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The “Who,” “What,” “Where” and “How” of the “Down Low”: A Personally-Inspired Book Review of Keith Boykin’s *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America*

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The “Who,” “What,” “Where” and “How” of the “Down Low”:

*A
Personally-Inspired Book Review of Keith
Boykin’s Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies
and Denial in Black America.*

William H. Alexander

In this review of Keith Boykin’s book on the Down Low, William H. Alexander draws generously from his own personal experience. According to Alexander, Boykin’s book is a wake up call and challenge to the Black community to stop wasting their time blaming and developing strategies that reject, exclude and oppress, but instead focus on their spirituality and humanity so that lives can be saved.

I first met Keith Boykin in 1995 at a conference sponsored by the National Black Lesbian and Gay Leadership Forum. He was interviewing individuals for his first book, *One More River To Cross*, and I was collecting data for my senior thesis, *Black, Male and Gay: Myths, Stereotypes, and Reality* which eventually led to my masters thesis. I was quite surprised and very pleased to find that he quoted me in his book.

As the title indicates, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America*, Boykin's latest book is about the "down low." The current understanding of the "down low" is that it refers to men (or specifically Black men) who have sex with men but consider themselves and lead public lives as heterosexuals. Among other widely held but unproven notions is that the prevalence of the "down low" among Black men accounts for the increasing spread of HIV/AIDS to Black women. Boykin fuses the power of popular songs, research and current statistics concerning the Black community, and his personal experiences in order to present us with an opportunity to move beyond superficial hype and grapple with the realities of and significant challenges to the survival of Black communities.

Boykin provides an alternative to the latest meaning of the "down low" and not only challenges but also debunks many of the stereotypes associated with this term. He explains that the *who* associated with the "down low" has changed over the years but that the *behavior* of the "down low" has not. Boykin suggests that *anyone* can be on the "down low" and that being on the "down low" is simply cheating; nothing more nothing less! When on the down low, people cheat themselves or cheat others through denial and/their behaviors. More importantly, Boykin challenges readers to go "beyond the down low" and ask the "who, what, where and why" about this sudden focus of attention on the latest version of the "down low." He directs readers' attention to: who is responsible for the creation of the "down low" hype; who the players are and who practices the behavior; why it is important to believe this latest version of the "down low" is only limited to one group; and what the current and potential implications of this latest version of the "down low" are for individuals and communities as a whole.

Boykin cautions readers about our susceptibility to racist, sexist and heterosexist ideologies and reminds them of their potential for incorporating their related stereotypes and very self-destructive

principles into their belief systems and behaviors. Further, he provides examples within Black communities, especially within the church, that allude to the adage “the oppressed becoming oppressors.” Although it is generally known that constant exposure to oppression often results in the oppressed internalizing the tactics and behaviors of their oppressors (so much so that oppressors need not be visible to achieve their goals), it saddens me how quickly some people forget the devastation and heart wrenching toll that oppression has cost Black people over the years, both physically and mentally.

Boykin encourages his audience to look at the possible long-term advantages of expanding and revitalizing Black communities through

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inclusion. Respecting and appreciating the heterogeneity within Black communities increases and improves their knowledge and understanding of the meaning of difference. Further, promoting inclusive strategies increases an awareness of

oppressive behaviors, especially when it comes to how overwhelming negative attitudes and behaviors toward homosexuality actually and significantly contribute to “down low” behaviors within Black communities.

Boykin not only sheds light on a number of significant challenges impacting the survival of Black communities, but he also provides a variety of practical solutions. He cautions Black people about their tendency to overlook core problems and choose instead to play the “blame game.” Playing this game steers the people away from (as well as prevents them from) accepting personal responsibility for their behaviors. When we begin pointing a finger at someone else or a group

(different from ourselves), we often forget that there are three fingers on that same hand pointing right back at us! When it comes to the prevention of HIV/AIDS in the Black community, it is vital that we refrain from finger pointing. Instead of spending so much time trying to find out who is responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS in our communities, wouldn't it be wiser to address the issue of personal responsibility or why so many individuals are experiencing difficulties with protecting themselves from a very preventable disease? Wouldn't it be wiser to develop realistic strategies that address the thoughts and feelings associated with one's inability to refrain from behaviors that are self-destructive as well as harmful to Black communities? I remember being asked what I thought would be an effective PSA (Public Service Announcement) that could assist in preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS in our community. I came up with "When it comes to HIV/AIDS, can't nobody give it to you... only you can!" This may sound a bit harsh but why beat around the bush, especially if the goal is to become a community of healthy and vibrant people?

Boykin discusses his admiration for Joycelyn Elders (former Surgeon General) because she is very candid and tells it like it is. He encourages the Black community to follow her lead and get over its discomfort with discussing sex and our sexual behaviors and desires. He suggests that the community's discomfort when discussing sex has the potential for negatively impacting the community as a whole. Boykin advocates for parents having frank and open discussions with their children about sex, sexual behaviors, and sexually transmitted diseases before they become sexually active. Further, sex, sexual behaviors and desires should be included in the discussion during sex education classes at school, with family and friends and most importantly with intimate partners. Boykin also suggests that the media should be developing storylines that demonstrate the negotiation of safe sex practices during those "intimate moments." The lack of discussion around these topics significantly contributes to the preponderance of risky sexual behaviors

within Black communities. Open discussions about these particular topics would in fact be an effective preventative tool in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS in Black communities. Boykin writes, “we have to have these discussions in order to save our lives.” (p.247)

Boykin’s last chapter discusses fear and love and how these two very powerful emotions impacted his life and can impact other lives as well. Here, Boykin tastefully weaves his personal views (that could be easily misread as idealistic) with realistic situations that are in fact necessary for Black communities’ survival. Boykin suggests that becoming overwhelmed by fear makes lives stagnant and limits the potential and natural tendency toward growth. Boykin quotes the first two Commandments to support his stance that loving God and learning to love ourselves makes it possible to genuinely love another. Love of self and having a genuine love for others empowers people to overcome their fears, especially those fears that can often lead to risky and self-destructive behaviors. Love of self promotes self-acceptance and overcomes the fear of rejection. Boykin encourages readers to walk through the paralyzing effects of fear. We must realize that participating in safe sex practices is a true demonstration of self-love and a genuine love for another. Practicing safe sex protects you and your partner. It is love that will ultimately save the community. This sounds like a simple task, but it is not as easy as one might think!

I especially related to Boykin’s *Beyond the Down Low* because I was reminded of an encounter that resulted in my first entertaining the idea that I might be gay. I wonder now if things would have been different if there had been more open discussions with my parents, priest and peers about sex, sexual behaviors and desires. I was still quite young at the time and was told that it was just a stage I was going through. Shortly after that experience, however, I found myself in love with another man, memorizing the words to *At Last* sung by Etta James and experiencing a feeling that made me want to tell the world about it.

In fact I wanted to shout the words from a roof top but was only able to whisper an edited version of them in a dark closet-like confessional that enclosed my shame. This was *my* first encounter with the “down low!”

I do believe that despite the fact that I would have had to keep my relationship on the down low, I had already chosen to accept my fate and was willing to live out the rest of my life with this person. But my last encounter with that person, the only person at that time, ended after ten years with his statement “we gotta stop doin’ this ‘cause everybody knows you’re gay and I don’t want people thinkin’ I am... I’m not gay.” He walked away from me and I walked away from myself.

As I struggled through my third drug rehab, thirty years later and three thousand miles away from where it all began, I was asked while participating in a psychodrama group session to talk about a painful encounter and recreate it. I chose to discuss my experience with that person. After I selected two members in the group who could represent me and the other person, the facilitator said “OK begin.” I opened my mouth only to sob uncontrollably for nearly twenty minutes!

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I had not realized the intensity of the pain I felt from being rejected nor could I believe that my pain and its intensity could

have lasted for as long as it did. Most importantly, however, I discovered there was much more to that pain. The pain I felt came from being told that I was an abomination and genocidal to the Black race. The pain I felt came from feeling rejected and alienated from my church and my community. The pain I felt came from my shame and guilt that enslaved me because I never moved to that supposed next stage of my sexual development. The pain I felt was the result of not even being able to share the devastation I felt after being told that there was something wrong with me by the very person who pursued, wooed and introduced me to who I am sexually. The pain I felt came from having to watch that

other person (from afar) go through relationship after relationship and marriage after marriage after marriage. The pain I felt was being forced to live a secret – the secret of the down low!

Fortunately at that time, living on the down low did not put my life at risk (at least sexually). My self-destructive behaviors manifested themselves in other ways. But it was my overwhelming love for God, support from my parents and gradual learning to love myself that assisted me in my struggle to overcome my many years of drug and alcohol abuse. During my process of recovery, I began to understand that I needed to take responsibility for my thoughts about myself and my behaviors and I soon realized that the bondage I felt was pretty much self-imposed and the result of a cruel and unfair indoctrination that doomed me to hell because of my homosexuality. Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low* would have saved me many years of suffering.

Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low* is a wake up call and a challenge to all in the Black community. Black people can no longer believe the hype nor fall victim to it. They must maintain an awareness of the tendency to avoid difficult challenges. Blacks need to stop wasting precious time blaming and developing strategies that reject, exclude and oppress, and focus more on their spirituality and humanity so that lives are saved, rather than condemned.

I encourage you (if you're old enough) to think back to the commercial that asked whether the voice of Ella Fitzgerald played over the television was "live" or "Memorex?" Then challenge yourself with a similar question, "Am I real or Memorex?" Do I believe what I believe because I believe it or am I only espousing beliefs that I was *taught* to believe? We must know who we are, love who we are and be who we are. Personal responsibility follows. Our lives depend on it.

Boykin demonstrates his true investigator-researcher and pragmatic problem-solving abilities as well as his commitment and passion toward finding and suggesting ways to improve the health and well being of Black communities. *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and*

Denial in Black America is a must read. It could save your life and the lives of others!

A native of Chicago, Bill Alexander now resides in the Roxbury area of Boston. He received his Bachelors degree from Claremont McKenna College and his Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Massachusetts Boston in December 2003. His Dissertation empirically investigated The Relationship Between Adult Attachment Styles and Psychosocial Outcomes of African-American Males.

Bill is the president of the Black Men's Health Alliance, a new organization that focuses on improving the mental, physical, and spiritual health of Black men. Bill also works for the Veterans Administration and teaches The Psychology of the African-American Experience at the University of Massachusetts Boston. He was formerly program coordinator for the Father Friendly Initiative, a program of the Boston Public Health Commission.