

**The
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C o M M e n t a t o r**
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on issues affecting African Americans
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Bruce's Beat
No white 'victims of racism'
No more 'theories' of down–lowness
No peace for CBC 'derelicts'
e–Mail from readers
by BC Associate Editor Bruce Dixon

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Because words are tools we use for expressing ourselves, and sometimes for getting at the truth, what we choose to call ourselves and the things around us is important. Look at the lasting damage to rational discussion that overt and covert white supremacists have done in the last forty years with terms like "reverse racism," "quotas," and "playing the race card." In some of the popular discourse these days one can be labeled a racist for calling attention to blatant racism. It seems that the Right would like to somehow define race and class out of our dialogue and out of existence, leaving us with language that cannot tell the truths they prefer to ignore.

Occasionally even discerning **BC** readers fall into such rhetorical traps. One wrote us:

I applaud Tim Wise's Think Piece on Ray Nagin, "White Rage and the Manufacturing of 'Reverse' Racism." It really hit home and offered some wonderful analogies to illustrate his points. Only one thing bothered me: Wise's claim that to white folks, racism is seen mostly as individual and interpersonal – after all, whites have not been targets of systematic racism in this country.

Not so Mr. Wise! Most eastern European immigrants to this country experienced systematic racism for decades while they integrated into the mainstream: Irish, Italian, Jews, Greeks and Slavs to name just a few. Okies were driven Westward away from the Dust Bowl experienced systematic racism from other settled whites in the Western America. Hillbilly whites from Appalachia migrating northward to the big cities to look for work experienced systematic

racism.

Fact is – whites have also experienced systematic racism. The big difference for black folks is – it's much easier for us to continue to have the experience because we are so identifiable.

Terrence D. Samuel, a *BC* subscriber

It looks like we need to define race, first. Race is a social convention that means different things in different societies. In the U.S., for instance, one is customarily black if one has any visible African descent and does not actively disavow blackness. The "white race" as we understand it, is a recent and uniquely American invention that generally means "not black" and not Native American either.

There is no doubt that 19th and early 20th century immigrants from eastern and southern Europe were treated shabbily by whites whose forbears invaded America ahead of them. But this seems to have been only a sort of probation till those folks learned to be Americans. White Americans. American whiteness has even been bestowed on European Jews, whose forbears experienced very real and vicious racism in the Old World for centuries, along with a kind of conditional, honorary and second class whiteness extended to some of those Asians and Hispanics who really, really want it. As for poor southern whites being victims of racism, how is this possible when in American society, they have never been defined as a "race"? Victimized and trash they may have been. But *white* trash, and as the old folks say,

If you white, you alright

If you brown, stick around

but if you black, get back,

We do thank Mr. Samuel for writing us, for subscribing and helping *BC* stay out here.

Last week's column recalled a *BC* cover story of last fall, "The Low Down on the Down Low" which called upon the corporation that is Oprah Winfrey to apologize and atone for another one of its lying authors, HIV–AIDS huckster J. L. King. We said then and still maintain that Oprah Inc.'s unleashing of the "down–low" boogeyman theory to explain the increase in HIV–AIDS among black women did incalculable and lasting damage to the battle for HIV–AIDS prevention, treatment, and understanding of the epidemic in the African American community.

At least one of our esteemed readers and subscribers took polite issue with our stand, so we here reprint her letter and take the time to explain ourselves.

I enjoy the website's insightful analysis of the African American condition. You have expressed the viewpoint that the explosion of HIV in black women is not being spread by black men who have had homosexual sex. And you say the CDC agrees that this is not the case but you do not say what is causing this tragic upsurge. I believe that bisexual men are playing a role in the pandemic. And I base my opinion on a knowledge of human behavior. Before the theory of "down–low" behavior, many women were not aware that many men, white and black, engage in bisexual sex without identifying themselves as gay or bisexual. I'm sure some of the increase in HIV among women is due to intravenous drug use but how many addicts are there?

I, also, think that a website dedicated to the Black American condition should examine the theory that AIDS is not a natural disease.

Yvonne

We are familiar with the work produced by some on the origins of HIV–AIDS, some of which was cited in the reader's letter, but which we edited for the sake of brevity. *BC* has nothing original to add to that conversation. Whatever the origins of HIV–AIDS, it is now a global epidemic, with tens of millions of infected across every continent. It is ravaging India and China, Russia and southeast Asia, eastern Europe and the Middle East as well as Africa, the Diaspora and South America. It is everywhere a disease of the poor, and in the U.S., where African Americans are disproportionately poor, it is most often a black disease.

A most irresponsible custom these days in what passes for mainstream journalism is to report on something, some question of public interest, then to repeat the statement on that same topic by someone else with an opposing view, no matter how farfetched or untrue, and then close the story. The reader or viewer is left to suppose that both sides are equally credible, or that since "authoritative sources" disagree, it makes no difference, or perhaps the truth is somewhere in the middle. How many more times do we need to see reputable warnings about man–made global climate change "balanced" with the hirelings of oil companies assuring us that there's nothing to worry about? How often must we hear sane citizens with and without law degrees reminding us that torture, secret imprisonment without trial and undeclared wars are illegal and immoral offset by goons saying this stuff is perfectly OK? "We report, you decide" is not journalism because it doesn't help people get at the truth. Due diligence, in journalism, is presenting the truth and being able to explain how you got it. Journalism is supposed to get citizens the accurate information they need about the world so that opinions citizens have can be based on facts.

For *BC*'s "The Low Down on the Down Low" story, we did eight telephone interviews with three M.D.s, and with five people who had advanced degrees in Public Health. Several people qualified in more than one category. Two of our interviewees were published HIV–AIDS researchers. Three were directors or key staff of HIV–AIDS treatment and advocacy organizations or contractors of state government. One was involved in inmate health care and another was an employee of or consultant to the Centers for Disease Control. We consulted material on the CDC web site along with speeches and articles of the researchers interviewed and other researchers not interviewed and read two or three dozen articles by others on the topic, and links to some of this material were contained in the article.

Every single medical doctor, public health professional, researcher, or treatment and prevention advocate *BC* talked to, whether on or off the record agreed with the CDC that there is no evidence bisexual men are chiefly or largely responsible for the rise in HIV–AIDS among black women. The "down low brutha" is a racist and a homophobic slander that has lasting traction only because some in our community still hold the discredited view that HIV–AIDS is a "gay disease." In their minds, the only way black women can get this "gay disease" is from heedless and predatory bisexual black men. This so–called "down–low" theory misdirects us from our own responsibility and from doing the things we need to do to fight the epidemic. To quote a little of our "down low" article:

"Secretive sexual behavior has been around since the dawn of time," said Dr. Malebranche to *BC*. "Why is it that now we need a new name for this behavior, aside from our need to blame and demonize black men, and distract our attention from what's really going on? ... Aside from...injected drug use, most of it [AIDS] comes from one place – unprotected sex. And most of the sex that most of us are having and continue to have with partners of the same or either sex continues to be unprotected. It's foolish, and in the context of an epidemic it's dangerous to imagine that so–called 'down low brothers' have a corner on the market for risky behavior or unprotected sex. They don't. We all have a hand in this."

"The myth of the downlow fails to accurately explain where the virus comes from or equip us to protect ourselves and each other.... Oprah's producers must have known that however false

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and misleading it might be, their "down low" show would attract viewers and be remembered by them, just like that low-down hustler J.L. King knew it would sell books. The market has an endless appetite for shocking tales of unique black depravity."

Repeating and endorsing tales of depravity to sell books and rope in daytime TV viewers is not journalism. **BC's** budget and staff are a lot smaller than Oprah Inc., but we'll stand our fact-based journalism up against their destructive boogeyman myth-making any time.

Finally, last week marked the release of CBC Monitor's second report card on the performance of the Congressional Black Caucus. For too long, black journalism has done nothing but celebrate our political leadership, rather than demand accountability from it. CBC Monitor is at the vanguard of this renewed demand that black elected officials represent their voters rather than their campaign contributors or their Democratic Minority Leader.

Here is what reader Edythe Jones sent us on the report card:

RIGHT ON for the latest CBC Report Card. Keep the pressure on the traitors and the weak. Let's know why it is important to flush the pollution in the next electoral cycle.

We, and our colleagues at CBC Monitor intend to do just that. The next CBC report card will roughly coincide with what used to be called Congressional Black Caucus week, and is now called something else around the first of September. But much sooner than that, CBC Monitor and Black Commentator are toying with the idea of an awards ceremony and dinner to be held somewhere in the Washington DC area in late spring or early summer. What kind of awards? We're glad you asked.

Back in 1996, George Curry's now unfortunately deceased *Emerge* magazine ran one of the most famous covers in recent black journalism. Drawing attention to Justice Clarence Thomas's career of legal and extralegal perfidy, Curry depicted him as "Uncle Thomas: Lawn Jockey for the Far Right." *Emerge's* "lawn jockey" cover gave us all something to laugh about in the middle of a very tough time for black America, and something to think about too. It wasn't mere negativity. It was a valid political statement, a cogent reminder of what the vast majority of our people did and still do believe, of what our forbears in the Freedom movement, the anti-lynching movement of our mothers and grandmothers, of our predecessors in Reconstruction and the resistance to slavery all knew: that a better world is possible, and it depends on us and our solidarity.

Brother Curry was certainly on to something. While there is plenty of room for African Americans of differing viewpoints to come together in a collegial way and do what we can to mutually advance the fortunes of our people, as in the MMM, there is also a crying need to hold some of the worst miscreants, malefactors and race traitors up to public ridicule and derision. True, it won't change their minds or make them feel any better, but it may deter others from inadvisable actions.

We like the sound of what may morph into an annual Lawn Jockey Award event to be held somewhere in the DC area. We think it honors an established journalistic tradition, and is freighted with appropriate ridicule and minstrel-show overtones. Minstrel shows, after all, depicted blacks in the demeaning and degrading frames of reference favored by racist whites of a bygone era. Lawn jockey award recipients will be selected too for their willingness to publicly demean and degrade themselves at the behest of their benefactors.

There are doubtless other refinements on the "Lawn Jockey" award matrix that we have not yet considered. What other kinds of mocking awards might be given to runners-up at the "Lawn Jockey" ceremony? We will throw that open to our readers. Email us with your comments and suggestions – not about who deserves such an award, not yet at any rate. We are still talking about what some of the other awards should be. We

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promise to print some of the best suggestions. Keep it clean, and we hope to see you in DC later this year at the first annual Lawn Jockey Awards dinner.

Contact Bruce Dixon at bruce.Dixon@blackcommentator.com.