

The Revolt of the **BLACK BOURGEOISIE**

THE BAD BOYS IN THE 'HOOD ARE THE IMAGE OF BLACK AMERICA. SOME BLACK AMERICANS ARE GETTING SICK OF IT. *By Leonce Gaiter*

AT A TELEVISION network where I once worked, one of my bosses told me I almost didn't get hired because his superior had "reservations" about me. The job had been offered under the network's Minority Advancement Program. I applied for the position because I knew I was exceptionally qualified. I would have applied for the position regardless of how it was advertised.

After my interview, the head of the department told my boss I wasn't really what he had in mind for a Minority Advancement Program job. To the department head, hiring a minority applicant meant hiring someone unqualified. He wanted to hire some semi-literate, hoop-shooting former prison inmate. That, in his view, was a "real" black person. That was someone worthy of the program.

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our true nature. At the junior high school I attended in the mostly white Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Md., a black girl once stopped me in the hallway and asked belligerently, "How come you talk so proper?" Astonished, I could only reply, "It's proper," and walk on. This girl was asking why I spoke without the so-called black accent pervasive in the lower socioeconomic strata of black society, where exposure to mainstream society is limited. This girl was asking, Why wasn't I impoverished and alienated? In her world view, a black male like me couldn't exist.

Within the past year, however, there have been signs that blacks are openly beginning to acknowledge the complex nature of our culture. Cornel West, a professor of religion and the director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University, discusses the growing gulf between the black underclass and the rest of black society in his book

Revolt of the Black Bourgeoisie

Leonce E. Gaiter. New York Times Magazine: January 26, 1994

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At a television network where I once

worked, one of my bosses told me that I almost didn't get a job because his superior had "reservations" about me. The job had been presented under the network's Minority Advancement Program. I applied for the position for which I knew my qualifications to be excellent. I would have applied for the position regardless of how it was advertised.

After my interview, the head of the department told my immediate superior that I wasn't really what he had in mind for a Minority Advancement Program job. No. For him, hiring a minority meant hiring someone unqualified. He wanted to hire some semi-literate who came shuffling into his office pulling hay out of his hair. That would have been a "real" black person. That would have been someone worthy of the program.

I had previously been confronted by questions of black authenticity. At Harvard, where I graduated in 1980, a white classmate once said to me, "Oh, but you're not really a black person, you know." No I did not. I asked

her to explain. She could not. She had known few black people before college, but a lifetime of seeing black people depicted in the American media had taught her that real black people talked a certain way and were raised in certain places. They could not stand as her intellectual equals or superiors. Any Afro-American who shared her knowledge of Austen and Balzac—while having to explain to her who Douglass and Du Bois were—had to be willed away for her to salvage her sense of superiority as a white person. Hence, the accusation that I was “not really black.”

But worse than the white majority harboring a one-dimensional vision of blackness are the many blacks who embrace this stereotype as our true nature. At the junior high school I attended in the mostly white Washington suburb of Silver Spring, Md., a black girl once stopped me in the hallway and asked belligerently, “How come you talk so proper?” Astonished, I could only reply, “It's properly,” and walked on. This girl was asking why I spoke without the so-called black accent pervasive in the lower socioeconomic strata of black society, where exposure to mainstream society is limited. This girl was asking, Why wasn't I impoverished and alienated? In her world view, a black male like me couldn't exist.

Within the past year, however, there have been signs that blacks are openly beginning to acknowledge the complex nature of our culture. Cornel West, a professor of religion and director of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University, discusses the growing gulf between the black underclass and the rest of black society in his book “Race Matters”; black voices have finally been raised against the violence, misogyny and vulgarity

marketed to black youth in the form of gansta rap; Ellis Close's book, "The Rage of the Privileged Class," which concentrates on the problems of middle- and upper-income blacks, was excerpted as part of a Newsweek magazine cover story; Bill Cosby has become a vocal crusader against the insulting depiction of African-Americans in "hip-hop generation" TV shows.

Yes, there are the beginnings of a new candor about our culture, but the question remains, How did one segment of the African-American community come to represent the whole? First, black society itself placed emphasis on the lower caste. This made sense because historically that's where the vast majority of us were placed; it's where American society and its laws were designed to keep us. Yet, although doors have opened to us over the past 20 years, it is still commonplace for black leaders to insist on our community's uniform need for social welfare programs, inner-city services, job skills training, etc. Through such calls, what has passed for a black political agenda has been furthered only superficially; while affirmative action measures have forced an otherwise unwilling majority to open some doors for the black middle class, social welfare and Great Society-style programs aimed at the black lower class have shown few positive results.

According to 1990 census between 1970 and 1990 the number of black families with incomes under \$15,000 rose from 34.6 percent of the black population to 37 percent, while the number of black families with incomes of \$35,000 to \$50,000 rose from 13.9 percent to 15 percent of the population, and those with incomes of more than \$50,000 rose from 9.9 percent to 14.5 percent of the black population.

Another reason the myth of an all-encompassing black underclass survives—despite the higher number of upper-income black families—is that it fits with a prevalent form of white liberalism, which is just as informed by racism as white conservatism. Since the early 70s, good guilt-liberal journalists and others warmed to the picture of black downtrodden masses in need of their help. Through the agency of good white people, blacks would rise. This image of African-Americans maintained the lifeline of white superiority that whites in this culture cling to, and therefore this image of blacks stuck. A strange tango was begun. Blacks seeking advancement opportunities allied themselves with whites eager to “help” them. However, those whites continued to see blacks as inferiors, victims, cases, and not as equals, individuals, or heaven forbid, competitors.

It was hammered into the African-American psyche by media-appointed black leaders and the white media that it was essential to our political progress to stay or seem to stay economically and socially deprived. To be recognized and recognize oneself as middle or upper class was to threaten the political progress of black people. That girl who asked why I spoke so “proper” was accusing me of political sins—of thwarting the progress of our race.

Despite progress toward a more balanced picture of black America, the image of black society as an underclass remains strong. Look at the local news coverage of the trial of Damian Williams and Henry Watson, charged in the beating of white truck driver Reginald Denny during the 1992 South-Central L.A. riots. The press showed us an African print-wearing cadre of

Williams and Miller supporters trailing defense attorney Edi M. O. Faal, Williams' defense attorney, like a Greek chorus. This chorus made a point of standing in the camera's range. They presented themselves as the voice of South Central L.A., the voice of the oppressed, the voice of the downtrodden, the voice of the city's black people.

To anyone watching TV coverage of the trial, all blacks agreed with Faal's contention that his clients were prosecuted so aggressively because they are black. Period. Reporters made no effort to show opposing black viewpoints. (In fact, the media portrait of the Los Angeles riot as blacks vs. whites and Koreans was a misrepresentation. According to the Rand Corporation, a research institute in Santa Monica, blacks made up 36 percent of those arrested during the riot; Latinos made up 51 percent.) The black bourgeoisie and intelligentsia remained largely silent. We had too long believed that to express disagreement with the "official line" was to be a traitor.

TV networks and cable companies gain media raves for programs like "Laurel Avenue," an HBO melodrama about a working-class black family lauded for its realism, a real black family complete with drug dealers, drug users, gun toters and basketball players. It is akin to the media presenting "Valley of the Dolls" as realistic portrayal of the ways of white women.

The Fox network offers a differing but equally misleading portrait of black Americans with "Martin." While blue humor has long been a staple of black audiences, it was relegated to clubs and records for mature black audiences. It was not peddled to kids or to the masses.

Now the blue humor tradition is piped to principally white audiences. If TV was as black as it is white—if there was a fair share of black love stories, black dramas, black detective heroes—these blue humor images would not be a problem. Right now, however, they stand as images to which whites can condescend.

Imagine being told by your peers, the records you hear, the TV shows you watch, the black "leaders" you seen on TV, classmates, prospective employers—imagine being told by virtually everyone that in order to be your true self you must be ignorant and poor, or at least seem so.

Blacks must now see to it that our children face no such burden. We must see to it that the white majority, along with vocal minorities within the black community (generally those with a self-serving political agenda), do not perpetuate the notion that African-Americans are invariably doomed to the underclass.

African-Americans are moving toward seeing ourselves—and demanding that others see us—as individuals, not as shards of a degraded monolith. The American ideal places primacy on the rights of the individual, yet historically, African-Americans have been denied those rights. We blacks can effectively demand those rights, effectively demand justice only when each of us sees him or herself as an individual with the right to any of the opinions, idiosyncrasies and talents accorded to any other American.