, glances, spittle, rage. Among these men are my brothers. I am the youngest; everyone can tell. We were three Guyanese boys, who became hyphenated, dissident, expatriate, and one even became a Republican. We became Guyanese-American, Afro-Caribbean and African-American. "'Cause that's all they gonna see any way."

However, long before that we played with cap guns and water pistols, Red light, Green light, one, two, three and Mother, may I? And when we played cowboys and Indians, I was always the Indian, an outsider.

There was Athos, the oldest. At the end of days in summer, there were times when my bicycle no longer inspired thoughts of escape, or immediate death while crisscrossing the jagged landscape of Brooklyn sidewalks and streets. On those days, I waited for Athos to come home from his basketball camp days. And when he came, the day would fade to dusk and he would tell me everything I needed to know. Like what happened to unicorns. "Things have to die in order to make room for others," he'd say. "Unicorns were probably like the dinosaurs. They had to die so that we could live." He made improbable faces, imagining the grimaces of frail human lives extinguished by the carefree prancing of brontosauruses. Or was it brontosauri? In my head thoughts of archeological expeditions of National Geographic proportions, flew every which way. And I loved him.

I was the little brother who became freak. I had grown hair in directions that made older folk and more than a few of the young uncomfortable at the least and disgusted at the most.

"Why can't he just cut it off?"

"You are a black man, that is already dangerous, why would you want them to think of you as anything other that respectable?"

My knotted strands of hair were repugnant to middle-class sensibilities. At my sister's wedding, think Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, I heard a whisper, "Why would anybody want to do that to their hair?" So I became a body.

But my oldest brother was proud of me. He placed me on classic pedestals. Such small daises are often dangerous perches. At the very least one can see away into the distance. He introduced me as his little brother, the one who could repeat everything he had taught me. He protected me from the names other men would call me when I was not a part of the Crown Royal and Heineken soliloquies. But he also enfolded me in secrecy and lies of what I struggle to convince myself are bearable and true.

When he was twenty years old he returned home. Or rather he was expelled from some ivy covered institution. He did not come alone. He brought a woman to our house. She told stories of African-Americaness that enthralled me. I could feel the Guyaneseness fading perhaps like the brontosauri. Yeah that's it, brontosauri is the plural of brontosaurus, and plurality can only occur when Guyaneseness is redefined in terms I create. But then they left. And like the unicorns of my childhood I did not tell him goodbye. Just like I will never tell him, that Mummy and Daddy waited at the clinic for him, for his first therapy appointment. I will never tell him that he could have changed everything. I will never tell him that he could have given voice to all our disappointment and desperation and the pressure to achieve. I will never tell him that we felt that too. Instead he ran away. And I dreamt of his flight in after-school special format. We would be reunited in the bus station the way that they do it on TV and homeostasis would return.

Instead, for months after, I wore his clothes, the oversized army issue pants, and the scrubs he kept from his internship at the hospital. He was to be the doctor. He also left me our parents' dreams for him. I pick them up. But I knew then that I was insufficient.

I am now six foot four to his six foot seven inches. No longer his little brother. His head hangs heavy beneath a crown of matted hair. Married. A father. An artist. He paints repetitive images of anatomies. Masculine, sinuous blacks, browns, blues. He writes letters. His letters come once a year ushered in or followed closely by his birthday, October 18th. In them he seems to say, "I am still alive. I believe in Jah." But I can't understand his hand. His letters are twisted to imagine calligraphy rather than the alphabet we were taught at Our Lady of Fatima. And more, the repetition of I and I, etched Haile, incised Selassie, ranted Jah and raving Rasta Fari confuse me. And I begin to see them as symbols, scratched angrily onto a page. They are intended to tell me that I am deluded. I have chosen the path that could only lead me to Babylon. And upon arriving, cause I will be foolish enough to arrive, I will be crushed by the mighty hand of the almighty Jah.

Most recently he questioned my audacity. He asked, "How could you walk across that campus, after I was treated so unfairly?" He does not realize that time has passed while I became a man, old enough to be the father of the runaway boy he was. Old enough to choose that campus. He never asked how often I wondered to myself, "What a torture it must have been for a 17 year old boy, barely three years in a new country, to walk the hackey sac strewn lawns." But he never asked me.

Nor does he ask about the street I travel or the names I have had to wipe from my dignity. He has not seen the hate in the eyes found on Castro, the Bijou, or the IRT, past Grand Central at 9 am on Wednesday. He does not know that moment when hate intersects ecstasy. I mean that happens to you, too? Right? There have always been men. He does not know the paths of Fort Greene Park, Butler Library nor Safeway supermarket after 11pm, any night of the week. He's never seen the fear seeping from the silhouette that approaches; nor heard their pleas, "don't kill me when I turn my back","don't walk away" nor, "anything."

Instead he asks me to choose between Baldwin and Cleaver. To think that he believes that these are options, adds insult to ignorance. And it occurs to me that if I were forced to choose between the two, I would rather die making revolutionary the act of inscribing my freedom to fuck than scraping cocaine residue from the walls of a glass tunnel that leads away from the revolution. There have always been men. Men who want me to choose among forefathers, my multiple selves, manhood, possession and control.

There have always been men that cannot hear me scream. Cannot hear the break voice into their phoned voices, "I do not want to have to discuss these issues with my daughter. She is too young for these things." Men who think because they say "You are not a father. Maybe then you would understand" that I will never be or could be one. "Maybe then," I think, "you will understand."

There have always been men. Men who cannot see. Men who cannot hear. Men who carry their shame in sadness. Men who scratch calligraphic images on canvases and men who are my brothers. There are men from whom I've had to walk. And as I do, I make my way home behind the rough-sawn lattice fences erected during the last twenty years of our lives. And twenty years means nothing in comparison to the lives we have already always lived.

Thomas Glave
This Jamaican Family: The Word and Dreams

But now whether or not you accept it, you understand that this is finally the message, delivered by them in shouting silences and stiffened backs whenever you summon the bravery to refer, even obliquely, to *that*: the message, simply, that *that*, as far as they are concerned, doesn't exist in this family; the message that, as true, proud Jamaicans still unmoved by North American and European "foreign" values, they will never reflect on the profundities of who you are in relation to *that*; and that, by now, you should already have developed the good sense (and good taste) to speak with them about other things – about anything but *that*. Speak with them about the more than 1,500 people murdered in Jamaica last year, many of the victims eviscerated by machetes and otherwise butchered – but have the courtesy and common sense not to mention that at least one of those people so brutally killed was both a beloved friend of yours and a political comrade in the fierce struggle *those* people (your people) constantly have to wage for their survival on the island. Speak with them about what the government can or cannot (or will not) do about the terrifying crime rate in Kingston especially, and share their disgust and horror over all of it, but do not—*absolutely* not—allude in any way to the various men-loving men whose throats were ripped open last year, or whose assorted parts were found splattered around the places in which, most commonly, they had lived – their bodies dismembered, the insider gossip went, by men who had known and desired them – men anyone in the know might have known and sometimes seen. Men whose moistened mouths and other parts, before the dismembering, had more than likely traveled over those bodies, inhaled their most intimate scents, and swallowed – the very beginning of the long, slow, so secret journey desired by so many, traveling without care into the realm of *O but now feel me now; yes, and take me in now, and —; yes, and now love me, please, and tell me: tell me how much you want me, how much I am yours. O yes, I am yours.*

Speak with them about the war in Iraq and U.S. savagery there – yes, of course; for you understood long ago that it would always be easier for them to deplore other people's viciousness before examining and correcting their own. Listen to them praise, nearly without end, the church of their choice; hear them ignore your mentions of more "inclusive," homo-friendly churches operating now even in Jamaica (though mainly in Kingston); attend carefully the words of the cousin who reminds the family every chance he gets about the importance of GOD in his life, as steadfastly as he always capitalizes "GOD;" do your best not to hate utterly the cousin who, even though you showed her love and concern during her traumatizing fight with cancer and after her husband's heart attack, now routinely avoids any contact with you because she has finally divined that you are *that way*; and, despite the fact that at least two of them clearly

suspect that you might, as the Victorians would have said, somehow "interfere with" their teen-aged sons, cherish in your deepest heart your elderly country aunt: that highly successful seamstress trained in her craft by your mother and grandmother, who recently heard you speaking on Jamaican radio about homo matters and afterward chatted with you easily enough on the phone; chatted, yes, and even *referred to* the radio interview's content, never once failing to use, in her cracked voice, those same words she had used with you ever since your earliest days on earth: words like *darling*, like *sweetheart*. Maintain faith in that love – in the surprises of generosity and the habit, among some people, of loving broadly, bravely, all-inclusively. It will be a supreme gift, that love, to you perpetually in search of Home, in search of Heart, in search of *Here*: *the place where I can love and be loved*: so you, the frequent traveler—wanderer—will think. *For I must run away from them all from time to time*, you have thought and will think again, *because it hurts too much to be around their denial, hatred, of who and what I am. It hurts, for if they will not/cannot love me,* you have often thought, very afraid, *or can/will love me only on the condition that I somehow become not myself – choke to death part of myself, erase a part, banish to silence and nonbeing that part which they despise – well, but what to do?* (Fear. Anger. And the loneliness. Deeply painful. Yes, admit it.) *Yet here – the place which I know exists somewhere – is where I belong. I will glimpse it clearly sometime in dreams, and know exactly by the feel of its warm, insistent press against me that it is for me. I will know that it is here*.

Recall, do not ever forget any of it – and throughout it all, especially in the harshest moments yet to come, remember the word.

O the word. This word. These. The words that can describe things like the rage you often feel (but don't necessarily express) when treated in those excommunicating, erasing ways by them; the rage which follows the always-hurt and knows, too well, its deepest source. The words that can provide shape to those things like *anger* (hateful); like *sorrow*, like *grief*, like *Jamaica, O, my people* – but also, in the best of moments, like joy. Joy well beyond their grasp and their theft, in the words that recall (in private, in the region of the most protected dreams) the scent and taste of coconut milk on his neck, the lick of white rum trickling along the smooth hairs below his (and where else?), and the arch of his back and glint in his eye when even now, just afterward or before, he moves that way, continuing to gaze upon you as you maneuver, as he prepares, until: these words that, in sorrow, in anger, in grief, in joy, will recollect him and them.

Them: yes, all of them. The ones whom you call the "blood" people: those of DNA, shared genes, facial likenesses, and memories of childhoods spent beneath banana and mango trees; the people of shared surnames that confirm the blood shared between you long after slavery and

emancipation, manifested outwardly, cousin to cousin to grandparent to aunt, in a variety of skin tones. The people whom you can never truly escape – not quite in Jamaica, nor anywhere else – and whom, in spite of everything, you do not yet want, quite, to escape. The people who, in true Jamaican middle-class style, with a few exceptions (such as your country elderly aunt, and one or two more) refuse to discuss with you *the subject*. The people who refuse to acknowledge (and why?) that even in Jamaica, in fact more than ever before in Jamaica, *the subject* looms larger and ever less hidden all about them. Looms in the faces of those whom you recognize and single out as that other family (and thank God for it): the men and women who dance closely, intimately, boldly, at all those private parties held at this house or that one; who kiss, flirt, and entwine their bodies, and even sometimes live together – in Kingston, mostly, although, so far as you know, principally in the more upscale parts of town. The family that, each day, even in Jamaica, steadily appears to become more tired of hiding and feeling compelled to hide: *that* family. The ones without whom, in the face of so much anger and censoring, days and nights in Jamaica these days would be truly intolerable, impossible, and far more threatening to the living, breathing body than they already are. Lately, with the gift of a few good friendships in that family, and with some courage, it becomes more possible to live in Jamaica with the taste of him, or someone else, in your mouth and memory, although—make no mistake—you will always have to live carefully. It becomes more possible, with that other increasingly large and visible family, to live without caring so much what the ones-who-would-deny-and-ostracize think, although you might still send them a Christmas card, still drop by (though less frequently) for a bite of curry goat, a plate of steamed fish and bammy, a drink and innocuous catch-up (without, while in their home, making any references to *that*) on Boxing Day. In this present that rapidly lopes toward another sort of future—a wider, more daring one—family and the "blood" people transpose to something else: to another way of being, seeing, and—so you hope—much less hurt. *Send that hurt across the sea,* murmurs that old bracing voice just beneath your heart, *in an airmail package addressed to Absolutely No One at the farthest end of the spinning globe*. Much less rage. No *You are sick* excommunications with the family of men pressing against men, women holding each other; nor the great trauma of *You do not exist, because you are disgusting*. Nor the old anguish of *You will never fully be a part of this family, because you are one of* them.

Soon, on another day or evening, impelled by the faces and secrets gradually disclosed in dreams brought by sojourns with the word (and grateful for them), you will imagine as follows the shifting portrait that will soon become memory: imagine simply two people driving alongside the sea, beneath nodding palms. Two people aware of each other's mouths, the slide of shoulders beneath soft cotton, and the reliable thrust of longing grasped between trembling hands. Two people driving and dreaming that something quite like joy, and more, just might be possible – knowing this time exactly how it will appear when it descends; two driving alongside the sea,

savoring the dribble-juice of star-apples over the lips, down the chin and over the fingers – but then all at once deeper into *scents inhaled,* into *his face pressed into your* (but that will always be a secret) – into *recollection of every thing both tasted and received that once again soon will move over that other face which, not only in dreams, so quickly becomes mine – our faces both different and the same, and the journeys between them forever and always secret. Here – yes, look at it, fold what you can of yourself around it – is kinship of still another kind.* Two people now driving alongside the sea to stop and step out of the car, to walk upon the beach unseen even by the lean-limbed fishermen in their low boats way out there: unseen as one of you risks doing *that*; as one of you risks making the other, in open daylight, feel *that* and O *that* – and but wait, you both think, for how the sand now sucks away beneath your feet in the retreating tide. How the foam rushes in to swirl and lick, just like that, about your ankles. The foam, swirling . . . now licking higher about the exposed flesh beneath those nodding palms, as the fishermen – as they rock in their small boats upon the sea, as the foam – as a hand dares in open daylight, impossibly, completely possibly, *for here is freedom, here finally is joy*, to rest its palm upon that waist – resting the palm and pressing – wrapping around to feel –

The lean-limbed fishermen, *out there.*

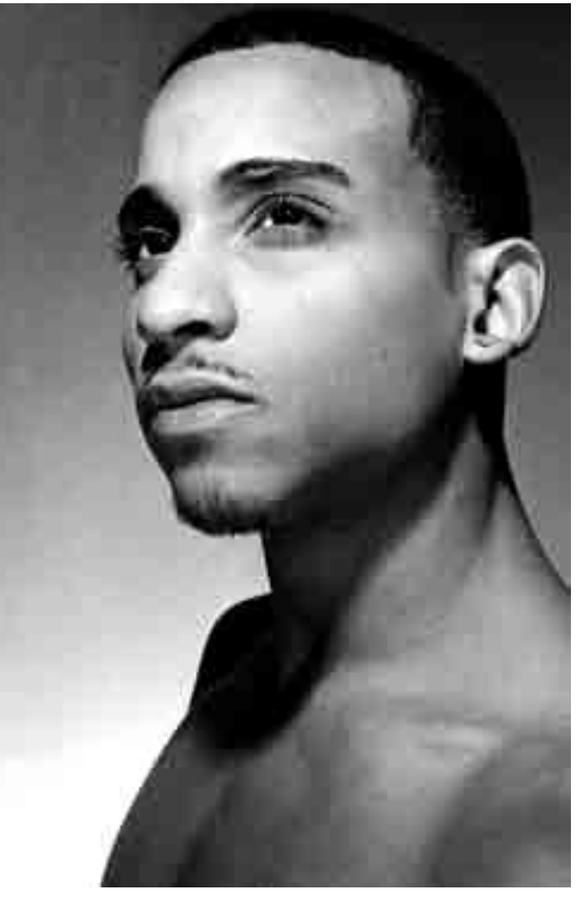
And the sea. Swirling. Now rushing in. Foaming.

Matais Pencil
Love, Pride & Living Transformatively

I am the catcher of breaths. I am the collector of bones. I am the safe house. I am the gatherer of us. I have called them here to this bookstore with my name on it. I have something to tell them. To give them. They fascinate me. They arrive on a daily basis, men and women lured by Audre Lorde sitting in my bookstore window. They see Wagon's Wheel, Tumbling Block and North Star, a hidden message sewn into the books jacket. They think they see a glimpse of freedom, these men and women, menwomen and womenmen, they are prideful. The way they love and how they love is prideful. The others, the ones who have come dressed in a secret, sneak to read the books that speak to the love they need. They sneak the love they want; the love that they know is natural. I see them. I see them excited about an author that they thought was out of print or dead. I see them cry when they recognize themselves in the pages of our poetry or our fiction or our prose. I see them cry when they see themselves, sneaking. "There," I say, "Go and sit with Essex, he will wipe your tears." I am often perplexed when I receive an email from a man or woman that I know is clergy, but they won't mention it in their correspondence to me. They won't mention it for fear that I might recognize them, or that I might recognize the contradiction in what they espouse on Sunday mornings. I might see it as strange that they are buying from a store that sells only black gay and lesbian books. This is our bible now. And hand them Langston. I see them.

I have met them here; the attractive, affluent, well educated, positioned, and traveled ones. Their countless dates, phone calls, text messages, chats, sex meetings, conversations over coffee, emails later, still, adding up to nothing. They are alone. They come in. I recognize them. They are cool, articulate, charismatic, some masculine, others feminine, maybe butch. We lean on tables with Assotto Saint and talk about our love for the books, the literature, authors and the community. We move over to the G. Winston James stack, go on to discuss our love of politics, culture, sports trivia, entertainment, news events, etc. I sit tarot-card-reader like until what is unspoken reveals itself. "I am single", it is by choice, of course. They are looking for love in the books, or maybe looking for answers to why love is eluding them still. Them- loving and sincere like so many of us. I wonder if there is an unspoken conspiracy among us to deny ourselves each other. Pain runs deep and is often disguised in murky, mysterious ways. And when I think about how we love, or how we think we should love, I often wonder are we drawing from empty reservoirs. Reservoirs that should be full of love, but instead they are full of competition and deceit, or lies and unavailable hearts. A sullied heart cannot love. But worst, a sullied heart cannot receive love. A Roy Gonsalves page flips as if in "Amen!"

Growing up in Oakland, I witnessed them. Positive, healthy, same-sex unions. Together for years couples. Loving each other good couples. Loving each other right couples. Those couples were models for me as I strive to make my relationships good and right. I want to love like a black gay man dancing, loosed, unburdened. I want to love like only a lesbian woman can nurture, a Celie and Shug love. When black gay and lesbian people love, it is the most beautiful and tender of revolutions. We cannot die from too much love; but surely from none at all. Steve Corbin whispers "Yes" from the shelf behind me. I want to love too much. I want to love meaningfully, to love real, mighty real. I know when I get to loving, love happens.



There have always been signs in my window. Signs that say it. Speak to it, love and pride, prideful love. They run fiercely through the black gay and lesbian community. When we increased the pride, we increased the love. The dust falls off of Thomas Glave's jacket. What then of pride? What then of an awareness of power; a recognizing that it is intrinsic to being an African American and gay or lesbian. I recognize that homo attraction is good and right and healthy and that we don't need to construct masks any longer. Being unmasked is power. Shame is embarrassing. Shame is shameful. My pride knows that homo-attraction and homo-love informs my being and humanity; it informs my politics and spirituality; it informs where I vacation and what I wear. My pride allows me to create safe places, safe governments, safe churches and safe families that are affirming uplifting and inspiring. It is about being free. It is Monkey's Wrench, Bear Paw and Crossroads sewn in the quilting circle of Bruce Nugent and Zora Neal Hurston. It is coming in; coming into our families; coming into selfhood, coming into power, coming in. My pride is about saying yes to love, saying yes to the universe and knowing that God sanctions our love. I see you. Come In. Be transformed. There are still signs.

I have gathered for you what was left for you. Books leave maps. There is a way to passion, conviction and togetherness. Step this way, through these, my doors and the way is made clear. I want you to see me here. Staying like a love you have looked for all of your life. This is where I start; at home, creating and molding a home life that is nurturing, affirming and one that allows me to face the world with composure. My home, the church and the community are seamless institutions that are all interconnected. They are my passions found, a lifetime of conviction. The walk I talk is transformative. I recognize that "isms" exist even within our black gay and lesbian minds and it requires that I work and do the work that empowers. I invested. I live transformatively. I commit to relationships that model love, acceptance, and courtship. I commit to loving like it is evolutionary; it is my service to you; it is all that is good, great, possible, healthy and smart about black gay and lesbian love. Yes Marlon. Yes Donald. Yes Craig. Yes Assotto. Yes Melvin. We've got to love somebody and there is someone that is worth our love. Find him or her and love them, love right and love them good. We have the power to choose, if not to be chosen. It is written. I see you. And here, from every corner and from every stack, your name is being called. You have never been alone. And every turn of every page is freedom. Is pride. Is yours. Is ours.

Craig Hickman
A Letter to My Birth Mother

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.
They come through you, but not from you…?
You may house their bodies but not their souls,
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
Which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams…
[S]eek not to make them like you.
For life goes not backward nor tarries with yesterday.

—Kahlil Gibran
The Prophet

1

You wouldn't know Jesus Christ if He Entered you. He tried. But you wouldn't let Him inside. Jesus Christ Entered me. And I knew it. I felt it. His Entrance was so forceful, so consuming, just like you, I tried to push him out at first. But my body wouldn't let me. You see, don't you? The spirit is willing, and the flesh is strong. Jesus Christ Entered me so good, so long, so hard, I was finally able to feel Him for who He truly is.

So I left, the hollow rituals, the false virgin prophets, the visionary impersonators, the closeted homophobes, the pedophile preachers, the fools who refused to let Jesus go all the way. I left the prison of dogma alone. Now, when I praise His holy name my whole body trembles with His first divine Entrance. And I let Him Enter me again and again and it gets better and better every single time.

Heaven is found here. So is Hell. Why wait till your body dies to enjoy your salvation? Christ has already come again. If you are so excited about the promise of His second coming, just wait till you experience His third, His fourth, His fifth… If you believe that Jesus would only come, could only come twice, you underestimate Him in all His power and glory, forever and ever. Amen.

4

Before I met you physically, I knew you psychically, I knew you spiritually and you were so much better for me then-Hallelujah!-there-Hallelujah!-in that intangible realm where children of a lesser God fear to tread.

In that intangible realm, you were always with me, giving voice to my creativity. You helped me become what I never thought I could be. All substance and pure fire, you spoke plain language through me, and gave me poetry.

That voice inside was always female; the artistry within was always yours. Putting it all together in RITUALS, you gave me SKIN & ORNAMENTS, THE LANGUAGE OF MIRRORS, and PORTRAITS OF A BLACK QUEEN gone THROUGH THE FIRE.

That voice inside was always female; the artistry within was always yours. You gave me Chaniqua B. Meek, Dessa Rose Flowers, Dolores Jeffers Price, and Vanna Black, troubled women, wise women, powerful women, all of them unafraid to tell the unadulterated unpleasant truth.

But most of all you gave me you. As April Marie Lynette Jones, who weaved stories better than she weaved hair, you spoke volumes to me, volumes through me, helping me become what I never thought I could be. You saved me with poetry.

6

You believe yourself to be the Mother of Mothers, the best of the rest, the kind of mother who knows where all other mothers fail. Oh, how you wish you were there to keep Dante out of my bed, to keep me out of Juneau Park, to pray me straight. No prayers of any mother can be that powerful, for I am exactly who I am created to be.

You believe yourself to be the Mother of Mothers, the best of the rest, the kind of mother who looks down her nose where all other mothers fail. But you are the Mother of Sorrows, the Beginner of Grief, undone by your own machinations.

Like mother, like daughter.

The enemy is within you and it doesn't have horns, breathe fire, or live under the ground. The enemy is in front of you when you look in the mirror, if you look in the mirror, you will see.

The daughters you raised, that beautiful trinity of daughters you raised, is destroyed: all three of them, destroyed, each in their own way, destroyed, all the same, suffocated in the bosom of damnation by what their mother taught them, by what their preachers told them, by what their minds cling to.

What is evil spelled backwards? Turn yourself around and see.

8

You are exactly who you limit yourself to be. So long as you turn your back on your God (and you turned your back long ago), so long as you limit yourself (and you've limited yourself for so long), I have no need for you. What do you need me for? To limit me in the throes of family madness? You already delivered me from the iniquity of that hypocrisy, already saved me from your original sin.

For you so loved me that you gave away your only begotten son and insofar as I believed in myself, my soul would not perish, but have everlasting peace. Therefore, let me go, let me be. Leave me physically, alone. Again.

Without you, I am free.

Without you, I can be with you.

Without you, I remain the God of you, able to be.

Just as I am.

Jason King

Remixing the Closet: The Down Low Way of Knowledge

"Pride on THE DL." Those four words of colossal irony were printed across a flyer I was handed during the summer of 2001. It was an invitation to a hip-hop party for men of color, called Brooklyn Sensation. At the time, the media were in a feeding frenzy over black and Latino MSMs (men who have sex with men) living "on the down low." In refusing to disclose their homosexual adventures to their female partners, these guys were being blamed for skyrocketing HIV rates in communities of color. The homothug had become the new millennium's stealth bisexual, hiding his "true" identity behind a Sean John hoodie.

This panic has created a whole industry of "experts" dishing out advice to straight women who want the real deal on what their men are doing behind closed doors. J.L. King offers lectures like "The Five Personality Types of DL Men" for up to $10,000 a pop. "Being on the DL is being in the closet about your sexual feelings for the same sex," King informed me in a recent interview. "When I hear the word 'closet,' I think it means to hide being gay and in the gay lifestyle." But the "PRIDE ON THE DL" party betrayed these assumptions. Why would undercover brothers want to openly celebrate being in the closet? The journalist in me couldn't resist hopping the 2 train to Brooklyn to find out.

Nobody let the dawgs out that night at Brooklyn Sensation. Instead, "PRIDE ON THE DL" brought out gaggles of flamboyant twentysomethings rocking the latest hip-hop gear, desperately trying to look tough. One petit guy sported a wifebeater that inched up his torso to disclose a pair of Hilfiger boxer shorts and a midriff Scorpion tattoo. The sweat on his powdered brow was held in check by a Fubu headband, and his mustard-colored oversize Timberlands weighed him down like a pair of gravity boots. With his swishy gait and lilting falsetto, this brother was a universe removed from the menacing homothug portrayed in the media.

"I call them thug princesses," says Lewis Nicholson, editor of Glamma magazine. "Even the voguing queens are now wearing their pants dropped off their ass, and they're claiming to be hard." Nicholson claims that such surreal scenes are becoming commonplace at DL parties and thug clubs across the country. A perusal of HX produced the following options for Gay Pride week: Thug Passion (named for the drink), Thugs4thugs, Erotic Fight Club (featuring "muscle thugs, escorts, DL playas, hoodlums, and wrestling in oil . . . men of color only!") – and those are just the sex parties.

On his self-distributed debut EP, *The Notorious Homothug*, TruDawg raps about a day in the DL life over a house music beat. A self-proclaimed SGL (same gender loving) rapper who calls himself "out and proud," TruDawg (Anthony Truly) has a day job as a fitness instructor, and he's bared it all in the gay porn rags. TruDawg uses the homothug label as a marketing tool, a way to get over. But open up the CD and you'll find an X-rated photo of TruDawg demonstrating the safest way to put on a condom. Rapping about homothugs is a way for him to save lives rather than sermonize.

If there's a DL community today, it's the result of this sort of brazen marketing. In the late 1980s, a group called A1BlackElite launched Bla-tino, a hugely popular series of sex parties thrown in secluded locations across the East Coast. Bla-tino's street-promo strategy targeted men who wouldn't otherwise fraternize at gay-identified clubs: "ruffnecks, barriboyboyz, thugs, popichulos, shortys, manchismos, brolic mutherfuckers, 'n your neighbor. (sic)" The door policy rejected fats, femmes, and anyone sporting an "AIDS look." Implicit in this rhetoric was the fear of effeminacy, a terror that bubbles under the surface of epithets like faggot. This intense ambivalence about the visible signs of gayness is part and parcel of DL culture. Undercover guys strive to be unclockable: undetectable.

In the wake of parties like Courvoisier Urban Thug Night, this ambition has become more like an ironic pose. Guys who call themselves incognitos, playas, real nikkas, thug bottoms, and pretty thugs fill online chat rooms to maximum capacity. These men are advertising their DL status. Nicholson finds such a contradiction hard to swallow. "Once you start putting thugs' faces all over billboards, it's no longer down low," he says. "People in Atlanta have begun to refer to DL as Dick Lovers."

Living on the down low is not new. Working-class and poor MSMs of color have always had to be low-key about their sexual preference, since they haven't had the same access to the safety nets that exist for white and middle-class men. But calling yourself DL—a term popularized in the 1990s in the presumably heterosexual lyrics of performers like TLC and R. Kelly—has become a way for some black men to admit they like guys without resorting to words like gay, bisexual, or queer.

Some men on the DL are true hardcore thugs who might rob you or do whatever it is that real thugs are supposed to do. But DL parties suggest that that many hip-hop-identified MSMs, even the most flaming ones or those who don't sleep with women, are rejecting classic identities in favor of simply coming out as "undercover" – despite the ambivalence and irony that underlie that strategy.

In the narrative of the closet that's dominated the gay movement since the late 1960s, men are supposed to be full of self-loathing about their secret sexuality until they emerge into the public like fluttering butterflies or strutting peacocks. But DL offers a new-school remix of the old-school closet, an improvisation on the coming-out narrative that imagines a low-key way of being in the world.

For some DL men, there is no "gay" essence to reveal, or a bisexual or straight one, for that matter. They may oscillate between male and female partners, but it would be a mistake to call such a brother a closeted bisexual, since it would imply that underneath the veil he's settled on a stable gender identity. DL is not an identity but a performance. It may even be working toward that elusive phenomenon hip-hop heads call "flow." Flow is when the MC locks his rapping into a groove, bringing the performance to a rhythmic, surging sense of balance.

Bernard Jones, owner of FreakDawg Productions, a black gay adult-entertainment company, notes that he's "seeing more people who just completely defy any category of sexuality. One of the models I work with is not hard, he's not soft, he's not effeminate, he's not thuggish. He likes men, he likes women, he's about to have a daughter, loves to be fucked, and plays with dildos. He's clearly someone who flows across a spectrum of sexuality and gender."

Kelvin, a middle-class friend of mine, has always had a penchant for hip-hop. He's been openly gay to his family and co-workers for some time. But several years ago he discovered that he could disguise his identity and meet self-professed thugs in online chat rooms. So he began the process of coming out for a second time, as DL. Kelvin would lose the suit and tie and don Rocawear lounge suits, and he began to grow cornrows. He'd break into ebonics and deepen his voice into a Barry White basso profundo when chatting on the phone with other "thugs." In arguments, Kelvin called me "bourgie" while insisting he was keeping it "ghetto." He stopped hanging out in queer-identified spaces and events, and opted for more anonymous venues popular among the DL crowd: sex parties, subway platforms, parks, and darkened clubs.

Unlike the traditional closet narrative, where men are in isolation, DL brothers tend to be relatively open about their sexuality—if only to each other—but under the radar. Creeping is not the same as being invisible.

Creeping on the down low, besides being rough on the knees, is high-maintenance work. But it often has a social end. For Kelvin, being on the DL became an elaborate drag show to "get in the door," to meet and hook up with other hip-hop-identified guys he wouldn't likely

encounter otherwise. Weeks into developing a relationship with a fellow "thug," Kelvin would drop the thug patina and become "himself," shedding the hip-hop gear and phony accent around his new friend. In most cases, the revelation seemed to cause no harm to the relationship.

Dressing up in campy thug gear would seem to deflate the original impulse to be undercover. But it's a strategy that often makes sense for MSMs trying to carve out space in hip-hop culture. There are few opportunities for such brothers to meet. At a time when homo-panic crimes like the recent beating of a gay man at Morehouse College are all too common, playing at being a thug may also be an important way for some MSMs of color to simply stay alive.

José Esteban Muñoz, author of Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics, notes, "We are so used to white masculinity setting the standard for the closet. Now when we talk about it in relation to communities of color, it's not so much about the single man on a subway; it's about a network of men who recognize each other as DL, and they have this new concept or word to describe it that isn't the closet. It's a way of projecting out a bunch of likes and dislikes, a code of the way you experience the world in relationship to desire and sexuality."

By equating extreme visibility with power, the gay movement manufactured a one-size-fits-all model for coming out. This tribal identity may have suited the politics of its time, but it left little room for folks to improvise and personalize. Hip-hop offers a new model, based on the recognition that a song can be riffed into many recombinant possibilities. DL's immense popularity suggests that a new generation is remixing the pride agenda.

Whether they pass as playas, blend into the skateboard scene, or live by critic Mark Simpson's concept of the "metrosexual"—a low-key, urban gent more likely to identify as a shopaholic than a gay man—young people of every race and class are responding to something in the air. It may seem like a retrenchment—and in some ways, it is—but their demand for self-determination extends a core value in gay liberation. Will the movement acknowledge the rap at the door?

David J. Malebranche

One In Three

A few years ago, the CDC reported that "one out of every three" black men who have sex with men (MSM) are HIV positive. Since I am a physician who happens to be both black and homosexual, I belong to this "risk group." For me, getting a HIV test is a yearly ritual – it's something many black MSM do as a byproduct of the fear embedded in our psyches for simply being who we are.

During my latest doctor's visit, I had my blood drawn, and was told to return for my test results in a week. I left with the usual amount of anxiety that accompanies an HIV test, keenly aware of my "risk group" status. One week later, I returned to the clinic, and after waiting for what seemed to be 2 hours (though in reality, only 30 minutes), a nurse informed me that my test results had not yet returned.

Physicians make horrible patients. Either we dismiss physical symptoms altogether, or we give ourselves the most serious diagnosis possible. If we urinate frequently, it's diabetes, a mole is a melanoma, a persistent cough, tuberculosis. I work at an HIV clinic, so I know that HIV serum antibody tests are actually a series of 3 tests (two Elisa and one Western Blot). If the first Elisa is negative, the result will be in the computer within 2 days. After a week, if the results are not in, it's likely that the first Elisa is positive, and the lab is confirming the diagnosis with the second Elisa and Western Blot. Knowing this and being told my HIV test is pending after a week is not a good thing. But the nurse shrugged her shoulders and just smiled at me.

"Why don't you come back in a couple days? It should be ready by then," she said.

"Well, it's been a week, and it shouldn't be longer unless something's wrong, right?"

"Unfortunately we don't have the results yet. I'm sorry."

I left with a polite "thank you." At home, I revisited my sexual experiences from the past year, including my inconsistent condom use. I looked for rashes, lymph nodes, examining every crevice of my body for anything suggesting HIV infection. I found nothing, but the CDC says I'm "at risk" for who I am, and in my heart I know *I'm at risk for what I've done*. Could I become the next "one in three" statistic on the pages of medical journals and media headlines? I can see it now – the HIV doctor who couldn't practice what he preached.

Two days passed, and I returned to the doctor's office for my test results. In the waiting room, I hope I have the nurse I spoke to before. She has a benevolent demeanor that puts you at ease like you're home with your mama. "Mr. Malebranche," a loud voice beckons, and another nurse, heavier in weight and attitude, brings me into a cold examining room and leaves. It is 10 am.

Five minutes later, she returns and hands me a paper.

"You're negative. Everything looks good."

I see the syphilis test result – "*Non-reactive*." Good. Further down, the HIV antibody test – "*In laboratory*." I choke on my own breath.

"What about the HIV test?" I ask.

"It's negative," she says flatly.

"No it's not. It's still in the laboratory. Why isn't it back yet?"

She takes the paper from me and looks at it.

"You're right. Why don't you come back in a couple of days? It should be back then."

A couple of days? Again? My blood boils as I try to remain calm despite the nonchalant style in which she is providing me HIV test counseling. I can't be the stereotypical angry black man – not now.

"Ma'am, I'm a physician. I do work with HIV. I know what it means when an HIV test takes a long time to come back. Could you call the lab to find out please?"

Half recognizing my fear and half annoyed by my insistence, she reluctantly exits. My mind remains on one horrific thought – this is it, *I'm HIV positive*. Despite knowing HIV is not a "death sentence," that cliché is more difficult to swallow when talking about my own HIV status. I look at the clock – 10:10 am. I think about my friends who are HIV positive whom I will call first for support. 10:20 am. How will I tell my family? Parents aren't supposed to bury their children.

10:30 am. I need to tell my recent sexual partners so they can get tested as well. 10:40 am. Beads of sweat trickle down my forehead as my heart beats out of my chest – so this is what a panic attack feels like. 10:55 am. The nurse with the benevolent demeanor enters, and I can't remember ever being so happy to see a familiar face in my entire life. She smiles at me.

"Hey, you were here the other day for your test results. You get them yet?"

"No, but one of the other nurses left me here at 10 o'clock to check on my HIV test – it's still listed as 'In laboratory.'"

"Do you remember the nurse's name?"

"No, but she's heavy-set."

She looks at me curiously. Something's wrong.

"What is it?"

"Well, we only have one 'heavy-set' nurse here, and she just went on her lunch break."

"She went on lunch break?!"

"Yeah. Listen baby, I'll go check on those results for you myself. I'll be right back."

I'm furious. How does a medical professional take a lunch break and leave a patient waiting on HIV results, especially when the patient is a physician who has explained his anxiety to her? Maybe she has no idea of my belonging to a "risk group" or inconsistent condom use, and thus didn't prioritize my test results over her eating. And if fellow medical personnel receive this kind of treatment, how does she treat other patients? My body is numb. This is it – *I'm HIV positive*.

11 am. After a full hour in that sterile examining room, the benevolent nurse returns.

"The lab faxed the results, I just have to get one of the doctors to sign off on it, and you can go home."

As thankful as I was, the benevolent nurse was missing the most important part of this whole interaction.

"The results?!!" I say impatiently.

"Oh, it's negative."

She hands me a paper, which shakes in my trembling hand. Below my name, next to "HIV antibody test," it now says "*Negative*." I start crying.

"Why was it still listed as 'In laboratory' if it was negative?"

"I don't know honey, these things happen. I'm sorry you were put through this."

"That's OK." I'm lying to her – I wasn't "OK." I hand the paper back to her, wiping the tears from my eyes.

"Could you please make a copy of this for me?" I need written confirmation of the bullet I just dodged.

"No problem."

As she leaves, I want to take out my frustration on the nurse who deserted me, but that would be displaced. She didn't put me at risk for HIV, I did. Maybe being a black homosexual man isn't my real HIV "risk group," but being a physician is. We often advise our patients on engaging in "healthy behaviors," yet we smoke tobacco and drink alcohol frequently, have poor nutritional habits, and have unprotected sex like we are immune to disease ourselves. A colleague of mine recently informally surveyed several medical professionals regarding HIV testing practices. She found that many have unprotected sex, but the only ones testing routinely were homosexual men and pregnant women. She asked me, "Does our status affect us knowing our status?"

I also realized that proper HIV testing and counseling practices among medical personnel are obviously lacking. People often do not obtain HIV tests due to previous negative medical experiences and fear of the testing process. Now I see why. So if our approach to HIV testing and counseling discourages people from getting tested, individuals and communities continue to have unprotected sex, and the epidemic continues.

The benevolent nurse returns with a copy of my test results.

"I hope this doesn't prevent you from coming back here for your next test."

I know that I will never go back to that office again. I'm too emotionally drained to wait for "lunch break" nurse to return and chastise her in person. A life awaits me where my status as a physician or a black homosexual man doesn't influence my HIV risk assessment, but rather encourages me to engage in safer sex and get tested based on my behavioral risk. I step outside to a glorious summer morning, no longer fooling myself about my risk of contracting a disease simply because of who I am.

One in three? Not if I have anything to say about it.

Khary Polk
Glass Blowing

-For Philip Huang

We were leaving a place that no longer exists, reminiscing about a bar that had recently closed. I wondered why the measure of love was loss in this city.

"I don't follow you," Ricky said, beginning the game of touching my arm as we moved north on Seventh Avenue South, walking towards a late-night pizza joint.

"It's the first line of a novel by Jeannette Winterson. 'Why is the measure of love loss?' I didn't understand it at first, but I think it means you don't know what you got till it's gone."

"Oh. Like Joni Mitchell," he said.

"Exactly."

I brushed back, keeping my hand away from his. I wanted a bit of friction, too, but I wasn't ready to handhold. Though I had never met Ricky before tonight, I knew him from Wonderbar, the East Village dive whose closure we were both lamenting. It was the only bar in New York that ever felt like home to me. Its multi-culti caste of dudes and chicks reminded me of my life growing up as an Air Force brat, where every kid I knew was mixed with something or another. Ricky partied there all the time. He was taller than your average fag; I remember watching him stick out in the bar's dank interior, even using him like a lighthouse to navigate the sea of bodies packing the spot. He caught me clocking him a few times, but neither of us took the extra step to exchange names. I always figured I'd meet him maxing among the Andres and Big Bois at Wonderbar, crunk under Bill Coleman's poly-genre groove. Instead, we met earlier that evening at Bar d'O during a book party for the first volume of Think Again. I contributed an essay to the collection and came out to support the fete. Meeting Ricky there made me think again about all we had lost with the closing of Wonderbar; and what we might do to recapture those memories in the meanwhile.

I guess he felt it, too. We drank and talked, talked and drank until it was clear we both wanted to spend the night together. Drunk and hungry, we bade Bar d'O adieu and headed out into the November air, giddy as schoolboys in love. By the time we sat down to eat, our game of grab-

ass had petered into silly innuendos and knee rubs under the table. I wolfed my pizza down. Turned my slices to breadsticks in a matter of minutes.

We were almost ready to leave when Ricky's eyes changed. Something was up.

"Khary, I want you to know. I'm positive."

I stopped, and in that brief pause a host of memories flooded my mind. I had forgotten about Paul, the curator of a Frank Lloyd Wright house I'd met my first summer at Oberlin. Like many a Negro before me, I had run north to Oberlin in search of certain freedoms. The night I went drinking with Paul and Micah I felt so alive in my own pursuit of happiness, so fresh and so free. We closed three bars in the city limits before heading back to the Wright estate, lounging within the modern wonder of wood and brick. Porn came on and our clothes came off; soon the three of us were naked, our bodies interlocking like the fretwork of the redwood ceiling. We even moved our play outside for a time, and the boy who had led a life sheltered by the barbwire fences of his military childhood was fucking two men on a tree-lined lawn, protected only by the shadow of night.

The next day, I ran into Micah at the first bar we'd crawled. He pulled me aside and quietly asked whether I had known that Paul was HIV positive. I had no idea. "Well it should be ok, we used condoms," he said, and I went back to my dorm room and began to cry. I was sure I'd been infected. I wondered why my first taste of freedom should come at so high a price. I held fast to this anxiety for years, folding it into my very character, always afraid an HIV test would confirm the worst of my fears: that black boys were the expendable subjects of social engineering. The most modern of creatures, we were the sacraments of a New World Order those sacrificed so that others might live.

Four years later I found out I was a bone marrow match with a sixteen year-old girl battling leukemia in Cleveland. Though I had no memory of ever registering—gay men are barred from giving blood, after all—the National Marrow Donor Program had tracked me down in New York City. They hoped I'd agree to become a marrow donor for the girl. Of course I would. Problem was, I knew the blood center would ask me whether I'd ever had sex with a man, or whether I'd ever had sex with a woman who had sex with a man. A "yes" to either question would mark my marrow ineligible for harvesting. They asked. I said "no" on both counts. I knew they'd test my blood.

The staff at the New York Blood Center kept telling me what a hero I was for donating bone marrow. They showed me photographs of firefighters who had given marrow transplants, pointing out the three who died on 9/11. You all are heroes, they said to me as they drew my blood for infectious disease screenings. You make us proud. Was this living my life on the down low, submerging the most salient part of myself in the service of a greater good? How many people had done the same thing? I spent the next week on edge, thinking about the girl whose body had mumped its way to 250lbs during chemo. My ability to save her life depended upon the history of my sex, the fitness of my blood. She paced the waiting room of my thoughts, stopping only to watch daytime TV, listening to a wise Oprah tell America to hide her little girls because Bigger Thomas is back! Willie Horton is back! Nushawn Williams is back! Magic Johnson is back! Eazy E is back! And girlllllll, don't be no fool now. Don't be no fool, baby girl; he will end your vagina monologue if you let him.

The results came by priority mail. I was too afraid to open the envelope. My breathing went shallow. I called up the center and asked them how my blood work went. A center rep told me they looked pretty good.

"But what about the AIDS test?" I asked.

"You passed that, too."

The woman heard the relief in my voice. She asked me why I was worried.

*

Leaving the pizzeria, Ricky and I took a cab back to his apartment in Fort Greene. We made out in the back seat the whole time, oblivious to the driver's eyes as we crossed the Manhattan Bridge into Brooklyn. When the cab pulled up to Ricky's building we were more than ready to head indoors. He paid the fare and led me up the steps to his brownstone walk-up. Inside, we began to undress, letting our layers pile upon the floor, shedding our skin on our way to the bed.

We kissed for a time, and my lips grew sensitive from the rasp of his beard. I made my way down his body and took his length into my mouth. It was a Cinderella fit. Ricky nudged the back of my throat with every thrust. There was no gagging, however; I'd grown gills. I pivoted, and soon his head was at my crotch, matching me stroke for stroke. The seesaw of our rhythm shook the bed.

Ricky rolled me upright. I wanted so badly to earn his trust. My legs were open; I could feel him loitering just outside my ass. His lips parted and pursed above me; a line of spittle fell from his

mouth and landed into mine, hitting the back of my throat. I coughed. Ricky waited, and lowered another soft, clear jewel into my mouth, the saliva cool and congealed as blown glass—I swallowed.

And I realized two things:

That to love anything was to risk its loss. And that risk, itself, is the oddest barometer of love.

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Jason King teaches classes on record producing, hip-hop and r&b at The Clive Davis Department of Recorded Music at NYU. He also works as a playwright, director, performer, songwriter, vocal arranger and cultural critic for magazines like Vibe, The Village Voice, and Blender. He has two forthcoming book projects: *Blue Magic: Spirit and Energy in Black Popular Music* (Duke University Press) and an alternative history of hip-hop.

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Khary Polk reads and writes in New York City in the doctoral program in American Studies at NYU. He lives in Brooklyn, next to the building where Christopher Wallace (a.k.a. The Notorious B.I.G.) grew up. The fact that Biggie's building just went condo (with an asking price of $450,000 per apartment) and countless numbers of gay bars and clubs have lost their leases due to the forces of gentrification are the material realities that helped shape "Glass Blowing." Khary's piece is also inspired by the work of Berkeley-based writer Philip Huang, particularly his story "You" published in *Corpus* (Vol. 2 No. 1, Winter 2004), edited by Jaime Cortez.

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Colin Robinson is a Trinidadian immigrant and Brooklyn resident who straddles an ethnic and cultural identity with the Caribbean, where he spent his entire childhood and adolescence, and a sexual identity developed in political and expressive community with other Black, Gay men and queer people of color in New York City, where he has lived his entire adult life, much of it illegally. His work is no less fragmented: currently Executive Director of the New York State Black Gay Network, where he created the 2003 publication *Think Again,* he has served as director of prevention and of community partnerships at GMHC, field producer for Marlon Riggs's 1989 film *Tongues Untied,* and editor and administrator for *Other Countries*.

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Marvin K. White, author of two LAMBDA Literary Award nominated collections of poetry, *Nothin' Ugly Fly* (Redbone Press 2004) and *Last Rights* (Redbone Press 2004) is a poet, performer, playwright, visual artist as well as a community arts organizer. He is a former member of the critically and theatrically acclaimed PomoAfroHomos. His poetry has been anthologized in *The Road Before Us*, *My Brothers Keeper*, *Things Shaped in Passing*, *Sojourner*, *Gents*, *Bad Boys and Barbarians*, *Bum Rush the Page* as well as other local and national publications. He currently holds a fellowship in the national African American poetry organization Cave Canem, sits on the board of Fire and Ink, a national Black LGBT writers organization and conference and has led creative arts and writing workshops from inner-city elementary schools to youth centers for runaway kids to black gay youth support groups. He is co-founder of B/GLAM a Bay Area, a California arts organization dedicated to preserving, incubating and presenting black gay men's arts.

Photographers

Gerard H. Gaskin a native of Trinidad and Tobago earned a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hunter College in 1994. As a freelance Photographer his work is widely published in newspapers and magazines in the United States and abroad including; *The New York Times*, *Newsday*, *Black Enterprise*, *King*, *Teen People*, *Caribbean Beat* and *DownBeat Magazine*. Additional clientele are record companies including; Island, Sony, Def Jam and Mercury Records. Gaskin's photographs have also been featured in solo and group exhibitions across the country and abroad including The Brooklyn Museum, The Queens Museum of Arts, Black Magic Woman Festival in Amsterdam, Holland and Imagenes Havana. His work is represented in the permanent collections of The Museum of the City of New York, The Queensborough Community College Art Gallery and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. His work is also featured in the books *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch* (2005), *Black: A Celebration of A Culture* (2004), *Committed To The Image: Contemporary Black Photographers* (2001), and *New York: A State of Mind* (2000). Gaskin has won many important awards in 2004 Minority Task Force On AIDS Marcel Christian Labeija Award Capturing the Uniqueness of the Ballroom Community and in 2002 he was awarded The New York Foundation for the Arts Artist fellowship for Photography and was part of the Gordon Park's 90 that brought together 90 of the top black photographers in United States to celebrate his 90th Birthday. Gaskin's photographs grace the covers and numerous pages throughout *Tomorrow*. Entitled *10's Across The Board* this series is intended to show the faces of Ball culture in a more personal and intimate way by exposing the beauty, pride, dignity, courage and grace that have been painfully challenged by mainstream society. These portraits were taken between June 2000 and July 2001 all with a 4" X 5" camera shooting Polaroid 55 Black & White Instant sheet film. There will be a book with the same name coming in late 2006. His work can be seen at www.gerardhgaskin.com. **Gaskin's photos appear on pp. Front cover, 4, 18, 23, 30, 34, 39, 52, 64 and back cover.**

Luna Luis Ortiz was born in New York City and studied photography at the School of Visual Arts (New York). He is a member of the Archive Project with Visual AIDS (New York). His work has been included in photography exhibitions at Art In General (New York), Paul Morris Gallery (New York), Thread Waxing Space (New York) and National Arts Club (New York). His installation work has been shown at the Boston Center of the Arts, Seagram Gallery (New York) and the New Museum of Contemporary Art (New York). He has worked along side photographers Nan Goldin and Shedrich Williames and was photo assistant to David LaChappelle. Luna was a featured artist in MTV, VH1, TeleMundo and PBS documentaries in 1994. He is in the permanent collection at the Kresge Art Museum at Michigan State University. His work graced the cover of *SHADE: An Anthology of Fiction of Gay Men of African Descent for Avon Books* (1996) and his work appeared in such publications as *VIBE*, *Blue*, *OUT*, *Contact Sheet 103*, *The New York Times*, *POZ*, *Callaloo*, *HX*, *QV* and *A&U*. He is currently teaching photography at The Hetrick-Martin Institute. Luna is one of the founders of the animation studio, The House of Frame by Frame Fierce and is being featured in a documentary film, about the New York ballroom community, *How Do I Look?*. **Ortiz's photos appear on pp. Inside front cover, viii, 3, 10, 15, 29, 33, 40, 47, 49, 51, 56, 58, 59, 60, 69, 74, 79, 80.**


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