

REPEAT AFTER ME: WE ARE DIFFERENT. WE ARE THE SAME.

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“It is as if people cannot feel they exist except by affirming, with a shudder, that they are different from something that they are against.”¹

The substance of my talk is expressed in its title. As I prepared my notes I realized I was having difficulty because everything I wanted to say has been articulated in such a variety of ways in our history. Long before the Rainbow Coalition took shape during the last presidential election, it was evident that diversity is a strength we need to explore rather than deny. The groups that have poured themselves into the foundation of American society had different views of what that society can and should be. This abundance of perspectives ought to help us formulate solutions to society's problems; instead, it causes destructive frictions. That we are always struggling with stereotypes is not a new idea. Nor is the concept unfamiliar that these sometimes subtle and undramatic battles are the substance of true social change.

An additional problem with this presentation is that it is delivered to a group that is already, for the most part, converted. Those of you who came to hear what I have to say are probably already thinking about these issues. Those who most need to hear my remarks are probably not here. They are not interested in the varied experiences of lesbians and gay men. They are not concerned with the issues of race and class — how they make us different, how they make us the same. Since they are not here, I ask you to be responsible for communicating these issues to those who ought to hear them.

And it is as simple as the title. We are the same and we are different. I am familiar to some of you. I have read my poetry, given speeches, made you laugh or think. I am acceptable because I do not present an immediate challenge to most of you. By virtue of my being on this panel, I have been rendered “safe.” You assume I will do the appropriate things, and all of the gut responses that white, middle-class people have to black women, to black women who grew up on welfare, to black women with dreadlocks, are stifled because I am up here. But make no mistake: we are different — as night and day.

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1. P. GOODMAN, *Underground Writing, 1960*, in *UTOPIAN ESSAYS AND PRACTICAL PROPOSALS* 233 (1962).

I grew up with my great-grandmother who had to make the choice between wearing stockings in the New England winter or allowing me to go to the movies on Saturday morning — my one childhood obsession. This choice was one that many poor parents have had to make, but when you are white and poor, poverty is considered a temporary setback. If you are black and poor, it is considered to be a result of your laziness, or lack of family structure, or domineering mother, or some other inherent inferiority. In other words, you are only getting what you deserve.

This experience has made me different from most of you from the day of my birth. We should not make the common error of equating the black experience with that of immigrants, for most black people in America did not come to the United States as immigrants. That fact is at the core of the conflict between Afro-Americans and Afro-Caribbeans in this country. It has rarely been addressed in public forums on racism and our political structure. When conservatives and, lately, liberals have said “they” should pull themselves up by their bootstraps, they meant me.

In high school, my guidance counselor told my great-grandmother to switch me from the college course to the business course, because in 1963 there was not much hope of sending a poor, colored girl to college. My great-grandmother had been tugging like hell at those mystical bootstraps only to receive these bizarre mixed messages from the so-called authorities who were still under the misconception that I was an immigrant, as their parents had been. They assumed that I, like those who had chosen to come here from Italy, Germany, and Ireland, was here by choice, and that I understood and accepted the rules and the sovereignty of the government that held power over me. But the immigrant’s experience is not mine.

The difference in our experiences has given rise to some of the most despicable words and ideas ever given credence in the Americas: lynching, miscegenation, Ku Klux Klan, “separate but equal,” “nigger.” While each immigrant group has had its share of derogatory names, it has also been true that each, with the possible exception of the Jews, has been able to go on to become accepted as American. Black people have never shared that luxury. No voting rights bill was needed to allow Italian or Irish immigrants the right to vote. It was assumed that underneath it all they were human and intelligent and could be educated to have a part in this society. But we have always been the other, the “negro,” the “black,” but never the American — unless we were hitting a home run or playing jazz in Paris. I have been an outlaw in this country since my birth and the birth of my great-grandmother, who helped to teach me my place even as she hoped desperately that I would grow beyond its boundaries.

Although that experience has stigmatized us and short-circuited our expectations, it has also helped us to develop a magical, insular world that protects us from “them,” or you, as the case may be. Black people in this country have developed a complex system of family relations that has little resem-

blance to the nuclear model that is imposed on Americans. The black middle class would have you believe we are the same; it is just not so. While we have developed a black middle class which emulates the white middle class obsessively, the majority of black people in this country are not in that category and never will be. The statistics on poverty and infant mortality in the black community should make that fact clear.²

Despite these differences, the black family model is every bit as legitimate as the one we used to see on "Father Knows Best." It is a creative hybrid of working-class, ethnic American and African sense-memory. Our families are extended and strong. I have as much loyalty to my "aunt" who worked in the same bar with my father for twenty years, and who took numbers, as any of the Kennedys has for Rose. Our loyalty is as pervasive and enduring as any other community's concept of family loyalty. The black family taught me that we are considered outlaws and that we must support each other in order to survive. It taught me that while we must dissemble, or even lie, to stay out of the sweep of righteous white wrath, we can still be true to one another.

The black family did not teach me the many subtleties of our tenuous position: that we have been so affected by our experience in white America that we often do not know what is true and what is false for black America; that the issue of class intersects with that of race, demanding that we understand those perspectives as well as we do racism. And it certainly never taught me that the issues of sex and sexism are as crucial to the understanding of our "place" in this society as skin color.

"Ultimately blacks in America are prisoners of the American sexual mystique. . . ."³ There have been few more illuminating words for me, and they remain as true today as they were sixteen years ago. We have all heard the myth of the black stud and the negress slut. Yet few of us have really come to terms with what these images meant to our participation in this society after the Civil War. We have concentrated on establishing that blacks should vote, that we can live in the same neighborhood as whites, and that we can be educated. But what have we done to counteract the image that blacks are purely sexual beings? Gunnar Myrdal's 1944 study showed that most whites believed that the highest priority for blacks in our fight for equality was the right to have sex with and marry white people.⁴ Whites believed that economic opportunity was the last of our priorities.⁵

While most of us would smile indulgently at our ancestors' reliance on the mythological figures of the stud and the slut, most of us, meaning Americans (I do think in solidarity with "Americans" at times), have not been able

2. Ladner, *Black Women Face the 21st Century: Major Issues and Problems*, 17 THE BLACK SCHOLAR, Sept.-Oct. 1986, at 16. "While infant mortality rates have declined for the nation as a whole, black rates have remained about twice those of whites and are about the same as they were for whites 20 years ago. (Children's Defense Fund, 1985)." *Id.*

3. D. ALTMAN, *HOMOSEXUAL: OPPRESSION AND LIBERATION* 194 (1971).

4. 1 G. MYRDAL, *AN AMERICAN DILEMMA* 60-61 (1944).

5. *Id.* at 61.

to replace those laughable stereotypes with anything more realistic. Calvin Hernton's analysis of one national myth — of the sanctity of white womanhood — applies inclusively: “[B]ecause this myth is acted upon *as if* it were real both by blacks and whites alike, then it *becomes* real as far as the behavior and sensitivities of those who most encounter it are concerned.”⁶ Blacks in this country have been reduced to our sexual functions. During the period of slavery, those sexual functions were a key to the economic survival of the plantation owner. Blacks were bred like any other livestock. We were bought and sold based on our breeding value. A plantation owner needed a woman to mate with his “black buck,” so he bought a wide-hipped “bitch” to improve his stock.

After slavery, the stereotypical experience that whites had with blacks was often just as remote and mythological: the mammy, whose function was implicitly sexual, *i.e.*, to nurse the children and fulfill all of the wifely duties except sex. This last function could be fulfilled by the whore on the street, most often black. The black man has been pictured as the feared rapist, the mindless laborer, or the powerful brute. Somewhere inside of most Americans (black and white), these stereotypes continue to fester.

Since the Civil War, most black Americans have been striving to overcome this mythology. We, that is to say my foremothers and forefathers, have been pressing our clothes just so, straightening our hair to a sheen, speaking most appropriately, averting our eyes from improper sights, and bolstering the image of the importance of the “family,” so that white people would discard the stereotypes and begin to look upon us as just “regular” human beings. Given that most black people would rather not talk about sex in public (that is, in front of white people) at all, is it any wonder that the gay rights movement leaves the black community trembling with fear and anger? For a people that has spent its entire modern existence in this country trying to shift its identity away from sex to encounter within itself a sub-group which has been totally defined by its sexual preference is both a shock and a threat.

Even for the black gay (and the black community always knows who we are), being black has always been the primary identification. I am afraid it will always be so. Why? Because I have been black all of my life. I have recognized that difference since my first encounter with the rest of the world. I also knew I was gay early, but that was not an issue when I was eight years old. At eight, everything sexual is intense and peculiar. Sexuality does not become an issue until later in life, when one is asked to make sexual decisions. I would guess this observation is true for many black gays. I do not mean that the issue of being gay is less real for blacks. I mean that by the time I learned that being gay was a reality with which I would have to reckon, I was already struggling with another reality — black skin—that was immensely more devastating in my daily life.

6. C. HERNTON, SEX AND RACISM IN AMERICA 7 (1966).

When I go into a store, people see a black person and only incidentally a woman. Being black invalidates even my femaleness. In an Upper West Side apartment building late at night when a white woman refuses to get on an elevator with me, it's because I am black. She sees a mugger as described on the late night news, not another woman as nervous to be out alone as she is.

In a yuppie restaurant, when the bartender insists that the waitress tell me how expensive the Courvoisier is, even though I've just spent \$100 on dinner, I know he is acting out of his perception of me as a black person, not because he sees a woman or a lesbian. It is as clear as the skin on my face.

I can pass as straight, if by some bizarre turn of events I should want to. Or I can pass as a compliant woman who accepts the patriarchal hegemony. But I cannot pass as white in this society. I will forever relate to the world from that perspective, until white people expand their definition of American. When American means Afro-American as well as Italo-American, then maybe black people will be able to break down our own mythology.

We act on our myths as if they were real. Blacks and whites behave as if all of the sexual taboos that we have grown up with are God's law. But the sexual taboos that we adhere to are, in many cases, outdated. Procreation and female fidelity are concepts whose importance is based on the need for the survival of the human race. In 1986, we have world hunger, unemployment, unchecked medical extension of life, and legally binding wills; propagation of the human race is much less relevant. However, black Americans bought the sexual norms just as everyone else did, perhaps even more enthusiastically since they were so important to our acceptance.

The gay rights movement has often stressed the independence of the gay experience. It has been important to our emotional health to separate from biological families because they are often the ones who hurt us while we search for a way to have a meaningful life. But the Civil Rights movement was a family movement. For most Afro-Americans the idea of separating from family is appalling and possibly fatal. The family (not the nuclear thing "they" talk about, but our family as we construct it) is our survival mechanism, and few of us would be willing to relinquish it. It is impossible for us to imagine moving forward without our families.

While the gay movement has made a strong step in the direction of the development of non-traditional families and has pushed for a redefinition more in keeping with the actual world in which we live, most gay activists have not dealt with the importance of coming to terms with the ones who birthed us. Many black gays will obfuscate; they will hedge about their lives and their loves, but they do go home for the holidays. During the 1960s, black people laughed at the hippies, not because of their ideas about sexual liberation and pacifism, but because the hippie movement insisted it could cut itself off from the family. They would live independent of the influence and money of their benefactors. For blacks this was a cruel joke. Even now, it is not easy finding

gays (or leftists, feminists, or nationalists) who will accept that some parts of our past can be a path to the future.

For many blacks today, it is the same cruel joke to hear gay people (defined by the media as white and male) saying they are independent of their past and are creating a new utopia of gayness and liberation. We know that the new world as described in the pages of the *Advocate*, the *New York Native*, and *Christopher Street*⁷ is not so different from that depicted in *New York Magazine*, or the *Village Voice*, or any other mass market publication, gay or straight. The new world is not very different from the old. White men are free to explore new constructs and to break sexual barriers, while we, the blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, and Asians are supposed to tag along like so many Tontos.

Black people cannot be invisible in this society, even if we want to be. Even if I have moved on to the middle class, the welfare patina does not wash off as easily as you might imagine. I still act out of that experience. I understand that the law means one thing for you and another for me — because I am black and because I was poor. Make no mistake about it, in spite of being on this panel here at the great New York University in the great New York City, in my heart, I am that same poor kid trying to look respectable for the welfare worker's visit. Ask Bernadette Powell what it means to be black and poor in this country.⁸ She would tell you it means she can't be the victim of rape or battery. Ask her what she thinks of the difference between the sentence she is serving in jail for killing her abusive husband, and the sentence Jean Harris⁹ is serving. Qualitatively, it is as different as night and day. These differences are the function of class and race in our society. "Equality before the law" means little in the face of these realities.

We needed the Civil Rights Movement to save our lives from lynching and discrimination. The sanction of law was needed to attack institutionalized racism. However, if we examine the lives of the majority of black Americans and see the poverty and segregation in which they still live, we see that the law has not done much good for them. My hope is that the gay rights movement will not make the same mistakes. Our survival depends not so much on the laws that are passed, although they are crucial, but on the attitudes we carry in our hearts and pass along to others.

If black Americans can ever let go of our feeling that we are the supreme victims (a title for which we sadly vie with Native Americans), then maybe we can begin to believe in our own worth and value in this society. If gays can

7. These are "mainstream" gay-oriented publications.

8. Bernadette Powell is a black working-class woman who was convicted in 1979 of killing her abusive husband. Over the course of their marriage, he had beaten her, scalded her, and thrown her down a staircase. She is now serving a sentence of fifteen years to life. See A. JONES, *EVERYDAY DEATH: THE CASE OF BERNADETTE POWELL* (1985).

9. Jean Harris, socialite and former headmistress of an exclusive girls' school, is serving a sentence of fifteen years to life for killing the prominent diet doctor, Herbert Tarnower, in a fit of jealousy and depression. See J. HARRIS, *STRANGER IN TWO WORLDS* (1986).

ever open ourselves to the full struggle for human rights, and not wait for non-whites, the disabled, or women to be in the room before making it an issue, maybe the concept of gay liberation will have the depth of meaning we all think it should. When white gay rights activists begin to look at the struggle from the multiple perspective that black gays cannot avoid, maybe the movement will begin to address the core issues that affect *all* people in this country.

If we can all forget about capturing a piece of the already overextended pie, we might make a change in this society. Gays have not yet decided whether the status quo is worth saving or whether we should be trying to change the entire structure. We need to find a solution to that question quickly. While we here are considerably different from one another, the people who oppress us are rather much the same. They all have the same idea that they know the right way and the correct behavior, and that it is their duty to see that those of us who are not correct stay out of their schools, their neighborhoods, and their homes. And they definitely do not want me to marry their sister!

According to the law, blacks and gays have always been on the outside, so our confrontation is not just with the law but with who we are and what we believe about each other. The issue of sexuality will always be a difficult one in this puritanical culture. For the black population it will be even more so. We, blacks and gays, need to shed our fear of examining our differences. We must acknowledge that the world does not see us in the same way, and what is more important, that we do not see the world in exactly the same way. Only thus can we sustain any meaningful activism and bring about change in our society.

