Black Gay Men and White Gay Men: A Less Than Perfect Union

Liberal and nationalist politics has consistently been imagined as a union between black and white men. However, I challenge the idea that masculine sameness is, should be, or can be the basis for equality and justice. In a racist state, “white tribalism” has always been a force for cohesiveness more powerful than masculine sameness.¹

Progressive Politics and the Myth of Masculine Sameness

The union of black and white men is a myth both old and persistent. In a superb essay, the historian John Saillant located this union in the very origins of the American republic. In the latter part of the eighteenth century, several white male abolitionists in their fictions depicted homoerotic unions between black and white men to show their fundamental sameness and hence the equality of African American and white men. When white men depicted in vivid detail the beauty and desirability of the black man’s body, the purpose, Saillant states, was to use “physical equality to hint of political equality, while homoeroticism hinted of the likeness and benevolence that might join black and white.”²

In the twentieth century, this idea of masculine sameness as the basis for equality has been propelled into our consciousness by a white-dominated media. In literally scores of Hollywood films and television movies, black and white men discover that they are essentially the same. Benjamin DeMott has called this enactment of interracial masculine sameness a “friendship orthodoxy,” and in Hollywood film, it is a prevailing force for bringing about peace, harmony, and justice.

Clearly, the friendship orthodoxy is the underlying guide for the movies that made Sidney Poitier one of the top ten box office attractions of the 1960s. In movies like The Defiant Ones, In the Heat of the Night, and Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner, an always
dignified Poitier played a black friend so loyal that even the most hardened racist men
came to love and respect him. Since Poitier’s box office reign, it has become a Holly-
wood truism that every African American male who has gained box office appeal has
had to demonstrate at some point in his career that he can play the friend of a white
man. Of course, the opposite is not true. The box office success of white male actors
does not depend on their demonstrating a capacity for friendship with an African
American male. White males who do play friends of African American males in Holly-
wood films seem to gain a certain appeal as good “liberals.” However, being per-
ceived as a good liberal has never constituted the sole criteria for employing white
actors in Hollywood. No white actor’s box office appeal depends solely on playing
a friend to an African American, but every black actor’s appeal seems to depend on
being perceived as friendly to white men on film.

Although I have focused on film thus far, and its representation of white/black male
friendship, the same can be said of the early philosophy of gay liberation, in which
masculine sameness was a guiding principle. Some have argued, for instance, that the
baths represented gay democracy at work. According to this view, all desires were
equal in the baths. But what may have happened in the baths was not carried out in
the streets. Despite this belief in equality and democracy, gay gentrification of neigh-
borhoods throughout the United States has been mostly a white phenomenon.

New Orleans is an example. In a miniversion of the greatest creation of wealth the
history of the world has ever known, when millions of white Americans after World
War II were given access to government-subsidized real estate ownership, a similar
case, on a much smaller scale, occurred among white gay men in the 1970s in the city
of laissez le bon temps rouler. Through a network of white gay men’s relations and
friendships, as well as connections to the political system of the city, the Faubourg
Marigny was gentrified. White gay men of different social extractions—profession-
als, artists, small businessmen, shop assistants, and even waiters—were capable of
pulling important resources from the city and the state. Black gay men, however,
were not invited to participate in this process. The result was that white gay men
became owners of real estate that almost instantly became highly desirable, thus
establishing them among the solid middle class of New Orleans. I will come back to
this case later in this essay.

Gay White Men, Gentrification, and the
Exclusion of Black Gay Men

Since Foucault’s claim that the “homosexual” is a creation of the nineteenth century,
many scholars working in a variety of fields have examined the relationship between gay
identity and societal forces. One of the most influential works to follow Foucault’s
claim was John D’Emilio’s essay “Capitalism and Gay Identity.” D’Emilio argued
that it was only by the second half of the nineteenth century, “when individuals began
to make their living through wage labor, instead of as parts of an interdependent
family unit, [that it] was . . . possible for homosexual desire to coalesce into a personal identity—an identity based on the ability to remain outside the heterosexual family and to construct a personal life based on attraction to one's own sex."

The relationship between economics and gay identity that D'Emilio outlined has attracted the attention of numerous scholars. In 1994 the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies of the City University of New York sponsored a conference on the subject. Many of the essays were later gathered in the collection *Homo Economics: Capitalism, Community, and Lesbian and Gay Life*. Two of those essays paid attention to the formation of gay communities. Jeffrey Escoffier outlined an economic history of gay communities since World War II that included what he called the "Territorial Economy" of the late 1970s, which was "marked by the spread of gentrification and neighborhood development." As Escoffier suggests, gay neighborhoods not only meant the presence of bars, retail establishments, and political organizations, but the extremely important factor of home ownership, the most significant means for accumulating capital in the American post–World War II economy.

The second study in *Homo Economics* that treats gay communities is Lawrence Knopp's "Gentrification and Gay Neighborhood Formation in New Orleans: A Case Study." In this essay, Knopp provides much critically needed information about the history and methods by which one gay neighborhood developed. Knopp's study is important because it challenges the usual myths about gay neighborhood formation. According to these myths, gay men fleeing oppression in small towns across North America moved to cities like New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, and Toronto. There, thanks to the anonymity of the city and the ability to derive an income apart from a family structure, gay men found more tolerant environs and affordable housing in the inner cities. Once established, these gays, mostly men, initiated community renewal projects. Knopp's study of gentrification in New Orleans provides a sophisticated examination of the formation of a contemporary gay neighborhood.

I am particularly intrigued by Knopp's study because I grew up, attended school and college, and worked in New Orleans. Having come out as a gay man in New Orleans, I was familiar, and sometime intimately so, with some of the occupants in the neighborhood and surrounding environs Knopp described. In the critique of Knopp's study that follows, I make two points. First, I keep the issue of race in focus by noting consistently that this gay neighborhood was almost exclusively white. Second, I indicate a contemporary so-called progressive scholar's inability to account for the role of racism in gay neighborhood formation.

Knopp focused on gentrification in the Faubourg Marigny, a small but densely populated area adjacent to New Orleans's famous French Quarter. Knopp attributes gentrification of the Faubourg Marigny to three events: "the movement of a small number of predominantly gay middle-class professionals to Marigny during the 1960s"; "a movement for historic preservation in the neighborhood, organized primarily by gay men"; and "the arrival of speculators and developers, who again were mostly gay, in the mid-to-late 1970s" (47). Whiteness (and concomitantly the exclusion of black men and to some extent lesbians) mattered in all three events.
Regarding the first of Knopp’s list of events that led to the neighborhood’s gentrification, the gay middle-class professionals who moved to the Faubourg Marigny in the 1960s were men hired to work at the newly created University of New Orleans. Knopp does not identify them racially, but race matters here. Whiteness was an implicit criterion for employment at the University of New Orleans. The UNO was founded in 1958, while segregation was still legal, as Louisiana State University at New Orleans; until the late 1980s, most black professionals in higher education did not get jobs at University of New Orleans. Instead, most African Americans employed in higher education in New Orleans worked at one of the city’s three historically black universities—Dillard University, Southern University of New Orleans, or Xavier University.

Race was also a significant reason these early gentrifiers selected the Faubourg Marigny.

Knopp speculates that the gay professionals preferred the Faubourg because its multicultural social history “made it easy for liberal whites to settle there without feeling that they were applying racist standards in their decisions” (49). Knopp notes that these men preferred the Faubourg because they enjoyed the neighborhood’s proximity to the French Quarter and its gay institutions, and because they rejected living in the more heterosexual family-oriented suburbs sprouting up near the University of New Orleans. The Faubourg’s multiracial history included its being a nineteenth-century community of free people of color and, during the late 1960s, being primarily composed of Irish and Italian whites fleeing to the white suburbs because of the immigration of African Americans. While Knopp’s speculation about liberal white attitudes may have some validity, I think it is important to keep in mind that a confluence of racial and economic issues may have been as important as not appearing racist. These professionals selected the Faubourg because it was not the adjacent predominantly African American Treme neighborhood. Although the Treme neighborhood was comparable in style to the Faubourg, it also contained a housing project and a population of African Americans considerably less well-off economically than those in the white ethnic working-class Faubourg. Given the city’s historical racial discrimination in bank lending practices as well as in the insurance industry, I am sure that it made more economic sense to buy property in a neighborhood that was marked by the Federal Housing Administration as white ethnic rather than black.7

Concerning the second in Knopp’s series of gentrifying events, by emphasizing historical preservation, white gays joined their interests to those of the white elite. Historical preservation has a long history in New Orleans that is very much associated with the local elite. The Vieux Carre Commission, which regulated development in the French Quarter, was established by members of the local elite in 1936. The initiator of the movement was a white gay architect who lived part of the year in San Francisco’s gay Castro. According to Knopp, this architect purchased property in the Faubourg in 1971 and used his connections with other, presumably white, middle- and upper-class gay men to encourage gay gentrification of the Faubourg. These men created the Faubourg Marigny Improvement Association, and they emphasized historic preservation. The FMIA cultivated its members’ connections with city officials, most notably the city
planning commission, successfully lobbied the mayor and city council for land use regulations, and held candidate forums at election time. The success of the FMIA had notable consequences beneficial to middle- and upper-class whites. Local politicians and new zoning regulations made historical preservation a priority in the Faubourg, with the very practical result that bank financing and insurance became easier to get.

Knopp’s third-listed event concerned the speculators and developers who really brought about the gay gentrification of the Faubourg with their focus on developing a market for all kinds of housing in the neighborhood among gays. Brokers encouraged “as much in-migration, home-ownership, and renovation in Marigny as was humanly possible, regardless of the in-migrant’s class status” (53). The targets were white gays who were middle and upper class, as well as those employed in the low-wage service sector. For instance, one gay real estate broker made aggressive efforts among young, low-wage, gay service-sector workers from the French Quarter who would otherwise not have had access to the housing market. I know from personal experience that most of these young gay men were white, because most of the workers at the bars, restaurants, and shops were white. When I lived in New Orleans, it was a truism that the gay service sector never hired black men and seldom any other men of color. The bars were especially notorious for hiring white men and for excluding black men from entrance.8

In order for gay in-migration to occur, it was necessary to develop, Knopp states, “the social and economic potential of the gay community” (53). Actually, the resources of the gay community melded with those of the white banking community. One real estate firm used a series of maneuvers, many of which were illegal, to help members of the local gay community to secure financing for virtually the entire purchase price of the home (53–54). The consequence was that white gay men, regardless of social class, received access to housing and the wealth that accrues from home ownership, and that black gay men were systematically excluded from participating.

Instead of a rigorous exploration of race as a factor in gay culture, Knopp’s explanations seem flimsy. The gay neighborhood in Knopp’s study was overwhelmingly white and male, but Knopp gives the following extremely weak explanation for this racial composition:

Gay identity in the United States is skewed in terms of class, race, and gender, i.e., that while homosexual desire and behaviors are multiclass and multiracial phenomena involving both women and men, the self-identification of individuals as gay is more of a white, male, and middle-class phenomenon. This is because it is easier, economically and otherwise, for middle-class white males to identify and live as openly gay people than it is for women, non-whites, and non-middle-class people. (46)

This explanation is a cop-out, even though white gays often proffer one like it. For instance, the entry “Ghetto” in Steve Hogan and Lee Hudson’s recently published Completely Queer: The Gay and Lesbian Encyclopedia contains the following remark: “A distinctive factor of black lesbian and gay life has been that a higher percentage of African American lesbians and gay men live outside gay and lesbian ghettos than their
white counterparts. Statements such as these by Knopp or by Hogan and Hudson fail to consider perspectives, testimonies, and theoretical writings that call attention to the ways in which white identities, including those of gay whites, are maintained by excluding people of color. Marlon Riggs called attention to this exclusion in his epic documentary film *Tongues Untied* when he announced that he was leaving San Francisco’s legendary Castro because he discovered that

In this great gay mecca,
I was an invisible man, still
I had no shadow, no substance.
No history, no place.
No reflection.
I was an alien, unseen, and seen, unwanted.

Brian Freeman, an African American and a founder of the performance group Pomo Afro Homo, confirmed Riggs’s observations in the 1997 documentary *The Castro*. The testimony of Riggs and Freeman calls our attention to the galling hypocrisy implicit in a progressive rhetoric that loudly proclaims that homosexuality is “multiclass” and “multiracial” except in the very communities in which people openly construct and live gay lives.

Scholarship such as Knopp’s, while progressive in sexuality issues, is dismally conservative in race issues. This type of scholarship does not consider, on the one hand, that race has a history among gay people and, on the other, that gay people exist in a racist society.

The history of race among gays must account for what the sociologist Patricia Hill Collins calls “controlling images” of black gay men. The significance of these controlling images is twofold. They are far from humanizing representations, and they serve as guides that may influence policies and other forms of public decision making. Hill Collins notes, for example, how public policymakers continually evoke the controlling image of black women as wanton, libidinous jezebels in the ongoing welfare debates. In another example, the legal scholar Regina Austin has sketched quite powerfully how the jezebel image figures prominently in juridical decisions that negatively impact black women. The public image of black women has a correlate in its image of black gay men.

Arguably, the dominant culture’s most powerful controlling image of black gay men is “the impostor.” In numerous works, particularly dramatic works for both the stage and film, urbane black gay men populate narratives of revelation. The sole purpose of these narratives appears to be the discovery by whites of the black gay man as fraudulent, as an impostor. The prototype for the black gay impostor is Shirley Clarke’s documentary *A Portrait of Jason*. At the beginning of *A Portrait of Jason*, the eponymous protagonist appears to be an elegant and witty dandy. Jason wears thick glasses, a blue blazer, and beige slacks. As the film progresses we witness Clarke supplying Jason with drugs and alcohol. By the conclusion of the film, we see Jason as a pathetic hustler and a con artist.
In the cult classic *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, Antonio Fargas plays Bernstein, the only black person in a group of 1950s bohemians. Continually, the white Greenwich Village bohemians speculate about Bernstein’s social origins; by the film’s conclusion, it is revealed that he grew up in the housing projects. In John Guare’s award-winning play and subsequent film *Six Degrees of Separation*, a “Black imposter intrudes on a white family by pretending to be a college chum of their son’s.”

Paul, the black imposter, who also pretends to be the son of Sidney Poitier, is revealed as a gay con and professional hustler.

In the hit film *The Crying Game*, Dil, the black female love interest, turns out to be a male. The thrill of the documentary *Paris Is Burning* was “realness,” how well poor and marginalized black and Latino gay men could convincingly pass as women, professionals, and students. In the landmark drama *The Boys in the Band*, Bernard plays a black friend to a group of witty and articulate white gay men. By the drama’s conclusion, we learn that his mother is a domestic worker for a rich white family in Detroit and that Bernard still carries a torch for the son of his mother’s employer.

This controlling image of the black gay man as imposter sharply contrasts with the image that gay men have cultivated since the 1920s. In *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World*, George Chauncey astutely observed that middle-class gay men in the period of 1920–1940 used a highly mannered and ambiguous sophistication to differentiate themselves from working-class fairies and the stigma that accompanied them. Chauncey states, “While the [more often working-class] fairy intended his style to mark him as a sexual invert, however, the [more often middle-class] queer intended his style to deflect such suspicions.”

Scholars studying the material origins of gayness must begin to examine the ways that controlling images such as the black gay man as imposter function. I suspect that when white gay men in New Orleans emphasized historic preservation as a bridge between themselves and New Orleans’s white elite, they also played out the controlling image of the imposter to exclude black gay men.

White-oriented researchers of gay neighborhood formation must also acknowledge that racist policies that have regulated housing in this country affect gays, too. When gays form neighborhoods, they participate in economic institutions that for decades have been openly hostile to African Americans and many other people of color. The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) is a notable case.

Begun in 1934 to stop bank foreclosures on home mortgages, the FHA began the discriminatory practice of redlining. Appraisers took maps of cities and assigned areas in them colors ranging from green as the most desirable to red as the least desirable for FHA loans. Racially mixed neighborhoods or those tilting toward black were redlined; those in white suburbs were assigned green colors. The FHA’s most basic sentiment was that racial segregation was necessary to maintain property values. The FHA’s *Underwriting Manual* openly stated that “if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes,” and recommended that “subdivision regulations and suitable restrictive covenants” were the best way to ensure neighborhood stability. Although
restrictive covenants were declared illegal in 1948, the practice of racial segregation in housing continued. Levittown in Long Island was typical of the effect of racial segregation. Begun after World War II as a mass-scale suburb, by 1960 not one of its 82,000 residents was an African American.

Not only was the state hostile to African Americans, but the banking industry was, as well. Banks routinely denied African Americans access to mortgage money. In a 1991 study of 6.4 million home mortgage applications, the Federal Reserve concluded that bank lending practices were racist. Some of the findings are startling. The poorest white applicant was more likely to get a loan approved than an African American in the highest income bracket. In Boston, African Americans in the highest income levels faced loan rejections three times more often than whites.

In general, banks were reluctant to lend in minority communities, and the Federal reserve study shows that racism in lending follows blacks wherever they want to move and no matter how much they earn. A 1993 Washington Post series supported the findings of the Federal Reserve study. In Kettering, a black suburb in Prince George's County, Maryland, the average household income is $65,000 a year and the typical home has four or five bedrooms, a two-car garage, and a spacious lot. Despite the upper income levels of the African American residents, local banks granted proportionately more loans in low-income white communities than they did in Kettering or any other high-income black neighborhood. Banking biases are particularly harsh for the working class and lower-middle-class African Americans, often leading many to go to finance companies for housing repair loans. These finance companies are the equivalent of loan sharks, with interest rates as high as 34 percent and huge balloon payments. Foreclosures are typical.

White-oriented scholarship on gay economics, and particularly on gay housing, does not address the degree of this hostility toward African Americans, but it should. This routine hostility toward African Americans provides important clues concerning the material reasons we continue to see gay as primarily a “white male identity.” We know that homosexuality is multiracial and multicultural, but we must begin to examine the material practices that keep white gays visible and that deny visibility to gay men of color. If scholars are really serious about gay economics, then they must begin questioning what the exclusion of people of color means in material terms.

Frederick R. Lynch’s study of suburban gays is a prime example of a scholar’s failure to even raise the question of what excluding people of color might mean to white gays. Lynch found that suburban white gays consciously and routinely exclude people of color from their friendship networks. These white gays in the suburbs “rejected any comparison of homosexuals with minority groups such as blacks or Latinos.” A group of white gay couples who worked in middle- to upper-level white-collar positions with an age range of twenty to forty-two maintained racially rigid boundaries so that “only white middle-class persons were even considered for membership.” What is appalling about Lynch’s study, which took place over four years, is that it never seems to have occurred to Lynch to ask his respondents why racial exclusivity was so important to them. After reading this study, I don’t know—and I am not even
sure that Lynch asked his white male respondents—if racial exclusivity was related to achieving their primary goals of "jobs/careers/income, a middle-class suburban home or condominium, a lover, and the 'suburban good life.'" Actually, I begin to think that the answer to such questions is so obvious to anyone of white orientation that the questions never arise.

Gay Men and the Myth of Masculine Sameness

Given the frequently ironic and camp behavior of gay men, one might think that inter-racial male sameness, particularly given its homoerotic origins, might become a reality in the gay community. This is far from true, as I have hoped to show in this essay. Clearly, racial tribalism—or more specifically, whiteness—played an integral role in the Faubourg Marigny’s transformation from an ethnic white working-class enclave to a gay neighborhood. I suspect that tribalism has played a significant but unspoken role in the creation of every other gay neighborhood in North America, and I might even add in South Africa, that is predominantly white and male. These neighborhoods that are produced by in-migration do not become white by accident. I will admit that it may not be the intention to create an all-white gay neighborhood, but systemic and institutional racism seems to prevail as a force far more powerful than masculine sameness.

As a last word, I want to make it clear that I am not suggesting that gay men argue for masculine sameness between white men and men of color. Instead, I will conclude by pointing out that at the same time that some white gays were accumulating wealth via gentrification, some black gay men were imagining alternative unions. A striking example appears in the late black gay poet Donald Woods’s poem “Sister Lesbos” for Audre Lorde:

With the smell of last night’s love on our lips
our paths collide
Sister Lesbos seeking new love.
Gold studs in the square of your ears
boots like mine.
My directions are full of smiles and approval
Sister and brother, brother and sis
smelling love for ourselves
on mornin’ lips

I call you sister distinctly, loudly
We are family of a real kind
fruits of the flower pushed sun-ward
through wide cracks in concrete.
March on sister, giving brothers poems
and your sisters that warm love.
What we’ve shared
is the strength
to be apart
what we seek
is the strength
to be together.
Liberation to love ourselves
fiercely, in the family way.¹⁴

Woods’s poem was included in the pathfinding *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*. Published in 1986, *In the Life* was the brainchild of Joseph Beam, who served as the anthology’s editor.

One of the remarkable factors about this anthology, as is evident in Woods’s poem, is the profound influence of black feminism and black lesbian feminism on many of the contributors. Beam, who would become one of the founders of the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays and an editor of its journal, *BlackOut*, had himself been deeply influenced by black feminism and black lesbian feminism.

Beam announces the influence of feminism on his work in the very first sentence of the introduction to *In the Life* with a reference to the representations of whites and blacks in film and literature: “All the protagonists are bland; all the Blacks are criminal and negligible”—a clear allusion to an earlier anthology of black feminist writing that boldly announced the rationale for black women’s studies. Further, Beam wrote, by 1983 he had grown weary of reading literature by white men, none of which, he states, “spoke to me as a Black gay man.” Beam wrote that this white literature “offered the reflection of a sidewalk.” Beam turned away from this literature and, instead, read “exclusively, work by lesbians and Black women,” because “at the very least, their Black characters were credible and I caught glimpses of my reality in their words.” Beam read some of the most brilliant women writing in the 1970s and early 1980s. He writes: “I was fed by Audre Lorde’s *Zami*, Barbara Smith’s *Home Girls*, Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years*, Barbara Deming’s *We Cannot Live Without Our Lives*, June Jordan’s *Civil Wars*, and Michelle Cliff’s *Claiming an Identity I Was Taught to Despise*.¹⁵

While reading Joseph Beam’s papers, I got more glimpses into how important black feminism had been to him. Beam wrote that Barbara Smith’s magnificent anthology *Homegirls* had served as the principle for organizing and structuring *In the Life*. Like *Homegirls*, Beam’s anthology included a variety of genres: poetry, drama, short stories, photography, and artwork. Beam divided the anthology into six sections that reflected various aspects of living as a black gay man. Beam also did not want to present a monolithic black gay identity, which is most obvious in the section “Speaking for Ourselves.” This section contains interviews with the contemporary black gay science fiction writer Samuel R. Delany; Bruce Nugent, a gay elder and a writer associated with the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; Blackberri, a poet, singer, and culture worker; and “Emmett,” a black gay factory worker who lives in the rural South.

Joseph Beam’s essay “Brother to Brother: Words from the Heart” is arguably the most well known contribution to the anthology. The essay was prominently featured
in *Tongues Untied* and is the source of that documentary’s famous intertitle, “Black men loving black men is the revolutionary act.” The essay has a profound sense of urgency, no doubt influenced by Beam’s readings of Audre Lorde’s *The Cancer Journals* and her collection of essays and speeches *Sister/Outsider* and Julie Blackwoman’s *Revolutionary Blues and Other Fevers*. The particular urgency was the sense of self-destruction as well as the viciousness of racism and chronic unemployment that Beam observed among so many black gay men.

Joseph Beam and many of the contributors to *In the Life* gave us a radical vision of black masculinity. This vision rejected the white-created images of hypermasculine black men or black men as frauds and impostors. Beam’s political vision reveals that a union of black gay men and black feminists is a highly productive one. As black people, we need to continue to imagine unions between black gay men and black feminists as part of a progressive and liberating politics. In much the same way that Lorde called upon straight black women to see in her a sister, Beam called for a sense of caring among black men. “Black men loving Black men is an autonomous agenda for the eighties, which is not rooted in any particular sexual, political, or class affiliation, but in our mutual survival. The ways in which we manifest that love are as myriad as the issues we must address.”

Notes

1. I deliberately use the phrase “white tribalism” instead of either “racism” or “white supremacy.” Although “white tribalism” is synonymous with the two terms, “racism” and “white supremacy” have become too emotionally loaded to be used in polite discourse. Today, no one is a racist. Even Ku Kluxers, as David Duke proclaimed when he ran for the U.S. Senate, are merely showing their racial and cultural pride. Furthermore, “white tribalism” has a couple of advantages. First, the term clearly announces that I am focusing my critical lens on white people. As an African American gay man, for too long a member of groups who were the subject of study and speculation, I find it empowering to refocus the anthropological gaze onto whites. Second, “tribalism” has enormous explanatory potential by drawing attention to practices of inclusion and exclusion. For instance, tribalism goes a long way toward explaining miscegenation laws that forced whites to marry within the tribe, or financial practices such as redlining that excluded African Americans from access to bank loans and housing but awarded these privileges to whites.


3. In the 1970s, the actor was Billy Dee Williams in *Brian’s Song* and the last two entries in the *Star Wars* trilogy, as well as Richard Pryor in *Silver Streak* (1976), *Greased Lightning* (1977), *Blue Collar* (1978), and *Stir Crazy* (1980). In the 1980s and 1990s Eddie Murphy dominated the box office, playing characters who eventually befriended white men in the wildly popular *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984), *Beverly Hills Cop 2* (1987), *Trading Places* (1983), *48 Hours* (1982), and *Another 48 Hours*. Before Lou Gossett won an Oscar as the tough Sergeant Foley who brings Richard Gere to manhood in *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982), he had played James Garner’s buddy in the *The Skin Game* (1971), a comedy set during the period of enslavement. In the 1990s Wesley
Snipes went from playing a frightening black drug kingpin in New Jack City to Woody Harrelson's slick basketball partner in White Men Can't Jump. Playing black soldiers in the Civil War who die in the arms of their white colonel, Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman were both nominated for Oscars in Glory; Washington won. Freeman was nominated again for an Oscar in Shawshank Redemption as a convict who becomes the best friend of a white fellow convict. In Philadelphia, Denzel Washington scored one of his biggest triumphs as an ambulance-chasing lawyer who successfully defends a white gay man dying of AIDS wrongfully terminated from his employment. Samuel L. Jackson received an Oscar nod in Pulp Fiction as the black half of a team of assassins.


7. I grew up in a working-class African American neighborhood, and during the late 1960s I witnessed an insurance representative misrepresent my parents’ home. The representative said our property was littered with beer cans and that neighbors reported that my parents regularly gave raucous parties. Although this representative lied, the insurance company denied our family coverage. My parents regularly tell this story, and it is a part of our family’s folklore about experiencing institutional racism.

8. In his 1989 documentary Tongues Untied, Marlon Riggs showcased the widespread practice of carding, a practice of demanding from black men an inordinate amount of identification to enter bars. It was not unusual for the same club bouncer to let white men enter a bar without asking for identification and to immediately stop black men at the door to request identification. One black gay man in Tongues Untied tells the story of how a bouncer asked him for five pieces of picture identification. I have yet to meet a black gay man who is unfamiliar with carding.


16. Ibid., 242.
Out in the South

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Carlos L. Dews and Carolyn Leste Law

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