

Male.Black.Gay

An Article by:

Jamil Akim

So she asked me to write about what I think it means to be a black gay man in America, huh? Black gay man. My thought. Well, damn, where do I start? The social emotional complexities of these three words keep me quite puzzled whenever placing them one after the other. This is my attempt in shedding light on my thoughts of the meaning of, Black...Gay...Man.

It is only fair that I share the contextual lens that influences my thought processes in this writing. First, I am a man. Second, I am black. Third, I believe that sexuality dwell on a spectrum with the poles being the socially constructed normative understanding of heterosexual on the far right and the socially constructed counter culture understanding of homosexual on the far left. I do not believe that anyone is fully far right or fully far left but dwell somewhere in between the two poles. I believe that on the spectrum of sexuality there are a multiplicity of sexualities and definitions that make this topic a layered topic that could be perpetually discussed without ever reaching a final answer or conclusion. Where I lie on this spectrum is slightly under the midpoint between the two poles closer to the side of homosexual (no this does not fall under the label bisexual). I was raised Pentecostal, although I do not subscribe to any particular understanding of God. I am a theologian particularly in the area of issues of human sexuality in western Christianity. I am an actor. I am a lover of love. Though I could go on forever labeling myself, these are the self-defined "labels" I find most pertinent to expose while constructing this piece. Also remember this article is addressing the black male gay experience only.

So, what does it mean to be a black gay man in America? Put on your seatbelt because this will be a bumpy ride. In order to align this identity Black, Gay, Man, within America it is important to alter the order of these words to align them with the order in which the American context teaches us these identities. So for the sake of this piece we will say what it means to be a male, black, gay in America, which provides synchronicity with how most of them or us learn these socially constructed identities within America. Let us begin with introducing how the socially constructed identities of being male, black, and gay are most often introduced.

First. Male. Boy. Blue. Toy trucks. Ninja Turtles. Sports. Don't Cry. Don't feel. Emotions are irrelevant. Breadwinner. Aversion to Fashion. Deep voice. From the inception of our conception most parents when they find out they are having a baby boy begin the process of social wiring of what it means to be a boy, a male, a man. In the most formative years of our lives of childhood we are bombarded with these ideologies and images of masculinity. The first day we are brought home from the hospital we are placed in rooms that reek with ideologies of western masculinity. We are first made aware that boys wear blue, don't cry, don't like pink, don't like Barbie dolls, play sports, are strong, and most importantly LOVE WOMEN and will marry one and have a family of their or our own. The masculine gender role is the first identity that most male black gays are confronted with learning, understanding, and subscribing. The feminine other becomes an aversion that we must all together reject and even dominate.

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Second. Black. Strong. Sexual prowess. Athletic. Potentially violent. Ladies man. Civil Rights. Aversion to academia. Rapper. Singer. Dancer. Artistic. Slang. Being confronted with the stereotypical identities of blackness in America is quite trivial because first, blackness is not homogenous. Second, the stereotypical ideologies of blackness were historically created by white America are still governed and advertised by mediums of white America. These ideologies of blackness often skewed to fit the agenda of white patriarchy are placed on black bodies in order to maintain white social political privilege. Male, Black, Gays when confronted with what it means to be Black could potentially construct quite diverse answers depending upon their or our subjective experience of being black in America. This identity of blackness is quite different than that of the male identity. The identity of being male is monolithically solidified and etched in stone without any form of subjectivity. The identity of blackness though steeped in socially political constructed stereotypes is a subjective reality based on one's personal experience of being black, geographic location, one's knowledge of black history, and the level of embrace of this history. Although, I would contend that the underlying factor of blackness is that of "otherness" to whiteness. In essence, as a black person in America what you do know is you or us are not white and do not receive the access or privilege of white men and women.

Third. Gay. Taboo. Abnormal. Love men. Feminine. Soft. Weak. Light voice. Abomination in God's eyes. HIV/AIDS. Promiscuous. Please do not CHOOSE this lifestyle. Since sex and sexualities have always been difficult conversations to discuss, even heterosexism, the understanding of what it means to be gay dwells in a world of unquestioned homogeneity for most male blacks. As previously stated, I believe that sexuality is a spectrum. I believe that there are multiple identities within the label of gay. Although being gay is more than just a man who is physically or sexually attracted to men, most often male black gays are confined to this definition of gay. They or I like men sexually; therefore, they or I must be gay.

Now that we have generally defined the introduction of these socially constructed identities within America let's get into the interesting discussion of what does it mean to be a male black gay in America? I contend that to be a male black gay in America is to be in a constant state of identity crisis and negotiation. I contend that it means that they or us are in a perpetual state of constructing and reconstructing who they or we are. I contend that being a male black gay in America one most often is able to identify with one or two of the social construction of the previously stated identities but rarely if ever all three. This then causes a perpetual state of cognitive dissonance thus creating conscious or subconscious compensations or over compensations. I contend that being a male black gay is perpetually navigating a triple consciousness of masculinity, blackness, and gayness. I contend that being a black male gay is perpetually navigating double marginalization. Marginalized within America for being black. Marginalized within America and the black community for being gay.

So, why do I say this? It is rare to find one who has fully integrated being male, black, and gay without compensating or over compensating in one or two of these areas to fill a painful psycho-social void created by marginalization. Let us dig into this deeper. First, let

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us talk about the one who embraces being stereotypically male and black but still solidifying their understanding of what it means to be gay. This is seen quite often. The following are some examples of this identity negotiation. Married but having sexual affairs secretly with men. This also plays out with the male black gay who is not in the closet, but proclaims, "I'm not gay I'm just a regular man who loves men". Or, we have all seen this one, the "homo-thug" with the fitted cap and timberland boots on, "the trade", or "I'm a total top", masc. for masc. Another, form of this is the black athlete that is stimulated by the homoeroticism of locker room play with the boyfriend or boy-toy secretly or not so secretly on the side. The minister who has a slew of "armor-bearers", which is one of the oldest forms of pederasty. These are all examples of male black gays that embrace and attempt to integrate male and black stereotypical or normative identities but somehow still negotiating what it means to be gay.

Second, let's talk about the one who embraces the male and gay but somehow is lacking in the area of the embracing of blackness. Being a musical theater performer, I have seen this scenario play out quite often. The assimilationist aiming for white acceptance who has only dated white men, has all white friends, and thrives on being the token black face. I have seen this male black gay deny their blackness by claiming to be creole or mixed raced or Dominican or Puerto Rican as though this exempts them or us from being black. This male black gay that is negotiating his blackness often makes the claim that they are colorblind, have "never" really experienced discrimination, and definitely feels more comfortable around white or other races of people than they do black people because being black is an identity that they shun or have not quite figured out.

Third, the male black gay that has accepted the identities of black and gay but troubled with the identity of what it means to be male. This often plays out in the over-compensation of stereotypical masculinity or the opposite extreme of the over-compensation of stereotypical femininity. Overall the result is the creation of MASKulinity. In essence, they or I do not know how to live out being a man so the creation of this mask serves as a supplement.

So, what about the one who has not quite negotiated any of these identities and feel at odds with being male black and gay. In this case we either meet someone who lives a life of over-compensations and or fraudulence in every aspect of life, or potentially one who is at risk of potentially taking his own life as a result of being so far disconnected from himself and the world around him to where he finds no purpose in living a life void of self-understanding and self-acceptance.

So back to the main question, what do I feel it means to be a male black gay? I feel that the meaning is found in being okay with living in the tensions of not always knowing. I feel the meaning is found with living in the perpetual state of identity negotiations yet knowing that these negotiations are the lessons of life's journey that will only make you or us more of who God designed you or us to be. I believe that by experiencing and shaving away what is not, you ironically find what is. I believe that being a male black gay means that you do live a life rooted in pain, rejection, social marginalization but that pain when used as such is

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a seed that house the potentiality of greatness unparalleled to any other. It is through pain and necessity that creativity and invention are catalyzed. This is why some of the greatest movements, literature, performance and fine art, fashion, and scientific discovery find its roots in the hearts, minds and lives of male black gays. I believe that being a male black gay if you do the work to fully integrate these modes of being result in an added strength and social political awareness that serves as the bedrock to our social political structures. I believe that your meaning and our meaning is not found in over compensation of false realities and image but most affective when we are fully integrated as male, black, and gay perpetually living in the tensions of what these words have meant, currently do mean, which influences what these words will be for the generation to follow.