Desire and the
"Big Black Sex Cop":
Race and the Politics
of Sexual Intimacy
in HBO’s Six Feet Under
Guy Mark Foster

CLAIRE: What do you see in him?
KEITH: He’s just David, you know.
CLAIRE: (Laughing) I know. That’s why I was asking.
KEITH: He is smart. He’s kind. He’s funny. I know he can be a little uptight.
Underneath that he’s such a little boy. Innocent. And I like that.
Most of the men I meet — Well, they just kind of want me to be
just one thing.
CLAIRE: What? Like ‘Big Black Sex Cop’? (impersonating a type of gay man:)
"Sorry I was speeding. Officer. I guess you have to punish me
now.")
KEITH: (Smiling) Yeah. And I don’t wanna be that. (Beat.) Rent a video.
(Claire laughs.) David, he gets me. When someone sees you as you
really are, and wants to be with you, that’s powerful.

This tantalizing exchange between Claire Fisher (Lauren Ambrose) and Keith Charles (Mathew St. Patrick), two of the main characters from the critically acclaimed HBO television series Six Feet Under, takes place after dark in a vacant lot in downtown Pasadena. Earlier, Claire, the pre-cocious teenage daughter of the proprietors of a local funeral home, had
God's and the Big Sex Cap (1961)

The New Queer Analysis on Television

By Ai-Lan Lee

Tackening Black Folks' Sexes Seriously

Since its première on June 3, 2000, Sin Sex Under Fire (1961) has enjoyed both critical and popular acclaim. The commercial success of the film has been due to the rise of gay media, which has consistently praised the series for its sensitive and progressive portrayal of same-sex relationships.

The film's main character, Keith, is a black gay man who struggles to come to terms with his identity in a society that is hostile to his sexuality. Keith is involved in a relationship with a white man, David, who is not aware of Keith's own sexual orientation. Keith's struggle to come out of the closet is a central theme of the film, and it is explored through various scenes that highlight the challenges faced by black gay men in an unequal society.

One such scene is the car accident, which occurs in the midst of Keith and David's relationship. The accident is a turning point in the film, as it forces Keith to confront his own identity and the societal pressures that have shaped his life. Keith's reaction to the accident is a testament to the power of the film in challenging stereotypes and offering a nuanced portrayal of black gay identity.

In conclusion, Sin Sex Under Fire offers a valuable perspective on the struggles faced by black gay men in an unequal society. Through its exploration of Keith and David's relationship, the film provides a powerful message that resonates with audiences across the globe.

References:


Image Credit:

The image shows a scene from the film Sin Sex Under Fire (1961), featuring Keith and David in a car accident. The scene is a pivotal moment in the film, highlighting the challenges faced by black gay men in an unequal society.

Note: The above text is a fictional account and does not reflect any real events or individuals.
While this could quite easily be the case, I would like to suggest there might be a more productive way to read the organization’s actions: as a calculated response to color blindness’ demand for Americans, white and nonwhite alike, to suppress all race discourse in the interests of overcoming racism. Put simply, the NAACP’s refusal to sanction the show could be seen as the organization’s way of thumbing its nose at such discourse altogether, thus ignoring and rejecting the typical mainstream television portrayal of black characters in multiracial casts.

The cultural critic Herman Gray uses the term “assimilationist” to characterize such portrayals. As he puts it, “the worlds [these programs] construct are distinguished by the complete elimination or, at best, marginalization of social and cultural difference in the interest of shared and universal similarity.” Black characters, when they do appear, are incor- porated within “hegemonic white worlds void of any hint of African American traditions, social struggle, racial conflicts, and cultural difference” (85). Although HBO is a cable station, Gray’s characterization of mainstream network television could easily apply to the way Six Feet Under has portrayed Keith Charles. As a result, African American viewers who tune in expecting the show to engage with their fears and anxieties about black cultural identities in general and race mixing in particular are often disappointed.

Suppressing Race, Narrating Gender

Let’s look closely at several scenes during season one of Six Feet Under that demonstrate the asymmetrical relationship between race and gender that I have been discussing. The first scene to consider is that in which David Fisher is first outed as a gay man. It opens with a flashback to David’s older brother Nate (Peter Krause) as a young boy, entering the embalming room where his father (Richard Jenkins) is hard at work embalming a recently deceased, middle-aged man. The scene closes in the present day with Nate, his brother David, and Rico, a Fisher family employee, all adults, conversing uncomfortably in this same embalming room over the body of Nate and David’s recently deceased father. Suddenly David’s cell phone rings and, not wanting to have the conversation in front of Nate and Rico, he excuses himself into the hall. One of the central purposes of this scene is to convey important information about the Fisher brothers: namely, their essential conflict with one another, one the show will seek to resolve over the course of season one. As evidenced by his reticence to talk to his lover in front of Nate, David is clearly struggling with his sexuality, a struggle with which the viewers are asked to sympathize. “Not only has David just been outed to us, the viewers,” writes Samuel Chambers, “but when he returns to the embalming room [after his conversation with Keith], we feel (and fear) with him that per- haps the closet door has been left ajar” (28). Nate and Rico may know his secret.

But a far more complex model of sexuality circulates within the show’s sociopolitical imaginary than the author is willing to acknowl- edge, given his exclusive fixation on the revelation of homosexuality. For who precisely is the “we” that, as Chambers describes it, “feels” and “fears” along with David that his secret identity as a gay man has just been revealed? For Chambers, as well as for much contemporary lesbian and gay/a queer theory overall, the “we,” the “world” that most matters is a uni- versalist one in which the concept of heteronormativity stands apart, untouched and carefree, from other forms of subjectification. It is, as Chambers puts it, “the structuring norm,” and it is therefore unmedi- ated by other forms of difference. What is equally important, however, and more often ignored, is that this scene also outs David racially as white. It does this in part because the caller on the other end of the line, David’s lover Keith, is not white, but black. To quote Stuart Hall, with only a slight adjustment from his original emphasis, “we know what ‘white’ means not because there is some essence of ‘whiteness’ but because we can contrast it with its opposite — black.” “Meaning,” in other words, Hall tells us, “is relational. It is the ‘difference’ between ‘white’ and ‘black’ which signifies, which carries meaning” (328).

While the “we” in Hall’s utterance recalls the “we” in Chambers, there is a crucial distinction between the two. The latter resists claims to a universalist social reality in favor of an awareness of the ways in which U.S. social formation is constituted more generally by racial history. For the former this history is ancillary, and therefore not worthy of mention. And precisely because of the history of the U.S. as a racially segregated
nation, the meanings that Americans attach to the sight of black and white bodies in close, intimate proximity to one another becomes weighted with sexual significance. As Siobhan Somerville has argued, "the figure of the color line itself instantiates(s) desire," regardless of gender (36).

It is incumbent upon viewers as well to recognize that David's outgoing not only reveals him as a gay man, but that it also reveals him as a particular kind of gay man — specifically, a "dingee queen," a pejorative term for a white gay man who is either primarily or only sometimes attracted to men of color — in this case, black men. Remarkably, this insight is one which critics like Chambers appear all too willing to overlook, perhaps because of the distasteful associations such terms, and others like it, often conjure. While this reticence is certainly understandable, such thinking, and the labeling it inspires, is nonetheless a central part of gay male culture, one that disproportionately affects gay men of color. Hence, refusing to challenge the underlying beliefs of such labeling only allows the troubling assumptions imbedded within them to remain conceptually intact, and therefore laden with enduring cultural meaning and power. Because the representational strategies of *Six Feet Under* interoperate the ideal viewers as white, middle-class, and heterosexual, the audience is only invited to think of David and Keith as a gay male couple and not as both a gay male couple and an interclassical couple. This limited way in which viewers are directed to think of Keith and David is reinforced throughout the first season by other scenes in which race and gender are semantically opposed.

In Episode Four, for example, Keith chases down and verbally lashes out at a white male motorist who calls David and him "fucking fags" for taking too long to pull out of the space in which they are parked. Walking back to Keith's SUV, David tries to downplay the man's homophobic remark by saying to Keith: "I don't think he meant anything by it." Incredulous at David's lack of outrage, Keith fires back: "You hate yourself that much?" Later in the episode, David meets up with Keith at the lesbian and gay church they have been attending together and apologizes for their disagreement in the parking lot. David then asks if Keith thinks he really hates himself. At this point, Keith, in a tone that is reassuring, but nonetheless firm, asserts that he knows that David is emotionally regarding his struggle to accept his sexuality; after all, Keith has been there himself, but he, Keith, has no intention of "moving backwards for anybody," and this includes David. When David responds that he is not asking Keith to "move backwards" but only to "be patient" and "a little calmer," Keith makes the following reply:

*Desire and the "Big Black Sex Cap"* (Foster)

*Do you have any idea what I put up with on my job everyday? How many times the word fag has been written on my locker? How many times I wonder going into a dangerous situation if I've even gonna get back? We were stopped on yesterday, David. And I did something about it because I am tired of it. When you get tired of it, you let me know.*

It is obvious that David's struggle to accept his sexual identity is offered as the sole context from which viewers are to construct meaning to this heated exchange with Keith, one of several between the lovers during the show's first season. The fact that Keith is not only a gay man, but also African American is presented as irrelevant in terms of the show's verbal narrative. His response to David, therefore, can only be allowed to serve one purpose — as corroborating evidence of his identity as a gay man. If what Keith says is allowed to serve multiple purposes, it may cause the viewer to oscillate between the various options and subsequently to derail the effort the show is making to "fix" narrative meaning, to maintain its dichotomous structuring of race and gender, and therefore to analogize the two forms of oppression. For what this scene and numerous others strive over and over to demonstrate is that Keith is proud while David is ashamed of being gay.

But what about Keith's earlier rhetorical question, the one that implied that David's attempt to downplay the homophobic slur offered incontrovertible proof that David hates himself for being gay? Might there be another way to interpret this remark and thus situate it against my reading of the scene as one that privileges David and his single-issue identity struggles? For, as I have argued, strong criticism is often directed at blacks who couple interracially with whites in African American communities. Such men and women are not only accused by other blacks of turning against their own culture, but they are often also accused of hating their own black skin as well as hating the black skin of other African Americans. The cultural critic bell hooks captures this dilemma nicely
what the margins represent a comparable site of vulnerability for him, his racial identity. So now I'm not a Naiti collaborator, David asks, simply.

* You know a lot of African Americans might say the same about you: being a member of the LAPD, being an African American police officer in Los Angeles, things like that.


African American communities, however, being in bed with the enemy also refers to someone who betrays the racial collective by entering into sexual and romantic relationships with whites. Because Six Feet Under chooses to suppress this "other," group-specific meaning of the terms it deploys, the show exposes its own ideological investments in the central tenets of a belief in color blindness that refuses to acknowledge the importance of membership in cultural groups and the extent to which such ties can exert influence (welcome and unwelcome) on individual choices.

In an illuminating exploration of the interracial sexual dynamics of the Academy award-winning motion picture Monster's Ball, Jane Flax writes: "Subjects are inducted into the symbolic order of contemporary America, not only through the Father's set of the incest taboo and the phallic intersection of sexual difference, but also through the Law's demand for racial interpellation. . . . The race/gendered reading of my body thus provides a narrative of identity. It enables [bodily] organs to speak and tell me who I am" (60). Flax suggests that we do not arrive at gendered subjectivity apart from racialized subjectivity or vice-versa, but that the two come into existence simultaneously as part of a mutually informing as well as mutually transforming partnership. The same holds true for our sexuality. Indeed, the very intelligibility of a subject's sexuality is dependent upon the extent to which our gendered and racial identities satisfy or, as the case may be, fail to satisfy dominant and, for African Americans, marginalized cultural norms and expectations. Moreover, this is the case not only with David (who we see repeatedly attempting to conceal his sexuality as a gay man from his family, friends, and community), but also with Keith, whose multi-issue identity concerns repeatedly fall out of view. Where are the black community members in Keith's life, if not shadowed by his homosexual identity? But more, how can he know that his boyfriend is white? The inclusion of a sister and parents for Keith in season two did little to answer this question since the fact that Keith is interracially coupled with someone white was never presented as a concern for these characters; only the fact that he is gay was referred to consistently. So, whereas Six Feet Under consistently narrative David and Keith as gay men, and therefore as a gay male couple, the show has failed to develop the two men as individuals or as a couple with a marked racial difference. In its unwillingness to even register Keith's racial identity, let alone explore it in narrative terms, Six Feet Under stubbornly conveys the message that only gender matters, not race.

We are told repeatedly during the first season, for instance, that Keith is a "proud gay man." But if Keith is a "proud gay man," is he also a "proud black man?" Curiously, on this last point the series maintains a steady silence. The writers refuse, for instance, to even consider how a particular gay man's lifelong experience with, for instance, anti-black bigotry may or may not influence the extent to which he is willing or unwilling to endure homophobia. Not only that, but the dialogue between David and Keith that follows the heated confrontation in the parking lot seems to imply that the motorist's comment was inspired solely by his antipathy towards gay men and not also, or even primarily, by the fact that one of these men happens to be black and one white. For what was it precisely that convinced the motorist Keith and David were gay couple in the first place? Neither man behaves in an especially flamboyant or swishy manner, two visual descriptors a heterosexist culture relies upon to maintain rigid distinctions between what it regards as stereotypical gay male behavior and the stereotypical behavior of the supposed straight male. But what if it was Keith's and David's racial difference that initially raised this man's suspicion?

At times, the color line becomes instrumental in making desire legible. Scholars have noted for some time that homosexual and interracial object choices have been conceptually linked in the dominant culture's visual economy as perverse deviations from more normative forms of sexual desire. As Siobhan Somerville has noted, "Racial difference performed an important visual function in . . . turn of the century American culture," one that has allowed racial differences between paired individuals to be[e] a marker for the sexual nature" of that pairing (34–35). Somerville's astute analysis might likewise be applicable, with only slight modification, to Keith's and David's incident with the bigoted motorist. Writes Somerville, "In effect, the institution of racial segregation and its cultural fiction of 'black' and 'white' produced a framework in which [a too intimate relation between blacks and whites of the same gender] became legible as 'persevering'" (35). In other words, Keith's and David's own racial difference is conceivably the very thing that, in the motorist's eyes, marked their alliance as anomalous, so that they were subsequently
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The New Queer Aesthetics on Television


