

The Front Page

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On the Down Low with Keith Boykin

By Andrew Davis
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Ask most people to define someone who is on the down low, and they are most likely to say that the term describes a Black man who's dating a woman but is secretly having sex with other men. However, activist-writer Keith Boykin says that the definition is certainly more complex than that.

In *Beyond the Down Low: Sex and Denial in Black America*, Boykin examines the social and cultural forces behind the "down low" phenomenon. Among the specifics analyzed are media-generated misconceptions; African-American women and HIV; and even the history of being secretive and unfaithful. In addition — in a move that is sure to generate buzz — Boykin criticizes J. L. King and his work, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Men Who Sleep with Men*. Among other things, Boykin says that King spreads misinformation by using incorrect statistics and feeding into stereotypes of Black men.

Boykin recently spent a few moments with me, talking about everything from public policy issues to the joy of iTunes.

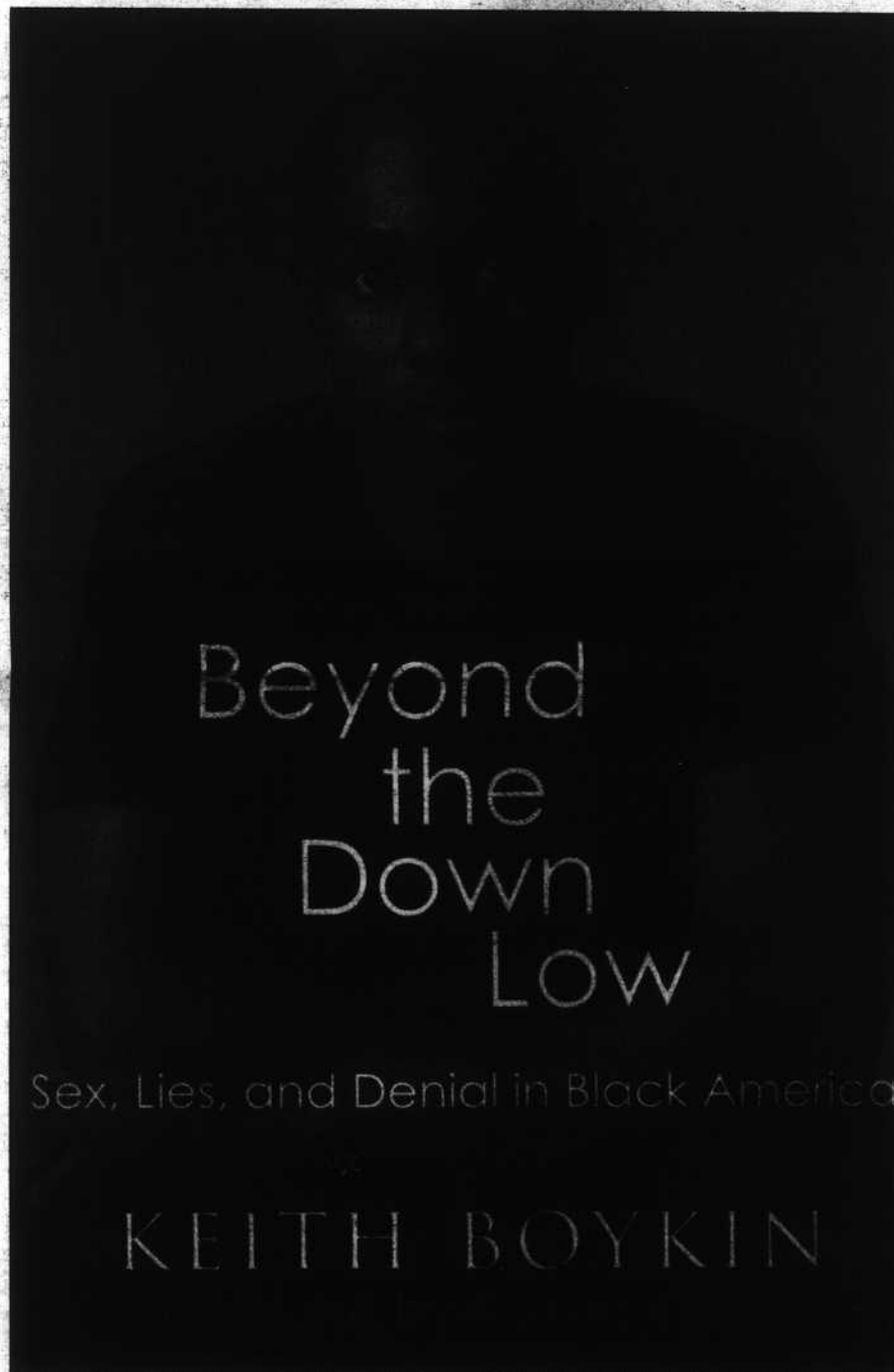
Andrew Davis: Keith, I found this book hard to put down. No matter how you feel about the subject, it seems like everyone should find this book intriguing.

Keith Boykin: Thank you. It's actually funny to hear that because my first book was so serious. This book shows who I am and how I've changed. I had just graduated from law school when I wrote the first book and I tried to write some intellectual legal tome. When I wrote this book, I just had a message that I wanted to communicate as thoroughly as possible and do it in a personal and interesting way.

AD: This book challenges the actual meaning of being on the down low.

KB: When I first heard about the down low years ago, I didn't know what it meant. I heard people use the term in entirely different ways. Some used it when talking about Black men who had relationships with women and who had sex with men. However, I knew other people who were clearly gay — and had no relationships with women — who also said they were on the down low, too. So there was a lot of confusion regarding what the term meant.

I explore the different definitions of



being on the down low in the first chapters of the book. Do we have a common definition? I come to the conclusion that there is no single definition of the term; the media has created its own definition and that's the one I try to focus on.

AD: It's pretty interesting where you have the exercise where you ask the reader to look at several different personal profiles and determine who's on the down low.

KB: Yes, because none of those people could be on the down low, depend-

ing on your definition. None of them meets the classic definition, which is an HIV-positive Black male who has sex with men while having relationships with women.

AD: You know, I really hadn't heard that being HIV-positive was part of the classic definition.

KB: Well, nobody specifically defines it that way — what the mainstream media does is assume that [being HIV-positive] is part of the case. Media stories say that men on the down low are

spreading AIDS to Black women: "Be careful of men on the down low because they might infect you." The reason that they don't define it that way is because there is no evidence to prove that men on the down low are any more likely to be HIV-positive than anyone else. However, they clearly assume that that's the case because all these articles — and even the dedication of J. L. King's book — state that Black men on the down low are responsible for the AIDS epidemic.

AD: A sentence in your book basically states that if white men on the down low didn't cause a new outbreak of AIDS in the white community, then maybe it's the same in the Black community.

KB: Yes, and that's a semi-rhetorical statement because we don't really know the answer to either one. However, no one really investigates white male sexuality in terms of the down low because it hasn't been pathologized that way.

AD: I like the fact that you discuss the history of the down low. While the term may be new, the act certainly isn't.

KB: Oh no, no, no. That's what so amazing to me. How did this story come up out of nowhere? Everyone knows that homosexuality and bisexuality have been around since the beginning of time — and everybody knows that a lot of gay and bisexual men don't identify themselves that way. So what's the big news flash?

That's something that's weird to me. When J. L. King's book came out, he was basically creating a news flash, saying "You have to worry about this." I suspect that there'll be new books out repeating that. What makes my book different is that it doesn't assume that being on the down low is new — and it says that what we've been told isn't necessarily true. It's a difficult task to calm people down after they've already been alarmed.

AD: The chapter on songs that deal with cheating (and being on the down low) is also pretty interesting. For example, there's the classic "Me and Mrs. Jones."

KB: [Sings the song's title.] Yeah, I hadn't even thought about that until I started writing the book. That chapter was the most fun to write.

AD: I can believe it.

KB: I think I enjoyed it too much. I went crazy with iTunes. I went on the

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