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Introduction

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Introduction

Castellano Turner, Ph.D.

In addition to reporting research and providing analysis, *The Trotter Review* has always been a forum for presenting a range of perspectives on timely public issues in the Black community. In the fall of 2003 the Institute staff discussed the possibility of publishing a special issue of the *Review* devoted to exploring the topic of “homosexuality and the Black community.”

We were aware that there had been longstanding disagreements among Blacks about this issue. Anecdotal information suggested that:

- 1) Black church leaders were generally hostile to homosexuals;
- 2) Black homosexuals were frequently alienated, both from the Black community and the gay community;
- 3) Black homosexuals were being blamed for the scourge of HIV/AIDS; and,
- 4) Black men on the “down low” were accused of being the cause of the increasing number of Black women contracting HIV/AIDS. We considered this topic worthy of attention, but we had other priorities at the time.

Later, in the spring of 2004, the Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) of Massachusetts stunned the state and the nation by ruling that the state

constitution permitted “gay marriage.” Specifically, the court ruled that it was unconstitutional to deny a couple of the same sex the right to be legally married. The jubilation in the gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender (GLBT) community and the firestorm of indignant protest that followed this unprecedented decision were all that might have been expected. The GLBT community saw freedom and justice on the horizon. Opponents saw a threat to marriage as a sacred rite, to the institution of marriage, and to universal moral values. It was said that one battle in the “culture wars” had been waged but that the war itself was far from over. How strong could the negative reactions be? A conservative friend remarked to me after the 2004 presidential election that the outcome had been determined by the three g’s: “gays, guns, and God.” Whether one accepts in whole this flip analysis, it is clear that “gay marriage” was an issue for a segment of the electorate. At any rate, polls showed that the country was split on this issue.

The split in response existed in the Black community in Boston as well. Many Black church leaders lined up to express their disapproval. Some Black community leaders, academics, and supporters of GLBT rights were equally vocal. When the state legislature took up the issue in hearings, in floor debate, and in a constitutional convention, it was clear that the Black community was not of one mind.

That brings us to what we offer here. We wanted to have a balanced set of papers representing all perspectives in the Black community. In the end, I believe that a wide range of perspectives are represented, but balance cannot be claimed. It was not difficult to recruit individuals eager to express support for equal rights for the GLBT community and gay marriage. It was more difficult to obtain either papers or interviews from those we approached who had made public knowledge of their opposition.

In attempting to present varying perspectives on the issues surrounding public policy on gay marriage and the more specific question of Black community response to its members who are GLBT, three interviews were carried out and are presented here.

Dianne Wilkerson, a Massachusetts State Senator, provides the perspective of a policy maker. As is clear from the interview, she was a major player in the debates that took place in the Senate constitutional debate. She had thought much about the questions raised and presented her position as one fully informed of the arguments on both sides. Although she provides some personal historical perspective, her position can be defined as primarily a legal one. Her support for gay marriage was based on constitutional law. She had to face negative responses from some in the Black community, but received support for her courageous stand from others.

In the interview with Rev. Irene Monroe, the reader will find the perspective of an activist—both feminist and GLBT activist. She responds to questions with much more than a personal perspective on the current debate. She places the debate in historical perspective and provides the kind of critical analysis one expects from a scholar. Like the other two interviewees, she is passionate in denouncing the racism that is behind much of the controversy surrounding the issue of homosexuality in the Black community. But she also makes it clear that she sees sexism and heterosexism among both Blacks and Whites. The racism found in the GLBT community cannot be excused and is compounded by the hypocritical exploitation of Blacks who are trying to find a community that accepts them for who they are.

Rev. Richard Richardson deserves special thanks from the *Trotter Review*, because he was the only public opponent of gay marriage whom we contacted who was willing to be interviewed. The reader will find that he states his positions clearly and articulately. On the one hand, his position that homosexual behavior is a sin is informed by his reading of Scripture. On the other, he makes it clear that it is not homosexual individuals that are disapproved of; it is only the homosexual behavior. Though he disagreed with and spoke publicly against the ruling that permits gay marriage, he is prepared to move on to the more pressing problems facing the Black community.

Two books reviews are carried in this issue. The first, by

Anne Gathuo, is a review of Constantine-Simms's *The Greatest Taboo: Homosexuality in Black Communities*. Gathuo provides a comprehensive summary of the major themes in the book as well as a thorough job describing the contributions of the many articles that make up the collection. Although there are some problems identified, the general conclusion is that it is a book that deals with most of the important issues, gives a variety of perspectives, and is a worthwhile addition to the limited literature on the topic.

William Alexander's review of Keith Boykin's book, *Beyond the down low: Sex, lies, and denial in Black America*, is not your typical book review. Bill goes deeper and is more personal than the typical reviewer. By allowing readers into his own life experiences he clarifies how the "down low" operates and the ways in which it can influence lives. A major lesson that he takes from the book is that the "blame game" is not productive. For him, the power of real love and the willingness to take responsibility for our actions together hold the answer to the present conflicts in the Black community. Boykin's analysis and recommendations clearly found resonance in the reviewer. He thinks that, if the message is taken seriously, much unnecessary harm could be avoided in the future.

This issue ends with yet another article by William Alexander entitled "Homosexual and racial identity conflict among African-American gay males." After reading personal opinions presented in previous articles, the reader gets the opportunity to examine relevant literature on the subject of gay African-American men provided in Alexander article. The literature that specifically addresses the issues of Black gay men is limited indeed. But the author has drawn upon other bodies of literature that contribute some part to the themes of the paper—racial identity development, homosexual identity development, and the impact of racism and heterosexism on identity and psychological well being. He has done a commendable job of making the appropriate connections among them and doing a critical analysis that allows the reader to see the importance of the issues raised. The paper also provides

original research data, which helps to put the rhetoric and anecdotal information in perspective.

The research itself is exploratory and must be interpreted with caution, but Alexander has allowed the reader to hear more directly from gay Blacks themselves. From the first steps of his research work, he grounded his approach in the words and sentiments of the individuals closest to the valid answers. He asked gay Black men to define their issues. Based on the issues identified, he proceeded to carry out intensive interviews with a small sample. Recognizing the limitations of the sample, he went on to do two waves of surveys of gay Black men from around the United States. He found support for his major hypothesis—racial and homosexual identity conflicts take a toll on the psychological well-being of gay Black men. The need for understanding and support is clear—from families, the churches, peers, and service agencies. We hope someone is listening.

A final personal note: The Trotter Institute staff and Advisory Board are pleased to inform our readers and supporters that a new permanent director, Dr. Barbara Lewis, joined us, as of September 2004. I am personally pleased that the Institute has found a leader who will help to expand its work into the realm of the humanities.

Editing this issue is my final unfinished task from my brief tenure as the Director of the Trotter Institute. It has been both a challenge

and a revelation for me. I have learned much from the several contributors, and I hope that I will find ways to expand and apply my knowledge.

Castellano Turner is Professor Emeritus in the Psychology Department, the College of Liberal Arts, University of Massachusetts Boston. He served as Interim Director of the Trotter Institute between April 2003 and September 2004, when he retired from the university. He was the first director of the Clinical Psychology Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston and served in that role for seven years (1989-1996). Before coming to UMass Boston, he had been a faculty member for twenty-one years (1968-1989) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Chicago in 1966.