



The D.L. Phenomenon in the Black Community

By Victor Anderson, PhD

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The Down Low (D.L.) has become a major preoccupation of contemporary black sexual politics and is mostly associated these days with black males. However, this was not always so. The D.L. is sometimes referred to as creeping. Whatever you call it, it has been around for a very long time in songs such as: Bobby Blue Bland's "(If Loving You is Wrong) I Don't Want To Be Right," Billy Paul's "Me and Mrs. Jones", Roberta Flack's "Reverend Lee", TLC's "Creep," Shaggy's "It Wasn't Me," and countless others. There is something revealing about these types of songs. They articulate heterosexual privilege. They celebrate illicit sexual relations among committed straight people (dating, cohabitating, engaged, or married) with other straight people who are either committed or not. Older generations talked about such liaisons euphemistically as "affairs," which were and are the stuff of gossip, innuendo, and whisperings throughout black neighborhoods and churches. However, no one thought of such affairs as unnatural or freaky. They enjoyed the privilege of compulsory heteronormativity.

Compulsory heteronormativity was a term deployed by Adrienne Rich (1994) to suggest that heterosexism does not quite unmask the ways that heterosexual norms are overdetermined

by patriarchy. Even so-called radical white feminists were not free of white male determined sexual norms in regulating their acceptance, mobility, and successes within patriarchal society. For Rich, lesbianism is most compatible with the aims of radical feminist criticism. However, compulsory heteronormativity is also appropriate in discussions of the D.L. phenomenon in black sexual politics. Both black female and male control over their bodies and sexualities are regulated and determined by heterosexual authority and legitimacy. In black sexual politics, compulsory heterosexual norms are doubly maintained both by black patriarchy and matriarchy. In what follows, I propose to view the D.L. phenomenon as the tragic and ironic effect of compulsory heteronormativity in black sexual politics.

Under compulsory heteronormativity, churches are notorious sites of the D.L. phenomenon. Whisperings about deacons, elders, their wives, choir members, trustees, ushers, and ministers all testify to it. Cultural critic, Michael Erick Dyson describes scenarios in which traveling black male pastors and religious leaders will often have as part of their itinerary, sexual affairs. “They travel to church, preach the gospel, meet a woman or women, have sex, return home, go back the next year and do the same. Even ministers who do not travel can roam their congregations, or the congregations of their in-town peers, in search of erotic adventure.” (Dyson, 1996, 104). Womanist ethicist, Marcia Y. Riggs describes a scenario in which a church secretary, begins by admiring her pastor but moves from just working in the church and keeping his appointment book to gradually picking up his laundry and eventually driving him to speaking engagements out of town. The amount of time they spend together fixes them as a couple. Now that she is the Pastor’s girlfriend, he asks her for sex. However, not much time passes before she finds herself competing for the attention of her lover, the pastor: “So much work has to be done, we rarely have time to be close anymore. He leaves messages on my machine about the work

that needs to be done, but he's always running off to some meeting. Sister Coward says Rev. is spending more and more time with Sister Saint. I know that she is trying to say something about their relationship, but I'm not going to listen. The sisters are always talking about Rev. and someone in the congregation." (Riggs, 2003, 34)

However, the contemporary hype over the D.L. in black popular culture has made a shift. It has traveled from straight people creeping with each other to marking *black males who sleep with males (MSM) while sleeping with women*. Much of the interest in the D.L phenomenon was spawned by the novels of E. Lynn Harris, the confessions of J.L. King, public disclosures of Terry Macmillan betrayal, a recent BET documentary on the phenomenon, and more recently Tyler Perry's portrayal of the phenomenon in his production of "For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf," and media coverage in 2010 of allegations against Bishop Eddie Long of Atlanta. Producers of black popular culture script the phenomenon within a climate of blame, victimization, suspicion, betrayal, denial, and distrust. Moreover, they appear to have found rich markets for their commodity, the infamous "D.L. brother."

In an article that I published in 2008, I described black popular imaginations of the D.L. brother as "two-faced" (Anderson, 2008). E. Lynn Harris imagines him as a black upper-middle class, managerial, professional, athletic elite, and simultaneously, a product of sexual pathology. Basil Henderson is Harris's quintessential model. He is the perfect catch for any black woman, a professional sports agent, vying for recognition in the Football Hall of Fame. Beware! He is also a black man without a soul, who preys on sexual victims (males and females). With Basil, nobody (literally) is innocent. Harris concludes Not a Day Goes By without a sinister warning from Basil: "I will issue to all the mothers and fathers out there, Tell your sons and daughters. I'm back, in full form. And I'm out there Roamin'. And switching lanes. . ." (Harris, 2000, 271)

Despite what virtues of work, class status, accomplishments, or professional esteem he may enjoy, in black sexual politics, the D.L. brother is vilified and demonized by the culture that produces and reproduces his existence. Disciplined and punished by compulsory heteronormativity, which polices black sexual politics in black communities, the D.L. brother is judged by his own community as monstrous, sinister, and down-right nasty. While commenting on George Jackson's dictum that "True Niggers Ain't Faggots," Black Queer theorist, E. Patrick Johnson says: "Given the constant surveillance by whites of black bodies within the institution of the family, black heterosexual men in particular have a vested interest in disavowing any dissident sexuality in their quarters. Thus the specter of the black fag haunts the mythic cohesive black heterosexual familial unit." (Johnson, 2003, 37)

So, what is to be done with the D.L. phenomenon in contemporary black sexual politics where black bodies are narrowly constricted on a spectrum from compulsory heteronormativity to homosexuality? The D.L. phenomenon fixes the D.L. brother as the betrayer of black women, pathological liar, predator, quintessential con, and dealer of HIV/AIDS and death in black communities. By any moral accounting, that is an awful lot of blaming, villainizing, and demonizing to transfer onto one black body. However, I would hope that the phenomenon would cause us all seriously to reflect morally (1) on the ways that compulsory heteronormativity distorts and contains the fluidity of black sexuality and practices; (2) that moral reflection would move us toward contemplating sexual ambiguity as a genuine aspect of living in a world constituted by change and move ethical thinking about sexuality beyond the languages of good and evil or natural and unnatural; (3) that ethical reflection may cause us to consider what responsibility and

accountability black communities have for ways in which they, as moral agents, produce and reproduce gender/sexual constructions that govern black sexuality politics.

Serious moral reflections on the D.L. phenomenon along the three ways suggested above may reveal that it represents the internal knots and contradistinctions within black communities themselves, which regulate sexual difference through compulsory heteronormativity. The sites are many: churches and mosques, schools and homes, fraternities and sororities, and other regulatory institutions. Critical moral reflection on compulsory heteronormativity goes a long ways toward moving contemporary discussions of the D.L. phenomenon from the theatre of blame and victimization toward viewing it as a tragic and ironic effect of compulsory heteronormativity in black sexual politics.

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