

# BLACK GAYS, LESBIANS FEEL TWICE OPPRESSED

By ISAIAH J. POOLE

One of my most memorable experiences covering the 1988 presidential campaign was one which demonstrated how pervasive and pernicious homophobia can be — even among the seemingly most “enlightened” in our press corps.

Of course, the “press bus” on presidential campaigns is legendary for being the place where the most sacred of cows are verbally slaughtered in the most brutal of ways, not so much out of mean-spiritedness but as a humor relief valve for the pressures that build during an arduous campaign schedule.

But that was no consolation to me the Sunday evening the press corps covering the Jesse Jackson campaign during the California primary boarded buses to attend a campaign event at a gay bar — and some of them promptly engaged in a round of harsh, deprecating gay jokes.

A small number of reporters opted not to even go to the event because it was at a gay bar (the “Catch One,” a popular black establishment). A few others spent much of the ride making jokes, about AIDS, homosexuals and manhood, which I hardly remember, and are not worth repeating in any event.

The one thing I do remember is my emotions. I was first angry that these reporters, whom I had come to know and respect not only as solid professionals but as caring people, could so easily slip into callousness.

They, of course, did not know that one of the targets of their brutal humor was on the bus with them, which led to my second emotion, one of frustration. I wanted to stand up in the middle of the bus to confront my colleagues and say, “Listen, as a gay man I find your jokes offensive.



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For one thing, I have worked side by side with all of you without threatening your health or your manhood. And many of you respect my work. Well, you should know that this man whom you have worked with and accept as a fellow professional is a gay man who demands respect as a gay man. And if you want to sit around and make fun of gay people, know that you are also making fun of me.”

I didn't make that speech. I now wish I had, even though it might have cost me some of the camaraderie I enjoyed during the campaign. Many of the reporters on the bus who thought that homosexuals are worth little more than being the butt of jokes are black professionals who would not tolerate “nigger” jokes. We as black professionals compromise our claims to sensitivity and fairness when we will not allow others to have what we demand for ourselves — and we need to be confronted when that happens.

## Will they come to my aid?

The experience in Los Angeles also raised anew a question I have had in my mind since I became active in the National Association of Black Journalists and co-founded the Washington Association of Black Journalists. I know these organizations will come to my defense if I am discriminated against because I am black. But will they come to my aid if I am discriminated against because I am gay — even though both forms of discrimination have the same root and have the same effect?

Minority journalism organizations, though they are at the vanguard of the crusade for justice and equity in the media, have yet to answer that question. A simple declarative statement from these organizations that says that our professional sphere — from the newsroom to the press plane — must be as free of discrimination, harassment and insensitivity against gay men and lesbians as we demand it to be for members of racial minorities and women is an overdue first step.

Black gays and lesbians often feel a “double oppression” — they feel disadvantaged by the dominant white society but they also feel oppressed by their own black community, which has historically adopted cultural norms often harsher than those in the white community, isolating and destroying the self-esteem of gay men and women. We in the black community must face squarely our role in that double oppression, declare it to be incompatible with our claims for justice and human dignity, and treat gay men and women with the respect and caring that we demand for every other member of the human race.

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