

2015

A Black Male

Roland Cody
Syracuse University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext>

Recommended Citation

Cody, Roland (2015) "A Black Male," *Intertext*: Vol. 23 : Iss. 1 , Article 17.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol23/iss1/17>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by SURFACE. It has been accepted for inclusion in Intertext by an authorized editor of SURFACE. For more information, please contact surface@syr.edu.



A BLACK MALE

Roland Cody Jr.

Figured worlds: We know they exist. We gave birth to them through our historical traditions, cultures, and actions. We continue to give birth to them through our consistent reenactments of those same traditions, cultures, and actions. But figured worlds change; they are as negotiable as our behavior in established traditions from years past. We learn, we adapt, we act, we negotiate, we learn again, we adapt again, and we act again. That's a figured world, and we all act out our roles in those worlds as is deemed socially acceptable, or based on societal norms determined by our past.

The roles in figured worlds have much to do with identity markers that we either embrace or shun, love or hate, acquire or are born with. Some identity markers we can choose, such as political identifiers like Democrat, Republican,

liberal, or religious identity markers such as Christian, Muslim, or Buddhist. From other identity markers, some more significant than others, there is no escaping. I wish to focus on one of the latter type, an inescapable identity marker with significant impact regardless of the figured world in which one who has it happens to be acting. I know because I am one: a black male.

I carefully choose the word "male" as opposed to "man" because I feel that the word "man" disregards youth. At this point in my life, I would use the word "man" to appropriately define myself, but because I don't want to dismiss my younger days I use the word "male," which incorporates all stages of my life: past, present, and future.

While this essay may be thought-provoking, eye-opening, and uncomfortable for many, I intend it to provide a



deeper understanding of what it means, and what it feels like, to carry such a strong and visible identity marker throughout the course of one's lifetime in any figured world.

I think the most appropriate way to begin my analysis is with an icebreaker, so here it is: "Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe." That quote from Kanye West was my answer when I asked myself, "If I had to summarize in one line what it means to be a black male in any figured world, what would I say?" *Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe.*

What does that mean? Well, the simplest interpretation of that line is that no matter where you are or how far you've made it, you're still an inferior being who will be treated as such; you are still a black male. Now, does that mean the definition of "nigga" is "a black male"?

No, not exactly. In fact, in figured worlds where "nigga" is an embraced term, anybody can be a nigga, including those who are male, female, white, black, Asian, etc. It doesn't matter, and the word is not used to be offensive. But in the specific line above, "nigga" does correlate more with the well-documented negative connotations of the word. Meaning, whatever progress you've made, you're still viewed as a no-good black male who is up to trouble. You still must face the same challenges as the black male in the projects or in jail. There is no difference: You're a black male, and that's what you'll always be, no matter what.

The question now is, *What is a black male?* What does it mean, exactly, to be a black male? "Black male" is a loaded identity marker, not just a descriptor of skin color and gender. To the black

male, it is an innate burden and an obstacle simply because of what it represents to others.

When I say “others,” I want to be careful not to overgeneralize or make assumptions, but I will state observations based on past experience. For instance, take the example of my walking onto a basketball court in an environment where I’m the only black male amongst a white crowd, which has happened many times before (especially on campus). I’ll more than likely be the first guy picked for a team, leading to a sigh of relief from anyone on my team. The members of the other team now believe they have to deal with a more rugged, physical player who’s assumed to be better and stronger than everyone else. Instantly, one of two things happens: Either the opposition plays tougher, hitting harder, shoving more, and being extremely aggressive, as if they have to prove to me that they will not be bullied, or they completely shy away, play timidly, and are extremely soft, in fear of going at me so hard that I might lash out and retaliate violently.

So with that information in mind, it’s up to me; it is my burden to ease the minds of everyone around me from the time I walk into the gym. I must smile and be overly friendly, laugh at everyone’s jokes, take some bass out of my voice, and ask politely to play the next game. That’s just to start: I must maintain this behavior, as well as other less aggressive characteristics on the court, for a certain period of time. Then I will notice a collective sigh of relief (sometimes literally), as if to say, “Oh, thank God, he’s not *that* type of black guy.”

Let’s take a look at the workplace. For the past five and a half years, I’ve

worked on Wall Street and in similar environments, where again I must adjust dramatically in order not to be considered a threat in some way. I am spoken to more politely than others in the office so that the person speaking to me won’t feel that they’re stepping on my toes and, again, fear that I might lash out violently. I now find myself in many instances fearful of the consequences of the fears of others because of my identity as a “black male.”

The black male does not have the luxury of “being himself” without penalty, mostly because “himself,” in most figured worlds, is the wrong thing to be.

It has become rather popular and a cliché for black males to use phrases like “I can’t do that, because I’m black.” To some that may seem silly or exaggerated, but to black males, it is very true.

Let’s look, for instance, at the case of Trayvon Martin, a young black male who was killed for what most in the black community would consider “just being black.” As I mentioned before, being a black male is a burden, and unfortunately for Trayvon Martin, maybe at such a young age he was not yet aware of the responsibility that came with that burden: the responsibility to ease the minds of those around him. Sometimes that includes taking off your hoodie, and certainly it means not running at night with it on, especially not in certain communities. It doesn’t matter if it’s raining and you’re trying to make it home to see a basketball game. To that a black male would say, “I can’t do that, because I’m black.”

How about being at a restaurant and, toward the end of your meal, getting up and going to the bathroom? I can’t do that, because I’m black. Sometimes I try

it just to see if anything has changed, but no, the waiters and owners still watch from a distance or rush to the table to make sure I'm not attempting to run out on the bill. So what's my responsibility as a black male? I first call over a waiter and ask for the bill, then randomly blurt out that I'm going to head to the restroom while they bring out the check. That eases their minds.

Assuming the responsibility of easing the minds of others around you as a black male is not easy, but it is necessary if you want to be treated fairly—or sometimes, as in Trayvon Martin's case, if you want to live. It comes with much practice, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom. Some are better at it than others. But I can guarantee you that any successful black male has mastered the art of easing the minds of people around him.

It's as if a pit bull were sat in the middle of a room full of people: Nobody would make any sudden movements until the dog showed signs that it was not like other pit bulls they had heard stories of

or seen on TV. For some, however, there is never enough proof. As Kanye said, "Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe."

Until this point I've focused for the most part on how black males are perceived by others who are not black males, but what about how black males are perceived by other black males—the black male who hasn't "made it" versus the black male who has?

Most who've "made it," as I mentioned before, know how to ease the minds of others around them. That includes the minds of other black males. I myself haven't yet "made it" in the sense of being extremely financially successful, but I am successful in the sense that I've "made it" out of the projects from which I came to a corporate job and a private university.

So how does that call for me to ease the minds of other black males back at home who haven't "made it"? Well, with them, it's almost the opposite of what I do elsewhere. I toughen back up, loosen up the tie, put the bass back



in my voice, get more aggressive, talk more loudly, change my language back to what I'm accustomed to, and don't talk about all I've learned elsewhere, because that's irrelevant to where I am now. This switch, this easing of minds, is still a survival tactic; it's still not easy, but it's necessary if you want to be treated fairly—and yes, sometimes even live—even amongst your own.

There was a kid who grew up in the projects with me—a black male, a very talented basketball player who was on scholarship to play for a Division 1 school. My guess is that he wasn't aware of his responsibility to ease the minds of his fellow black males, because he came off as arrogant, as if he thought he was better than everyone else back at home. They cut off his legs, as if to tell him, "Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe"—and don't you forget it.

Whenever I come home from school, everyone greets me with open arms. They call me "College": "Yo, that's my man College right there! You back, my nigga? You not too good yet?"

That's what they say. My response? "Of course I'm back, nigga! Where the fuck else I'ma go? This home." I think I've gotten pretty good at it. My mom tells me to be careful when I'm home, stay prayerful, and be smart. She's well aware of the burden I carry and the responsibility that comes with it, as is my father.

I look at successful black males on television such as Stephen A. Smith, a sports broadcaster for ESPN who is one of the two most notable faces on the very popular morning show *First Take*. Often on *First Take*, they discuss topics dealing with race and perception in America. On such occasions, Smith demonstrates knowledge of his responsibilities as a black male. In a recent episode, he said, "...I understand that ... [judging] a book by its cover is wrong, but it's also reality, and you have to deal with that. And as a result, when I sit here on national TV every morning, and I am a black man who is educated and who understands the porosity of opportunity that ex-



ists out in this world for us...and we complain in our community about the absence of opportunities accorded to us in comparison to other groups that exist in this country.... Well, what do we do to facilitate that? If you come across, and the imagery that you provide, is not something that ingratiates yourself with a potential employer, where does that leave you? I feel an obligation to react to that and to make sure that I present myself in a fashion that, dare I say, is receptive to corporate America, because I understand the importance of imagery."

The quote above highlights my argument regarding the responsibility of every black male to ease the minds of the people around him, or as Smith put it, to "change their perception by [his] presentation." Smith also speaks on the show about how he talks, dresses, and acts differently when he goes back home. It's not to say that black males are the only ones who act differently at work than outside of work or differently at school than outside of school. But such drastic change and the reason for it is something to which not everyone can relate.

I also look at other notable black male figures such as Sean Combs or Sean Carter, both of whom made their names in hip-hop, which is a very aggressive culture and a predominantly black male industry in which the street life and culture is praised and rewarded. In the hip-hop world, Combs goes by "Diddy" and Carter goes by "Jay-Z," and they display images and lifestyles that are popular in the hip-hop world. However, in the course of other business ventures such as buying sports teams and owning vodka lines,

Macy's clothing brands, and television stations, they drop their stage names, put on suits and glasses, and change their language, all of which allows them to be successful in other areas.

That said, however, there is still seemingly a "ceiling" for black males. Kanye West refers to this in his popular rants about trying to break into the fashion industry. He talks about making a lot of money but still nothing in comparison to the one who signs his checks, and how the ceiling created by his identity marker as a black male will probably never allow him to be the one who signs the checks for future Kanye Wests. Again, "Even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga in a coupe."

With all of the boundaries, burdens, and responsibilities of being a black male, what does it all mean? I have discussed shifting from one figured world to another: on campus, on the basketball court, at work, and at home, and how the changes in language, attitudes, attire, and overall aura are necessary for fair treatment and, in some cases, survival.

Where does the black male receive a break? Where is the black male safe? Who is the black male, really, when he has to change and adapt no matter where he happens to be in order to be successful or survive? In what figured world is the black male not seen as a black male? As I mentioned at the very beginning, for some identity markers, there is no escape; there is one inescapable identity marker with significant impact, no matter what figured world one with it happens to be acting in. I know because I am one: a black male.