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BLACK ON BLACK
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BLACK ON BLACK:
ON OUR RESILIENCE AND BRILLIANCE
IN AMERICA

DANIEL BLACK

AUTHOR OF *DON'T CRY FOR ME*

DANIEL BLACK

ke to the streets with our bullhorns and
ty and shout, scream, protest, and fight
s words, the arc of the universe bends
This we *can* do.
see us.

DYING TO BE LOVED

Public health officials wonder why black men are still contracting HIV in disproportionately high numbers. The Centers for Disease Control reported, in 2019, that “black people account for a higher proportion of new HIV diagnoses compared to other races and ethnicities.” Black gay men are, by far, the most affected in this group. In fact, more than 9000 black men contracted HIV in 2019, while only 5805 white men and 7820 Hispanic/Latino men discovered their positive status. The real scare is that black men are only 6 percent of the US population. Now, unless we assume black gay men unintelligent, we must believe something is amiss here. I have very close friends in the HIV prevention field who shake their heads whenever we broach this subject. They know, of course, that stigma, unawareness of one’s status, and hesitance around PrEP all play a role, but perhaps there’s another variable, too, something invisible that many of us haven’t considered.

— This is painful to write and even more painful to

admit, but I think many young black gay men are *willing* to die—if it's the only way to be loved without limits. That's right. They've negotiated with death and they're clear on the terms. One could even say they've *decided* to die in order to be touched fully and freely in this life. Most of them know rejection, debasement, and humiliation, in one way or another, so they don't share the American dream of long life filled with children or some existential joy. They simply want to be loved—completely—like every other human being. They want to *make* love freely, without self-chastisement or guilt. However, the world says their intimacy could kill. Yet, unlike for so many of their queer elders, going “untouched” isn't an option. Gay kids today enjoy full-bloomed boldness that, forty years ago, was only a hope. Hence, some risk lives—their own and others'—as they embrace imperfect, undomed bodies, regardless of the cost. Their behavior is certainly liberating. It's also, sometimes, deadly.

Historically, black gay boys have rarely been loved and adored *the way they are*. Many are beaten, by parents and/or homophobes on the streets, with hopes that they'll change, as if their authenticity is somehow personally offensive. Some—far too many—are touched only in reprimand. Parents scold them, preachers pray for them, teachers sneer at them, and they find themselves, at fifteen or twenty, so desperate for love that nothing, including their very lives, is worth not know-

ing it. Many assume a mask of defiance—that disposition that says “FUCK YOU!” to the world—so their hurt won't completely consume them. Others hide in heteronormativity, performing sufficient masculinity so that others leave them alone. And a few swing to the other extreme—living in bars and sex clubs or surviving through sex work. But all of them do *something*. They construct the best world they can, knowing they won't win, but refusing to die without facing the possibility of love. It's a beautiful thing, really. It just costs so much.

When you're taught that your entire existence is an abomination, you stop hoping for certain things. You learn quickly that love is optional for you. Sex will be dirty and defiled and spoken of only in the crudest terms. You will be prayed for incessantly, but never worshipped. Whispered about, but never exalted. God does not like you, others will say, which justifies their hatred, and makes you wonder what went wrong in the womb that even God couldn't fix. Everything about you is a problem: the way you walk, the way you talk, the shape of your body, the way you hold your hands, the timbre of your voice. Young black gay boys discover very early that, if they are to have value in their community, they'd better come up with some other way of being. Most find something. Many escape into the church, which, of course, is ironic since churches often condemn them, although churches also use them—when they need the spirit to move. And in

their young, fragile hearts, this condemnation translates into the belief that they are not lovable—not to the standard majority. So they search for other rejects, like themselves, who *can* love them without concern for their lives.

In the '80s, when AIDS ran rampant in the black gay community, many believed and spoke of the epidemic as God's wrath against sexual deviance. Preachers nationwide shouted unashamedly, "You got to pay for your sins! God is not mocked! A man ain't got no business lying with another man!" They buried sons of the church weekly, warning other boys to "Be men!" the way God intended. Most tried hard. Many even married women, believing, as some had suggested, that *pussy'll change your mind*. Even preachers said this. We heard them. But they were wrong. The only thing marriage did was convince black women that black men were willing to use them, yet again, to hide their disgrace. This was misogyny at its best. It was wrong then. It's still wrong now.

I recall what AIDS did to black men in the '80s and '90s. It drained them of life and happiness. It turned them into community pariahs. It stripped their bodies so angrily that many were left as mere skeletons of their original selves. I had friends who went from 200 pounds to 135 pounds in a matter of weeks. They looked unplugged from life's source: shriveled, withdrawn, bedridden. Relatives hid them away in dark rear rooms and

unashamedly lied about their malady. "Cancer," some said, shaking pitiful heads. Or "Doctors don't know what it is." We weren't told to love them; we were told to shun them. "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner" turned into "God hates the sinner, too." So many died of AIDS during that era that some black gay men simply stopped having sex altogether. They became eunuchs of fear. They'd been made to despise their own desires, to believe that their natural urges were demonic, so they simply stepped into abstinence. This, however, did not make others love them. It simply meant they wouldn't die from *the thing*. That's how people thought of AIDS—as some monstrous epidemic that sought to find and admonish black men for their sissyness, their sexual recalcitrance. We now know better. But then, many black women married masculine-performing gay men and paid for it. In other words, ignorance around homosexuality cost lives in the entire black community. It still does.

Young people today are not quite so fearful. They seem to have less to lose. American culture is more tolerant, more supportive, more nurturing of variant identities than forty years ago, so current LGBTQ millennials take risks once unheard of. This is not to say that being gay is somehow easier than it once was; rather, it's to assert that the contemporary LGBTQ community has far more allies than its predecessor ever did, and therefore black gay boys can consider modes

of being that their elders never conceived of. The decision to love without limits, literally to forego all barriers to the pleasure of the HIV-positive body, is both a declaration of agency and a choice—albeit, perhaps, unwise—not to treat oneself as too diseased to love.

If you're over forty, you remember the emaciated ones, those whom AIDS swallowed whole. You remember the oxygen tanks and white face masks. You couldn't forget the way families sometimes abandoned brothers in stale, dank hospital rooms. You recall that many fathers and mothers wouldn't endure open-casket funerals. They didn't want the shame. We shook our heads. We knew. They knew we knew. But we weren't free to talk about it, to mourn the loss of our sacred brothers. No. Their untimely demise was supposed to function as a warning to the rest of us that Death was on its way to every household where boys refused to be boys. So, hypermasculinity became every boy's burning desire. It wasn't always accessible though. Or believable. Many gay boys were simply too effeminate. But they tried. Some died trying.

The legacy of this epidemic was that black gay boys were taught the ugliness of their desires. They were made to believe that God hates their intimacy. This is a horrible inheritance for any human being—the realization that their affection kills. But this is what happened. This became the narrative for black gay men of the '80s. Since, back then, no one knew who

had HIV until it was too late, a large portion of black men, unlike their more empowered descendants, simply denied themselves the right to love. Or at least to express it. The larger public, it seemed, was delighted that faggots were finally getting their due. Even medical officials were slow to respond to this public health crisis. After all, only sissies were dying. And black sissies at that. White gay men, who certainly experienced discrimination and abuse, were at least socially valued for their whiteness. Yet no one could imagine why a black boy would want to be that way, when simply being black was already hard enough. Some still believe, even today, that people choose to be gay. Yet, for the life of me, I can't conceive why anyone would.

Still, the only way to survive, it seemed then, was through avoidance. Many black gay brothers simply resolved to live out their days alone. Often, mothers kept them close and loved them privately, but even they, many of them, couldn't love them openly. Friends and relatives learned not to ask about their private lives or love interests. If they were alive, people thought, they had avoided the others. There were, of course, bold, stalwart black men like Essex Hemphill and Marlon Riggs who defied the imprisonment of silence, who told the world to kiss their ass if it thought they were going to die in shame. And we loved those men. We exalted them. But most of us were not like them. We were afraid to die in shame, afraid of shaming our

people to death. So we lived—some of us—but now we wonder if dying in our truth might've been better. Our silence did not protect us from public ridicule. It did not make America rethink her toxic homophobia. It did not heal our hearts from fear of death. It did not make hateful people love us. It did not engender dignity or understanding in the heart of the ignorant. Ultimately, it did not save us. No, our silence only prolonged the inevitable confrontation between our potentially free, living selves and the pseudo-freedom we had constructed. We didn't know then what Essex and Marlon knew—that a man will either live free or regret that he didn't.

And that's the point here—that contemporary black gay men won't accept silence anymore. They won't agree to shut up and jack off alone until their dying day. They're insistent about their humanity, resistant to the notion that there is no Heaven for them, even if they enter earlier than most. They have help in places black gay men of the '80s only dreamed of. There are books now—Saeed Jones's *How We Fight for Our Lives*, Hari Ziyad's *Black Boy Out of Time*, George M. Johnson's *All Boys Aren't Blue*, my own *Perfect Peace*, etc., etc.—and movies like *Moonlight* and *B-Boy Blues* and even churches like Atlanta's Vision Cathedral, pastored by a visionary black gay man (and his husband) who celebrate sexual variance in the kingdom of God. None of this was available forty years ago. And if black men

today must die to live their truth and to love without fear, that is precisely what many are prepared to do.

They don't say this. They don't even admit it. It's often a subconscious conviction, a kind of inadvertent decision not to err as their fathers did. They simply refuse the condom. Or reject the meds. Or avoid asking the lover's status. But they know. These are intelligent black men who've had to negotiate worth and communal value most of their lives. They know. It's just not the central question: "Are you positive?" The central question is "Can you love me if I am?" And those who say yes risk it all, knowing full well what that *all* might mean.

Consequently, PrEP hasn't caught on within the black community the way medical officials hoped it would. First, people simply don't die from AIDS the way they once did. The taboo hasn't vanished—that's for sure—but medical advances assure that HIV-positive men don't bear the look of death anymore. Indeed, if a brother takes his meds faithfully, his life expectancy equals that of any other person. So men are not nearly as afraid as they once were. That's one reason being HIV positive and/or spreading the virus is no longer an obsession. Yes, it still kills, but so what? "Black men are dying in the streets anyway," one young brother told me. "So all we want is to love and be loved," he said. "What else really matters?"

Another young man, sitting in my office weeping silently, asked one day, "Where are the old, happy, black gay men?" Our eyes met, but I didn't speak. I couldn't. I had no answer. I could've said, "Here they are!" but I wasn't the age he meant. He was asking for the senior elders, the seventy-five-, eighty-year-olds who had survived AIDS and lived to tell about it. I wanted to assure him they exist, but I didn't know of any. Then I realized the problem: this young brutha couldn't see himself in the future. Neither could I. But I began to wonder... What *does* happen to black gay men as they age? They don't *all* die young, do they? Surely that's not even possible. Wouldn't that be a national disaster?

For his seminal text *Sweet Tea* (2008), scholar E. Patrick Johnson interviewed an old black gay man from New Orleans named George Eagerson or Countess Vivian. At the time, he was grand, flashy, spunky, and ninety-six years old. I'd never heard of this before—a proud black gay man who was practically ancestral. He died in 2012 at age ninety-nine. *But where are the others?* I thought. He can't be the only old black gay man. Yet perhaps he *could* be the oldest *out* black gay man. As I read the interview, Mr. Eagerson morphed into an anomaly in my mind, a sort of cultural dinosaur who had somehow endured. I wanted him or someone to tell me where all the black gay elders had gone.

Countess had no answers. He testified that young black gay men were plentiful in his day. He said,

"There were lots and lots of black gays. They were all over the place!" I frowned. "They're all dead now, of course," he said, which makes sense at ninety-six, yet the answer I seek to ferret out is where do gay men go after sixty? If there are hundreds of thousands of young black gay boys, there should be communities of senior black gay men somewhere. But where?

I asked a friend about this and he said something most remarkable: "They discover the futility of homosexuality and leave that lifestyle altogether. Being fabulous and rebellious is cute at twenty-five, but when a man wakes up at forty-five with no one beside him and no one to call, he accepts what people have been telling him all his life—*there is no future in that way of being*." I almost cried. Not because of the hopelessness, but because of a world that is happy to see these human beings go away. It's as if people think being gay is a fantasy that, at some point, fizzles out. I tried to refute his argument—"black gay men don't simply transmute into heterosexuality over night!"—but I couldn't withstand his recurring question: "Then where are they?"

I discovered, finally, the core of his quandary: he didn't know the utility of LGBTQ folks in a community. He hadn't seen them central to groups of people who *were not* gay. He didn't know why the world needed them. Most of the world doesn't either. But I do. There is no whole, healthy community without gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Truth is, all be-

ings are necessary in a social system. In the groundbreaking book *The Spirit of Intimacy*, Sobonfu Somé explains that, among the Dagara people of traditional West Africa, those with variant sexualities are seen as particularly spiritual. Their sexuality is understood as a sign of their ability to commune with both the visible and the invisible. They are known as *gatekeepers*, she says, because, metaphorically, they stand at the crossroads between the living and the ancestral realms. "We needed them," she admits, "to negotiate for the rest of us concerning things we cannot know or handle."

We also need queer beings because procreation isn't always bodily. Sometimes it's intangible, resulting in things like the end of oppression and the formation of healing institutions. But rest assured there is no communal vitality without the fluidity of difference. Gay brothers and sisters reveal to the world the many manifestations of love, the multiple ways human beings demonstrate God's divinity. LGBTQ spirits assure that answers and solutions to social dilemmas represent the complexity of who we are and what benefits the greatest whole. And queer people exist to divulge the full human capacity for creative genius. There is no artistic tradition without us. No Broadway, no American Music Awards, no Pulitzer Prizes, no MacArthur Geniuses, no Harlem Renaissance, no Black Arts Movement, no Woodstock, and certainly no Coachella. Put simply, American culture would not exist without gay people's

influence. Actually, culture can only be maintained by those tough enough, bold enough, and imaginative enough to disrupt what ordinary folks find acceptable. When we recognize this, we'll also find those old black gay elders, lurking perhaps in an unsatisfying heteronormativity, and we'll free them to be what God sent them to be. Until then, many black gay boys today agree to die because, after the rendezvous of youth, their imaginations fail to reveal any reason to press forward into an unknown tomorrow. We—black folks, America, the Western World—will answer one day for having dismissed the beauty of these sacred souls, and on that day, I hope the whole world is listening when God whispers, very softly, "I'm gay, too."