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Black Macho Revisited: Reflections of a Snap! Queen

Marlon T. Riggs

Negro Faggotry is in fashion.

SNAP!

Turn on your television and camp queens greet you in living color.

SNAP!

Turn to cable and watch America's most bankable modern minstrel expound on getting "fucked in the ass" or his fear of faggots.

SNAP!

Turn off the TV, turn on the radio: Rotund rapper Heavy D, the self-styled "overweight lover MC," expounds on how *his* rap will make you "happy like a faggot in jail." Perhaps to preempt questions about how he would know—one might wonder what kind of "lover" he truly is—, Heavy D reassures us that he's just "extremely intellectual, not bisexual" (*BLK* Mar. 1990: 3).

Jelly-roll SNAP!

Negro Faggotry is in vogue. Madonna commodified it into a commercial hit. Mapplethorpe photographed it, and art galleries drew fire and record crowds in displaying it. Black macho movie characters dis'—or should we say *dish*?—their antagonists with unkind references to it. Indeed references to, and representations of, Negro Faggotry seem a rite of passage among contemporary Black male rappers and filmmakers.

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Snap-swish-and-dish divas have truly arrived, giving Beauty Shop drama at center stage, performing the read-and-snap two-step as they sashay across the movie screen, entertaining us in the castles of our homes—like court jesters, like eunuchs—with their double entendres, their dead-end lusts, and, above all, their relentless hilarity in the face of relentless despair.

Negro Faggotry is the rage! Black Gay Men are not. For in the cinematic and television images of and from Black America as well as the words of music and dialogue which now abound and *seem* to address my life as a Black Gay Man, I am struck repeatedly by the determined, unreasoning, often irrational desire to discredit my claim to Blackness and hence to Black Manhood.

The terrain Black Gay Men navigate in the quest for self and social identity is, to say the least, hostile. What disturbs—no, enrages—me is not so much the obstacles set before me by whites, which history has conditioned me to expect, but the traps and pitfalls planted by my so-called brothers, who because of the same history should know better.

I am a Negro Faggot, if I believe what movies, TV, and rap music say of me. Because of my sexuality, I cannot be Black. A strong, proud, “Afrocentric” Black man is resolutely heterosexual, not *even* bisexual. Hence I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value; indeed it’s a testament to weakness, passivity, the absence of real guts—balls. Hence I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a Black Gay Man because, by the tenets of Black Macho, Black Gay Man is a triple negation. I am consigned, by these tenets, to remain a Negro Faggot. And as such I am game for play, to be used, joked about, put down, beaten, slapped and bashed, not just by illiterate homophobic thugs in the night, but by many of Black American culture’s best and brightest.

In a community where the dozens, signifying, dis’ing, and *dishing* are revered as art forms, I ask myself: What does this obsession with Negro Faggotry signify? What is its significance?

What lies at the heart, I believe, of Black America’s pervasive cultural homophobia is the desperate need for a convenient Other *within* the community, yet not truly *of* the community—an Other on which blame for the chronic identity crises afflicting the Black male psyche can be readily displaced; an indispensable Other that functions as the lowest common denominator of the abject, the baseline of transgression beyond which a Black Man is no longer a man, no longer Black; an essential Other against whom Black men and boys maturing, struggling with self-doubt, anxiety, feelings of political, economic, social, and sexual inade-



Fig. 1. On television's *In Living Color*, Damon Wayans (l.) as Blaine Edwards and David Alan Grier as Antoine Merriweather star as critics with their own public access television show who review great works of art "from a male point of view." Photo by Darius Anthony. © 1990 Fox Broadcasting Company. Reproduced with permission.

quacy—even impotence—can always measure themselves and by comparison seem strong, adept, empowered, superior.

Indeed the representation of Negro Faggotry disturbingly parallels and reinforces America's most entrenched racist constructions around African-American identity. White icons of the past signifying "Blackness" share with contemporary icons of Negro Faggotry a manifest dread of the deviant Other. Behind the Sambo and the Snap! Queen lies a social psyche in torment, a fragile psyche threatened by deviation from its egocentric/ethnocentric construct of self and society. Such a psyche systematically defines the Other's "deviance" by the essential characteristics which make the Other distinct, then invests those differences with intrinsic defect. Hence, Blacks are inferior because they are not white; Black Gays are unnatural because they are not straight. Majority representations of both affirm the view that Blackness and Gayness constitute a fundamental rupture in the order of things, that our very existence is an affront to nature and humanity.

For Black Gay Men, this burden of (mis)representation is compounded. We are saddled by historic caricatures of the Black

Male, now fused with newer notions of the Negro Faggot. The resultant dehumanization is multi-layered, and profound.

What strikes me as most insidious, and paradoxical, is the degree to which popular African-American depictions of us as Black Gay Men so keenly resonate American majority depictions of us, as Black people. Within the Black Gay community, for example, the Snap! contains a multiplicity of coded meanings—as in SNAP! “Got your point!” or SNAP! “Don’t even try it!” or SNAP! “You fierce!” or SNAP! “Get out my face!” or SNAP! “Girlfriend, pleeeeeease.” The Snap! can be as emotionally and politically charged as a clenched fist; can punctuate debate and dialogue like an exclamation point, a comma, an ellipsis; or can altogether negate the need for words among those who are adept at decoding its nuanced meanings.

But the particular appropriation of the Snap! by Hollywood’s Black Pack deflates the gesture into rank caricature. Instead of a symbol of communal expression and, at times, cultural defiance, the Snap! becomes part of a simplistically reductive Negro Faggot identity: It functions as a mere signpost of effeminate, cute, comic homosexuality. Thus robbed of its full political and cultural dimension, the Snap!, in this appropriation, descends to stereotype. Is this any different from the motives and consequences associated with the legendary white dramatist T. D. Rice, who more than 150 years ago appropriated the tattered clothes and dance style of an old crippled Black man, then went on stage and imitated him, thus shaping in the popular American mind an indelible image of Blacks as simplistic and poor yet given, without exception, to “natural” rhythm and happy feet?

A family tree displaying dominant types in the cultural iconography of Black men would show, I believe, an unmistakable line of descent from the Sambo to the Snap! Queen and, in parallel lineage, from the Brute Negro to the AIDS-infected Black Homo/Con/Rapist. What the members of this pantheon share is an extreme displacement and distortion of sexuality. In Sambo and the Snap! Queen, sexuality is repressed, arrested. Laughter, levity, and a certain childlike disposition cement their mutual status as comic eunuchs. Their alter egos, the Brute Black and the Homo/Con, are but psychosocial projections of an otherwise tamed sexuality run amuck—bestial, promiscuous, pathological.

Contemporary proponents of Black Macho thus converge with D. W. Griffith in their cultural practice, deploying similar devices toward similarly dehumanizing ends. In their constructions of “unnatural” sexual aggression, the infamous chase scene in *Birth*

of a Nation and the homophobic jail rap—or should I say attempted rape?—in Reginald and Warrington Hudlin's *House Party* display a striking aesthetic kinship.

The resonances go deeper.

Pseudo-scientific discourse fused with popular icons of race in late-nineteenth-century America to project a social fantasy of Black men, not simply as sexual demons, but as intrinsically corrupt. Diseased, promiscuous, destructive—of self and others—, our fundamental nature, it was widely assumed, would lead us to extinction.

Against this historical backdrop consider the highly popular comedy routines of Eddie Murphy, which unite Negro Faggotry and "Herpes Simplex 10"—and AIDS—into an indivisible modern icon of sexual terrorism. Rap artists and music videos resonate this perception, fomenting a social psychology that blames the *victim* for his degradation and death.

The prime-time fag pantomimes, camp queens as culture critics, and the proliferating bit-part swish-and-dish divas who, like ubiquitous Black maids and butlers in fifties' Hollywood films, move along the edges of the frame, seldom at the center, manifest the persistent psychosocial impulse toward control, displacement, and marginalization of the Black Gay Other. This impulse, in many respects, is no different than the phobic, distorted projections which motivated blackface minstrelsy.

This is the irony: There are more Black male filmmakers and rap artists than ever, yet their works display a persistently narrow, even monolithic, construction of Black male identity.

"You have to understand something," explained Professor Griff of the controversial and highly popular rap group Public Enemy, in an interview. "In knowing and understanding black history, African history, there's not a word in any African language which describes homosexual, y' understand what I'm saying? You would like to make them part of the community, but that's something brand new to black people" (*Melody Maker*, 31 Mar. 1990). Thus Black Macho appropriates African history—or, rather, a deeply reductive, mythologized view of African history—to rationalize homophobia. Pseudo-academic claims of "Afrocentricity" have now become a popular invocation when Black Macho is pressed to defend its essentialist vision of the race. An inheritance from Black Cultural Nationalism of the late sixties, and Negritude before that, today's Afrocentrism, as popularly theorized, premises an historical narrative which runs thus: Before the white man came, African men were strong, noble protectors, providers, and warriors for their families and tribes. In precolo-

nial Africa, men were truly men. And women . . . were women. Nobody was lesbian. Nobody was feminist. Nobody was gay.

This distortion of history, though severe, has its seductions. Given the increasingly besieged state of Black men in America, and the nation's historic subversion of an affirming Black identity, it is no wonder that a community would turn to pre-Diasporan history for metaphors of empowerment. But the embrace of the African warrior ideal—strong, protective, impassive, patriarchal—has set us down a perilous road of cultural and spiritual redemption, and distorted or altogether eliminated from the historical record the multiplicity of identities around color, gender, sexuality, and class which inform the African and African-American experience.

It is to me supremely revealing that, in Black Macho's popular appropriation of Malcolm X (in movies, music, rap videos), it is consistently Malcolm *before* Mecca—the militant, macho, “by any means necessary” Malcolm—who is quoted and idolized, not Malcolm *after* Mecca, when he became more critical of himself and exclusivist Nation of Islam tenets, and embraced a broader, multicultural perspective on nationalist identity.

By the tenets of Black Macho, true masculinity admits little or no space for self-interrogation or multiple subjectivities around race. Black Macho prescribes an inflexible ideal: Strong Black men—“Afrocentric” Black men—don't flinch, don't weaken, don't take blame or shit, take charge, step to when challenged, and defend themselves without pause for self-doubt. Against this warrior model of masculinity, Black Macho counterpoises the emasculated Other: the Other as punk, sissy, Negro Faggot, a status with which any man, not just those who in fact are gay, can be branded should he deviate from rigidly prescribed codes of hypermasculine conduct.

“When I say Gamma, you say Fag. Gamma.” “Fag.” “Gamma.” “Fag.” In the conflict between the frat boys and the “fellas” in Spike Lee's *School Daze*, verbal fag-bashing becomes the weapon of choice in the fellas' contest for male domination. In this regard Lee's movie not only resonates a poisonous dynamic in contemporary Black male relations, but worse, Lee glorifies it. Spike Lee and others like him count on the complicit silence of those who know better, who know the truth of their own lives as well as the diverse truths which inform the total Black experience.

Notice is served.

Our silence has ended.

SNAP!