

Desire and the
“Big Black Sex Cop”:
Race and the Politics
of Sexual Intimacy
in HBO’s *Six Feet Under*

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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 precocious teenage daughter of the proprietors of a local funeral home, had

arrived to search for the remains of a human foot a former boyfriend had tossed from his car window after Claire had angrily stuffed it inside his locker in retaliation for his having bragged to classmates about their fetishistic sexual tryst. Keith, an LAPD police officer, who is a black gay man who just happens to be dating Claire's closeted brother David (Michael C. Hall), shows up separately to fulfill a promise he had made to David that he would try to locate the severed appendage before Claire got into any more trouble. Claire's delightfully knowing comment, anticipating Keith's description of the type of men he had dated before meeting David, makes spectacularly vivid the kinds of psychic risks to which many contemporary blacks are vulnerable in a white-dominated society that claims to be color-blind with respect to race, but which in reality is far from it. Claire surmises that those men wanted Keith to play the archetypal role of the hypersexual black stud of their fantasies and nothing more—a role that, we are to presume, David does not want him to play (at least not full-time).

Notably, Keith does not explicitly mention the racial identities of the men he dated prior to David. Claire simply assumes these men are white; either that, or she assumes that whatever these men's racial or ethnic identities happen to be they have already internalized dominant (i.e. white) cultural beliefs about the way black bodies signify in an antiblack culture like the U.S. After all, Claire's "Big Black Sex Cop" remark can only make sense to viewers, as indeed it can only make sense to Keith (who confirms its accuracy), if we are willing to acknowledge all that we know of the mythologized discourse that has surrounded the black body over time within colonial and U.S. racial regimes.

This unlikely conversation between and David's younger sister and Keith asks viewers to consider that Claire, and by extension *Six Feet Under*, offers Keith a progressive white vantage point for a critique of "color blindness." It is a matter of common knowledge that color blindness has been the dominant public understanding of race in the U.S. since the end of the Second World War, replacing centuries of the ideology of color-consciousness, which held that whites were superior in every way to other races, especially blacks. And while *Six Feet Under*, especially in those scenes with Keith, initially appears to offer viewers a trenchant critique of this present ideology, I will argue that the show's

representational politics has not completely departed from this dominant postwar strategy for dealing with race. While *Six Feet Under* would like us to believe that David is different from most of the other men Keith has dated, I want to argue that the show actually offers its viewers no concrete evidence in support of this claim.

As scholars have argued, one of the principal drawbacks of color blindness as a strategy for reconciling ourselves with an overly race-conscious past is that it represses rather than confronts and resolves racial tension, and the repressed always returns in less palatable ways. Because *Six Feet Under*, with few exceptions, suppresses verbal references to race while fully exploiting race's presence in the form of black/white visual differences, it allows race's unspoken absence to resurface in unexpected, even troubling, ways. Thus the narrative is engaging in a self-conscious effort to manage or contain otherwise problematic discourse about race that might prove disruptive to the specific brand of color blindness that underwrites its portrayal of Keith and David's relationship. This representational approach has led *Six Feet Under* to depict Keith and David reductively as a gay male couple rather than, what they appear to some viewers to be—a gay male interracial couple.

Taking Black Folks' Issues Seriously

Since its premiere on June 3, 2001, *Six Feet Under* has enjoyed both critical and popular acclaim. The mainstream press and the lesbian and gay media have consistently praised the series for its sensitive and progressive treatment of lesbian and gay concerns, and the show has garnered many nominations and awards. Yet the show has not been recognized by the NAACP Image Awards, which has overlooked the series in general and overlooked its lone black actor, Mathew St. Patrick, in particular. Perhaps this has more to do with the type of character St. Patrick portrays than with his acting ability, as homosexuality and black/white intimacy have long been controversial within black communities. The NAACP's failure to endorse of *Six Feet Under* in general and St. Patrick in particular could easily be attributed to both homophobia and mixophobia.

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 incorporated 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 perhaps 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 acknowledge, 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/queer theory overall, the "we," the "world" that most matters is a universalist 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 unmediated 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 instantiate[s] desire,” regardless of gender (36).

It is incumbent upon viewers as well to recognize that David’s outing not only reveals him as a gay man, but that it also reveals him as a particular kind of gay man — specifically, a “dinge 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* interpellate 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 interracial 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:

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’m even gonna get backup? We were stepped 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

when, in an interview with the black British filmmaker Isaac Julien, she asks: “[H]ow can we name the black desire of the white body without reinscribing the idea of black self-hatred or distaste for the black body?” (qtd in Julien and McCabe 127).

And yet at the level of the show’s verbal narrative such concerns are suppressed. As viewers, we are not asked to consider how having a white boyfriend might create anxieties for Keith, whose loyalties may not lie exclusively with the largely white gay community, but also with black heterosexual culture. Why the black heterosexual community? Because most black gay men are vulnerable not only to homophobia but also to racism due to the visibility of their black skin — which for some men supercedes knowledge of their gayness — many choose to take refuge from time to time in the black community, which is overwhelmingly heterosexual. As Cathy Cohen states, “The prospect of facing continuous residential, occupational, and social exclusion as a manifestation of widespread racism, even in primarily white lesbian and gay communities, underscores the importance of [lesbians and gay men of color] securing, often at very high stakes, feelings of safety and familiarity” (93). These “high stakes” very often translate into black lesbians and gays having to endure forms of homophobia from relatives, friends, and acquaintances in the black community. The small consolation for such men and women is the knowledge that at least the homophobia one suffers is not doubled by racism.

Six Feet Under at times attempts to manage or contain racial discourse by displacing verbal references to race onto references to some other, often related, textual concern. We can see evidence of this occurring throughout several episodes, the most notable perhaps in Episode Five when David and Keith argue once again over David’s struggles with being gay. This time the argument centers around David’s apparent need to keep the two men’s relationship a secret. Keith accuses David of taking one step forward when he finally comes out to his brother Nate, but then of taking “a giant leap backwards” when he refuses to allow Keith to accompany him to his family’s church and risk being identified by the congregation and his family members as gay. Stung by what he perceives to be an unwarranted attack on the depth of his commitment to Keith, David’s only response is to retaliate and wound his black boyfriend in

what he imagines represents a comparable site of vulnerability for him, his racial identity. “So now I’m a Nazi collaborator?” David asks, smugly. “You know a lot of African Americans might say the same about you being a member of the LAPD.”

On the one hand, David’s allusion to the controversy generated by the 1991 Rodney King beatings in Los Angeles and the subsequent trials, coupled with the extermination camps of the Third Reich, helps to place his conflict with Keith in a historically and culturally specific context — after all, some African American police officers were made to question their personal and professional loyalties during this admittedly trying period, just as some Jews were vilified for their collusion with Nazi war criminals during World War II. On the other hand, David’s attempt to equate these two scenarios with the tensions caused by his own ambition to be a deacon in the Episcopal church and his identity as a middle-class gay man is not only strained, but also arrogant and spineless. Keith’s devastating reaction to David’s cool logic is therefore entirely appropriate given the self-satisfied superiority his suddenly very white boyfriend has just exhibited. Hence, when Keith, after hearing this, leans in and shouts viciously into David’s face, “You fucking coward!” and then jumps into his SUV and drives out of the parking lot, the viewer is invited to share vicariously in Keith’s disappointment. But about what precisely is the audience supposed to be disappointed? Is it the fact that David is in such denial about his shame at being gay that he cannot begin to appreciate his boyfriend’s efforts to help ease him through the process of coming out, or that his shame is so totalizing it leads him, opportunistically, to make two false analogies that expose his naivete about that which matters most to Keith, a gay man and a person of color?

It is at this point that I suggest the show exposes its displacement of verbal energy about race onto other concerns that stand in or act as a surrogate for its suppressed discourse about race. For when David suggests that Keith may be in bed with the enemy for being a black police officer, his comment attempts to manage and contain the meaning of race the show exploits for its own liberal ends. In so doing, it simultaneously reveals that its preferred concept of race is exclusively manufactured for the benefit of its ideal viewers, individuals who are white, middle-class, and heterosexual and do not care to be implicated as racists. Within

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 no of the incest taboo and the phallic interjection 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, for instance, who may be less troubled by his homosexuality than by the fact 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 relevant. So although *Six Feet Under* consistently narrativizes 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 to 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 steely silence. The writers refuse, for instance, to even consider how a particular gay man's lifelong experience with, for instance, antiblack 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 a 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 become 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 'perverse'" (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

identified or, to use Althusser's term, "hailed," as gay men. Because *Six Feet Under*'s script fails to acknowledge that (in some instances at least) antiblack and antigay biases might be mutually constitutive, the show is unable to offer an explanation for Keith and David's identification as fags when, in truth, there is nothing in their gendered behavior to convey this idea. In this instance, gender performance is decentered as the privileged lens through which to make visible a sexual identity that might otherwise go unnoticed.

But if such an identity can become visible, even if at times that visibility is a misrecognized one — after all, not all mixed-race pairings of black and white men are inflected by eroticism, just as not all mixed-race pairings of same-race men and women are inflected this way — what language do we use to distinguish them from what they are not? In other words, does the language of color blindness foreclose such distinctions altogether, or can such a language be reconfigured to speak on behalf of such erotic entanglements, but in a way that acknowledges race rather than evades it? Moreover, by embracing a narrow understanding of color blindness and applying it in both institutional and interpersonal scenarios and suggesting that the best way to eradicate the challenges associated with race is to ignore them are we simply setting ourselves up for failure? Why not confront those challenges head-on and work to negotiate them ethically? In other words, why run from the very people we have made ourselves into?

The fact that *Six Feet Under* does not shy away from calling attention to Keith Charles' racial identity, even at the same time as it privileges his identity as a gay man, is not necessarily problematic on its face. After all, there are black Americans who choose to prioritize different aspects of their identities over race (see Conerly 1996; Scott 1994). What is a problem, however, is the show's tendency to isolate Keith from black institutions and individuals, as well as from black cultural references, in order to control and fix the meaning of blackness the show is willing to engage. Equally troubling is the show's occasional portrait of the unsettling impact Keith's very presence has on the numerous white characters with whom he interacts, including his boyfriend, David. Although some of this anxiety is intentional and therefore pleasurable for many viewers (present company included), much of this anxiety is certainly not

intentional, and for this reason it is deeply revealing. This latter anxiety exposes the show's stubborn adherence to a public understanding of race and color blindness, which, in its present form, is inadequate to the task of resolving the crisis of difference that has long plagued our collective national life. One way out of this current impasse (but by no means the only way) is for the show's creator and his team of writers to give themselves collectively up to their own anxieties as racialized citizens of this troubled republic. Doing so would mean simply allowing the many abbreviated eruptions of verbal references to racial sameness and racial difference that structure the show to run their logical course rather than doing as they have done, repeatedly ducking their heads in and out of the depths of race as if testing their toes in frigid waters. After all, some of us are already in the water, swimming, or, as the case may be, trying to keep ourselves from drowning.

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