

The Love That Dared Speak
By Craig Washington

By now, like me you do not have to be a WNBA follower or a sports fan to know who Houston Comets forward Sheryl Swoopes is. As the most prominent athlete to have ever come out while active, moreover in her prime, Swoopes has set a historical precedent of multiple relevance. She is also the first major Black sports figure male or female to speak openly about her homosexuality and the first Black lesbian whose coming out has garnered this level of attention. As with any noble act of defiance, her declaration reveals far more about our society than it does her.

I find it hard to feel anything simple or pure about this story beyond my sheer admiration for this champion and her partner Alisa Scott. As a notoriously angry Black homosexual in America, I feel like I should feel like dancing in the streets and waving a Swoopes flag in every sports bar in the country. I have not gotten there yet and I do not know if I will ever go. I have grown impatient with age and find it rather absurd that in 2005, this is even newsworthy, if not a cause for celebration. The fact that it is, is a national embarrassment that substantiates the banality of bigotry. In short, I am both overjoyed and pissed off that this is such a big deal.

I have not been quite so divided since Oscar night 2002, when both Halle Berry and Denzel Washington took the high honors so long denied their predecessors and their peers. As Halle's tearful exuberance was counterbalanced by Denzel's elegant nonchalance, my own elation was diluted as I could not ignore the deplorable history that made their victories so goddam historical in the first place.

WNBA president Donna Oreander and Comets coach Van Chancellor have publicly applauded the superstar and while their support may be truly heartfelt, it is also in their financial interest to come out cheering for their unrivaled top draw. Let us not forget that this is the same WNBA that marketed Swoopes while pregnant and married to help "heterosexualize" its image. Many heterosexuals have already criticized Swoopes for inappropriately sharing her "personal life". Her ex-husband released a statement admonishing the public to consider that "there is an 8-year-old child (their son Jordan) that will undoubtedly receive attention because of his mother's pronouncement regarding her lifestyle." A friend told me that one popular Black radio mogul has questioned whether Swoopes should still be considered an appropriate role model for young Black girls.

In another not so long ago time, heterosexuals would have come for Swoopes en masse like the torch bearing villagers in "Frankenstein". It may seem a sign of progress that many of today's homophobes attempt to mask their anti-gay hostilities by either minimizing ("everybody knew, so why did she bother?") or exaggerating ("how many millions of young WNBA fans will turn gay this week?") the impact of gay celebrities coming out. But such attempts to appear "tolerant" only forestall the terrifying reckoning

from which all bigots shield themselves with the illusion of normalcy. It is that undeniable truth that, as Cornell West suggests, underneath our dresses and our business suits, we are all funky creatures.

If heterosexuals are so concerned about the “attention” that Swoopes’ son will receive, they have an opportunity to cultivate a society in which little Jordan will be affirmed as the fortunate child of a courageous, loving mother. Those who challenge her legitimacy as a role model might reflect on the honesty and dignity she has displayed which place her head and shoulders above countless narcissistic hetero male athletes whose often dirty drawers are worshipped. In the midst of the blitz, we may wonder if Swoopes’ coming out will make a difference to a 14-year-old Black lesbian in the West End who does not possess a multi-million dollar talent for which her “lifestyle” might be pardoned. I have faith that it will, that in some indirect and immeasurable way, it must. “I wish as a society, as a world, that this wouldn’t be an issue anymore. Unfortunately, it is,” Swoopes told an interviewer. I could not have said it any better.

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