

---

## **“Mary don’t you weep,” and more struggles over sexuality, filth and salvation**

Diepiriye Kuku-Siemons

---

“Mary, don’t you weep. Oh Papa don’t you moan,” goes the old Negro Spiritual’s first few lines. For me, these hymns evoke spirituality and resistance simultaneous to the reality of slaves—the progenitors. Like Mary’s tears, these hymns reflect, contemplate and help make sense of life—whatever life may be. At least on the surface, this was the religion that the progenitors of these spirituals sang, in order to survive. The slave shared this religion with even the most brutal slave master, one who liberally dealt lashes, forced slaves to breed like steed, effortlessly sold off children, regularly raped women, denied paternity and with increasing intensity lynched and castrated men. Such a reality led many to plead for an afterlife as the only plausible relief from such circumstances, crooning “Soon—ah will be done wit’ da troubles of da world. Goin’ home to live with God.” These words solaced Blacks—to get on while retaining some sense of sanity in insane circumstances.

Viewing Christianity as an outsider has since my childhood been an obsessive pastime. Driving down Jefferson Street between downtown and the predominantly African-American, mixed-class “West End,” one experiences an awing institution of religion. This particular pattern is repeated throughout Black communities in America: A menagerie of massive

to mundane churches, all various protestant sects, spanning blocks along the broad road, each boasting massive, congregations and boisterous clergy—one of which my grandparents helped found. Domestic work was the work most available to Black women, and was fraught with the looming threat of sexual exploitation and the resentment from the masters' wives. Men were humiliated by indemnifying work and labor conditions that were unfulfilling and low-wage earning. Under and unemployment among Blacks continues to be exuberant. Like many of their contemporaries, my grandparents had transitioned from cotton fields to the urban south as soon as they could. After WWII, southern Blacks, many of whom had heard first hand account from former slaves, migrated north in hoards. In Kentucky, many flocks of church eventually congregated between 27th and 18th streets on Jefferson. For Blacks in the south, kin was understood and traced through church affiliation. Queries in our vernacular phrases like, "Whose your pastor," "Which church you 'long to," or "Which congregation you 'part of" pervade each new introduction. Churches serve as spiritual safe spaces of communal solace and mobilization. In fact, in the New World it was the only space where we could peacefully congregate.

Even as a non-Christian, the Christian ethos was inescapable. As a Black child in Kentucky, and educated in a schematized liberal, multi-cultural and artistic oriented school, I was constantly affronted with difference. The endeavor of that institution was to bring together so-called races and classes so divided across the city; less attention was given to religion, and even less to sexuality. Our teachers and curriculum overtly acknowledged and celebrated Jewish people as a minority, yet offered little education about Judaism beyond the superficial set of facts deemed necessary to know by the Euro-Christian hegemony—one which Blacks consistently subverted for its inequality, and yet strangely many buy into for its promise to reward discipline and diligence with power. The Euro-American

Christian ethos justified the exploitation and continued disempowerment of Black people in America as we were deemed descendents of Ham—the fallen son of Noah. Thunderous leaders of large local African-American congregations used the same Christian-fundamentalist doctrine to resist hate crimes and anti-discrimination in employment and housing initiatives to protect queer people that white supremacists use/d to justify Slavery, Jim Crow (American Apartheid), racial segregation, contemporary social segregation, discrimination, as well as the so called redemptive penal system. Now it seems as if the whole world looks and laughs at our American antics: The systematic race and class bias of our penal system contrast with pop cultural reward for the poor, the Black and the meager all just laughing and smiling on stage as if none of this has happened—as if systematic disenfranchisement were not the definitive basis for power and wealth in America. The rhetoric simultaneously encourages alterity while demonizing the Other.

By the mid 1980's multi-culturalism had become a national obsession, like a trend slowly taking hold in urban and eventually rural communities alike. I was raised Buddhist. My family is religiously mixed, which facilitated early acculturation to the idea of loving and respecting another despite fundamental, radically important theological and cosmological rifts and therefore responses to present day suffering. Confounding alterity in my world, at a very early age I became aware of what I then considered my 'deviant' sexuality. In my mind, it made sense that since people of such conflicting and deep ideological differences could seamlessly consider one another as kin, then wider acculturation of differences in sexuality should certainly follow in the very same thread.

By seventh grade, just when I started to actively contemplate and attempt to understand my homosexuality, my best girlfriend grew breasts. Frankly, by Thanksgiving Alicia was voluptuous. Her breasts were huge,

larger even than several of our teachers, most of whom were slender and white. I believe that more than a few resented this. It was as if the presence of my best girlfriend fed them angst—though just a child. I resisted believing that the hostility could be envy; for Alicia and I were only kids; I did not want to believe that we were threatening. Yet, I could not ignore how many adults began to relate to her with contempt. Her presence evoked a defensiveness and aggression.

I was always on the look out for the same response of contempt, which I generally only received from kids who were not in my immediate environment. I worked very hard to avoid provoking the hostility I often felt when meeting strangers—kids clearly the cruelest by virtue of being crude ambassadors of a culture of intolerance. As soon as they heard my funny, African name, or perceived that I was effeminate, their look and tone would shift and conveyed such great contempt. I developed many successful strategies to avoid this response from adults. Largely, adults recognized the general inappropriateness of contempt and hostility towards a child, notably one that showed reverence and respect to adults. Further, most adults with whom I interacted as a child were either aware or would be presented with my accolades: I was a ‘product’ of the most socially progressive and academically challenging public school in the city; I spoke vernacular and Standard American English both with great articulation; adults either exoticized or romanticized my African heritage; I belonged to an infamously inter-cultural and inter-class religio-spiritual community; I was active in various artistic, academic and athletic groups; and I did not shy away from engaging adults in conversation. Compared to most Black people in that city, I was relatively ‘progressive’ and well off in the localized cultural currency. To this day, most people I meet freely assume that I come from a solidly middle class family—known in urban India as “a good family.”

This is the social currency with which we contend in the South, and for which Black families nudge and fight over either collectively or discursively—hoping to gain acceptance, success and perhaps affirmation in a patriarchal masculine system. By virtue that patriarchy incessantly dehumanizes us and teaches us to mimic the same patterns of dominance/subordination, it is not our culture; it cannot be. Simply, it is not life affirming for women, people of color, and anyone else whose very existence challenges its status of control, despite any amount of cultural currency we may gain in order to play and succeed at the game.

Patriarchal masculinity is not just prejudice. Prejudices based on perceived racial or class differences, for example, inform everyday interactions—repeating and therefore reinforce the patriarchal power-oriented paradigm of dominance to mediate relationships. It extends beyond the ability that one individual has to oppress another—for example an adult slapping a child, an employer yelling at his/her employees, didactic teaching, or even lovers resolving conflict through deception, coercion or violence. Patriarchal masculinity informs each of these interactions, affirming individual power to oppress another through repeating the pattern of violence, intimidation, dominance/superiority and underlying subversion of intimacy in order to create and maintain (power) distance.

“Prejudice plus power,” is the ability and reasoning of one group of people to determine the destiny of another group of people. We have a culture of endemic violence, intimidation coercion and entitlement, manifest as systematic discrimination and oppression. It is not safe. It deems that even basic communication between people becomes a power play—a threat of humiliation, assertion of authority or even violence, where one must win and one must lose. All are armed and shielded, inevitably at some point turning those defenses and that armament inwards. Patriarchal masculinity often ‘reads’ this armor as cockiness on the part of women and

people of color, 'bitchiness' on Queer people, or even read as belligerence on Black men. Black women, of course, are simply wanton whores in that paradigm. This armor was, and still is necessary for any non-mainstream child growing up in America and especially in the so-called 'Commonwealth' of Kentucky. This type of democracy presupposes majority/minority polarization—someone is always bound to get screwed.

By the seventh grade, my best friend was suiting up with her armor as well. Her breasts and my effeminacy evoked negative sexual connotations and many responded as if we were very threatening. Attending the same school since the second grade, she and I had been longtime friends so it was easy for us to side with one another over the issue of public scrutiny of our emerging sexualities. Many of my earliest memories of any issues surrounding sexuality involve she and I gradually coming to terms with the discord between the innocence and curiosity with which we saw ourselves and what our world expected of us.

Even as early as the second grade when we referred to intercourse as "doin' the oochie coochie," most of my male classmates had already been socialized to relate to sex as a conquest over females—as if it were our duty as males to conquer in any way, by any means, her untamed sexual prowess. Perhaps we were curious and creative, for our discursiveness brought relief to otherwise muted hues, particularly in times and in places adverse to comprehensive sexual health education. Though at that age we lacked any language to discuss these circumstances outside of our juvenile understanding of racism, I believe that Alicia also felt that we were unduly treated. After all, just as in the praxis of racism, we had no say in the matter; it was simply nature taking its course. Alicia's family was also deeply Christian, and non-reticent to accept a universal hierarchy that simultaneously justified the system of oppression in which we are entwined, and offered no respite.

I will never forget one particular late autumn afternoon during English class. It must have been the last class of the day as Alicia and I had hurried through our assignments. We raced to the teacher's desk, handed in the papers and just as quickly returned to our seats, anxious to continue our usual chatter. In a hushed voice, Alicia revealed to me that her conservative Christian denomination neither fêted on Christmas and Easter nor worshipped any idols such as flags. I felt like swinging from the lights as she explained this, because finally there was someone who could articulate what I felt.

By then I was beginning to question patriotism and the purpose of the nation-state system; I was repulsed by its symbols, none of which reflected positive views of me or anyone like me. The whole thing seemed artificial—a sham. We all knew that Blacks were not even legally 100% human for most of our time here in the New World. She and I also talked about the 'August the Eighth', which is when we in Kentucky mark the Emancipation Proclamation Declaration. Alicia gave me a sly grin as I told her about my summer trips down to Hopkinsville, Kentucky to just be Black and celebrate 'August the Eighth' with other Black people for a week each year.

I was enamored at her rejection of the 'good ole boy' system. This is how we referred to what I now name as the white Christian patriarchal masculine middle-class monopolization of regional, state, county and local politics, much to the disenfranchisement of our communities and people. In Social Studies class, we had spent months on sanitized white-American history, weeks on European history, days on African-American history (as if it were somehow separate from 'American' history) and just hours on the histories and cultures of non-Western peoples. Though the city boasted neighborhoods and parks with names like Shawnee, Cherokee, Chickasaw, Seneca and Iroquois, there was not even a mention of the Trail of Tears in all of my education in Kentucky.

Most of what we learnt about the world outside of Western Europe, Russia, North America and Israel revolved around the colonial experience. Absolutely no information was presented in any of my public school education regarding non-white and non-wealthy people and places outside of the colonial experience. Hence, the “Third World” conditions in which poor Blacks in the West End of Louisville, poor whites towards the north, and the isolated southeast Asian slum in the south was all justified by this universal position of dominance of those seeking wealth at any expense.

Alicia realized that these slightly non-mainstream aspects of her life unclouded the lenses often worn by those in the world around she and I. We were minorities within minorities, in a place where we knew that we were expected to be different and to make a difference, by all of the adults in both our families and in school. Adults in our environment never accorded us the simplicity of ‘being’. Whenever we exited our homes, we carried the responsibility of representing. Right there, in the seventh grade, as Alicia fumbled through endless ways of folding her arms to hide her new chest, I realized that if I thought about boys the way that our guy friends boasted about their conquests over girls, I could somewhat relate to their juvenile sexual sentiments. Buried and hidden deep in the corners of my mind I started to eroticize males the way the world around me eroticized women and girls, and it felt good. Nonetheless, I knew that I did not (nor wish to) relate to conquering or boasting over my erotic interests.

Alicia lived in a family that staunchly discouraged the very thought of sex. Though my family was relatively forward about sexuality among young people, I never encountered an adult who was ready to approach the topic of homosexuality. Despite this, I knew that I was surrounded by a plethora of love. I had visited Alicia’s home several times after school, and knew her elder siblings who attended the same school. I realized that Alicia was insecure about any support for her searching for understanding. Though we

could not offer each other any information, we offered each other acceptance. In the circumstances in which we lived in Louisville, I have always been cognizant that I am extremely fortunate to have known such acceptance at such a young age. Clearly, Alicia helped to teach me to give that in return. We knew that we were vulnerable, but she helped train me to be tough in spite, and despite of it all. And, to act wicked and love every minute of it.

By the end of the seventh grade, it was clear that my best girlfriend would be labeled a problem child. Alicia had demonstrated several instances of violence in school. I knew that she was just acting out at a world that demonized her to her face, and continually ignored and effaced her voice. I wanted to act out too, but not for the strong presence of my mother and her determination to development me to know and love myself, relish in the freedom of mobility, mentally free of class oppression and lust to know and engage the world. Inevitably, I knew that I would leave Kentucky, which I did at 17 only months after high-school graduation. In the seventh grade, however, my best friend, the first person to ever stand up to those who would gay bash me, was not encouraged to develop her own self-esteem. Her mother had several children, no other parental or communal support but the church, which left little time for parenting past strict disciplining. This, it was clear even to a twelve year old, would not suffice to develop my best friend into a vibrant woman who would be comfortable with her body and her sexuality in a patriarchal, racist and misogynistic environment.

It was years after her expulsion from our school that I heard any concrete news about my best friend. Apparently, she had been shuffled from public school to public school, and had eventually shot a teacher in the ear at the school for ill-behaved students. This was a time and in a place where a child was more likely to have access to a gun than a condom. The word was that Alicia would be expelled from that school, which then left such youth with little opportunities in life in general, and a severely retarded

opportunity to earn a high school or equivalent degree. Our school system was apt, effective and efficient in producing poor, mal-educated, Black youth with criminal 'record and resonance' with local cops!

In our eighth grade Physical Education course, we were offered the new and improved sexual education curricula, which had been totally re-invented that year to include comprehensive contraception information, responding to the increasing incidence of teenage pregnancy and, at that time, the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. I started to pray that none of my friends would get pregnant, raped or contract some disease. Protectively, I even dated one girl whom I often walked home from school, knowing that with me she would never have intercourse, and that my masculinity had no intention of dominating, conquering or coercing her. Most of our peers were preyed upon by older, presumably heterosexual, boys; many such girls were easily coerced into unprotected sex. This pre-mature 'sexperimentation' and lack of appropriate information constituted their sexual debut. In retrospect, both the girls and their elder male counterparts lacked positive modeling of behavior in our environment as well as sufficient sexual guidance appropriate to their level of physical and mental maturity. I still remember that first girl to leave our school for the teen-mothers' school, which simply left me wondering who would follow suit.

Vicariously, I experienced many first, second, and perhaps tenth sexual experiences through the network I had developed by middle school. I believed, as I do now, that my female peers earnestly sensed my sexuality was not one of dominance vis-à-vis theirs and therefore concluded that my masculinity was of no threat to them as they would not be judged or labeled; this made me privy to their rather informative chatter. Certainly, I also wanted to date and rush to indulge my friends with the details of those crush-induced heart palpitations like everyone else in all my entire eighth grade class. Like everyone else, I may have also wanted to experiment with

sex. Having several slightly elder female cousins, I was also able to see how the onset of puberty and experimentation with sex played out at home. I collected a great many facts about female adolescent sexuality among urban Blacks in Louisville in the mid-eighties to nineties. This insight led me to conclude that my emerging sexuality was threatening and taboo.

In the early days, I worked tirelessly to maintain an image of a high-achieving, well-adjusted adolescent in order to detract from my sexuality and perhaps compensate (or my penance) for effeminacy. Sometimes I felt I should not have any sexuality, especially not one resembling my own homosexuality. I sustained this facade for many years to come. In my environment, women and girls demonstrated healthy relationships based on open communication amongst one another, mutual consent, acceptance, consistency and respect. With the notable exception of my mother's parents and their relationship with me, in my environment and even popular culture many relationships between men, women and men, adults and children, were all based on domination, and few did little to question that. By the time it became evident to me that I was gay, I had been able to surround myself with enough caring women and girls, be they family or friends, who were prepared to accept knowing about my gayness and continue to support me.

Every now and again, I think of my best, best, 'bestest' girlfriend, Alicia. On one trip home from college, I bumped into Alicia at a burger joint. There she was, still smiling, happy as ever to see me. I tried my best not to make her feel embarrassed. She had been bitterly cast away from the school where I later graduated as a star student. She was working the cash register at a second rate fast-food chain in an obscure neighborhood while I was away excelling at an exclusive small liberal arts college. We spoke for a while and caught up. I do not remember if she had any kids. Her high and full cheeks shone as I recounted the past few years of my life. Her ever cheerful, glossed-

over eyes betrayed the fact that she had faced her share of adversity is what short lives we had lived thus far.

**TWO ROADS DIVERGED...  
AND SORRY I COULD NOT TRAVEL BOTH<sup>†</sup>**

I left the greasy burger joint and hurriedly trailed down the street. Once I knew that I had cleared eyeshot of the restaurant, tears burst from my eyes, as they do now as I recount this story to myself. All Alicia knew that she could rely on was her church. Even that community was not able to supplement whatever tools she lacked to overcome her circumstances, which I first sensed when we both became conscious of our sexualities. Upon that chance meeting, Alicia showed me that her life was barely above water, fighting her environment for even a chance at breaking the cycle of poverty bestowed to us. Social rejection from peers and adults, as well as lack of positive role models appropriate information leads many to such an enormous deficit in self-confidence—a deficit that reduces life-choices. Cognizance of such a systematic deficit can lead to ambivalence or rage. I still try to sift through the factors that push the lives of two people in such different directions, whose lives cross paths for such a good while. We shared the scope of the planet and it as clear now as it was then that there exists little space for alterity. Yet, for those years in elementary and middle school however, we both had a chance to give and receive love.

---

<sup>†</sup> From Robert Frost's poem "The Road Less Traveled."