



## Gay Is Not "The New Black"

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Editor's Note

The following is an essay submitted by Maurice L. Tracy, an out African-American man, and a Ph.D student attending Saint Louis University. The Vital VOICE has never published an essay on the front page, and will likely never do so again. In the spirit of Black History Month and in the hope of giving a voice to a population that is given precious little attention in the mainstream media, the African-American media, and even the GLBT media (outside of reporting disease rates and chronicling the "down-low" phenomenon), it is my expressed hope that this essay will spark intelligent discussion within and without the GLBT community. Maurice's opinions are strictly his own and are not necessarily shared nor implicitly sanctioned by the Vital VOICE newspaper.

-Lucas Hudson

### Gay Is Not The New Black

By: Maurice L. Tracy

There is an ever-increasing popular notion and phrase that haunts me: "Gay is the New Black." Thankfully when *The Advocate* used this phrase as the cover story tag for their November 2008 issue they followed it with a question mark, but I wonder, for how many gay Americans is this notion really a question? To apply Elle Woods' feeling about orange being labeled "the new pink," whoever called gay "the new black" is seriously mistaken.

Let me be clear, I see the gay rights struggle as part of the civil rights struggle. To miss that point is to allow the struggle for civil rights to remain fragmented, incomplete, and under the ownership of one particular group and makes that group monolithic in nature---no group is monolithic. The Civil Rights Movement encompasses gay individuals, women, racial minorities, class struggles, citizenship issues, gender identity, and many other varying categories.

In this respect, the Civil Rights Movement is not a black movement or a gay movement but a queer movement. The notions of equality, fairness, and access are not queer values in theory; they are queer values in practice. For most of us equality, fairness, and access to power and mobility comprise the foundation of America. There is no country where this notion has emerged as a lived experience through-out its borders for everyone; and America is no exception. There are only pockets nationally and internationally where this utopian concept can be experienced—(The Village in NYC, Boys Town in Chicago, Castro Street, Manchester in the U.K., etc), and even then only in a limited form.

My quarrel with the idea that "gay is the new black" is that it is insulting to me as a gay black man who is politically, socially, and culturally engaged and active in the (white) gay community, black

community, and gay black community. Gay can never be the new black because first and foremost this phrase does not acknowledge the fact that there are those of us who are already gay AND black. We live within the margins, not because we choose to but because society places us there.

What is labeled as 'black culture' frequently does not acknowledge our homosexuality. Though black culture is not a monolithic entity, generally speaking, it does not overtly accept homosexuality as readily as mainstream (read white) culture, largely due to the proportionally larger role that conservative Christian religion plays in African-American households. This is repeatedly written about in both the mainstream and gay presses. It was also used to blame black Americans for the passage of Proposition 8. Not only were reports of the rate of black Americans supporting Proposition 8 grossly over-exaggerated, it took focus away from the fact that there was also ample support from white voters and Latino voters. There is more than enough blame to go around. **According to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, people who attended church regularly, regardless of race, were the ones who overwhelmingly supported Prop. 8. Therefore, what we have here is not a case of "black homophobia" but religious homophobia.** "Black culture" therefore became an easy target for the lazy individual. The fact is that black culture is homophobic because America is homophobic.

What is not talked about to the same extent as "black homophobia" is that gay culture is just as racist as black culture is overtly homophobic—because America is still a racist country. And yes, I am aware that I am writing this at a time when our president is a man who looks more like me than any other president we have had, but contrary to the hype, the election of President Obama does not signal the dawning of a post-racist America.

The presidential campaigns of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama tell us how obsessed with race and gender we still are as a nation. The majority of the discourse about Clinton's campaign was whether or not America was ready for a female president, if she was feminine enough, or, at times if she was too emotional. The discourse about Obama was almost entirely connected to his body as a black man: was he black enough, would America elect a black man, comparing him to Martin Luther King, would he walk on inauguration day, should there be more security on that day, etc. We are not living in a post-race or post-gender society. I believe we are just starting to scratch the surface on class and sexuality.

To a certain extent, one cannot expect an individual reared in a country where they are repeatedly informed, however passively and/or subliminally, that they are in some way superior to another group of people even if they happen to be homosexual. In fact one might expect that individual to cling ever more closely to this false notion because they have been cast out from the culture in which they were originally nurtured. Since gay racism is rarely if ever addressed, it has allowed gay individuals to view gay culture as devoid of racism and therefore it might seem natural to label gay as "the new black."

Indeed, after a few quick comparisons it may seem like a common-sense proposition that homosexuals have taken the mantle of acceptable bigotry from African-Americans. Once upon a time a black person and white person could not marry; now it is not a person's race that prevents two people from being legally wed but their gender; blacks at one time served in the military under different conditions and pressures than their white counterparts, now gay men and women must serve in the military under different conditions and pressures than their heterosexual counterparts; housing has historically been an issue for both blacks and gays and the list can go on. Yet, I refuse to allow gays to co-opt an identity so frequently discriminated against by gay people.

Take for instance the responses the (white) gay community had to two recent pejoratives hurled by "celebrities"—one homophobic and the other racial. When *Grey's Anatomy* star Isaiah

Washington referred to T.R. Knight as a "faggot" the gay community was justifiably upset. Many gay individuals wanted *Grey's Anatomy* to fire Mr. Washington on the spot. A few months later their wish was granted as Dr. Burke was sent packing in one of the lamest character write-offs in history, and incidentally *Grey's* started to jump the shark only in season what, three? In the process, the previously closeted T.R. Knight became a poster-child for out-and-proud gays who brave the scary heterosexual world populated by bigots now represented by the very previously supportive Isaiah Washington. Yes I wrote supportive Isaiah Washington, because many of us who are black and gay were baffled. The Isaiah we knew was not homophobic; he was an actor who played an out gay black professional man in Spike Lee's *Get on the Bus* —and he did this before *Brokeback* made playing gay the trendy thing to do.

While T.R. made the chat-fest rounds and appeared on the new lesbian queen of nice Ellen DeGeneres' show, many of us were still lacking a clear sense of what happened and what should be done to rectify the situation. Contrast this with the case of *Real World* cast member Davis Mallory, a blonde haired, blue-eyed newly out gay man. The moment this southern Christian popped onto the screen the message boards at mtv.com were set ablaze. Many people could not stop gushing about how "cute" Davis was. Then one day our gay Christian hero picked up the phone and stated "[this] nigger wants to kill me." He was referring to his black roommate, Tyrie Ballard, whom he was in an argument with because earlier in the evening Davis did not defend another black houseguest, Stephen Nichols, when a bartender referred to him with a racial epithet. Was there massive outrage from the mainstream gay community about this incident? No. According to blog posts what seemed to matter most was the fact that Davis was cute.

If these were the only incidents of gay prejudice or the lack of sensitivity and awareness gay culture has in regards to race then I could easily pack up my self-important essay and go home, but unfortunately, these are not the only instances. A Marc Jacobs shirt that was marketed specifically for the Pride 2008 season (I am not aware whether people sported the T-shirt here in St. Louis) featured the Pride Flag emblazoned on the Confederate Flag. When some individuals objected, a frequent response was that it was just about Southern Pride. Doesn't that sound familiar? How many hundreds of politicians have denied gays the right to marry with similar logic? "It is not that we hate you gay people; it is just that it is tradition for a man to marry a woman."

Frequently, white gay people stay silent when the conversation turns to men on the Down Low (DL). They are comfortable to allow the DL man to remain an African-American figure, but I can attest that there have been many white men who frequent certain gay sex establishments with wedding rings on their fingers.

*Queer As Folk*, the supposedly monumental breakthrough for gay visibility did not have a single significant character of color during their entire run. When I brought this up in a chat room years ago, this is the resounding response I received: Be glad that we have a gay television show at all! But "we" did not have a gay television show. For me, and the millions of others who looked similar to me and not at all like Ted, Emmet, Mikey, or Brian, *we* still did not see ourselves represented on television. *We* had not arrived, *our* time had not come---it felt like *we* were still in the back of rainbow bus. *We* had to create our "own" shows, *Noah's ARC* and *The DL Chronicles*, on LOGO and HERE to get any face time or recognition of our existence on television! These shows by necessity have an explicit dedication to portray black gay male life because mainstream gay television does not seem able to conceive of a world where black gay people exist. Sadly parroting *Queer as Folk's* example, *Noah's ARC* and the *DL Chronicles* neglected to portray the lives of black lesbians who are rumored to have their "own" show in the works.

Yet, what makes the call for gay being "the new black" so offensive, are the incidents used to prove this assertion are ripe with gay prejudice at the least, and racism at the worst. In spite of the fact the Mormon Church spent \$25 million dollars to defeat, some groups blamed the defeat on the African American vote. During the Proposition 8 fiasco, Dan Savage was trotted out to numerous media organizations to be the voice for the oppressed gay people of California. Not

once was his polemical column quoted, where he stated: "I'm not sure what to do with this. I'm thrilled that we've just elected our first African-American president. I wept last night. I wept reading the papers this morning. But I can't help but feeling hurt that the love and support aren't mutual. I do know this, though: I'm done pretending that the handful of racist gay white men out there—and they're out there, and I think they're **scum**—are a bigger problem for African Americans, gay and straight, than the huge numbers of homophobic African Americans are for gay Americans, whatever their color." Conveniently, this post was taken down before Mr. Savage made the press rounds. His allegations are not entirely accurate, black people in general did not vote any differently than any other demographic when people stop viewing black people as some monolithic entity and realize the real culprit was conservative religion.

To Mr. Savage, the easy, convenient and popular way out was to scapegoat black individuals, which helped drive a wedge further between gay communities and black communities but also between white gay individuals and black gay individuals. In addition, what does Mr. Savage think it does to the black gay male in regard to aging in a culture that views you primarily as a walking phallus and judges your beauty according to the standards of whiteness? If he really wanted to know, I would simply direct him to certain St. Louis clubs where one can see black gay men only talking to white gay men in a clear search for validation from the "man," or I can direct him to certain clubs where black gay men cling so fiercely to each other, constantly reminding each other that yes indeed, black is beautiful and worth more than a quick internet rendezvous to fulfill some fetish or vague curiosity for something dark and "Nubian." Dan Savage does not care about the affects black homophobia has on black gay people. He clearly does not care about the affects his white gay misunderstanding, prejudice or racism has on black gay people.

The final sin that gay racism commits is it makes gay culture apathetic and through this apathy, gay racism can become deadly. Alternatively, ignoring or paying attention to an epidemic simply because the face of that epidemic is changing is immoral. Blacks and whites, gays and straights all share in this guilty behavior. For heterosexual black communities to finally start addressing AIDS simply because the face of AIDS has become the face of a young black woman is almost unforgivable—what about all those gay black men who died before? For the gay (white) community to put the AIDS pandemic on the political and social backburner and focus on legislation-gay marriage, ENDA, "Don't Ask Don't Tell," etc. when the face of AIDS is now the face of gay black men (and infection rates are rising); well, that is criminal. And yes, the community is turning its back.

Consider the film industry, when AIDS first hit, there were many movies that dealt with the subject and usually starred white gay male characters. Now that the image is shifting, the number of AIDS-themed films are decreasing and the number of gay romantic comedies and tragedies are increasing. When I spoke to one of my white friends about this he said, "Don't you think people are getting burnt out on it? I mean people know what to do, wrap it up, what more can you do?" Now at a time when people who look like me are dying, I do not find AIDS fatigue to be an acceptable reason to turn to respectable heterosexually modeled marriage.

When I speak to many young gay black individuals and realize this is a generation like me who grew up with AIDS, but unlike me they went to high school during the dark ages (aka the Bush Years), and therefore received very little sexual education. Furthermore, what little they did was geared toward heterosexual intercourse. So I say no to my white friend, people are not getting burned out, people are dying and still dying. The only difference, my white friend, is that many of them do not look like you.

I want to say, dear reader, that there is very little joy in this essay for a reason. I cannot apologize for the stridency of my words or for the urgency of my message because the anger I hope you feel pulsating from the page, is one that has been simmering for a while and it is finally starting to boil over for many black gay individuals. Gay will never be "the new black" because it does not respect blackness nor does it embrace blackness. Gay cannot love blackness because it does

not recognize the complexities and variances of blackness and black experiences. Gay does not want to be "the new black," believe me.

I began this article answering the question of whether or not "gay is the new black" with a loud unwavering no, but that is not the reason I wrote this article. For too long the voice of the gay community to America has been blindingly white; for too long the image of black America for gay people has been a heterosexual image--neither community has sought to listen to the voice of those of us who are gay people of color. It is past time that we come out from the margins and ask not just to be heard, but to forcefully, confidently, demand to be listened to. We must be comfortable being a thorn in the side of both communities, never letting either community rest until it joins not a Civil Rights Movement, or Gay Rights Movement, or Women's Rights Movement, but our Queer Movement for true equality, and in order to do that we must first speak for ourselves.