

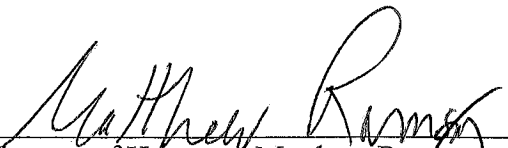
Exploring Men "On the Down Low": Race, Sexuality, and HIV in the Twenty-First Century

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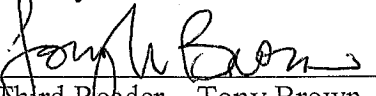
On the basis of this thesis defended by the candidate on April 28, 2014
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Abbreviations

AIDS	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
MSM	Men who have Sex with Men
MSMW	Men who have Sex with Men and Women
YAAMSM	Young African American Men who have Sex with Men

In the twentieth century it has become almost impossible to moralize about epidemics—except those that are transmitted sexually.

—Susan Sontag, *AIDS and Its Metaphors*

Introduction

When the AIDS epidemic emerged in America at the beginning of the 1980s, the disease seemed particularly suited to an extra-medical, moralizing discourse. The gradual understanding that HIV was sexually transmitted led many Americans to respond with anger, disgust, and condemnation, and people with AIDS often received little sympathy, even as they faced a condition with no known cure or reliable treatment. This fear and hostility arose from multiple sources. As a health crisis which claimed an exponentially larger number of lives, “AIDS ma[de] painfully explicit the limits of our ability to intervene against the course of the biological world.” Despite the progress of modern medical science, it would take years before understanding of the epidemic evolved beyond the knowledge that it spread through “bodily fluids,” a euphemistic phrase that nonetheless failed to contain the socially and morally loaded connotations evoked by the more descriptive terms “blood” and “semen.” Coupled with this medical distrust was the project of religious, political, and social conservatives, who attempted to control AIDS through moral, rather than medical, means.¹

The stigmatization attending the epidemic and its victims was facilitated by the sexual identity of individuals at the center of the American epidemic: gay men. Epidemiologists first found AIDS in the bodies of urban, gay males, and suggested there was a connection “between

¹ Allan M. Brandt, “AIDS: From Social History to Social Policy,” in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, ed. Elizabeth Fee, Daniel Fox, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), 166-167. One of the manifestations of this moral approach to was opposition to safe-sex education and condom use by the Catholic Church and Senator Jesse Helms, among others. To them, encouraging abstinence, heterosexuality, and monogamy was considered more important than promoting preventative safe-sex practices.

some aspect of the homosexual lifestyle” and the disease.² It was not until March 1983 (nearly two years after AIDS was first identified in June 1981) before the “risk categories” for individuals were expanded from gay males to four groups: homosexuals, heroin-addicts, hemophiliacs, and Haitians—colloquially referred to as the “4H’s.”³ Unfortunately, these four categories had the consequence of obscuring the ways in which HIV was transmitted. Assigning risk to identity (gay men, heroin-addicts) as opposed to behaviors or actions (unprotected anal sex, intravenous drug use) implied that simply being a gay man meant one was at risk for infection, regardless of one’s sexual behavior.

The news media, to the extent that it covered the early AIDS epidemic at all, tended to focus initially on white gay men, but depicted them more often as carriers rather than as victims, making habitual reference to the disease’s “origins” in the gay community.⁴ Although the media soon shifted their focus away from gay men,⁵ the association between the disease and white, gay men persisted. Medical discourses again solidified this connection. Prior to the term “Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome” became widely used, some officials referred to the disease as GRID—“Gay Related Immune Disorder.” Though the term was quickly abandoned, the

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “*Pneumocystis* Pneumonia --- Los Angeles,” in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 30, no. 21, (June 5, 1981): 1-3. Last accessed November 11, 2013. <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/june_5.htm>. Some scholars argue that medial officials may have focused so heavily on gay men because they underestimated the early effects of AIDS on drug users, whose deaths may wrongly have been attributed to drug overdoses. See Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), esp. “Invisible to the Centers for Disease Control,” 119-148.

³ Gerald M. Oppenheimer, “Causes, Cases, and Cohorts: The Role of Epidemiology in the Historical Construction of AIDS” in *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, ed Elizabeth Fee, Daniel Fox (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), 53; 60.

⁴ For an analysis of broadcast television news, see David C. Colby and Timothy E. Cook, “The Mass-Mediated Epidemic: The Politics of AIDS on the Nightly News Network.” In *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, 84-122. Many activists and scholars have drawn critical attention to the lack of coverage AIDS received in the early years of the epidemic. See Randy Shilts, *And the Band Played On* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2007). Originally published 1987.

⁵ A media study by the Kaiser Foundation found that in terms of news media, gay men represented 100% of the affected population covered in 1981, but only 5% in 1986; gay representation in the media never rose above 5% again. Mollyann Brodie, et. al, “AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic,” *Supplement to the March/April 2004 issue of Columbia Journalism Review*: (2004):1-8.; data on page 5. Colby and Cook argue that broadcast media quickly moved to a focus on “innocent victims” of the AIDS epidemic, such as hemophiliacs; implicit in this move was the idea that because gay men could adjust their sexual behavior, they were somehow guilty (98).

connection between gay men and this mysterious disease did not leave popular imagination as readily.⁶ As Cindy Patton argues in *Inventing AIDS*, the boundaries between disease and the bodies of the infected are often blurred, as infected individuals symbolically *become* the disease.⁷ Making the distinction between all gay men, and those gay men infected with AIDS, was thus difficult for many Americans. Homosexuality has long been conceptualized as a physiological or psychological illness (homosexuality was considered a mental illness by the American Psychiatric Association until 1973), and AIDS literalized these understandings of gays as diseased. Because the symptoms of AIDS frequently manifested in highly visible ways on the bodies of the infected, Patton's claim illustrates how discomfort around disease and sexuality combined to stigmatize non-infected gay men as potentially infected. Additionally, the popular connection between HIV and homosexuality was a stigma for all individuals, regardless how they were infected or their sexual identity.

In addition to news and medical discourses, a number of other media reinforced this association between gay men and AIDS. Popular culture is a prominent example, as gay men were quick to respond to the AIDS epidemic through artistic works such as novels, short stories, and plays.⁸ Even when gay men were not the primary creative force behind these artistic works, they were overwhelmingly the *subjects* of AIDS stories, especially in film.⁹ The 1993 movie *Philadelphia* exposes this focus. The film relays the fictional story of a white gay man, Andrew Beckett, who is fired from his job due to his seropositive status and the homophobia of his

⁶ Oppenheimer, "Causes, Cases, and Cohorts," in *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, 63.

⁷ Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hal, 1990), 55. Emphasis is Patton's.

⁸ See, for example, Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, especially *Babycakes* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984). The story was originally serialized in the *San Francisco Chronicle* in 1983. For a more complete list of artistic works that engaged with HIV/AIDS during the first decade of the epidemic, see the "Annotated Bibliography" in both Judith Laurence Pastore (ed.), *Confronting AIDS Through Literature*: (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993); and *Writing AIDS*, ed. Timothy F. Murphy and Suzanne Poirier (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁹ Kylo-Patrick R. Hart, *The AIDS Movie* (London: Routledge, 2000).

business partners. Although Beckett is gay and has a romantic partner, the film largely sanitizes the relationship: filmed scenes between Beckett and his lover exhibiting physical affection and lying in bed together were cut from the final product.¹⁰ Although gay men contributed many enduring works of art exploring the HIV/AIDS epidemic—Tony Kushner’s epic play *Angels in America* is one of the most popular and critically acclaimed—their contributions were frequently overshadowed by works made by mainstream artists; *Philadelphia*, for instance, made over \$200 million dollars at the box office. As we see with *Philadelphia*, while white gay men provided the primary subject of AIDS-related media, they were often unable control the narrative that formed around them.

Gay men also invited connections to the disease through their health service, advocacy, and activist groups, such as Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP, often with support from lesbian women.¹¹ On the one hand, these artistic and advocacy projects managed, somewhat ironically, to further the association between the gay, white male body and AIDS. As news and medical discourses described gay men as “diseased,” gay men’s public responses helped construct them as centrally located in the epidemic. On the other hand, this owning of the disease empowered the gay community: gay men grew more knowledgeable about the disease, gained experience in service organizations and social organizing, and mounted successful educational and activist campaigns. To borrow historian Dennis Altman’s phrase, AIDS provided gay men “legitimatization through disaster.”¹² While their action threatened to bind associations between white gay men and HIV/AIDS, it also brought them a form of respectability. As a group, they

¹⁰ *The Celluloid Closet*, directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (1996; Culver City, VA: TriStar Pictures, 2001), DVD.

¹¹ For a history of ACT UP, see Debora B. Gould, *Moving Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009). The documentary film *How to Survive a Plague*, dir. David France, (IFC/Sundance Selects: 2012), is particularly illustrative, featuring primary footage from number of ACT UP’s attention-grabbing and wildly successful protests.

¹² Dennis Altman, “Legitimation through Disaster: AIDS and the Gay Movement,” in *AIDS: The Burdens of History*, 301-315.

pressured the government to recognize and negotiate with previously-ignored gay organizations, while also increasing the amount of funding and resources, public and private, dedicated to researching and treating HIV/AIDS.¹³ In his moving and award-winning play, *The Normal Heart* (1985), author and activist Larry Kramer argues “Being defined by our cocks is killing us.”¹⁴ An important figure in the history of AIDS activism—he co-founded both Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP—Kramer recognized the importance of organizing the gay community beyond the bathhouse culture birthed by the sexual liberation movement of the 1970s. Through the gay response to AIDS, Kramer seems to have gotten his wish: the epidemic mobilized the gay community into a more organized collective that increasingly demanded social acceptance and packed formidable political power.¹⁵

Although the white gay community responded to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in a way that ultimately led to political gains for the LGBT community and to the dedication of more government resources to combatting the disease, other communities were reluctant to “own” HIV in the same manner. Black communities, in particular, were quite slow to respond to the epidemic. As scholars have noted, there was not a literary or artistic engagement with the disease in African American literature comparable to the response by white gay men.¹⁶ Rather, as sociologist Cathy Cohen argues in her pioneering study of AIDS in the black community in America, African American leaders redrew “the boundaries of... ‘true’ blackness,” excluding black intravenous drug users and homosexuals from “indigenously constructed definitions of

¹³ Altman, “Legitimization through Disaster,” (313). See also, James W. Jones, “The Sick Homosexual: AIDS & Gays on the American Stage & Screen” in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature*, 103

¹⁴ Larry Kramer, *The Normal Heart* (New York: Samuel French, 1985), 115.

¹⁵ Much of Kramer’s advocacy works is premised on the importance of gay’s recognizing their potential political power. See, for example, “1,112 and Counting” in *New York Native*, Issue 59, March 14-27, 1983. Reprinted in *Reports from the holocaust*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1989) 33-51.

¹⁶ Judith Laurence Pastore, “What Are the Responsibilities of Representing AIDS?” in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature: The Responsibilities of Representation*, 16-35.

black group identity.”¹⁷ By rejecting certain members of the black community who engage in morally-suspect behavior (drug use, homosexuality), Cohen argues that black leaders participated in the historical project of trying to “‘clean up’ the image of sexuality in the black community,” as a defense against a historical and widespread societal racism.¹⁸ Cohen is not alone in her assessments, and other scholars have reached similar conclusions about homophobia in black communities, and a reluctance to “own” the epidemic. Writing in 1989, scholar Harlon Dalton argued in “AIDS in Blackface” that, “the black community’s impulse to distance itself from the epidemic is less a response to AIDS, the medical phenomenon, than a reaction to the myriad social issues that surround the disease and give it meaning.”¹⁹ Dalton and Cohen, writing 10 years apart, come to similar conclusions about how responses to AIDS in black communities have less to do with the medical factors of the epidemic, and more with social and moral discourses surrounding AIDS, such as debates about homosexuality, IV drug use, and sexual promiscuity. Though Dalton offered possible ways to advance preventative education and to decrease stigmatization of AIDS among black communities, it is clear that by the time of Cohen’s book in 1999 his hopes went sadly unrealized. Looking at these two works in conversation, especially in light of Dalton’s analysis of potential roots of homophobia in black communities, reveals the importance of viewing African American responses to AIDS in an historical context.

This project will examine what happens when the denial of HIV in black communities became impossible. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was reporting in unambiguous terms about the disproportionate impact of

¹⁷ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁹ Harlon L. Dalton, “AIDS in Blackface,” in *Daedalus*, Vol. 118 (3) – Living with AIDS: Part 2 (Summer 1989), 205.

HIV/AIDS on black men and women. Despite only representing approximately 13% of the population, blacks accounted for nearly 45% of cumulative AIDS cases.²⁰ While the CDC published similar findings as far back as 1989,²¹ this time the findings struck a chord in mainstream media. The timing might be attributed to the fact that the media now had a palatable narrative on which to hang sensational stories about AIDS in racial minority communities: the “bisexual bridge.” In 2000 and 2001 the CDC released preliminary results of study revealing that black men who have sex with men (MSM) have higher rates of HIV infection than their white and Latino counterparts. Some researchers went so far as to posit that these black men represented a “bisexual bridge,” between gay men (always presumed to be at high risk for infection) and heterosexual black women, causing them to become infected with HIV at rates disproportionately high in relation to their overall representation in the population.²²

Following the publications of these claims, mainstream newspapers seized upon this theory and spoke in alarming tones about a sinister group of individuals to blame: black men on “the Down Low.” Over the course of the decade, more than 250 news articles were published on the topic, and stories about the Down Low appeared on popular television programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Yet despite this widespread attention to the epidemic, defining the Down Low remains a somewhat difficult task. Part of this confusion results from inconsistent terminology: the Down Low is also referred to as “da down

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV and AIDS --- United States, 1981—2000.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 50. no. 21 (2001): 430-434.
<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm5021a2.htm#tab1>. (accessed April 19, 2013).

²¹ In 1989, the CDC reported that approximately 27 percent of AIDS cases in America were in African Americans. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report: Year End Edition* (January 1990). Last accessed January 20, 2014. <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/statistics_surveillance89.pdf>.

²² See, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV Incidence among Young Men Who Have Sex with Men---Seven U.S. Cities, 1994-2000.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 49, (2001): 440-444; and “HIV/AIDS among Racial/Ethnic Minority Men who Have Sex with Men---United States, 1989-1998. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 49 (2000): 4-11.

low,” “the DL,” “down low,” “down-low,” “the low low,” or “Down Low brothers.”²³ In general, the media phenomenon around the Down Low refers to: 1) black men, who 2) lead publically heterosexual lives, to the point of identifying as straight and possibly having a wife or girlfriend, while 3) secretly engaging in sex with other men, causing them to 4) contract HIV, and 5) spread HIV to black women.²⁴ However, as it will become apparent in subsequent chapters, not all of these elements are present in all news stories on the topic, and depending on the context, certain elements of the Down Low narrative are emphasized over others.

The intense media focus on Down Low men from approximately 2000-2010 is especially surprising within the larger context of representation of blacks (and black gays/bisexuals) in the media throughout the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Mainstream media reports tended to ignore black concerns in the epidemic. In her examination of the 4,671 stories published on HIV/AIDS in *The New York Times* between 1981 and 1993, Cohen found that only 231 focused on African Americans, and most of those were dedicated to celebrities, such as Magic Johnson.²⁵ A more recent and extensive survey of major American newspapers and television news broadcasts by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that only 3% of stories in the first 21 years of the AIDS epidemic portrayed “U.S. minorities.”²⁶ While these numbers are useful for illustrating the lack of black representation in mainstream media coverage in regards to HIV/AIDS, neither Cohen nor the Kaiser Family Foundation explicitly clarify where they classify black gay and bisexual men. The Kaiser study, for example, uses the categories “U.S. minorities” and “gay men,” whose ethnicity is unspecified. Both studies suggest, by omission, that in referring to gay men they are

²³ For consistency and clarification, I will primarily use “Down Low” or “on the Down Low,” when referring to the subject.

²⁴ Definition adapted from Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low*, (New York: Carroll & Graff, 2005), 13-14; and J.L. King and Courtney Carreras, *Coming Up from the Down Low*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005); 36.

²⁵ Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness*, 160-1.

²⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation report. See also footnote 5.

referring exclusively to white individuals—a harmful oversight which reinscribes the false understanding that homosexuality is exclusively a white behavior.

Despite the potential richness of such a study, the Down Low has not been examined from an historical perspective. Most academic approaches to the topic have been short, and largely limited to the fields of sociology or public health. Some of these studies have been quite critical of the presumptive link between bisexual black men and high HIV infection rates in black women, drawing attention to the fact that very little evidence links “Down Low men” to HIV infection in African American women.²⁷ Other researchers have tried to map out the particulars of black bisexual behavior empirically, especially in comparison to bisexuals of other ethnicities.²⁸ Most helpfully, some scholars have drawn attention to the ways that social constructions of black sexuality have colored medical and sociological studies of “Down Low men,” and dispelled the myths that this bisexual behavior has no historical precedent.²⁹ The only full length examination of the Down Low, Keith Boykin’s *Beyond the Down Low* (2005), is also unsatisfying from a historical perspective. Boykin does admirable work in drawing attention to the inconsistencies in the Down Low narrative (which will be explored more fully in Chapters 2 and 3) in an accessible and easily digestible style, and he advocates for more education about HIV prevention in African American communities. But his account is too rooted in anecdote and personal storytelling and lacking in any critical apparatus to be satisfying as an academic text.

²⁷ See David J. Malebranche, “Bisexually Active Black Men in the United States and HIV: Acknowledging More Than the ‘Down Low,’” *Archive of Sexual Behavior* 37, (2008): 810-816; Lena Denise Saleh and Don Operario, “Moving beyond ‘the Down Low’: A critical analysis of terminology guiding HIV prevention efforts for African American men who have secretive sex with men,” *Social Science and Medicine*, 68 (2009): 390-395; Gregorio Millett et. al, “Focusing ‘Down Low’: Bisexual Black Men, HIV Risk and Heterosexual Transmission,” *Journal of the National Medical Association*, 97, no. 7 (July 2005), 52S-59S.

²⁸ See Richard J. Wolitski et. al, “Self-Identification as ‘Down Low’ Among Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM) from 12 US Cities,” in *AIDS Behavior*, 10 (2006): 519-529; or Lisa Bond et. al, “Black Men Who Have Sex with Men and the Association of Down-Low Identity with HIV Risk Behavior,” *American Journal of Public Health*, Supplement 1, 99, no. S1 (2009):S92-95.

²⁹ Chandra L. Ford, Kathryn D Whetten, Susan A. Hall, and Jay S. Kaufman, "Black Sexuality, Social Construction, and Research Targeting 'The Down Low' ('The DL')," *Annals of Epidemiology*, 17, no. 3 (2007): 209-216, 10.1016/annepidem.2006.09.006.

In looking at this topic, the issue is not in proving or disproving the “bisexual bridge” between Down Low men and black women. Indeed, as I will discuss in chapter 2, while bisexual black men are definitely *a* vector for HIV transmission in black women, they are almost certainly not *the* vector—a position supported by the CDC as of 2009.³⁰ Neither will this thesis map out the particularities of black bisexual behavior, or provide case studies of men who identify as being Down Low/on the Down Low. These examinations would be interesting, but are ultimately outside the scope of this thesis, and several have already been explored somewhat by sociologists.³¹ Finally, it is also not my intention to argue whether or not behavior categorized as “Down Low” is recent, or an exclusively black phenomenon. The answer to both of these questions, I believe, is an obvious “no,” and has already been satisfactorily answered elsewhere. Bisexuality exists across both historical and racial boundaries. While the specifics of HIV are a recent complication of bisexuality, the fundamental behaviors ascribed to Down Low men (sexual encounters with men and women; nondisclosure of sexual orientation) are neither new nor racially specific.³²

Instead this thesis explores the discourse around Down Low as it played out in the media in the first decade of the twenty-first century. By “media,” I refer primarily to news media, although, when appropriate, it will also include an examination of popular sources, such as films, television programs, novels, and memoirs. Guiding my research are the following questions: How did the Down Low come to be coded as a phenomenon specific to black/African American

³⁰ See Chapter 2; Millett et. al, “Focusing ‘Down Low’”57S.

³¹ See fn. 27.

³² For a discussion of how the Down Low is not “new,” but merely a new phrase for previously recognized behaviors, see Ford, et. al, “Black Sexuality, Social Construction, and Research Targeting ‘The Down Low’ (‘The DL’).” For an example of how the Down Low might appear in other races/ethnicities, see M. Alfredo Gonzalez, “Latinos *On Da Down Low*: The Limitations of Sexual Identity in Public Health,” in *Latino Studies*, no. 5 (2007): 25-52; or the story of James McGreevey, a married man who resigned his position as governor of New Jersey when it was revealed he had been engaging in an extramarital affair with a man. See McGreevey, “The Making of a Gay American,” in *New York Magazine*, 2006. Accessed at <http://nymag.com/news/politics/21340/>.

individuals, even as the behaviors the term refers to (bisexuality, infidelity, HIV/AIDS transmission) are racially universal? How did the African American community come to “own” the Down Low as a problem facing black communities, and what were the goals and results of this ownership? How does the Down Low discourse represent a continuation of the history of pathologizing black sexuality? Examining the Down Low enables a better understanding of how historical ideas about masculinity, sexuality, and race intersect at this particular period in time to inform a discourse around black, male (homo)sexuality that is inscribed in racist and homophobic ideologies. Approaching this topic from an historical perspective illustrates the ways in which the Down Low represents a continuation of a historical racism from mainstream society, in which black sexuality is routinely vilified and presented as a dangerous and transgressive threat to social and sexual order. Several of these themes are illuminated by feminist and queer theories, which are helpful in probing how and why these intersections occur, while also providing the tools to critique the racist and heterosexist assumptions underlying most of the discourse surrounding the Down Low.

In order to answer these questions, I divided this thesis into three chapters. The first chapter, “Race and the Historical Roots of the Down Low” provides an historical context for a study of the twenty-first century discussion of the Down Low. By looking at the history of masculinity, sexuality, and venereal disease as they intersect with racist ideologies about black bodies, and black men in particular, we can better understand why some gay and bisexual black men felt compelled to keep their same-sex attraction a “secret,” and how and why the mainstream media and African America press responded to the Down Low in markedly different ways.

These divergent responses are the subjects of Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. In Chapter 2, “‘The Lowdown on the Down Low’: Understanding the Mainstream Media Narrative,” I look at the mainstream media coverage of the Down Low, and chart a timeline of the narrative as it played out in mainstream discussions. In mainstream media, reports tended to be fairly removed from the potential threat of Down Low men. The Down Low was not viewed as a problem facing American society in general; instead it was a sensational problem facing black women, who were victimized by infected, sexually threatening, and dishonest black men. Finally, in Chapter 3, “The Down Low in African American Media,” I examine how the African American press engaged with the epidemic. As I argue, the focus of the coverage differed from the mainstream coverage of the Down Low in significant ways, even as the coverage in the African American media was often framed as a response to the mainstream media. In the African American media, the Down Low was frequently divorced from medical implications, and was instead examined as a social problem, one that promised to negatively stigmatize black men, and threatened the stability of heterosexual black relationships and “the black family.” In response to this, many members of the African American press attempted to “own” the disease: that is, they tried to recognize the Down Low as a problem that needed to be solved by the community. Ultimately, this organization allows me to both draw the contours of the Down Low discussion in the twenty-first century, while also making clear the connections this discussion has to historic conversations about black sexuality, masculinity, and disease. Although the Down Low seemed like a new and unprecedented phenomenon to many observers, in reality, the Down Low clearly has origins in racist and homophobic ideologies that extend backwards in American history. The Down Low represents, then, the ways in which these harmful ideologies are able to adapt over time, and envelop new wrinkles: here, sexual identity, and HIV.

In addressing this topic, I am acutely aware of my social position as a white, middle-class, male in discussing sensitive and complex racial issues. While any project of this sort threatens to replicate the very racism it aims to dismantle, I will attempt to avoid this possibility by refusing to engage in essentialist judgments or understandings of black sexuality or culture, and to treat seriously the historical strands of racism that continue to influence the lived experiences of black individuals. It is important to note that while this thesis is not primarily focused on exploring the lives of gay, bisexual, same-gender-loving, and queer black men—engaging with them indirectly, through media discourses surrounding their alleged behavior—this does not reflect apathy or antipathy. My intention is, in fact, quite the opposite. By examining the Down Low media discourse, I approach the lives of these men from a sympathetic perspective, and ultimately I hope to better illuminate the unique challenges facing these men as actors navigating their sexuality, race, and masculinity in social and cultural environments that have long been singularly unwelcoming.

Chapter 1 – Race and the Historical Roots of the Down Low

When the Down Low narrative began at the end of the twentieth century, the topic was sensational. The black men at the center of a story were a spectacle, and their behavior deemed shocking, immoral, and dangerous. The media viewed Down Low men with disdain, and coverage focused on how to mitigate the threats posed by Down Low men—particularly to heterosexual women. The media extended little sympathy to the men themselves. While HIV remained central to the public understanding of the Down Low, especially in the predominantly white concerns of mainstream media, the health of these men became secondary to the threat their “irresponsible” behavior posed to others. Although the Down Low appeared to be a new phenomenon to some commentators, the discussion of the Down Low is better understood if it is examined as part of a historical tradition, where black sexuality, especially black male sexuality, is often pathologized as a social and public health threat. The Down Low media discourse represents a moment when historical conversations about raced and sexed bodies incorporate new complications: here, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, same-sex desire, and the threat of transmission.

In order to better comprehend how popular and media discourses constructed the Down Low, this chapter explores some of the historical roots underpinning these discourses. The goal of this chapter is twofold. First, by looking at the history of black masculinity and sexuality, it becomes apparent why many gay and bisexual black men felt it necessary to hide their same-sex behaviors. In other words, I explore why, historically, homosexuality was forced to the margins of black communities in America, located outside the boundaries of respectable and accepted behavior. Second, and somewhat more broadly, this chapter will expand on how the DL fits into the general pathologizing of black male sexuality. The Down Low was hardly the first time that

African American men were considered a threat to public health, and by looking at the history of how black sexuality intersected with medical discourses and venereal disease to produce constructions of black sexuality as dangerous, we can better understand how the Down Low was so readily accepted as the popular conception of black gay behavior.

To accomplish these goals, it is necessary to outline a few grounding assumptions. First, I assume that there are black men who have sex with men, regardless of which labels they affix to themselves, either privately or publically.³³ That is, I am using a behavioral definition for homosexuality and bisexuality rather than an identity-based definition—when referring to gay or bisexual men, I generally refer to “men who have sex with men” (MSM), and “men who have sex with men and women” (MSMW). Second, I assume that the challenges facing black men who have sex with men are different than the challenges facing white (or Asian, or Latino) MSM, which I will demonstrate over the course of this chapter. To accomplish this, I have organized this chapter into three sections. The first two, “Black Sexuality,” and “Black Masculinity,” explore how and why the space for MSM and MSMW is limited in black communities. The last section, “Venereal Disease and The Tuskegee Study,” looks at the connection between black sexuality and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexuality

Black sexuality has a long history of being viewed with an essential “otherness,” particularly by Westerners. As historian Kathleen Brown argues, early European colonial forces in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries viewed the Africans they encountered on their travels

³³ For a discussion about whether to use self-identity or behavioral-based definitions of same-sex activity for academic research, see Stokes, et. al, “Bisexual Men, Sexual Behavior, and HIV/AIDS” in *Bisexuality: The Psychology and Politics of an Invisible Minority*, ed. Beth A. Firestein (London, California, and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), 149-168.

with suspicion, believing them to have larger sexual organs and sexual appetites than Europeans, a view likely influenced by European Christianity, which associated blackness with sin and evil.³⁴ The English explorer Richard Jobson, who visited Africa in 1620, reported on the sexual activity of some of the natives he encountered in his book, *The Golden Trade* (1623). In one section, Jordan explains the why some Ethiopian men need multiple wives, because their “members were as the members of Asses, and [their] issue was like the issue of horses...”³⁵ Already, during this early encounter we see the association of black sexuality with promiscuity and the analogy between black men and animals, due to the alleged size of their penises. Though these influences seem to have been transported to America by the English during colonization, the association of blackness with inferiority did not solidify until the seventeenth century, “with the growing need for African labor and the initiation of an overseas trade in slaves.”³⁶ With the growing economic dependence on slave labor in the American economy, and a system that allowed slave status to be inherited, early Americans grew increasingly invested in defining racial difference between black and whites, encoding a racial hierarchy in law and in social consciousness.³⁷

Although blacks were frequently on the receiving end of accusations of racial inferiority and sexual impropriety levied by whites, historian Martha Hodes convincingly argues that blacks were relatively free to exercise their sexuality during the antebellum period in America. This relative sexual freedom decreased as blackness and slavery became increasingly synonymous in America. Hodes attributes the increased anxiety attached to black sexuality over time as a result

³⁴ Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*, (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 110-112.

³⁵ Richard Jobson, *The Golden Trade: Or, A discovery of the River Gambia and the Golden Trade of the Aethiopia*, 1623. Accessed February 2, 2014 at <www.penelop.uchicago.edu/jobson/jobson4.html>

³⁶ Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, & Anxious Patriarchs*, 112.

³⁷ Ibid. See also, Laurel C. Schneider, "What Race is Your Sex?," in *Queer Religion: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion, Volume II*, ed. Donald L. Boisvery and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara: 2012).

of colonial, and later, American, laws that decreed slave status was inherited from the mother. Thus, white slaveowners could have sex with—often, rape—their female slaves with relative impunity, assuring that the child of any such union would be a slave, and increasing the slaveowner's property. Conversely, sex between black *men* and white women was infinitely more problematic, as the child of such a union inherited the free status of the white mother. Free mixed-race children defied the binaries of white/black and free/slave that permeated American society, particularly in the South.³⁸ Black sexuality, especially the sexuality of black men, came to be seen as more subversive in a system deeply invested in slavery, and was thus viewed with suspicion and contempt by white slaveowners and Southern community leaders.

Yet, as long as white Southern patriarchs were able to control black bodies under slavery, sex between whites and blacks remained largely unchecked. Hodes documents several mixed-race relationships between white women and black men in her book *White Women, Black Men*, finding that often such unions led to little legal punishment for either party. When the Civil War threatened to, and ultimately did, destroy American slavery, white anxiety about black (male) sexuality reached a breaking point. For example, it was during the 1860s that the derisive term “miscegenation,” used to describe interracial unions and marriage, was coined.³⁹ Hodes qualifies the idea that sex between whites and black under slavery was necessarily a problem. Instead, sex between blacks and whites was acceptable as long as Southern patriarchs could keep control of situation through the system of slavery. Once slavery began to break down, during the Civil War, white men lost absolute control over black bodies and thus sought new ways to regulate black male sexuality. If sex between slave men and white women was tolerable, sex

³⁸ Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 55-57.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143-146.

between free black men and white women was considered threatening to white masculinity and patriarchy.

This increased scrutiny applied to black male sexuality after the Civil War and end of American slavery had numerous, often fatal, consequences. These consequences are perhaps most clear in regards to lynching, which became widespread in the American South during the Reconstruction period. By and large, the story of lynching in America is remembered as the public execution of black men for (alleged) sexual encounters with white women, typically coupled with a more or less official charge of rape. Lynchings often included genital mutilation of the victim, a highly visual connection between lynching and sex. Lynchings became primarily a method for whites to control blacks by shaping the acceptable range of sexuality, and by using the threat of lynching to discourage blacks from realizing their political autonomy.⁴⁰ In reality, American lynching was a complex phenomenon with multiple causal factors, and lynchings in different regions of the country often had different motivations. Indeed, anti-lynching advocates as far back as the 1890s argued that, rape and/or interracial relationships between black men and white women were not the primary cause for the majority of lynchings during the Reconstruction period. Ida B. Wells, for instance, published a number of pamphlets deconstructing the traditional lynching narrative, provocatively claiming that, “Nobody believes the old thread bare lie that Negro men rape white women.”⁴¹ Wells rejects this claim as a justification for lynching, arguing instead that Southern whites *actually* used lynching as a way to punish blacks for attempting to exercise their new economic and democratic freedoms. Claims that black men were

⁴⁰ Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998). See also, Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999). In Douglas’s chapter, “Stereotypes, False Images, Terrorism: The White Assault upon Black Sexuality,” (31-59) Douglas traces a similar history of black sexuality. However, she focuses on women, where here my interest is exploring the history of black male sexuality. Nonetheless, her comments about the use of lynching as a tool for black social intimidation are useful here.

⁴¹ Ida B. Wells, editorial in “Free Speech,” May 21, 1892, quoted in Wells, *Southern Horrors* (New York: New York Age Print, 1892). Reprinted (New York: The Arno Press, 1969), 4.

raping white women was a smokescreen of sorts, a way to mask the true intent of lynching, and make the brutal public murder of black men more palatable. More recently, modern historians have explored other explanations for lynching, besides interracial coupling. For instance, in his book *Rough Justice*, historian Michael Pfeifer looks at how Americans, especially those in the “Wild West,” used lynching as a way to navigate law, justice, and the creation of the death penalty.⁴²

Whatever the motivations behind lynchings might have been, sexual relations between black men and white women were and remain the dominant paradigm through which lynching entered into public memory. Sociologist Johnathan Markovitz ably demonstrates how lynching became understood through this narrow lens in public memory, to both historic and contemporary audiences, in his book *Legacies of Lynching*. Markovitz points to a particularly telling example, during the Congressional debate of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill during the early 1920s. During the debate, Mississippi Representative Thomas Sisson claimed that he, “would rather the whole black race of this world were lynched than for one of the fair daughters of the South to be ravished and torn by one of these black brutes.”⁴³ Sisson’s remark is only one of a number of similar remarks made in arguments against anti-lynching bills in the Senate, all of which failed to pass, largely because of opposition from conservative Southern Democrats.

Sisson’s remark is interesting for a number of reasons. In particular, it displays a deep hostility towards black sexuality, which is refracted through the lens of white superiority. Black “brutes,” according to Sisson, represent a threat to the entirety of white Southern womanhood; if it were not for the threat of lynching, he suggests, there would be no way to curb black men’s sexual urges. Sisson’s comment is also revealing as it demonstrates how the complex

⁴² Michael J Pfeifer, *Rough Justice*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 64.

⁴³ Quoted in Johnathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), xv.

phenomenon of lynching was reduced to a consequence of black men raping white women. That his argument was apparently persuasive suggests a widespread willingness to believe the stereotypes about black men's sexuality, and thought lynching was the best way to protect women from these men. Additionally, Sisson's claim suggests he exhibited little fear of retaliation for such nakedly transparent racism. The project to restrict black men and women's political rights in the South through lynching, discriminatory poll taxes, and other methods was apparently successful. During the debates on lynching bills, for instance, there were no black members of the Senate to speak out in defense of black Americans; in fact, there were no black Senators from any state between 1881 and 1967. Lynching in America—both in practice and as a potential tool employed by the South as a tool to ensure white supremacy—is a powerful example of the lengths that Southerners went to in order to control the sexual, economic, and political autonomy of black men.

Although anti-lynching advocates such as Ida B. Wells had been fighting against this reading of lynching as far back as the 1890s, Sisson's comments from 1920 reveal how Southerners continued to use the image of the animalistic black rapist as an excuse to sanction lynching. While lynchings decreased significantly following the start of World War II, the 1950s brought a number of high-profile lynchings of black men which refocused the connection between black sexuality and lynching. The case of Emmett Till is perhaps most well-known, a 14-year-old boy from Chicago who was lynched while visiting family in Mississippi for allegedly flirting with a white woman. Till's case became widely publicized following his funeral, and was cited in African American newspapers as an example of white Southern racism, which used lynching as a way to enforce social control of blacks, particularly black men. If Till,

a young, northern teenager could be lynched for merely looking at a white woman the wrong way during a family vacation, it seemed that no black man was safe from white supremacy.⁴⁴

Ultimately, the story of lynching illustrates how sexuality remains a point of vulnerability for African-Americans, particularly men. When conservative Southerners were able to successfully defeat the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, it was because the image of the brutish black rapist invoked by Sisson was widely accepted—the language about black inferiority, large sexual organs, and uncontrollable sexual lust had been available to whites for centuries. Lynching became a way for white Southerners to shape black sexuality, by defining the parameters of what behaviors were deemed socially acceptable for black men, and policing those parameters with the threat of violence. Lynching became, for decades, a primary place for public discussion of black sexuality; for interracial relationships between black men and white women, the narrative of the black rapist was perhaps *the* singular paradigm that would shape popular understandings of these unions. Considering both the longevity and intensity of this pervasive—albeit clearly racist and false—myth about black men, it is not surprising that conceptions of black sexuality as dangerous and uncontrollable were hard to dispel.

Masculinity

Traditionally, black men have been denied recourse to mainstream conceptions of masculinity in America, which are typically predicated on a white model. The roots of this denial are seen as far back as the beginnings of the American Republic. Masculinity in the early American period was seen by many as arising from participation in civic life, such as through

⁴⁴ Christine Harold and Kevin Michael DeLuca, “Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till,” in *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, Vol. 8 (2), 2005, 263-286.

voting and property ownership.⁴⁵ Such participation, it goes without saying, was denied to slaves. But even free blacks were largely unable to participate in American civic life. After all, it was not until the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870 that black men were guaranteed the right to vote; tragically, they were not be truly free to exercise this right in many parts of the country until nearly a century later, following the Civil Rights movement and the Twenty-Fourth Amendment. White men's refusal to allow black men to gain access to one of the fundamental attributes of masculinity—civic participation—took many forms throughout American history. During World War II, for instance, the segregation of the armed forces meant black men were often relegated to noncombat roles. Since participation in the War was central to American manhood during this period,⁴⁶ it meant that African American men were largely excluded from joining the “band of brothers” that proved their manhood by fighting for their country. Even when they were able to enlist, life in the army was difficult for black men: though they represented less than 10% of American military personnel in Europe, they represented 42% of soldiers convicted sexual assault.⁴⁷ Clearly, black soldiers had to be more careful exercising their sexuality than their white counterparts. Of course, it is incredibly unlikely that black soldiers were committing sexual assault at such disproportionately high rates. Clearly, even in Europe, historical hostility influenced understandings of black masculinity and sexuality. The fact that such misleading statistics were accepted indicates how the myth of the black male rapist continued to affect understandings of black sexual behavior even as lynchings were on the decline.

⁴⁵ See Mark E. Kann, *A Republic of Men*, (New York: New York University Press, 1998). Kann argues that American founders deliberately framed participation in civic life as masculine as a way to encourage “disorderly men” to embrace responsible citizenship.

⁴⁶ See Timothy Stewart-Winter, “Not a Soldier, Not a Slacker: Conscientious Objectors and Male Citizenship in the United States during the Second World War,” in *Gender and History*, 19 (3), November 2007, 519-520.

⁴⁷ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 13, 33; Mary Lou Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

The racial inequality in law and legal justice apparent in the disproportionate conviction rates of soldiers convicted of sexual assault is not an anomaly. Indeed, racial inequality in the legal system continues in America in the twenty-first century. The enforcement of the American “War on Drugs” is often racist in practice, even if the laws behind American drug policy are ostensibly race-neutral. A 2013 report by the American Civil Liberties Union on American marijuana policy found that even though black and white Americans use marijuana at roughly equal rates, blacks are nearly 4 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana possession.⁴⁸ In some areas, such as Washington, D.C. the disparity is even more apparent: in the nation’s capital, blacks are more than 8 times more likely to be arrested for marijuana than whites. Given the roughly equivalent rates of marijuana use in whites in blacks, it seems obvious that race plays a factor in enforcement of marijuana laws.

Outside of the ability to participate in the American Armed Forces, other facets of masculinity were likewise made unavailable to black men. Control of and/or access to women, central to American masculinity, was impossible for black men during slavery. Since slaves were not allowed to legally marry, law prohibited black men from forming legally binding relationships with women or their own children. Thus, these men were not only unable to play the role of the breadwinning patriarch, but they were unable to protect their women from sexual abuse from slaveowners, or prevent their family members from being sold away to other owners. The end of slavery did not necessarily correspond to increased access to women for African American men. Indeed, lynching was premised on the desire to discourage black men who might sexually or romantically desire white women, and to punish those who acted on their desires.

⁴⁸American Civil Liberties Union, “The War on Marijuana in Black and White: Billions of Dollars Wasted on Racially Based Arrests,” <https://www.aclu.org/sites/default/files/assets/1114413-mj-report-rfs-rel1.pdf>. Last accessed April 10, 2014.

Finally, black men were often unable to fulfil perhaps the defining aspect of masculinity: playing the role of breadwinner. Writing in 1965, government official Daniel Patrick Moynihan claimed that black men's inability to be the sole financial support for his family has forced the Negro community "into a matriarchal structure."⁴⁹ The report Moynihan authored, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, was published in March 1965. In it, Moynihan argued that the cause of social and economic failings of African Americans was "the weakening position of the Negro Male."⁵⁰ Until black men accept the role of family leadership, then, per Moynihan, matriarchy will undermine African Americans' ability to "establish themselves as stable, effective units, living according to patterns of American society in general."⁵¹ Moynihan's report was not exclusively critical of black men, and Moynihan did express recognize that external factors sometimes prevented black men from reaching their potential as (literal) patriarchs. In his book, *I Am A Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement*, scholar Steve Estes wrote that, "...Moynihan believed that obstacles to black manhood lay at the head of the 'race problem' in America, and...saw a reduction of the welfare dependency and black men's acceptance of family leadership as solutions to that problem."⁵² A key component to this "race problem" (in addition to black men's inability to succeed as patriarchs) was the mismatch between black and white communities. That is, Moynihan found it particularly problematic that black men were not the family breadwinners because this put black communities out of sync with mainstream American family values, which valorized the nuclear family, headed by the father/husband. Per Moynihan, black men were not only failing their individual families by failing to adequately provide, but also hurt black communities by failing to conform to dominant

⁴⁹ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, 1965, 29.

⁵⁰ Estes, *I Am A Man*, 108.

⁵¹ Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 29.

⁵² Estes, *I Am A Man*, 108.

mainstream values and expectations. Moynihan's report would later come under criticism, particularly by the nascent feminist movement, who objected to Moynihan's claim that female-run households are inferior to patriarchal ones. But the report's claims drew on public perceptions that black men were unmasculine, earned less money than their female counterparts, and were unable to play the role of patriarch even within their own communities.

Given the obstacles facing black men in their desire to attain the masculinity to their white counterparts, it is understandable that certain segments of the African American community placed a premium on masculinity. Unfortunately for gay and bisexual black men, homosexuality is often considered incompatible with masculinity, both in black and mainstream white society. Gay and bisexual black men were doubly burdened in negotiating their sexuality. They not only had to contend with widely-accepted stereotypes of black sexuality as threatening, bestial, and out of control, but also with largely negative stereotypes of homosexuality, which was typically associated with sexual deviance and mental illness. But for many African American leaders, homosexuality was not an individual condition or concern, but a "problem" for the race, which needed to be addressed.

This understanding of black homosexuality is perhaps best demonstrated through historian George Chauncey's examination of Harlem at the turn of the twentieth-century, in his book *Gay New York*. As Chauncey notes, Harlem was one of New York City's gay enclaves during the period he studied (1890-1940), albeit somewhat by default: segregation limited the mobility of all blacks, and the options for gay and bisexual men were already slim. Participating in the thriving gay sub-culture in Harlem was usually easier for visiting whites than it was for black residents, however. While white gay men could discreetly visit the area then return to their lives in other parts of the city, "black gay men and lesbians had to negotiate their presence in the

shops and churches of Harlem as well as its clubs.” Some gay men were able to make these negotiations successfully, gaining acceptance or recognition, if not respectability or celebration. But if gay men and women were “casually accepted by many poor Harlemites...they were excoriated by the district’s moral guardians,” who represented Harlem’s black Christian and middle-class forces.⁵³

The behavior of gay black men was troubling to these moral guardians for a number of reasons. Many churchgoers and religious leaders were opposed to homosexuality because they felt it was incompatible with their religion. From the perspective of the Christian faith, homosexuality was, and still is, frequently considered a sin and a form of sexual immorality. Middle-class blacks drew upon images of homosexuality as “wrong” or sexually deviant as part of the process of differentiation from their working-class peers. Because the concept of an African American middle class was new and fragile, respectable middle-class blacks could contrast their upstanding and morally righteous behavior with the immoral and deviant sexual behavior of the working-classes. This in turn strengthened their claim to high-ground in black communities to support their bids for community leadership.⁵⁴

Finally, and perhaps especially, community leaders feared that the behavior of black gay men reflected poorly on the whole of the African American community in Harlem. In other words, they anticipated that cultural images of the “womanish-acting” black gay man would be employed by racist thinkers to stigmatize *all* black men, regardless of their sexual identity.⁵⁵ Since dominant forms of masculinity were frequently denied to black men, the visibility of gay black men—who, like all gay men, were often characterized as effeminate—threatened to stigmatize black men, who were already considered by many to be unmasculine. The anxiety

⁵³ George Chauncey, *Gay New York*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 228, 248, 253.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 253-254.

exhibited by community and religious leaders here is comprehensible. After all, the discourse of lynching and the false stereotype of the black male rapist negatively colored the sexuality of black men everywhere. The idea that black men were unable to control themselves sexually became one of the dominant frames through which whites viewed black sexuality. Although these two stereotypes are seemingly mutually exclusive—black men have uncontrollable heterosexual lust that causes them to rape white women, and black men are unmanly—the apparent contradiction did not protect the black community from the deployment of racist ideology. That these two stereotypes can co-occur with seemingly little trouble might seem counter-intuitive. However, it is important to remember that racism does not stem from logical thinking, but is frequently the project of ignorance, intolerance, and bigotry. Also, while these stereotypes might exist simultaneously, they may gain or lose salience based on context: an unemployed black man on welfare might be considered unmanly because he does not conform to expected patriarchal behavior, but that same man might be considered a sexual threat if he is seen as acting too familiar with a white woman.

Journalist John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me*, in which the white journalist medically darkens his skin to attempt to investigate the reality of black experiences in the South, gives insight into the variety of different racist stereotypes employed against black men. He observes that when walking in white neighborhoods, he is frequently referred to in a demeaning and emasculating way as "boy," by white men, regardless of their relative ages. At another point in the text, Griffin is picked up by a white hitchhiker, who asks to see Griffin's penis, to see if stereotypes about black men's sexual organs being larger than white men's sexual organs are true.⁵⁶ Griffin's text shows readers how multiple or even contradictory stereotypes can exist. Thus, if effeminate black gay men were perceived to be tolerated in Harlem, community leaders

⁵⁶ John Howard Griffin, *Black Like Me* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

thought, it might be used as evidence to further stigmatize the sexuality and masculinity of black men.

The discourse used by Harlem's religious leaders, as documented in *Gay New York*, is surprisingly similar to the conversations occurring in African American media about the Down Low more than 50 years later. In both cases, black gay and bisexual behavior is seen as a threat to black society and the black family; a community, rather than individual issue. This response is perhaps best illustrated through the minister Adam Clayton Powell, whom Chauncey identifies as "perhaps the most famous African-American clergyman in the nation" during the height of his popularity (1908 to 1937).⁵⁷ In 1929, Powell launched an attack on homosexuality in the African American community. An article in the African American newspaper *The New York Age* from November 16, 1929, summarizes a recent sermon by Powell, where he claimed that "Homosexuality and sex-perversion among women...has grown into one of the most horrible debasing, alarming and damning vices of present day civilization, and...it is increasing day by day."⁵⁸ Years later, Powell writes in his autobiography that he opposes homosexuality in African American communities because it represents a threat to heterosexual black relationships, by "causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying."⁵⁹ According to Chauncey, "Powell's emphasis on the dangerous extent of lesbianism in the black community suggest that he saw women's refusal to marry as posing the most insidious threat to the black family."⁶⁰ Here, Powell's anxiety about lesbianism is less about their sexuality *per se*, but about the potential disruption lesbians

⁵⁷ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 254.

⁵⁸ "Dr. A.C. Powel Scores Pulpit Evils: Abyssinian Pastor Fires a Broadside Into Ranks of Fellow Ministers, Churches," *New York Age* Nov. 16, 1929, 1. Accessed online February 3, 2014 through Fulton History.

⁵⁹ Adam Clayton Powell, *Against the Tide: An Autobiography* (New York: Richard R Smith, 1938), 216.

⁶⁰ Chauncey, *Gay New York* 255.

pose to black families by refusing to conform to heteronormative conceptions of marriage and family.

Later, black authors writing in the African American press would echo Powell's sentiments. A. Asadullah Samad's 2004 article, "Brothers on 'the Down Low': The Latest Stigmatization of the Black Male," similarly suggests that Down Low men are so troubling for the black community because their actions lead to "the deterioration of black male/female relationships," which cause men and women to "pursue alternatives" to heterosexual marriage and families.⁶¹ In both cases, the authors approach black sexuality from a religious and heteronormative perspective. Black homosexuality, both in Powell's Harlem in the 1920s, and with Samad's Down Low men in the 2000s, represents a substantial threat to the stability of "the black family," or Christian values of the black middle-class. Also, Chauncey notes, most African American newspapers were supportive of the anti-gay rhetoric of Powell and his contemporaries. Their support for the moral campaign "was consistent with their general editorial policy, for many papers took on the role of policing their community as well as boosting it."⁶² Powell himself praises *The New York Age* in his autobiography as a valuable partner in his moral campaign against homosexuality.⁶³ As I argue in Chapter 3, a similar desire to police sexual and moral behavior is the predominant theme of African American media coverage of the Down Low.

Venereal Disease and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment

⁶¹ A. Asadullah Samad, "Between the Lines: Brothers on 'the Down Low': The Latest Stigmatization of the Black Male Image," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 13, 2004, ProQuest (389363021).

⁶² Chauncey, *Gay New York*, 256.

⁶³ Powell, *Against the Tide*, 211.

Black sexuality in America has long subject to a number of negative stereotypes, many of which associate black bodies with animalistic tendencies, suggesting that black men and women are overly sexual beings. Such stereotypes can in turn fuel further assumptions about black bodies and sexuality. One particularly prominent example is the commonly held idea by many nineteenth and early-twentieth century scientists that syphilis affected blacks in higher rates, and different ways, than whites. As one doctor suggested near the beginning of the twentieth-century, blacks were “a notoriously syphilis soaked race.”⁶⁴ This assumption about syphilis and racial differences in health grew more from racist assumptions about black sexuality than from empirical evidence. A report from the Public Health Service’s Venereal Disease Clinic examining syphilis in blacks in the Mississippi Delta claimed that, “As a group these negroes are carefree, happy and peaceable; crimes of violence unassociated with a sexual background are rare; their prodigality is inordinate and their sex appetite is enormous.”⁶⁵ Drawing on historical stereotypes about the allegedly large sexual desire of blacks allowed the study’s authors to assert that blacks experienced syphilis in significant greater rates than other racial groups. Though the study found that nearly 20% of individuals in the three counties they studied had syphilis, they claimed this was a vast underrepresentation of the problem, again drawing on racist stereotypes about sexuality to justify this belief. The idea that blacks were particularly afflicted by syphilis culminated in the infamous and controversial Tuskegee syphilis experiment, a medical study which ran from 1932 to 1972, designed to study the progression of untreated syphilis in African American men.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Quoted in James H. Jones, *Bad Blood: The Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, New and Expanded Edition* (New York: The Free Press, 1993), 27. Originally published 1981.

⁶⁵ Quoted in Susan Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); 27.

⁶⁶ The official title of the study is “U.S. Public Health Service Study at Tuskegee,” but is often referred to as “the Tuskegee Syphilis Study” or “the Tuskegee Experiment.” Taking my cue from Susan Reverby, I refer to it as “the Study.” See Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee*, 8-9.

The Study was inspired, in part, by racist medical ideology. In an attempt to support a hierarchal view of race which held that white racial supremacy and black inferiority was scientifically measurable, many doctors argued that the health of blacks and the health of whites must be considered separately from one another. Thus, doctors tried to justify the social and institutional discrimination against blacks (such as the Jim Crow system in the South) as medically valid. If doctors could prove that blacks were incapable of reaching the same mental, medical, or physical heights as whites, then their subordinated social and legal status would be justified.⁶⁷ The Study grew partially out of this belief that black and white health had to be studied discretely. As historian Susan Reverby put it, “The assumptions of racial difference shaped the Study’s science from its beginning.”⁶⁸ The goal of the Study was to discover the effects of untreated syphilis on African American males in Macon County, Alabama, and was conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service, with support from Tuskegee University, a private and historically black college in Macon. The Study continued for 40 years—even after an effective treatment for syphilis became widely available—until it became a national news item in 1972. The ensuing scandal and accusations of racism levied against the Study forced its termination later that year. Particular criticism was levied against what the Study for its unethical procedures: for denying treatment to the men enrolled in the study; for discouraging them from seeking treatment elsewhere; for failure to obtain proper consent from and explain study procedures to subjects (many were told they were receiving treatment for “Bad Blood,” a colloquial term for many diseases, including syphilis); and for various other ethical transgressions. Finally, the revelation that the United States government was operating the Study

⁶⁷ Jones, *Bad Blood*, esp. Chapter 1, “A Moral Astigmatism” (1-15). Information about the history of the study is drawn from Jones, *Bad Blood*; Susan M. Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee*; and Allan M. Brandt, “Racism and Research: The Case of the Tuskegee Syphilis Study,” in *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 8 (6), Dec. 1978, 21-29.

⁶⁸ Reverby, *Examining Tuskegee*, 232.

was particularly disquieting. Not only was the government failing to protect these men, but it was actively involved in perpetrating harmful medical research on largely-low class black men.

The effects of the Study's revelation were surprisingly long-lasting. After the media exposed the Study in 1972, the Study continued to be remembered. A high-profile and ultimately successful lawsuit filed against the government by Study survivors and their families, academic texts on the Study, a fictional play and later film (*Miss Evers' Boys*) about the Study, and a public apology for the Study by President Bill Clinton in 1997 ensured the study remained in public memory in the decades following its conclusion. The Study retained a particular salience in light of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and is frequently cited as an example of why African Americans are supposedly quick to distrust medical authorities, particularly about sexually transmitted diseases. Misinformation about the Tuskegee Study in popular consciousness may contribute to this distrust of medical authorities, and these misunderstandings about the actual details of the Tuskegee study pertains to some scholars. For example, Harlon L. Dalton, a professor at Yale University, wrongly claimed in his essay "AIDS in Blackface" that "the government *purposefully* exposed black men to syphilis," which is not true.⁶⁹ Dalton is not alone in believing the government infected black men with syphilis as part of the Study. The racism and racialism of the Study, images of doctors giving men in the Study spinal taps, and the Study's attempt to prevent subjects from receiving treatment certainly make such a belief plausible; the revelation of other secretive government medical experiments, such as Project MKUltra's LSD trials, further fueled speculation that the government intentionally infected men with syphilis. Dalton's comment nonetheless demonstrates the level of distrust in government medical authorities the Tuskegee study has inspired in some African Americans.

⁶⁹ Harlon L. Dalton, "AIDS in Blackface," *Daedalus*, 118, no. 3 (1989), 220. Italics added. While the government attempted to prevent study subjects from receiving treatment for syphilis, there is no evidence to suggest that the scientists ever infected any participants with syphilis.

Another possible effect of the Tuskegee study might be the relatively large numbers of African Americans who hold “conspiracy beliefs” about HIV/AIDS. For example, in a study of black adults in San Bernardino, California in 1999 found that more than one quarter of participants endorsed beliefs that AIDS was created by the government as a form of genocide against blacks.⁷⁰ In a different national survey from 2005, 48.2 percent of respondents reported that they believed that “HIV is a man-made virus,” and more than half believed a cure to HIV exists but is being withheld from the poor.⁷¹ Some scholars have posited the belief that AIDS is man-made, or that it was intentionally released by the U.S. governments of a form of “genocide,” is partially attributable to lingering memory of the Tuskegee Study. As illustrated by Dalton’s example, Tuskegee often seen as an example of the government intentionally exposing black men to an STD.⁷²

While surveys clearly indicate that at least some African Americans harbor conspiracy beliefs about the HIV epidemic, it would be wrong to imply that this mistrust extended to *all* African Americans. For instance, in the same study which found nearly half of black respondents believe AIDS was man-made, three-quarters also believed that “medical and public health institutions are trying to stop the spread of HIV in black communities.”⁷³ Despite the allegedly high acceptance of conspiracy theories in African American communities, there remain diverse and even contradictory opinions about the virus. Less clear is the prevalence of conspiracy beliefs in other racial communities. Some researchers, such as Laura Bogart and Sheryl

⁷⁰ Elizabeth A. Klonoff, and Hope Landrine, "Do Blacks Believe That HIV/AIDS Is a Government Conspiracy against Them?," *Preventative Medicine*, 28, no. 5 (1999): 451-457, pmed.1999.0463 (accessed April 25, 2013). It should be noted that approximately 50 percent of African-Americans expressed disagreement with these beliefs.

⁷¹ Laura M. Bogart and Sheryl Thorburn, “Are HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs a Barrier to HIV Prevention Among African Americans?”, *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, 38, no. 2 (2005), 213-218

⁷² For a connection between conspiracy beliefs and Tuskegee, see Stephen B. Thomas and Sandra Crouse Quinn, “The Tuskegee Syphilis Study, 1932 to 1972: Implications for HIV Education and AIDS Risk Education Programs in the Black Community,” *American Journal of Public Health*, 81, no. 11 (1991), 1498-1505.

⁷³ Bogart and Thorburn, “HIV/AIDS Conspiracy Beliefs,” 215

Thorburn, argue that conspiracy beliefs in relation to AIDS is largely a racial phenomenon within blacks communities, while others argue that similar beliefs exists across populations with little racial disparity.⁷⁴ Regardless of how other races might perceive the disease, given the history of medical racism towards African Americans—popularly symbolized by the Tuskegee study—their early unwillingness to engage with the HIV/AIDS epidemic becomes somewhat more understandable.

Conclusion

The intention of this brief historical survey has been to illustrate how the Down Low media phenomenon of the early-twenty-first century can be better understood when viewed as part of a historical conversation. Looking at the history of black sexual and masculinity makes it clear why some black MSM and MSMW may feel pressured to keep their sexuality a secret. Black gay men (and women) have long been pushed to the margins of African American communities, outside the “boundaries of blackness,” as sociologist Cathy Cohen puts it. This marginalization is apparent in Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s, when gay black men and women were considered a threat to the black family, and, more broadly, were feared as sexual deviants whose “immoral” actions could be used to stigmatize middle-class blacks and delegitimize black communities in general. Though the specifics of this marginalization has changed over time, evidence suggests that many black men and women feel pressured to suppress their sexual identity in favor of their racial and ethnic identity. As Cathy Cohen claims, often gay black men and women are offered “conditional black membership”: They can be accepted by their community—an acceptance necessary in a largely racist society—only by silencing their

⁷⁴ Michael W. Ross, E. James Essien, and Isabel Torres, "Conspiracy Beliefs about the Origin of HIV/AIDS in Four Racial/Ethnic Groups," *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome*, 41, no. 3 (2006): 342-344, 10.1097/01/gai.0000209897.59384.52 (accessed April 25, 2013).

homosexuality. This allows them to present to white society a more homogenous and morally acceptable portrait of blacks as a group.⁷⁵

A study of Young African American Men who have Sex with Men (YAAMSM) published in 2013 argues that this question facing many black homosexuals—am I gay or black first?—persists. Through sociological research, the authors found that YAAMSM in urban Chicago are far more likely than their white or Latino peers to contract HIV. Though the causes for these disproportionate rates are complex, one reason for high numbers of infection is that YAAMSM frequently receive incorrect information about HIV risk and prevention strategies from family members. Apparently family members frequently convey this misinformation on purpose, in an attempt to dissuade YAAMSM from identifying as gay or bisexual. According to the authors, family members (e.g. parents and older relatives) tell these YAAMSM that HIV infection is a consequence of sexual *identity* rather than sexual *behavior*. That is, HIV infection is not preventable through condom use and practicing safe sex, but is the inevitable result of simply “being gay” or bisexual. The consequences of such “shock tactics” by family members are numerous. On the one hand, this misinformation about HIV leads to some YAAMSM to believe HIV infection is inevitable, so they dismiss safe-sex HIV prevention tactics as unnecessary, increasing their risk for HIV infection. Additionally, the authors of the study suggest that receiving misleading or untrue facts about HIV infection from family members leads these men to mistrust *all* information about HIV, further alienating them from risk-reduction techniques.⁷⁶ While the behavior of the relatives of these YAAMSM might seem baffling to

⁷⁵ Cathy J. Cohen, *Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 92. See also, bell hooks, *Talking Back* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), 120-121.

⁷⁶ Dexter R. Voison, Jason D.P. Bird, Cheng-Shi Shiu, and Cathy Krieger, “‘It’s crazy being a Black, gay youth.’ Getting information about HIV prevention: A pilot study,” in *Journal of Adolescence* 26 (2013): 111-119, doi: 10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.09.009.

outside observers, the roots of this behavior become more readily discernable in light of historically produced homophobia in African American communities, and fears about how black (homo)sexuality might reflect negatively on the community as a whole. Lastly, these YAAMSM become encouraged to hide their sexuality from their family members and racial peers, for fear of opprobrium and attempts to censure their behavior. Thus, they are placed in a double bind where they feel encouraged to present themselves as heterosexual while remaining a high risk for HIV infection.

Finally, this historical grounding can help us make better sense of the differing responses to the Down Low exhibited by the mainstream media, and the African American media, which are explored in depth in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively. The response of the mainstream media, I argue, is largely consistent with dominant (and racist) ideologies about black sexuality and its close relationship with disease. In general, the mainstream media viewed the Down Low at somewhat of a distance. To these sources, discussions of the Down Low were inextricable from either race or HIV transmission. The Down Low was not a problem facing gay and bisexual men, but a problem facing *blacks*. It was an alarming and potentially dangerous pattern that drew upon historical fears of black sexuality as dangerous, even infectious; however, the danger posed by Down Low men was primarily a threat to black women. Concern was expressed occasionally for white men and women, but predominately the media focused on black women, viewing them largely in the context of victims of these selfish, sexually promiscuous, and diseased black men. Though the particulars of the discussion—HIV, Down Low men, clandestine bisexual relationships—might be new to the twenty-first century, as shown in this chapter, the themes of this discourse are not. In African American media, the health risk posed by Down Low men was sometimes secondary to the possibility that Down Low men might pose a threat to the stability of

black families. This anxiety indicates that the history of racist stereotypes attached to black sexuality and masculinity remains salient in African American communities. The idea that homosexuality and sexual transmitted diseases could potentially be incorporated into racist ideology in order to stigmatize blacks informs African American coverage of the Down Low. By looking at the Down Low in an historical context, these divergent approaches to the Down Low in mainstream and African American media are understandable with the long history of hostility directed towards black masculinity and sexuality.

Chapter 2 – “The Lowdown on the Down Low”: Understanding the Mainstream Media Narrative

In order to better understand the “Down Low” phenomenon as it played out in the first decade of the twenty-first century, this chapter will examine a timeline of the Down Low in the mainstream media. While determining which media sources count as “mainstream” may appear to be a somewhat arbitrary distinction, I use the following definition as a guide, adopted from Noam Chomsky’s article “What makes mainstream media mainstream.” Chomsky defines mainstream media as, “disseminated via the largest distribution channels, which therefore represent what the majority of media consumers are likely to encounter. The term also denotes those media generally reflective of prevailing currents of thought, influence, or activity.”⁷⁷ This differentiates a source such as *USA Today* which has wide, national readership, from either *New York Amsterdam News*—a local newspaper targeting African-American readers—or *The Advocate*—a small, national magazine with a primarily gay readership. Also included in this category of “mainstream media” sources would be television programs, such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Law and Order: SVU*, both of which have viewership measurable in the millions. Finally, this chapter will also include discussions of popular authors such as J.L. King, whose 2004 memoir, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep With Men*, landed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 26 weeks.

The Down Low timeline can be broken down into three sections, which I refer to as “Emergence,” “Explosion,” and “The New Normal.” The separation of these three sections is not absolute, but they are helpful categories to think about the narrative arch of the “Down Low” as it played out in the mainstream media. “Emergence” refers to the period between 2000 and April 2004, when the Down Low narrative first gained traction in the media. “Explosion” refers to the

⁷⁷ Definition adopted from Noam Chomsky, “What makes mainstream media mainstream,” *Z Magazine*, October 1997, <http://www.chomsky.info/articles/199710--htm>. Quote from Wikipedia contributors, “Mainstream media.” *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mainstream_media.

period in April 2004 and the following months when the Down Low became a prominent national media story, with a focus on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and King's memoir, *On the Down Low*. "The New Normal" begins in 2008, when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and other public health officials distanced themselves from the term "Down Low" in the context of HIV/AIDS research.

By examining the mainstream media's coverage of the Down Low, I hope to show how mainstream media constructed the Down Low as an exclusively black phenomenon. While both white and black men exhibit the potential for sexual relations with both men and women, mainstream media effectively pathologized black bisexual behavior, linking the Down Low inextricably to HIV/AIDS transmission. Black women were "victims" of these Down Low black men's duplicity and sexual promiscuity. White bisexual and gay men were essentially absent from the conversation about the Down Low, which instead focused on sensationalizing black sexuality; fears that the Down Low was a threat to white men and women were rare. Indeed, because it became impossible to talk about the Down Low in mainstream media without discussing both race *and* HIV, the Down Low represented a view of black men's sexuality as dangerous, diseased, and immoral.

Emergence: "Double Lives on the Down Low"

Attempting to trace the origins of the Down Low in mainstream media is not an entirely straightforward project. Much of the difficulty can be attributed to the amorphous nature of the term "Down Low," which is a phrase loaded with multiple, often overlapping meanings. For example, the "down low" (lower case) first entered the popular lexicon through African American hip-hop and R&B songs in the mid-1990s. TLC's "Creep" reached the number 1

position on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1995, while R. Kelly's single "Down Low (Nobody Has to Know)" hit the top 5 of that chart the following year. In both of these songs, the "down low" is imagined as a form of discretion and secrecy in relation to sexual activity. R. Kelly implores a female lover to keep their relationship "on the down low" so "nobody has to know"⁷⁸ while TLC describe "creeping" around on a boyfriend during a relationship, secretly seeing someone "on the down low."⁷⁹ In both songs, the down low is imagined as heterosexual, but the down low aspect of the song refers to keeping the encounter a secret, rather than describing a specific sexual act or behavior. In a different context "down low" is also a phrase used in sports jargon. A basketball player might play defensively by going "down low" on the court. In this situation, "down low" is divorced from either racial or sexual connotations, instead acting as a special metaphor. Additionally, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the Down Low (as a proper noun) comes to describe both a specific set of behaviors and a sexual identity.

The first recorded use of "Down Low" in relationship to homosexuality appears to be in an article from the February 8, 2000 edition of *The Village Voice*, an alternative weekly newspaper published in New York City.⁸⁰ The article, written by Guy Trebay, is entitled "Homo thugz blow up the spot: a gay hip-hop scene rises in the Bronx" and examines "Warehouse," a nightclub in New York City that caters to a particular sub-group of gay men: "homo thugz." According to the article, homo thugz are black MSM who adopt the dress and demeanor of contemporary black hip-hop culture: do-rags, FUBU jackets, platinum necklaces, and sideways bandanas. Key to the "d.l." for the men identified in the article is being able to "pass" as

⁷⁸ R. Kelly, "Down Low (Nobody Has to Know)," written by R. Kelly. 1995 by Jive Records.

⁷⁹ TLC, "Creep," written by Dallas Austin. 1994 by LaFace.

⁸⁰ Guy Trebay, "Homo thugz blow up the spot: a gay hip-hop scene rises in the bronx." *The Village Voice*, February 01, 2000, <http://www.villagevoice.com/2000-02-01/news/homo-thugz-blow-up-the-spot/>. While *The Village Voice* normally would not qualify as a "mainstream" news source due to its relatively small, geographically determined readership, because the *Voice* carries the first reference to the Down Low, I believe the source is useful in this chapter to establish a timeline of the phrase's use.

heterosexual. That is, the “down low” becomes a way for these gay men to hide their same-sex desires from the general public. The article quotes a self-identified gay black man, Charles Jackson, who is an organizer of the Warehouse’s hip-hip night, as saying, “I don’t like people that, when I’m walking the streets, say I’m gay [*sic*].” Yet the article is careful to note that not all of the men at Warehouse identify as gay. “I ain’t no homo, I’m a straight up bisexual nigga. Write that down,” one of the thugz tells Trebay. While Trebay does not imagine that the “d.l.” constitutes its own identity—he describes it instead as a behavior exhibited by certain members of a “gangsta” gay subculture—already in the article one sees the beginnings of an understanding of a Down Low men occupying a secretive “subterranean” organization. For instance, the article notes a number of Internet chat rooms that cater to the homo thug crowd.⁸¹ It also discusses organized sex parties like the “Dicklennium” for “[black] homies, thugs, roughnecks, and shorties.” The article does not suggest any links between these d.l. thugz and HIV infections in black women, although Trebay does note in passing, that black and Hispanic communities have “disproportionately elevated” rates of infection, and that “tracking viral vectors among men who have sex with men who don’t identify as gay” is difficult. The explicit connection between Down Low men and HIV was not yet solidified in the mainstream narrative, yet from the beginning the Down Low (or here, the “d.l.”) was understood as a race-specific behavior, outside the parameters of white sexuality.

Despite the appearance of the term “Down Low” in *The Village Voice*, and at least one African American newspaper in 2000, the first phase of the Down Low as a media spectacle would not begin in earnest until 2001. According to Keith Boykin, who studied the Down Low for his 2005 book, *Beyond the Down Low*, the mainstream media conversation focused on the Down Low as a health problem following the “8th Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic

⁸¹ Ibid. The chat rooms Trebay mentions include, “GayThugz4GayThugz, or BlkThug4Blkmm, or BlkDLM4M.”

Infections” in Chicago, during the first week of February 2001.⁸² At the conference, Linda Valleroy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) announced the results of a study that indicated that “nearly one-third of African-American gay and bisexual men [are] infected” with HIV.⁸³ Although the study contained only a small sample of men ages 15-22 in six cities, the results led to a sensational response in the mainstream press, especially when paired with Valleroy’s earlier comments in July 2000, when she claimed that young black MSMW represented a “‘bridge’ for HIV” to be passed from gay men to heterosexual black women.⁸⁴ While the idea that bisexual men might be act as a bridge between gay men and straight women had been around since the beginning of the epidemic,⁸⁵ Valleroy’s astonishing claims arrived at a time when it was no longer possible to deny that African American men and women represented disproportionately high numbers of People with AIDS in relation to their overall population in the United States,⁸⁶ and thus seems to have caught the attention of the mainstream media. Within six months of the conference, major stories on the African American HIV infections and the Down Low appeared in *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Chicago*

⁸² From Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low*, (2005), 93-4.

⁸³ National AIDS Treatment and Advocacy Project, “Alarming HIV Prevalence Among African American MSM in New York City (542 men surveyed),” from Reports for NATAP from the 8th Annual Retrovirus Conference, Chicago, Feb 4-8, 2001. Last accessed February 2, 2014 at <www.natap.org/2001/8thcroi/alarming_prevalence021901.htm>.

⁸⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Perinatal Studies Released Today from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,” news release, July 12, 2000, pg. 4, <http://name.umdl.umich.edu/5571095.0161.015>.

⁸⁵ See Stokes, et. al., “Bisexual Men, Sexual Behavior, and HIV/AIDS” in *Bisexuality*, ed. Beth A Firestein, (1996), 149-168.

⁸⁶ For information on infection rates, see Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV and AIDS --- United States, 1981—2000.” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 50. no. 21 (2001): 430-434. For a look at the response (or more precisely, the lack thereof) of black leaders during the first two decades of the AIDS epidemic, see Cathy J. Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, (1999). However, by 1998, the Congressional Black Caucus was ready to advocate for federal resources to target HIV/AIDS specifically in blacks. See, Larry Reeves, “AIDS, Black Gays, Black Memphis.” *Tri-State Defender*, June 28, 2000. ProQuest (367738602); or “Evolutions in the Minority AIDS Initiative Secretary’s Fund,” May 12, 2001. Last accessed December 2, 2013, at <<http://blog.aids.gov/2011/05/evolutions-in-the-minority-aids-initiative-secretary%E2%80%99s-fund.html>>.

Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, St. Louis Post – Dispatch, and *The Los Angeles Times*, among others.⁸⁷

An article from *USA Today*, published on March 15, 2001, exemplifies much of the coverage from this early period. The title of the article sets the parameters for the Down Low as it would largely be understood over the course of the decade: “The danger of living ‘down low’: Black men who hide their bisexuality can put women at risk.” Already, before looking at the body of the article, readers are meant to understand a number of factors about the Down Low. Specifically, the title defines the down low as a problem of “black men,” who represent a problem because they “put women at risk.”⁸⁸ The risk of HIV infection here is imagined only in within the context of its ability to harm heterosexual women. Beyond the title, the article further explores the secretive nature of Down Low men: “Black women think he’s Prince Charming: well paid, well-educated, nicely dressed, active in church and devoted to family. Yet there’s something the women don’t know and never will: He’s secretly having sex with men. What’s more, he might bring home an unwelcome guest—HIV, the AIDS virus.” Here, the problem with the Down Low is two-fold. Most obviously, the Down Low is a problem because it brings HIV into the lives of black, heterosexual woman. Also implied, but not explicitly stated, the Down Low exacerbates a heterosexual fear of gay and bisexual men being able to “pass.” Not only are these bisexual men successfully able to hide their same-sex desires, they are in fact “Prince Charmings,” desirable to straight black women. Bisexuality, the article implies, negates a man’s value as a mate—regardless of his apparent masculinity, if he is bisexual, he necessarily threatens a woman’s health.

⁸⁷ In addition to the articles cited in-text, see also Christopher Heredia and Sabin Russell, “AIDS at 20: New Wave of infection hitting minorities hardest,” in *San Francisco Chronicle*, June 4, 2001; Jocelyn Stewart and Sharon Bernstein, “Minority Groups Facing a Tougher Fight with AIDS,” in *Los Angeles Times*, February 7, 2001.

⁸⁸ Steve Sternberg, “The danger of living ‘down low’: Black men who hide their bisexuality can put their women at risk.” *USA Today*, final edition, March 15, 2001. ProQuest (408838602).

A *New York Times* article published a few years later on April 5, 2004 gives further insight into how paranoia about the Down Low is partially due to fear that men who have sex with men might successfully appear to be heterosexual. In the article, “AIDS Fears Grow for Black Women,” author Linda Villarosa describes Misha King, a woman who began researching black gay and bisexual men out of fear she would accidentally end up with a Down Low man. “I’ve been on field trips to the gay bars and have seen guys that look like men you would date...I treat every man as a bisexual because I don’t want to end up as the sister with H.I.V.,” King says.⁸⁹ King’s fear of dating a bisexual man appears to stem from her assumption that gay and bisexual men would be easily distinguishable from heterosexual men, which is troubled by her trips to gay bars. Ironically, the first-hand interaction with gay/bisexual men she experienced during her “field trips” seem to have exacerbated her fears of gay and bisexual men as a threat to her health. While King’s realization that many gay/bisexual men “look like men you would date”—that is, they are mostly indistinguishable from straight men—might inspire tolerance, instead, King becomes even more afraid that *any* black man she meets might be Down Low, thus a health risk. Cheryl Jackson, writing in the *Chicago Sun Times* also suggested that anxiety about the Down Low was because Down Low men “are not effeminate,” so their same-sex desires are difficult to determine.⁹⁰ In these examples, HIV risk is tied to having a gay or bisexual identity, rather than practicing specific high-risk sexual behaviors; King actively avoids dating bisexual men because she views them all as potentially infected with HIV. The fact that Prince Charming has sex with men is reason enough for black women to stay away.

⁸⁹ Linda Villarosa, “AIDS Fears Grow for Black Women: Experts Say Risk Is Tied to Bisexual Male Partners.” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2004. ProQuest Historical Newspapers. Misha King does not appear to be related to author J.L.King.

⁹⁰ Cheryl Jackson, “Life on the Down Low – Author writes about black men who see men on the side, then give HIV to wives,” *Chicago Sun Times*, December 3, 2003, NewsBank (0FF40C1C79E86AA8).

Conspicuously absent from the *USA Today* article is the suggestion that Down Low men might be victims of HIV. Instead, women remain the focus of discourses about determining who is at “risk” from Down Low behavior and HIV infection. The *St. Louis Post – Dispatch* for example, also linked the Down Low to HIV infections in black women. “Black men call it living on the ‘down low’ – men who are presumed to be straight having sex with other men – and it’s a leading cause of black women contracting HIV, the AIDS virus,” ran the article’s lead.⁹¹ The next year, the paper referred to the Down Low as a “Deadly Secret” that “experts believe...may be a significant factor in the increase in HIV infections among African-Americans, particularly in women.”⁹² In 2003, the *Washington Post* echoed these sentiments, claiming that “Black Men’s Hidden Sex Lives [are] Imperiling Female Partners.” That article begins by describing a woman who married a Down Low partner: “She tested positive for HIV in October, infected by the man she had married the year before.”⁹³ Determining who was and was not at risk for HIV infection became a theme that appeared throughout the Down Low narrative. Predominately, this concern about health was not extended to Down Low men. Instead, their infection seemed an inevitable consequence of their lifestyle. As Sternberg wrote in his *USA Today* article, “No public health agency has figured out how to warn men on the ‘down low’ about the risks they’re courting.” Instead, prevention advocates are “aiming their messages at women,” who are apparently more willing to listen.⁹⁴ In the article, public health officials failed attempts to educate Down Low men results from DL men’s unwillingness to listen or limit their risky behaviors. When it comes to practicing safe-sex, Down Low men are apparently a lost cause.

⁹¹ Gregory Freeman, “Fear is Preventing a Public Dialogue Over Leading Cause of Black Women Contracting AIDS.” *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, five star lift edition, April 1, 2001. ProQuest (19309600).

⁹² Denise Hollinshed, “Some Gay Black Men Are Keeping a Deadly Secret,” *St. Louis Post – Dispatch*, April 21, 2002, five star lift edition. ProQuest (402071297). The article was part of a series in the *Post – Dispatch* titled “The Changing Face of AIDS: The impact of AIDS in St. Louis.”

⁹³ Jose Antonio Vargas, “HIV-Positive, Without a Clue: Black Men’s Hidden Sex Lives Imperiling Female Partners,” *The Washington Post*, April 4, 2003, ProQuest (409510667).

⁹⁴ Sternberg, “The danger of living ‘down low,’ *USA Today*.

Outside of a few exceptions, most mainstream news stories discussed Down Low men only within the context of the threat they represented to black women. That the mainstream media should focus so narrowly on the health concerns of straight black women instead of Down Low men might seem counterintuitive. After all, if the CDC was correct, and upwards of 30% of black MSM and MSMW were truly HIV positive, then these men had HIV in both greater absolute numbers and at higher rates than black women; if HIV infection was not such a problem for black MSM and MSMW, then there would be no great threat to heterosexual women. Yet for the mainstream media, Down Low men were rarely the recipient of sympathy or understanding. That they had such tragically high rates of HIV infection was unfortunate, but only a concern insofar as they might act as a “bridge.”

This overwhelming emphasis on the potential health and safety of heterosexual black women instead of on the Down Low men who allegedly were *already* uniformly infected with HIV fits into the long history of HIV media coverage. In his 1987 essay, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” literary critic and queer theorist Leo Bersani criticized the media focus on heterosexuals during the height of the AIDS crisis, and the government’s apparent prioritizing of research on HIV testing instead of HIV treatment. He writes that, “We can count on that same press to give front-page coverage to the story of a presumable straight health worker testing positive for the HIV virus and...almost no coverage at all to complaints about the elephantine pace at which various drugs are being tested and approved for use against the virus.”⁹⁵ Bersani’s claims—that the media during the height of the crisis in the mid-1980s were more concerned about the

⁹⁵ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *October*, Vol. 43, AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter, 1987), 197-222.

potential of HIV in the “general population”⁹⁶ than in gay men and intravenous drug users who were already living with AIDS—are supported by empirical research. Media scholars Timothy Cook and David Colby analyzed television news coverage of the AIDS epidemic from 1981 to 1985 found gay men were the subjects of early coverage on AIDS, when it was a “mysterious disease” seemingly affecting only gay men. However, television coverage quickly moved on, focusing on the “Threat to the Innocent,” such as hemophiliacs and children of HIV positive women. Yet as Colby and Cook note, even when the media discussed gay men they were presented as carriers instead of as victims, and in news reports about heterosexuals, the disease’s “origins” in the gay community were frequently noted.⁹⁷ Implicit in the discussion of AIDS in “the Innocent,” is the idea gay men are somehow to blame for HIV/AIDS, that they are “guilty” of sexual transgression and thus are more deserving of their infection than “innocent” hemophiliacs, who were infected through no wrongdoing of their own. The themes that these critics observed during mainstream media coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic emerge again here in the coverage of the Down Low. Similar to (white) gay men in the early 1980s, Down Low men are typically portrayed as carriers rather than as victims. Trying to explain this theme, Colby and Cook write that at the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in 1981, AIDS presented a problem to journalists, because gay men were not considered “newsworthy” at the time.⁹⁸

When Down Low men became a hot news topic in the early-2000s, mainstream media coverage of these men was presented in the context of a public health threat to heterosexual women. Two decades after the AIDS epidemic began, the mainstream media still had trouble

⁹⁶ Many scholars have criticized the use of the term “general population” in medical and media discourses of the 1980s, arguing that this supports narrow and exclusionary understanding of what entails the American “general public.” See, among others, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), 51.

⁹⁷ Timothy E. Cook and David C. Colby. “The Mass-Mediated Epidemic.” In *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, ed. Elizabeth Fee et. al (1992), 84-122

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

treating homo-/bisexuality in black men as a newsworthy subject deserving of respect. While the Down Low media narrative ostensibly foregrounded the lives of these men, the emphasis within news stories on straight women illustrates the extent to which homophobia prevented a sincere attempt to sympathize with the health risks facing Down Low men, or to understand why they felt a need to keep their sexual behaviors a secret. It was easier to draw on the racist, historical stereotypes of black men's sexuality than it was to question the historical and social traditions that made it so appealing for these men to hide their same-sex attractions behind a public projection of heteronormativity.

Also characteristic of the "Emergence" period is the understanding of Down Low as not just a set of behaviors that black men employed to keep their "double lives" hidden from women, but also as a sexual identity. The *New York Times Magazine* cover story from August 3, 2003 typifies the idea that the Down Low is a separate sexual identity from "gay" or "bisexual" (or "straight," for that matter) even as it illustrates the porous and flexible nature of a binary definition of sexuality. The *Times Magazine* article, "Double Lives on the Down Low," was written by Benoit Denizet-Lewis. While Denizet-Lewis recognizes that "there have always been men—black and white—who have had secret sexual lives with men," he suggests that the Down Low is a "phenomenon of the last decade," an "organized, underground subculture largely made up of black men who otherwise live straight lives."⁹⁹ He also suggests that "the majority" of black MSM "still lead secret lives." The Down Low, according to the article, is tied to all black same-sex encounters, which are mostly conducted in secret. "Double Lives on the Down Low" never explicitly blames these DL men for HIV infection in African American women, but the disease hovers at the peripheries of the article.

⁹⁹ Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Double Lives on the Down Low," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/08/03/magazine/double-lives-on-the-down-low.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>.

What makes Denizet-Lewis's article so interesting is the way he discusses the Down Low not only in terms of men being "on the DL" but also in terms of "DL men."¹⁰⁰ The rhetorical distinction, though seemingly slight and often used interchangeably, is significant. Denizet-Lewis suggests that a black male can not only be "on" the DL, which implies that the DL is a set of scripted behaviors potentially available to all individuals regardless of sexual orientation, but that a man can *be* DL, indicating that the Down Low represents a sexual identity distinct from other identities, such as "straight," "bisexual," or "gay." The slippage indicates how the Down Low threatens the heterosexual/homosexual binary by allowing men (primarily black men) to claim an identity outside of this binary. Indeed, to view Down Low as a discrete sexual identity or orientation troubles the modern vision of sexuality as a function of a holistic identity, largely predicated on the gender of one's sexual object choice.¹⁰¹ Instead, the ability to claim Down Low/DL as an identity suggests that these men view their sexual orientation instead as contingent on their actions or behaviors, rather than in terms of a dualistic binary.

The movement between behavior and identity is not lost on Denizet-Lewis: "For many men on the Down Low...the DL label is both an announcement of masculinity and a separation from white gay culture. To them it is the safest *identity* available—they don't risk losing their ties to family, friends and black culture."¹⁰² Here, Denizet-Lewis references the idea that black communities are less accepting of homosexuality than white communities. Understanding the parameters of this identity, however, is a more difficult project. As Denizet-Lewis notes, "Black men on the DL typically say they're on the DL for life. Since they don't generally see themselves as gay, there is nothing to 'come out' to, there is no next step." And yet, by the end of the article,

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault posited this conception of homosexuality as a discreet sexual identity as beginning in the mid-nineteenth century in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, Vintage Books, 1978), 42-43.

¹⁰² Denizet-Lewis, "Double Lives on the Down Low."

Denizet-Lewis suggests exactly that, implying that the Down Low represents a transitional step for gay black men who are unwilling to publically or privately consider themselves to be gay. He offers this reading through the story of “Jigga,” a man who initially identifies as Down Low, but later becomes “considerably more comfortable with his sexuality.” Denizet-Lewis molds Jigga’s story to formulate a narrative of Down Low men as men who have begun to act upon their same-sex sexual desires, but reject the traditional terms of “gay” or “bisexual,” using the Down Low as a form of denial. As they become more comfortable with themselves, such as Jigga does, they move out of their Down Low phase and embrace a gay or bisexual identity they previously denied. Even as Denizet-Lewis illustrates how the Down Low constitutes an identity beyond or outside of the heterosexual/homosexual binary, he is either unable or unwilling to commit this vision, and undermines his claim by arguing that the Down Low merely represents a dangerous, black, version of the “closet.”¹⁰³

In this section, I have mapped how the Down Low narrative shifted from a mostly sympathetic view of gay and bisexual black men adopting a “homo thug” persona, to a public health problem that required addressing. When the CDC reported that black bisexual men might represent a threat to the health of heterosexual black women, mainstream media seized upon the story, and began to widely report on the behavior of these Down Low men, but linking them inextricably to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Even when HIV was not the primary focus of the article, the disease was never far: Denizet-Lewis mentions HIV or AIDS nearly 50 times over the course of his article,¹⁰⁴ even though his primary purpose to sketch out for the general public the behavior patterns of these Down Low men, not their relationship to sexually transmitted disease.

¹⁰³ For more on the gay men and the “closet,” see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2008). Original edition 1990. Though Sedgwick posits that the closet affects *all* gay men, she does not recognize how the racial differences might affect experiences of the closet.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Pitt, “Downlow Mountain? De/Stigmatizing Bisexuality through Pitying and Pejorative Discourses in Media,” *The Journal of Men’s Studies*, vol. 14 (2) Spring 2006, 256.

The mainstream media discussion of the disease during this period, then, focused primarily on how Down Low men represent a health crisis by pathologizing and sensationalizing black male sexuality as diseased, promiscuous, and secretive. In describing the Down Low as discrete sexual identity, Down Low men became potentially *subversive*, troubling normative understandings of sexuality as a binary between heterosexual and homosexual. Having cemented the link between the Down Low and HIV in the media, the next section will focus on how mainstream media constructed the Down Low as an exclusively black phenomenon, denying the possibility that white bisexual men could be Down Low.

Explosion: *Law and Order: SVU*, J.L. King, and Oprah Winfrey

In April 2004 the Down Low in mainstream and popular media greatly increased in visibility. Partially capitalizing on the publicity offered to the narrative by the cover story on *The New York Times Magazine* in August 2003,¹⁰⁵ a number of significant developments occurred in April 2004 which further etched the Down Low into wider popular consciousness. First, an episode of the television series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* which aired on April 6, 2004 took as its subject a man on the Down Low. The publication of J.L. King's memoir, *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men* followed on April 14, and spent six months on the *New York Times* "Best Seller" list. Finally, the first episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to discuss the Down Low aired two days later, on April 16. Within a year, more than 50 different newspapers and magazines published at least one story on the Down Low. In order to understand the Down Low's explosion in visibility in the spring of 2004, this section will focus on an examination of the Down Low episodes of *Law and Order: SVU* and *The Oprah*

¹⁰⁵ On *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Oprah cites "Double Lives on the Down Low" as bringing the issue of the Down Low to her attention.

Winfrey Show, as well as the work of J.L. King in order to explore how race became inseparable from the Down Low narrative in the mainstream media.

Law and Order: SVU is a television program which airs on NBC, a spin-off of the popular police procedural/legal drama television series *Law and Order*, but with a focus on “sexually based offenses,” or crimes. Many episodes of both shows are topical, featuring fictionalized versions of recent news stories. The “Lowdown” episode which aired in April 2004 fits this pattern, and the episode encapsulates much of the prevailing media discourse about the Down Low. In the episode, Jeffrey York, a white assistant district attorney from the Bronx, is found dead in his car. After examining the body, detective Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) admits that she briefly dated York years ago. As the investigation progresses, the detectives discover that York was HIV positive, which he kept hidden from his coworkers, along with his sexual orientation. The episode’s investigation centers on the gradually-uncovered relationship between York and his African American boss, Andy Abbott, who is also secretly HIV positive, and has a wife and child. Ultimately, the detectives deduce that Abbott murdered York when York asked Abbott to leave his family to be with York, and threatened to “out” Abbott if he refused. Additionally, Abbott’s wife finds out she is HIV positive as well, having contracted the virus from Abbott. In a parallel sub-plot, Benson worries that she too might be infected with HIV because of her relationship with York several years prior. Assuaging her fears, Benson’s HIV test shows that she is negative for the virus. In tying Abbott’s murder of York to Abbott’s infection of his wife, the episode is quite explicit in constructing the Down Low as a fatally dangerous problem among black men that needs to be policed and punished.

The episode of *Law and Order: SVU* is particularly helpful in understanding how the Down Low is constructed as an exclusively black problem by the mainstream media. The racial

dimensions of the Down Low are evident in exploring the difference between the two assistant district attorneys in the deadly love affair at the heart of the episode: the white Jeffrey York and the black Andy Abbott. Both men exhibit almost fully the behaviors that would classify them as “on the Down Low.” They both 1) lead publically heterosexual lives, 2) to the point of dating or marrying women while simultaneously 3) secretly sleeping with other men, and are 4) HIV positive, which 5) threatens the women in their lives with HIV infection.

Despite the extensive and obvious similarities, *Law and Order:SVU* subjects the two men to very different standards of acceptability. The most obvious difference between the two men—who have the same career, share the same seropositive status, and similarly endanger women in their lives through their secretive sexual behaviors—boils down to race. Although both York and Abbott could potentially be considered Down Low based on their actions, the episode only ever refers to Abbott as being on the Down Low; as psychiatrist George Huang (B.D. Wong) tells Benson, York was instead “a closeted man.”¹⁰⁶ This distinction based on race is not an oversight: the Down Low is defined in explicitly racialized terms during the episode. The episode’s investigation into York’s murder hits a road block when Benson and her partner interview Abbott’s all-black male friends, who falsely inform the detectives that Abbott was at the group’s regular poker game during the time of York’s murder. (Later, the detectives realize the men are using poker games as an excuse to sleep together without arousing suspicion from their wives and girlfriends.) Back at the NYPD offices, the police captain wonders “Why are they all protecting him?” prompting the only black member of the squad, Odafin “Fin” Tutuola (played by rapper/actor Ice-T) to suggest that “They’re on the Down Low.” He proceeds to enlighten his confused and shocked white colleagues by explaining that the Down Low is:

¹⁰⁶ *Law and Order: SVU*, “Lowdown,” episode no. 111, first broadcast 6 April 2004 by NBC. Directed by Jud Taylor and written by Robert Nathan.

Black men havin' sex with other men...[They say] it's just sex. They hang out, have a few drinks. Pretend that what goes on downstairs isn't who they are. You grow up being black, you're supposed to be a man, become a father...they all see being gay as a white man's perversion....[Down Low men] go out, have sex with other men, then come home, have sex with their woman and pretend they're straight.

He follows it up with a quick, “Don’t look at me, I just know stuff!” to assure his colleges that *he* is not one of these duplicitous Down Low men. Despite Benson’s objections that white men “have trouble dealing with” their homosexuality as well, Fin remains firm. “It’s different for black men,” he says, alluding to the historical struggle by black men to gain social respectability and the contentious relationship between black communities and homosexuality, while not explicitly referencing it.¹⁰⁷ Even as the behavior of York and Abbott remains essentially similar, the episode is clear in placing York “in the closet” and Abbott “on the Down Low,” without offering an explanation of how or why their race is significant enough to require these men to have different identities. The only suggestion as to why black and white bisexuality might be treated different is Fin’s remark that, “It’s different for black men,” which he does not elaborate. To the white media, the Down Low represents a problem specific to blacks—albeit one with potentially deadly consequences for whites who get in the way of Down Low men. “Lowdown” thus suggests to viewers that the Down Low cannot be understood except as a specifically black activity, even if DL men’s actions correspond exactly to similar behaviors in white men.

Shortly after the airing of “Lowdown,” two separate but related events helped elevate Down Low discourse in popular consciousness. The first was the publication of J.L. King’s memoir, *On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep With Men*. King had been working on the memoir in one form or another since at least 2001, when King first began his series of public lectures and appearances warning about the threat of HIV

¹⁰⁷ For a detailed look at this history, see Chapter 1.

and the Down Low to the African American community.¹⁰⁸ Surprisingly, King does not ever explicitly define what he means by the “Down Low.” The only clue readers get is in the title: “Straight” black men who sleep with men.¹⁰⁹ Here again, the Down Low refers only to black men whose claim to a heterosexual identity is suspect. An additional layer to the Down Low is suggested in the book’s dedication, addressed as a “protective guide” to “all the women whose health has been jeopardized...by men living on the DL.” King expands this explanation in the first chapter, suggesting that “black women [are] contracting [HIV] in such high numbers,” because they are “getting infected by their husbands and boyfriends, who are not telling them that they are also having sex with men.” Keith Boykin spends a large part of his book, *Beyond the Down Low* specifically refuting King’s work, pointing out the obvious contradictions in *On the Down Low*. For example, King claims to have interviewed “hundreds” of DL men and conducted “DL focus groups,” while also claiming that DL men are an HIV risk because they refuse to wear condoms, since using a condom forces the DL man “to think about what [he’s] doing,” and acknowledge that his is having sex with other men.¹¹⁰ It seems unlikely that men so steeped in denial that they refuse to wear condoms would agree to participate in online or in-person focus groups with King to discuss their actions in detail, or enter into long-term relationships with other DL men.

¹⁰⁸ Information about King in 2001 can be found in: Linda Villarosa, “AIDS Education is Aimed ‘Down Low,’” *The New York Times*, April 3, 2001, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/03/health/aids-education-is-aimed-down-low.html>. King had been giving lectures on “The Five Personality Types of DL Men,” since at least 2003, parts of which grew into *On the Down Low*. See Cheryl Jackson, “Life on the Down Low – Author writes about black men who see men on the side, then give HIV to wives,” *Chicago Sun Times*, December 3, 2003, NewsBank (0FF40C1C79E86AA8).

¹⁰⁹ J.L King and Karen Hunter, *On the Down Low*, (New York: Broadway Books), 2004. Because of King’s popularity and frequent appearances in mainstream media, his book’s publication on a major press, and his national reputation as “Mr. Down Low,” I am counting his best-selling book as an example of “mainstream media.”

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, n.p., 11. For King’s discussion of his focus groups, see *On the Down Low*, 135. For information about DL men and condom use, see 25-26; 48.

Boykin's work is important in understanding how and why the assumptions underpinning the Down Low narrative fall apart under critical scrutiny, but I am less interested in proving or disproving the "truth" of the Down Low, and more interested in examining how King's book constructs the Down Low as a black behavior/identity, and how he magnifies the "threat" of the Down Low by sensationalizing the topic. From the title on, King writes that the limits of the Down Low extend only to "*black* men who sleep with men." King's imagined audience appears to be heterosexual black women. His racial identification is apparent in his reference to black men and women as "brothers and sisters," and by referring to whites as "they" while using the inclusive "us" and "we" when discussing the black church and black communities. His explanation of gay slang terms, such as "top" and "bottom" further indicate that his audience is imagined to be heterosexual.

This focus on African American women is especially apparent in the chapter on "DL Behavior Types." King identifies five "DL Types" as a guide for black women: The Mature Brother, the Thug Brother, the Professional Brother, the "I Have a Wife/Girlfriend" Brother, and the "I'm Just Curious" Brother. King is direct in acknowledging how broad and encompassing these descriptors are, admitting that, "When I talk about these five in my workshops, I've had women tell me that I have described every man in our communities. And that is my point; DL men are part of the daily lives of all of us." King's message again is contradictory. He promises to reveal the secrets of "DL brothers" while simultaneously suggesting that his descriptions could fit any man, insisting that that DL men are "husbands, boyfriends, lovers, fathers, grandfathers...police officers, firemen...serving in all branches of the military...". In a particularly colorful example, King suggests that national "gospel conventions," often turn into Down Low orgies, as these conventions are excuses for Down Low men "to meet and to have

sex while away from their hometown. Many midnight concerts turn into affairs where brothers are cruising each other.” Including such sensational examples muddles King’s goals in the book. It seems unlikely that encouraging black women to be suspicious that every black man could be Down Low, and that all of black men’s potential social activities (such as attending a church convention) could be a clue of Down Low behavior will lead to a decrease in HIV infections in black women.

Despite King’s insistence that his text is a “protective guide,” his advice on how to determine “DL Behavior Types” is undermined by his equally firm insistence that DL men cannot be identified by specific behaviors, because a DL man could come from any professional, educational, religious, or family background. Although King does offer practical advice on safe sex practices throughout the text—he advises women to have “candid discussion about sex with your mate” and encourages regular condom use in sexual relationships—the reader’s takeaway from the text is not likely to be very empowering. Instead, what is most likely to linger is King’s suggestion that the only way for black women to determine if their man is on the down low is to use their decidedly un-scientific “women’s intuition,” in order to avoid being used as a “lab rat” for HIV infection by DL men.¹¹¹ In addressing a predominantly black audience, and by writing about the Down Low only in terms of black men, King helped further mainstream constructions of the Down Low as an exclusively African American phenomenon. Like earlier authors addressing the subject, King associates the Down Low with HIV, suggesting that all Down Low men pose a risk to heterosexual women by their selfish acts of bisexuality. But King’s book, like the episode of *Law and Order*, is more explicit in recognizing the Down Low in racialized terms.

¹¹¹ Quotes from King, *On the Down Low*, 136, 18, 82, 15. For King’s discussion of the importance of women’s intuition as the only tool to detect Down Low men’s behaviors, see 130. For King’s reference to women as “lab rats,” see 28.

This focus on the racial aspects of the Down Low is likewise apparent in the *The Oprah Winfrey Show*'s first broadcast on the Down Low in April 2004, which prominently featured J.L. King. The episode did feature other guests, but King's appearance was the most extensive. Indeed, although King had been featured in many reports on the Down Low prior to his appearance on Oprah—he was quoted in the *USA Today* article from March 2001 as “Jim King,” and was interviewed for a national news program on CNN in February 2004¹¹²—it is likely that his appearance on Oprah helped his book reach “best seller” status so quickly, since the show reached millions of viewers.¹¹³ Much like *Law and Order: SVU*, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* episode, “A Secret Sex World: Living on the Down Low” collects many of the elements about the Down Low from the earlier media narrative and brings them to a larger audience. Examining the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is particularly illustrative in showing how mainstream media was unable to understand the Down Low outside of the context of both HIV and race.

Like “Lowdown” and King's memoir, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is quick to explain the Down Low as an exclusively black problem. Oprah opens the episode by explaining her interest in the Down Low because of her position as “an African American woman,” and tells viewers that the Down Low is “a shocker!”¹¹⁴ Given the racial context of the introduction to the Down Low, the episode makes clear that black male sexuality is the root of the issue, which is posited as the reason “why so many women are getting AIDS.” Ironically, even as King and other individuals are quick to suggest that the Down Low as a behavior or identity is not exclusively a black phenomenon, they construct the Down Low as a “problem” only in regards to the actions

¹¹² See Sternberg, “The danger of living ‘down low.’” <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/program.pl?ID=748110>

¹¹³ Daily viewership for *The Oprah Winfrey Show* was estimated at 9 million for 2004, Penny Wark, “Oprah Winfrey: The TV Queen's Crown Slips,” in *The London Times*, (May 29, 2008).

¹¹⁴ E. Rakieta (Executive Producer,) *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, “A secret sex world: Living on the down low,” broadcast April 16, 2004 (Chicago: Harpo Productions). Unfortunately, episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* are not available for streaming or purchase, nor is it re-broadcast on television. For quotations from the show, I am reliant on a transcript of the show compiled by the non-profit HIV/AIDS service organization Big Bend Cares, accessed at <http://www.bigbendcares.org/images/pdfs/oprah.pdf>. Spelling and capitalization as in original.

of black men. King's comments on the episode illustrate the limits of the mainstream media's ability to understand the Down Low outside the context of black male sexuality. He says:

This is not just a black thing. There are a lot of White men who are bisexual. They don't use the term "down low," but they are bisexual and they are creeping in from the suburbs into our neighborhood because they have a desire to have sex with Black men. Having sex with Black men and going back to their suburbs to their homes to their wives. So, I don't want White women to think this is just a Black thing...that only black women are being impacted. I think if this continues, we're going to see White women as being infected at the same rate as black women.

Through this remark, King attempts to convince his audience that the Down Low represents a threat to the health of "White women" in addition to black women. But the route he takes to prove this comment is unusual. Rather than suggesting that white male bisexuality is a public health problem in and of itself, King says that white bisexual men threaten the health of white women only because they are "creeping" into "our [black] neighborhood" to sleep with black men. Here, white men only threaten women because they, too, sleep with black men; if white men did not fetishize and have sex with DL men, then both white men and white women would be safe from the threat of HIV. According to King, men living on the Down Low are not a "white" problem, but only an extension of a pathologized and dangerous black male sexuality. Curiously, King does not address the possibility that black bisexual men might be having sex with white women. If white MSM fetishize black men, it seems likely that some white women would as well. Perhaps King wished to avoid mentioning the possibility of sex between white women and black men, which has a contentious and often violent history in America.¹¹⁵ Regardless of his motives, his omission is telling, as it further removes the threat of the Down Low from mainstream or white society. Thus, despite King's protestations to the contrary, *The Oprah Winfrey Show* links HIV infection in women (especially, but not exclusively black women) inextricably to the sexuality of Down Low black men.

¹¹⁵ See, for instance, Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men* (1997). See also Chapter 1.

The episode also demonstrates the problems of attempting to analyze the Down Low outside of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in mainstream narratives. King, for instance, mentions to Oprah that the only reason that the Down Low is such a popular narrative because “the numbers” of HIV infection in African America women “are up.” He continues, “If there was a cure for HIV tomorrow, the behavior would still continue.”¹¹⁶ King offers an important clarification that the prevalence of Down Low behavior is not directly related to HIV infection in black women, the subtlety in this observation is one that he himself continually undermines in suggesting that Down Low men represent a health threat for straight women. Additionally, because the Down Low is introduced within the episode within the context of “one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS [sic],”¹¹⁷ and the episode ends with an individual from an HIV/AIDS non-profit suggesting tips to reduce the risk of infection, it is likely that King’s brief attempt to separate the Down Low from HIV is ineffective. Regardless, King’s comment is helpful as it reveals that the Down Low media narrative became so popular because it was tied to the rising HIV rate in black women.

The New Normal

Pinpointing the “end” of the Down Low narrative is a fruitless task. Once the Down Low took hold of common understandings of black men’s sexuality, it was impossible to erase entirely. Though it is true the term’s frequency in the media gradually decreased after the 2004-2005 peak, the Down Low continued to be used by mainstream media for years; as late as February 2008 the Down Low was still appearing in *The New York Times*, which ran an article

¹¹⁶ “A secret sex world: Living on the down low,” *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

¹¹⁷ Biologically speaking, one cannot “get” AIDS. HIV can be transmitted sexually, but as its name implies, AIDS is a condition “acquired” when HIV develops in the host for an extended period of time without treatment.

on a bathhouse in New York City that self-identified as catering to “men on the down-low.”¹¹⁸ Even during the peak years of the Down Low’s appearance in mainstream media, individuals objected to the term and its link to HIV; however, these voices were often lost in the conversation. Following the publication of Boykin’s *Beyond the Down Low* in 2005, he received a few sympathetic book reviews, but the book failed to gain the popular or commercial momentum that attended J.L. King in 2004.¹¹⁹ Rather than thinking about the “end” or “decline” of the Down Low, a more useful interpretative paradigm would be to observe the way the narrative of the Down Low man lingers in popular understandings of black sexuality.

In the public health field, the Down Low officially lost much of its explanatory status in October 2009, when the CDC officially declared that Down Low men (or black MSMW) were no longer considered the primary vector for HIV infection in black women. Although a few academic journals published articles refuting or debating the Down Low prior to 2009,¹²⁰ the CDC’s statement downplaying the Down Low as a “risk factor” is perhaps more significant because of the institutional and financial power the organization commands. The CDC first announced their findings in a press release through the National Prevention Information Network, and through an interview on NPR later in the month.¹²¹ In both releases, the CDC, through spokesman Kevin Fenton (director of the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention) identified the imagery of the Down Low as a primary vector

¹¹⁸ James Angeles, “Liaisons Dangereuses.” *The New York Times*, CY5, February 17, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/17/nyregion/thecity/17bath.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0.

¹¹⁹ For sympathetic coverage of Boykin, see Jane Henderson, “Down Low: Up for Debate,” *St Louis Post – Dispatch*, five star late lift edition, 14 March, 2005, ProQuest (402552777); or Rick Blalock, “Out Review,” review of *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies and Denial in Black America*, by Keith Boykin, *Black Issues Book Review*, May/June 2005, ProQuest, (217794017).

¹²⁰ For studies that addressed the Down Low prior to October 2009, see Chandra L. Ford, et. al., “Black Sexuality, Social Construction, and Research Targeting ‘The Down Low’ (‘The DL’),” *Annals of Epidemiology*, 17, no. 3 (2007).

¹²¹ “Myth: HIV/AIDS Rate Among Black Women Traced To ‘Down Low’ Black Men,” *Tell Me More*, originally broadcast on NPR on 28 October 2009.

for disease transmission a “myth.” According to Fenton, studies conducted through the CDC “have looked to see what proportion of infections is coming from male partners who are bisexual and found there are relatively few.”¹²² Instead, medical researchers and public health officials “need to look at the risk factors which are more prevalent in the community”—injection drug use, unprotected sex with multiple individuals, and unprotected sex with heterosexual men who have multiple female partners and/or are using injection drugs.¹²³ Nearly eight years after the “Down Low” was first introduced in the media as a term to describe gay and bisexual black males, and seven years after the term was applied to HIV infection, what is arguably the most powerful public health institution in the world unambiguously stated what critics like Boykin had been claiming for years: the Down Low is *not* to blame for disproportionately high rates of HIV infection in African American women.

But despite the distancing of public health officials from the term “Down Low” in October 2009, the term did not disappear from popular use. Although the Down Low largely disappeared from mainstream newspapers and magazines, the “myth” had entered into popular paradigms of black sexuality. References to the Down Low popped up on television programs such as *The View* in 2010, and *30 Rock* in 2011. Some individuals continued to advance the imagery of the secretly bisexual black man who infected straight black women with HIV as an explanation for high rates of HIV infection in black women. In an interview with Larry King in 2013, African American film director Lee Daniels described his visit to Gay Men’s Health Crisis—an HIV/AIDS non-profit service organization in New York City—while conducting research for his film *Precious*, about a black teenager who contracts HIV after being raped by her father. Daniels explained that while he expected to see the center filled with gay men, he saw

¹²² George E. Curry, “Official Says ‘Down Low’ Men Not Responsible for High HIV Rates Among Black Women,” *CDCNPIN*, October 7, 2009, <http://www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/display/NewsDisplay.asp?NewsNbr=54078>.

¹²³ “Myth: HIV/AIDS Rate Among Black Women Traced to ‘Down Low’ Black Men.”

“nothing but...black women with kids” there.¹²⁴ According to Daniels, the reason that so many black women and children have HIV is, “Because black men can’t come out. Why? Because it’s simply that you can’t do it. Your family says it, your church says it... your parents say it, your friends say it... so you’re living on this DL thing and you’re infecting black women. And so it is killing us.” Daniels’ comments neatly summarize the narrative of Down Low men expressed by mainstream media: gay and bisexual black men feel pressured to keep their same-sex desires a secret, contract HIV through sex with other men, then pass HIV on to unsuspecting straight black women. If the Down Low was a “myth,” then clearly the mythology of the Down Low brother and HIV remained an influential and salient explanation for individuals trying to understand high HIV rates in African American communities.

For Daniels, race was central to his understanding of the Down Low. It was not a problem for *all* straight women, but specifically for black women and their children. When Daniels says the Down Low is killing “us,” the inclusive pronoun suggests he means the threat of the Down Low is to “the black culture,” as opposed to women in general.¹²⁵ The continued understanding of the Down Low as a race-specific behavior is also apparent in an article by *World News Daily (WND)*, a conservative, far-right American news website. Although this website is too small and extremist to be considered “mainstream,” the website picks up on many of the anxieties about Down Low men expressed in the mainstream media. On October 2, 2012, *WND* published an article by Jeromi Corsi called, “Trinity Church Members Reveal Obama Shocker! ‘Matchmaker’ Rev. Jeremiah Wright ‘provided cover for gays,’” the first in what it promised was a series of articles on the secret lives of Barack and Michelle Obama. According to

¹²⁴ “Bullied, Called Names and Beaten: Lee Daniels Recalls Growing Up Gay,” interview with Larry King. YouTube video, 2:29, uploaded by “Larry King,” August 13, 2013. Accessed February 19, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rrr7izsQa-Q>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

Corsi, when Barack Obama (before his election to the Presidency) attended the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, he was a member of “The Down Low Club,” a secretive “matchmaking” service for gay black men run by church leader Jeremiah Wright.¹²⁶ This article was not the first time this news website directed personal attacks against Obama, and had earlier run articles calling into question the legitimacy of his American citizenship and birth certificate and accusing him of hiding his homosexuality in order to make him a more viable candidate for political office.¹²⁷ The credibility and journalistic integrity of the article—based on unsubstantiated allegations from anonymous sources who claim to fear for their lives if their true identities are revealed—is questionable, and the article is better understood as a sensational piece of tabloid journalism. For instance, a poll accompanying the article offers readers responses such as, “It isn’t shocking. He was mentored by bisexual, communist pornographer Frank Marshall Davis,” and “It’s no more bizarre than having a president with a Marxist and Muslim background.” Nonetheless, the article illustrates the ways in which the Down Low remains a popular lens through which to view black bi-/homosexuality. Corsi explicitly categorizes the Down Low as a product of “the black community.” In other words, it is impossible to imagine that *WND* would have been able to claim that Obama was on the Down Low if he did not have African heritage.

Outside the news media, other health organizations still felt it necessary to address the Down Low as a potential cause of HIV in black communities. Despite the definitive position of the CDC in October 2009, in April 2011 the *Psychology and AIDS Exchange Newsletter*, a

¹²⁶ Jerome R. Corsi, “Trinity Church Members Reveal Obama Shocker! ‘Matchmaker Rev. Jeremiah Wright ‘provided cover for gays’ for *WND*, October 2, 2012. Last accessed on February 23, 2014, <http://www.wnd.com/2012/10/trinity-church-members-reveal-obama-shocker/>.

¹²⁷ Jerome R. Corsi, “Claim: Obama Hid ‘gay Life’ to Become President: Chicago homosexual community shocked he could keep it a secret,” for *WND*, September 11, 2012. Last accessed on February 23, 2014 <http://www.wnd.com/2012/09/claim-obama-hid-gay-life-to-become-president/>.

publication of the American Psychological Association (APA), ran an article informing readers about “The truth about the ‘Down Low,’” which claimed that “it would be fruitful to move our discussions beyond conversations of ‘down low,’” echoing the CDC’s position from two years earlier.¹²⁸ That the APA felt the need to debunk the Down Low narrative suggests that this explanation for HIV in black women still held sway in popular understandings of black sexuality and in regards to HIV in black communities. Clearly, in spite of the efforts of the CDC and other public health organizations to declare the end of the Down Low, the term, and all the fallacies and false stereotypes that attended it, had already gained purchase in the popular lexicon.

Conclusion

When gay and bisexual black men first began using the terminology of the Down Low in the late 1990s, they were not referring to themselves as health risks or as necessarily HIV positive. Instead, living on the Down Low was seen by some of these men as a way to reconcile their same-sex attraction with a desire for inclusion in and conformity with their racial communities. In addition to the pressures exerted upon gay and bisexual men to hide their sexuality in a predominantly heteronormative society, black gay and bisexual men faced unique pressures regarding their sexuality and masculinity. By following the script of the Down Low, these men found a way to satisfy their sexual desires while still retaining acceptance in black communities that encouraged individuals to conform to heteronormative relationships. If homosexuality was “a white man’s perversion,” as Fin claimed on *Law and Order: SVU*, then so was the closet. The Down Low presented gay and bisexual black men with an alternative to the labels of a predominantly white gay culture. It was a way to express same-sex desire while

¹²⁸ David Malebranche, “The truth about the ‘Down Low,’” *Psychology and AIDS Exchange Newsletter*, April 2011. <http://www.apa.org/pi/aids/resources/exchange/2011/04/down-low.aspx>.

distancing these men from the cultural stereotypes of effeminacy and the perceived whiteness of Eurocentrism of gay life in America. The self-identified d.l. men who attended Warehouse—the club profiled in the *Village Voice* in June 2000—and who talked with one another through online Internet chatrooms were buying into an identity which came with a set of agreed upon behaviors that privileged secrecy and discretion. True, many of these men, such as J.L King, also maintained relationships with women who were unaware that their partners were seeking sexual encounters with other men. While this infidelity can be interpreted as a form of duplicitous behavior, as many individuals in the mainstream media claimed,¹²⁹ they also make sense when viewing the larger history of black men's sexuality in America. Many Down Low men realized that their acceptance in black communities was contingent on their ability to conform to a heteronormative lifestyle—a lifestyle which meant pursuing sexual or marital relationships with women—and responded accordingly, by adopting a heterosexual public persona and hiding their same-sex desires behind this façade. To describe one's self as Down Low was also meant as a signal to like-minded black men: it was an agreement that any engagement between Down Low men would not threaten their ability to maintain public heterosexuality.

Of course, these same behaviors that allowed men to protect their social and community acceptance also made them vulnerable to the type of intense scrutiny placed upon them by the media. The sexuality of black men has always been viewed suspiciously by mainstream, white culture, and they have long been subject to a number of myths: beliefs that black men have larger genitals than white men; that they are more sexually active; and the stereotype of the black rapist which permeated Southern society during Reconstruction. Many middle-class black men could escape these harmful racist stereotypes by claiming “respectability,” through economic stability, religious piety, heterosexuality, or the formation of heteronormative nuclear families. Yet Down

¹²⁹ Pitt, “Downlow Mountain?” *The Journal of Men's Studies*, vol. 14 (2), Spring 2006.

Low men had no access to many of these options. Not only were Down Low men sleeping with other men—a cause for social rejection in both white and black communities—but they were also liars, adulterers, and home-wreckers. When the CDC and the mainstream media began accusing Down Low men of infecting “innocent” women through their secretive sexual behaviors, these men (to the extent that this label reflected the actions of actual black bisexuals) had little evidence to marshal in their own defense: if the media was correct, and these men were cheating on their partners and infecting them with HIV, their behavior was widely considered immoral and perhaps even illegal.

Thus, the problem of mainstream media discourse around the Down Low became a problem of contestation: who gets to say what it means to be a Down Low man? What is the cause of high rates of HIV in black women? Which victims of HIV are worthy of sympathy in the media? Down Low men suddenly became the center of a national media conversation about HIV in African American women (and, to a lesser extent, in African American men). The charges levied against these men—they were promiscuous, dangerous, and infected—were not new, having long been inscribed in racist ideologies and black sexuality. HIV represented merely a new complication to these stereotypes, and existing stereotypes about black men and their sexuality were deployed to explain HIV in black women with surprising ease. Down Low men allowed the mainstream media a convenient entry point to discuss AIDS in black communities, as the narrative allowed for easily identifiable victims (black women) and villains (Down Low men). That black MSM were contracting HIV in higher rates than black women was of little concern in media coverage. This pattern echoes the sentiments of the mainstream media of the 1980s, which was more interested in AIDS in the “general population,” than in (white) gay men. Gay men could change their risky behavior, while “innocent” children or hemophiliacs could

not: gay men were implicated in their disease, while innocent individuals were merely the victims of unfortunate circumstances. Similarly, Down Low men were not the recipients of sympathy because they were the primary agents of infection. Black women were guiltless in comparison, the victims of selfish, lying, cheating bisexual men. Rather than attempt to understand why these bisexual black men felt compelled to lie about their sexuality, the media chose to portray them as harboring villainous intent, harming black women and through their sexual behaviors. That the media chose this route is unsurprising. Attempting to view Down Low men with sympathy and understanding would require an acknowledgement of the racist and homophobic inequalities that permeate society. It was easier, and less threatening to readers, to pretend that instead these Down Low men were themselves the problem, and the cause for HIV rates that disproportionately affected racial minorities. Because the mainstream media reported from a predominately white paradigm, they were largely able to view the problem at a remove: the Down Low was a problem happening *over there*, in black communities. The next chapter will explore the response of the African American media to the Down Low, who did not have the luxury of distancing themselves from the phenomenon like the mainstream media did.

Chapter 3 – The Down Low in African American Media

Mainstream media was quick to seize upon the narrative of the Down Low. The topic allowed for a much-needed discussion of HIV in straight black women, but the tone of coverage was often sensational, focusing on the sexual promiscuity, infidelity, and general misbehavior of these apparently remorseless black men. As Oprah Winfrey declared, the Down Low is “a shocker.” The Down Low was framed as a problem that was, for the most part, exclusively black, typified by the “Lowdown” episode of *Law and Order: SVU*, which characterized a white bisexual character as “closeted,” while labeling his black counterpart as being “on the down low.” By portraying the Down Low as a racially specific behavior, most mainstream media and fiction viewed the topic from a distance. Reporters were on the outside looking in, a voyeuristic perspective apparent in (white) reporter Benoit Denizet-Lewis’s trip to an African American bathhouse to report on the sexual activities of black MSM for *The New York Times Magazine*, a decidedly middle-class bastion of respectable mainstream journalism.

This chapter will explore the response to the Down Low in African American media. By this, I refer to media which target primarily African American readership, such as *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, or newspapers such as *New York Amsterdam News*, or the *Afro-American Red Star*. When appropriate, I will also refer to articles and opinion pieces published in mainstream media sources, but which explicitly aim to communicate with, and are written by, African Americans. As the Down Low was heavily described as a solely black behavior or identity, examining African American media sources promises to provide insight into how black communities responded to the Down Low, its attendant relationship to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and bi-/homosexuality in black communities.

Not all African American media sources held the same view, nor did all authors approach the subject in the same way. Despite this, a few clear themes emerge from African American media treatment of the Down Low. In particular, African American media tended to “own” the Down Low as an issue facing the black community. Most African American media sources repeated this claim, suggesting that the Down Low was a special issue that black communities needed to address. In this sense, authors often saw the Down Low not as a problem just of black bisexual men *per se*, but a problem facing the black community as a *whole*, which needed to be addressed. Indeed, individual men became almost secondary to the narrative of the Down Low in black media, as authors focused on the threat that “Down Low brothers” posed to heterosexual black women, and the potential for Down Low men to cast a larger stigma on the black community. This chapter will begin by studying early African American media explorations of bisexuality and HIV from the late 1980s and early 1990s. The next section, “A Community Problem,” looks at the ways the Down Low was considered a problem for black communities in America, particularly in terms of how the Down Low threatened heterosexual black relationships.

Proto-Down Low?

An article published in *Ebony* magazine in January of 1988 titled “Black Women, Bisexuals, and the AIDS Risk,” warned readers of the increasing threat that bisexual black men posed to black women. The article’s author, Laura Randolph, writes that Black women face a “mounting anxiety” because of a fear of exposure to the AIDS virus through “undercover bisexuals with a double sex life and a high risk factor.” She explains that the problem “has nothing to do with gay or homosexual lifestyles. The problem, to put it bluntly, is that women

who have unknowingly slept with bisexuals...could have been exposed to AIDS...” due to these “undercover bisexuals.” Randolph goes on to note that African Americans represent a disproportionately large percent of the AIDS cases among women, and that “a rational, responsible Black woman in this era” must insist her male sex partners wear condoms.¹³⁰

The article typifies much of the media coverage that attended the Down Low: a note about the disproportionate impact of HIV/AIDS among black women; a warning to engage in safe sex; a dismantling of the “pure myth that Black men aren’t bisexual or gay”; and a focus on the impact of the disease on heterosexuals (“Black women – and their current partners”). These characteristics are concomitant with an almost casual disregard for the lives of HIV positive gay and bisexual black men, who become a “problem” to the black community only because they threaten the health of black women.¹³¹ Considering the degree to which the article collects many of the threads of the Down Low media narrative, it is surprising that the article was published 12 years before the term “down low” first appeared in *The Village Voice*, and 13 years before the term gained in popularity after its appearance in a number of mainstream daily newspapers.

Despite *Ebony’s* warning to black women about their vulnerability to AIDS, the message apparently did not stick. In April of 1994, *Ebony* published an article titled “New AIDS Scare for Heterosexuals: The Increasing Threat to Black Women.” Similar to the 1988 article, “New AIDS Scare for Heterosexuals” attempts to frighten readers (explicitly identified here as heterosexual, black females) into practicing safer sex by notifying them that, “Nationwide, heterosexual Black women are contracting HIV...faster than any other single group of Americans.”¹³² Although the article anecdotally suggests that bisexual black men are a vector of transmission into black

¹³⁰ Laura B. Randolph, “Black Women, Bisexuals, and the AIDS Risk,” *Ebony*, January 1988, 120. Accessed via Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=n8wDAAAAMBAJ>

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Muriel L. Whetstone, “New AIDS Scare for Heterosexuals: The Increasing Threat to Black Women,” *Ebony*, April 1994, 188. Accessed via Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=-8sDAAAAMBAJ>

women, the focus of this article is less about the methods of transmission, and more about describing the increasing AIDS diagnoses in black women as an attempt to educate readers.

These early warnings notwithstanding, many writers covering the Down Low in the following decade suggested that blacks remained ignorant about realities of HIV risk, even as the disease increasingly affected the lives of racial minorities in the United States. Writing in April 2004 in the *Chicago Tribune*, African American columnist Dawn Turner Trice claimed that “too many in the black community still view AIDS as something that affects white gay men or people in parts of Africa. That’s simply not true.”¹³³ Years after *Ebony*’s attempts to raise the alarm about HIV/AIDS in African American women, many writers felt that feelings of ignorance or invulnerability with regards to HIV in the black community still needed to be addressed. This lack of education (or at least the commonly-advanced idea that there was a lack of education), makes more sense in the context of the larger history of popular representations of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. While white gay men used artistic works to address the epidemic ravaging the gay community, there was not a parallel movement by black artists to address HIV/AIDS on the scale of white, gay artists.¹³⁴ Even in books or stories not written by white gay men, they remained the primary subject for most literature written about HIV/AIDS. This disproportionate representation can be found in popular films about the disease, where blacks found little representation through the end of the twentieth century. In his detailed analysis of feature-length films with AIDS as a central subject released between 1981 and 1999, Kylo-Patrick R. Hart found that of the 76 characters with HIV/AIDS depicted in the films, 53 were explicitly

¹³³ Dawn Turner Trice, *Chicago Tribune*, “‘Down Low’ stir should provoke talk of safe sex,” April 26, 2004, ProQuest (420128681).

¹³⁴ See the Introduction for more information. For analysis of television coverage of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Cohen, *The Boundaries of Blackness*, (1999); and Colby and Cook. “The Mass-Mediated Epidemic,” In *AIDS: The Making of a Chronic Disease*, ed. Elizabeth Fee et. al (1992), 84-122. An analysis of literature on HIV/AIDS can be found in Pastore, “What Are the Responsibilities of Representing AIDS?” in *Confronting AIDS Through Literature*: 16-35.

identified as white gay men. Only six characters were African-American: five gay men, and one heterosexual woman.¹³⁵ It is likely that this representation in literature and film, even if it was occasionally homophobic, educated many white gay men about the threat HIV/AIDS, and the necessity of taking preventative measures to protect against infection. Conversely, the absence of black representation in either news or popular media may have led some black individuals to conclude they were not at risk.¹³⁶

While it is true that black literary engagement with HIV/AIDS was minimal, one of the few texts that did engage with the epidemic preconfigured almost precisely the concerns that the *Down Low* raised in the 2000s. The text in question is *Invisible Life* by E. Lynn Harris, an out gay black man, and was originally published in 1991. Although *Invisible Life* was not the only novel to look at HIV/AIDS in black men, it was one of the earliest, and it was the first novel to take black male bisexuality as its main theme.¹³⁷ The novel traces the melodramatic story of Raymond Tyler, a black man who grapples with his bisexuality, simultaneously dating a black man and a black woman in New York City. Through Ray, the *Invisible Life* examines some of the problems facing black gay and bisexual men. Ray muses, “No black man in his right might would choose to be gay. I had always been proud of being black...” admitting that he has trouble reconciling his sexual orientation with his ability to be a proud black man, as if he imagines blackness and gayness to be mutually exclusive. Lynn emphasizes Ray’s struggles through Ray’s estranged relationship with his father, who informs Ray that “your mother and I didn’t raise you

¹³⁵ Kylo Patrick R. Hart, *The AIDS Movie*, (2000), 42, 48-49, 63. These figures do not include documentaries, or short films.

¹³⁶ For a fuller examination of the (non)representation of blacks in the news media, see Mollyann Brodie, et. al, "AIDS at 21: Media Coverage of the HIV Epidemic," *Supplement to the March/April 2004 issue of Columbia Journalism Review*: (2004):1-8.

¹³⁷ Lisa Frieden, “Invisible Lives: Addressing Black Male Bisexuality in the Novels of E. Lynn Harris,” in *Bisexual Men in Culture and Society*, ed. Brett Beegmyn and Erich Steinman, (New York, London, Oxford Harrington Park Press, 2002), 73-90.

to be no sissy.”¹³⁸ The difficulty that the novel’s black characters have in reconciling their same-sex attraction with their racial identity manifests in the number of men in the story who live their lives as the “undercover bisexuals” *Ebony* feared, undetectable to their female partners. Ray and all of his friends and lovers, are either dating or married to women, and their professions run the gamut from lawyers to a deeply closeted NFL player, who hits on Ray yet considers himself “straight.”¹³⁹

The specter of AIDS is never far from the story. Ray makes numerous references to the idea that African Americans do not find AIDS to be a threat, even within the gay community. He says, “I reflected on how most black gay men thought AIDS was a white boy’s disease when it was first brought to the attention of the gay community. Most of us thought that when black guys started to die from it, it was because they were *snow queens* [black men who sleep with white men].” Ray also lays out a mythos of the black bisexual somewhat similar to the Down Low narrative that would emerge a decade later:

I thought about *trade*, men who had sex with other men for money or other motivations. The majority of these men were lower middle class and either married or living with black women of the same class. They usually chose feminine guys as targets and didn’t consider themselves gay or bisexual. The women they lived with usually had no idea of their secret lives because of their great sexual prowess...Difficult economic times had caused a lot of these black men to, infect, mess around with sissies and punks...¹⁴⁰

Through Ray, who acts as a mouthpiece for the author, Harris suggests that many black bisexual men are able to deceive their female partners about their “secret lives” because the black men possess such incredible “sexual prowess” as to be able to “pass” as straight. Given the sympathy with which Harris examines Ray’s struggles to navigate both his bisexual desires and his racial

¹³⁸ E. Lynn Harris, *Invisible Life*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), original edition published by Consortium Press, 1991. “No black man...” 84. “Your mother and I...” 116.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 132. The one gay character who sleeps exclusively with men in the story, the effeminate Kyle, a prostitute who sleeps with a number of married and/or closeted men, including the NFL player, Basil.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 170, 171. Italics in original.

identity, it is odd that Harris suggests that many black men who have sex with men are doing so only as a result of “difficult economic times,” which causes them to sleep with other black men for money, and leads them to “infect [and] mess around with sissies and punks.” Despite the inclusion of this economic element, Harris’ statements are not far from those King made about the Down Low a decade later. Both men suggest that all bisexual men necessarily represent a threat to the health of heterosexual black women, because of their selfish desire not to disclose their sexual orientation.

In response to his growing awareness about the alleged threat that bisexual black men pose to unsuspecting heterosexual black women, Ray takes responsibility for his actions by refusing to have unprotected vaginal sex with his former college girlfriend and by coming out as bisexual to her. Harris molds Ray as the model bisexual, protecting the health of the virtuous, innocent black woman, who is fooled by Ray’s apparent masculinity into believing he is straight. However, the novel culminates in the cautionary tale of Candance (the fiancé of Kelvin, a bisexual black man that Ray secretly dated in college) who dies from complications due to AIDS. Years after they drift apart following graduation, Kelvin and Ray reunite in New York. Kelvin, engage to be married, suggests to Ray that Ray marry one of Candance’s friends, so the two can once again become secret lovers while projecting themselves to the world as heterosexual; Ray rejects this proposition. In the novel’s closing, Candance, who is a religious, trusting, and sexually modest woman, is unexpectedly revealed to be HIV positive—infected by Kelvin—and dies shortly after her diagnosis. Harris closes the novel with a long internal monologue from Ray, who blames himself and Kelvin for being “part of a secret society that was endangering black women like Candance to protect our secret desires,” ultimately leading to the

death of unsuspecting women. Harris is unambiguous in placing the blame for her death on the shoulders of Kelvin, who infects her because of his secret, bisexual, promiscuous lifestyle.

Although the *Ebony* articles on HIV/AIDS in heterosexual black women explicitly discussed race, the aim of the articles was to educate readers on risks of infection outside the gay community. The specificity of the women's race was important only insofar as it was used to draw the attention of a female African American readership; otherwise, the material discussed in the article, about the risk posed to heterosexual women by men who used intravenous drugs, had multiple female partners, or were bisexual could map easily onto white women. In fact, the concerns *Ebony* raised mirror similar themes in mainstream media coverage of the relationship between bisexual men and HIV in the 1980s and 1990s. In his article, "'Ethically Questionable?' Popular Media Reports on Bisexual Men and AIDS," Marshall Miller argued that mainstream media frequently suggested bisexual men represented a health threat to their female partners. As he writes, "the bisexual is used to explain the intrusion of AIDS into the 'safe' space of...white...straight life."¹⁴¹ Thus, *Ebony's* coverage of bisexual men can be understood as a reflection of concerns expressed by whites in mainstream media, but now with an emphasis on the black community. Conversely, Harris's novel highlights concerns unique to gay and bisexual black men. Put another way, *Ebony's* advice to their female readership about safe sex could easily apply to white women and did not necessarily represent specific concerns to African Americans, but Ray's struggles with intersections of race, masculinity, and sexuality apply uniquely to black men. By examining these intersections, *Invisible Life* proleptically suggests the concerns of Down Low men, who would enter popular consciousness only a few years later. This is not to say that the Down Low media narrative was merely a repackaging of preexisting

¹⁴¹ Marshall Miller, "'Ethically Questionable?' Popular Media Reports on Bisexual Men and AIDS," in *Bisexual Men in Culture and Society*, 99.

concerns in the black community; conversely, the singular nature of Harris' text shows how infrequently examined these intersections were prior to the emergence of the Down Low in mainstream conversation.

A Community Problem

Having examined some of the predecessors of the Down Low in African American media and fiction, this section will outline the Down Low narrative in twenty-first century African American media. The organization here will be thematic, rather than chronological, and will be broken down into two sub-sections. The first will look at how the Down Low narrative was considered an attack on relationships between heterosexual black Americans. The second will examine the way that the disease was "owned" by African American media as a problem that needed to be addressed by and within the African American community.

The Down Low as a Threat to Heterosexual Black Relationships

Many critics and writers who reported on the Down Low viewed it within a larger context of the perceived conflict between masculinity and homosexuality in black communities. Writing in June 2001 in the *New York Amsterdam News*, John Price suggested that while the black community is quick to rally around victims of "Black oppression in America," this "Black circle of support," has traditionally ignored "members of the black community who happen to practice same-sex behaviors."¹⁴² Price includes a quotation from Kevin McGruder, executive director of the non-profit organization Gay Men of African Descent, who says, "Part of the hysteria about 'down low men' is our obsession with these notions of masculinity...Many people are reacting to the idea of a man stepping out of a 'man's role,'" which is understood in heterosexual terms.

¹⁴² John Price, "Broke circle, gay Black men," *New York Amsterdam News*, July 19, 2001, ProQuest (390235928).

Other writers echoed McGruder's comments, such as fellow HIV/AIDS activist Phil Wilson, who claimed that when blacks hear "that a black man has HIV we immediately...wonder what's wrong with him *as a man*."¹⁴³ Author J.L. King also advanced this theme in interviews and public appearances, in addition to in his best-selling book *On the Down Low*. Reporting on a talk King gave, the *Philadelphia Tribune* wrote that, "'Men on the Down Low' situations have become so popular because being gay or bisexual is the worst thing you can be in Black communities."¹⁴⁴ In making these claims, the African American media was responding to a feeling of widespread homophobia evident both in American society writ large, and of homophobia specific to the black community. It was also responding to ideas about black masculinity.

While a full analysis of the origins and history of homophobia in the African American community is beyond the scope of this project, it is useful to examine some of the historical roots of homophobia in the African American community as it intersects with masculinity and gender.¹⁴⁵ Some of these ideas are mapped out more fully in Chapter 1, but it is useful to revisit some of the more salient themes here. In her essay, "What Race is Your Sex?" religious studies scholar Laurel Schneider explores the ways in which sex, gender, and race became co-constitutive elements of social identity, tracing the creation of racial difference to European colonial expansion, and then in service of a Western model of global capitalism. As a result of this racial categorization and the subsequent project of slavery (in the Western European and

¹⁴³ Emphasis added. Phil Wilson, "Black Men and HIV: Challenging Silence and Stereotypes," *New York Beacon*, July 25, 2001, ProQuest (367885922).

¹⁴⁴ Mignon Brooks, "Men on DL hurt straight women," *Philadelphia Tribune*, February 19, 2002, ProQuest (337826856).

¹⁴⁵ There is much debate about whether the African American community is less tolerant of homosexuality than other racial or ethnic groups. My goal is not to quantify African American homophobia, but to understand some of the unique factors that contribute towards black understandings of homosexuality in America. For a bit on this debate, see Paula C. Rust, "Managing Multiple Identities: Diversity Among Bisexual Women and Men," (53-83) in *Bisexuality*, ed. Beth A. Firestein, (1996).

North American context), “The white race is thus gendered male by virtue of its dominance, and the nonwhite races are gendered female, indicating their need for supervision.”¹⁴⁶ The consequences of this gendering of race are manifold: black slave men are feminized by their forced submission to “other, more powerful [white] men,” while slave women are masculinized by forcing them to labor, disallowing the passivity that is at the heart of feminine identity. Of particular interest to this project is the way that this interlocking feminization of black males and masculinization of nonwhite women collude to encourage heteronormativity in nonwhites, as a way to combat destructive racist and sexist stereotypes. That is to say, a black man can assert his masculinity by dominating women, and a black woman can prove her femininity by submitting to a black male.¹⁴⁷

Thus, African American homophobia is partially a response to white racism. Since white supremacy often relied on stereotypes about black sexuality—such as that blacks are “naturally” more promiscuous than whites, or that blacks have larger sexual organs than whites—following the collapse of slavery, many blacks attempted to fight those stereotypes by adhering to a limited set of acceptable sexual behaviors. This project was strengthened by the religiosity of African Americans. Horace L. Griffin, a self-identified gay black minister and religious scholar writes that many “black churches” favor homophobic readings of Christian scripture, which limit the potential for gay black men and women to find acceptance in their communities. Attempting to write honestly about his perceptions of widespread homophobia in African American communities, Griffin writes, “In light of historical racism and the indoctrination of rigid gender and sexual roles through the Christian church, African Americans generally possess a larger

¹⁴⁶ Laurel C. Schneider, “What Race is Your Sex?,” in *Queer Religion: LGBT Movements and Queering Religion, Volume II*, ed. Donald L. Boisvery and Jay Emerson Johnson (Santa Barbara: 2012), 134.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 130, 136.

degree of sexual shame and limited understandings of sexual morality,” which leads to intolerance of gay members of black communities.¹⁴⁸

Furthermore, black communities have a history of viewing homosexuality and blackness as incompatible, stemming from a belief that labels like “gay” and “bisexual” represent Eurocentric cultural norms. This reluctance of many African American who have same-sex relations to identify as either bisexual or gay led public health officials to term the phrases “men who have sex with men” and “men who have sex with men and women” in the 1990s. By using these “identity-free” terms, instead of the more common terms of gay or bisexual, epidemiologists “sought to avoid complex social and cultural connotations that, according to a strict biomedical view, have little do to with epidemiological investigations for disease.” In other words, the goal was to focus medical research and outreach on sexual behaviors (anal sex between men) as opposed to sexual identity (being gay). Though MSM is race-neutral on its face, the impetus for coining the term was to engage with black men that have sex with other men, but who did not identify as gay. Since in practice, since “gay” is frequently coded as “white” in society, the term MSM’s is often implicitly understood as referring to men of color.¹⁴⁹

Outside of public health, gay black men suggest that they have trouble seeing homosexuality as a black behavior. Writing about his youth in the 1980s, gay black activist and artist Rodney Christopher wrote that he was reluctant to come out as gay because he had no identifiable black gay role models. It was only after reading black LGBT publications such as *Black/Out* and *Other Countries: Black Gay Voices*, and “learning that there were bright, articulate, thoughtful black gay men” that Christopher gained the “courage to face life out of the

¹⁴⁸ Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African-American Lesbians & Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland: The Pilgram Press, 2006), 18-19.

¹⁴⁹ Rebecca M. Young and Illan H. Meyer, “The Trouble With ‘MSM’ and ‘WSW’: Erasure of the Sexual-Minority Person in Public Health Discourse,” *American Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 95 (7), 2005, 1144-1149.

closet.”¹⁵⁰ Historians of sexuality have also identified the widespread associate with whiteness and gayness. In historian Allan Berube’s 2001 essay, “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” he writes that college students in his classes identify that the common social image of “gay man” is someone who is “white and well-to-do.” Berube notes that “the gay male population is not as white as it appears to be by the images of gay men projected by the mainstream and gay media,” and notes the positive contributions to American life made by gay black men of color, such as James Baldwin. However, he observes that the stereotypical understanding of gay men as white is oppressive for gay men of other racial and ethnic identities.¹⁵¹ Though there were several television shows airing in the 2000s which positively depicted the lives of gay men, such as *Will & Grace*, *Queer as Folk*, and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, the main characters in these three shows were exclusively white—black gay men were sorely lacking from this mainstream depiction of gay American life.¹⁵² Given cultural stereotypes connecting gayness to whiteness, extremely limited representation in media of positive images of gay and bisexual black men, and homophobia in black churches and African American communities, it is not surprising that many black MSM and MSMW did not wish to use labels such as gay or bisexual to define their sexual identity.

Given the historical American investment in this racial disenfranchisement of black men and women by forcing them into positions of submission along lines of race, gender, and sex, it becomes easier to comprehend (but not condone) how heterosexism colors much of the reporting

¹⁵⁰ Rodney Christopher, “Explaining it to Dad,” in *Boys Like Us*, ed. Paterick Merla (New York: Perennial, 2002), 306. Originally published 1994.

¹⁵¹ Allan Berube, “How Gay Stays White and What Kind of White It Stays,” in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wray (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 234-236.

¹⁵² *Noah’s Arc*, a short-lived television series which depicted the lives of four gay black best friends, aired from 2005-2006 on Logo TV, a network which caters to LGBT audiences. Though the show is a welcome examination of gay black life, since the show aired on Logo TV, it is unlikely many individuals who do not already identify as LGBT watched the show or the network. Conversely, a program like *Will & Grace*, which aired on the more widely available NBC had a more diverse audience that was also greater in number.

about the Down Low in African American media. Many authors appear to be responding not exclusively to the Down Low, but are engaging with the larger paradigm of the history of black masculinity. Occasionally, this context is made explicit, such as in A. Asadullah Samad's article, "Brothers on 'the Down Low': The Latest Stigmatization of the Black Male." In his article, Samad positions the Down Low in a larger context of "the deterioration of black male/female relationships," which causes men and women to "pursue alternatives" to heterosexual relationships. To Samad, homo-/bisexuality in black men and women is not a natural phenomenon, but a negative consequence of social decline of black communities. Fixing these male-female relationships would thus ameliorate the prevalence of same-sex desire in blacks. Framing the Down Low in this way, Samad's article exposes a major fear which underlies much discussion of the Down Low in black community publications. The Down Low is not so much a problem in and of itself, but rather, exemplifies a larger issue facing black men and women: "the decline of the black family," or, the decline of positive connections between black men and black women. The Down Low becomes especially problematic for Samad because it threatens to cause social stigma for black males:

Make no mistake, we do need to go after this 'Down Low' brotha, because his behavior brings destruction to our women and the future prospects of trust needed to build stable families and communities. But we shouldn't let this cowardly behavior be the driving force that frames the social context of black men and his standing in the overall society.

Here, Samad directly addresses his fears about the Down Low in terms of the impact it has on black families and on straight black men. His anxiety about the threat the Down Low poses to black men's fragile "standing in the overall society," indicates he is aware of how racist stereotypes about black men have historically been used to delegitimize black men.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ A. Asadullah Samad, "Between the Lines: Brothers on 'the Down Low': The Latest Stigmatization of the Black Male Image," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 13, 2004, ProQuest (389363021).

As other scholars have demonstrated, African Americans have long been intent on policing sexual behavior in black communities, for fear that any behavior that might be seen as sexually or morally deviant would be used against the community.¹⁵⁴ Sociologist Cathy Cohen explains these concerns as a result of a politics of respectability by middle class blacks. According to Cohen, the response of blacks to what they consider “deviant behavior” is in part “motivated by their interest in protecting the class mobility they have secured through hard work and ‘good moral fiber,’...[the] acceptance and adherence to a normative value structure developed to sustain the power of some dominant group members.”¹⁵⁵ Thus the investment in “good moral fiber” in black community is in part a desire to protect class interests, which are partially a result of some blacks’ ability to achieve respectability through advancing a limited set of “acceptable” behaviors. Individuals not adhering to these behaviors threaten the ability of middle class blacks to demonstrate convincingly their good moral fiber to the rest of society, and thus must either reform their behavior or risk rejection from black communities.

Samad fits into this tradition by exhibiting concern that the behaviors of these Down Low men might reflect poorly on all blacks, particularly middle- and upper-class hetero-black men. Indeed, although unstated, the “overall society,” Samad alludes to might be better understood as “mainstream” or white society. Thus, Samad is expressing a fear that black masculinity will be disrespected in non-black communities. Samad’s article helps explain how the Down Low narrative was sometimes perceived in the black community as separate from the context of HIV infections in African American women. That is, it was possible to extricate the discussion about the Down Low from concerns about HIV infection. Instead, many writers viewed the Down Low

¹⁵⁴ See Chapter 1. For an example of his this desire to police potentially deviant sexual behavior among gay black men during the first half of the twentieth century, see George Chauncey, *Gay New York* (1994), Chapter 9, “Building Gay Neighborhood Enclaves: The Village and Harlem,” 227-267.

¹⁵⁵ Cathy J. Cohen, “Black Sexuality, Indigenous Moral Panics, and Respectability: From Bill Cosby to the Down Low,” in *Moral Panics, Sex Panics*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York, London: New York University Press, 2009), 117.

as indicative of broader concerns in the African American community—here conceived as a threat to the masculinity of *all* black men, regardless of whether or not they are “on the Down Low.” This reading of the Down Low as a threat to masculinity or heterosexual black relationships is largely absent from mainstream coverage, but colors much of the reporting on the subject in African American media. Because the Down Low was viewed by the mainstream society as a problem afflicting a minority community, questions about white masculinity and sexuality were not salient. For black individuals, however, the potential for white society to use Down Low men to pathologize black sexuality and masculinity was all too fathomable.

Samad’s article is perhaps the most transparent in its fear that the Down Low will negatively affect black male and female relationships and place black masculinity under increased scrutiny from white society, many other writers raised similar concerns. One month later, in June 2001, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* published another piece on the Down Low, this time written by Darryl James. James wrote that the Down Low, “is provoking fear, and based on that fear, many Black women are looking at ALL Black men as potentially ‘Down Low,’ damaging already tenuous relationships.”¹⁵⁶ James agrees with Samad that the Down Low places an unnecessary additional burden on already-strained black heterosexual relationships. The *Westside Gazette* ran a profile on a female HIV activist in May 2004, who lamented “the increased stigmatization Black men now face as a result of the recent ‘Down Low’ sensation.”¹⁵⁷ The media-savvy King, several years removed from the publication of his book, claimed that he was still facing complaints from the black community because his work, “has caused a lot of

¹⁵⁶ Darryl James, “HIV On the Down Low,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 24, 2004, ProQuest (369327737). Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁷ “Longtime educator/activist/researcher Cleo Manago dispels myths and uncovers volatile truths behind ‘Down Low’ dilemma in the Black Community,” *Westside Gazette*, May 13, 2004, ProQuest (369014415).

damage between [black] men and women.”¹⁵⁸ Though the language is sometimes exaggerated, the authors were exhibiting a real tension in the black community. Benoit Denizet-Lewis (author of “Double Lives on the Down Low,”) said at an HIV conference in New Orleans that of the “hundreds of e-mails he received after his story was published, many have come from angry black women who feel betrayed by their men.”¹⁵⁹

By examining the Down Low in the context of African American media, we can begin to contemplate how and perhaps why black communities offered different understandings of the Down Low as a narrative and as a “problem” than the mainstream media. Unable to view the Down Low at a distance, as many mainstream media outlets did by ascribing the Down Low as an affliction striking only a racial minority, African American media often considered the Down Low in a larger context of a wider mainstream distrust of black masculinity, and as a possible barrier to male-female relationships. When many black writers bemoaned the menace the Down Low posed to “black families,” they also conveyed the unspoken understanding that these black families were understood only in a heterosexual context. While authors demanded that Down Low men change their behaviors, they offered these men little incentive to do so: black MSM and MSMW were largely unwelcome in the “black family,” and black writers were not particularly willing to suggest that gay black men could form family units with other men. Examining the African American media’s fear that Down Low men threatened heterosexual black men and women shows how black concerns about the Down Low differed from white men’s concerns, but also explains why Down Low men might feel the need to hide their same-sex behaviors in the first place.

¹⁵⁸ “Down Low Author Out and About But Says Black Community Still Stigmatizing Him,” *Jacksonville Free Press*, July 31 – August 6, 2008, ProQuest (365263729).

¹⁵⁹ Tara Young, “Black HIV epidemic is focus of forum; Secretive sex by men called chief cause,” *Times-Picayune*, April 30, 2004, ProQuest (415779247).

Owning the Disease: The Impulse to Reform

Most African American media sources agreed that even if the Down Low was not an exclusively black phenomenon, it at least warranted special attention from African Americans.¹⁶⁰ The previous section explored how the Down Low was sometimes viewed outside the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and treated as representative of the problems affecting the formation of black male-female relationships by further stigmatizing black masculinity and sexuality. This section explores further the ways in which the Down Low was owned as a black problem within African American media. In addressing the Down Low, authors often had multiple agendas. While many desired to raise awareness about HIV rates in black communities, and to educate African Americans about the importance of condom use and safe sex, this desire to educate was often tied to a twin moral impulse to change and shape the behavior of black MSM and MSMW. This impulse for reform is significant within this context of the Down Low, as it represents how black writers responded both to the Down Low, and to mainstream framings of the Down Low.

In order to evaluate how the Down Low was conceived of as a moral affliction that needed to be remedied, I want to lay a theoretical groundwork before advancing, drawing on the work of Gayle Rubin and Michel Foucault. Rubin's analysis of "moral panics" is insightful for understanding the Down Low's treatment in African American media. According to Rubin, moral panics are moments in Western society during which, "some unfortunate sexual activity or population" comes under intense opprobrium and scrutiny from wider societal forces, resulting

¹⁶⁰ For examples of how African American media viewed the Down Low as a problem in black communities, see Bernie Hays, "The low down on the 'down low,'" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, city edition, April 19, 2006; Shannon Williams, "Women should look for signs of their man being on the down low," *Recorder*, April 23, 2004, ProQuest (367724319); or, Sonya Toler, "'Down Low' brothers: Are they responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS in Black Community?" *New Pittsburgh Courier*, city edition, May 19, 2004, ProQuest (368265407)—who started bluntly, "The problem is a Black problem."

in legal and social change. The “furor” incited by moral panics typically target “sexual dissidents,” who “lack the power to defend themselves,” because of their failure to adhere to a limited spectrum of “acceptable” sexual behavior, historically defined as heterosexual, married, monogamous, and reproductive.¹⁶¹ In other words, the sexual behavior of these non-normative individuals represents a point of vulnerability, from which they are susceptible to an attack on moral grounds. While the Down Low did not result in the state extending its power in an attempt to regulate sexual behavior, the Down Low became “a sexual witch hunt,” particularly in light of the media frenzy it spawned. As such, any attempt to understand the Down Low must necessarily examine how authors were viewing the topic through a moral lens.

Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I* can similarly help us analyze the motives behind some of these authors, and perhaps the outcome they hoped to achieve. Foucault explores how a Christian model of confession became, during the Enlightenment, an institutional tool used to exercise authority through regulating discourses around sex. Rather than lead to repression, an institutional pressure to confess actually increased the number and variety of discourses around sexuality, which lead to, “A policing of sex; that is, not the rigor of a taboo, but the necessity of *regulating sex* through useful and public discourses.” This regulation occurred collaboratively with an attempt to control and shape the “displacement, intensification, reorientation, and modification of desire itself.”¹⁶² In the context of the Down Low, this confessional model was occasionally literalized, as in the case of J.L King’s appearance on daytime talk-shows, and the number of memoirs published during the mid-2000s by authors

¹⁶¹ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” *Deviations*, ed. Gayle S. Rubin (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011), 168-170. For Rubin’s discussion of what constitutes acceptable sexual behaviors, see 152-153.

¹⁶² Michel Foucault, *A History of Sexuality, Volume I*: (1978) trans. Robert Hurley, 23-25.

talking about their personal experiences around the Down Low.¹⁶³ Yet, more important than the confessional model is its intended effect: the use of discourse to police, control, and shape sexual desire and behavior. This desire becomes apparent in many of the articles produced by the African American media about the Down Low.

The project of shaping the behavior, or more precisely, the behavior and sexuality of black men, is most readily apparent in the work of socially conservative writers. Bobby Glanton Smith's article, "Down Low Brothers or Just Low Down Brothers?" while one of the more extreme, is illustrative of the homophobic sexual policing the Down Low inspired in African American media. The framing of the Down Low as a moral issue is made explicit by Smith who begins his article by asking, "Have we lost our moral compass completely?...Case in point, when did it become acceptable for brothers to imperil the lives of sisters with such sexual impunity?"¹⁶⁴ Although Smith alludes to the health issue posed by Down Low men, this is a rhetorical feint, as Smith is more interested in the "sexual impunity" allegedly allowed to gay and bisexual black men. Like other authors, Smith places the Down Low in the context of a harmful impediment to male-female relationships: "It's bad enough that men have difficulty being monogamous—having to worry about whether a man is predisposed to his own gender is simply too much for a woman to bear." Essentially, Smith here argues against homosexuality as a barrier to "conventional relationships between men and women." "Indiscriminate sex across gender lines," Smith continues, is morally wrong, and against the will of God, who only "sanctions relationships between men and women." Smith willfully conflates the specifics of the Down Low with all male same-sex activities. Instead of expressing concern for the health and

¹⁶³ In addition to texts discussed in this chapter some of the other memoirs include Terrance Dean, *Hiding in Hip Hop: On the Down Low in the Entertainment Industry—from Music to Hollywood* (2008); J.L. King and Courtney Carreras, *Coming Up from the Down Low: The Journey to Acceptance, Healing, and Honest Love*, (2005).

¹⁶⁴ Bobby Glanton Smith, "Down Low Brothers or Just Low Down Brothers?" *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 6, 2004, ProQuest (08904240)

wellbeing of black individuals, Smith instead calls for an end to same-sex activities as a way to protect religiously sanctioned heterosexual pairings.

It is this self-proclaimed religious high-ground that marks Smith's article as invested in the idea of reforming and regulating black male sexuality. Smith frames his article as a call to arms to heterosexual black men, framing the Down Low as a matter of "right" (monogamous heteronormativity)¹⁶⁵ and "wrong" (promiscuous homosexuality), arguing that the Down Low is an "atrociousness upon our women and our race."¹⁶⁶ His solution to the Down Low to regular sexual behavior, which Smith suggests should occur through the threat of physical violence. He says that DL men "deserve to be tarred and feathered," by their heterosexual male peers. Although he stops just short of advocating for open "vigilante justice (yet)," the threat of violence is tangible.¹⁶⁷ The Down Low becomes a way for some to express a desire to control and censor black behavior, although Smith is an exception in openly suggesting physical harm.

The language of violence and deception was often used in discussions of the Down Low, although typically authors ascribed this violence was ascribed to the Down Low men themselves. Reporter Bernie Hays, for example, referred to the Down Low as "a sadistic form of sexual violence," perpetrated by "young African-American men."¹⁶⁸ Another reporter called "men who have sex with men" and keep this secret from their female partners, "dangerous, self-deluded liars."¹⁶⁹ Following the airing of *Law and Order: SVU*'s "Lowdown" episode, King said in an interview that he knew a Down Low man, who, if he was ever outed, would kill the man who

¹⁶⁵ It should be noted that "heteronormative" is not synonymous with heterosexual; certain acts may be heterosexual but are not considered heteronormative. Jakobsen and Pellegrini, *Love the Sin*, (2003), 28.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, "Down Low Brothers of Just Low Down Brothers?"

¹⁶⁷ Vigilante violence as a response to the AIDS epidemic was not unique to the Down Low. See Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *October* (43), 197-222. JSTOR: 3397574.

¹⁶⁸ Hays, "The low down on the 'down low,'" *New Pittsburgh Courier*

¹⁶⁹ Phillip Morris, "Irresponsible men on the down low put women at risk," *The Plain Dealer*, February 17, 2004, ProQuest (292244882)

outed him.¹⁷⁰ In other articles, Down Low men are predators who “prey” on unsuspecting women.¹⁷¹ Even outside the rhetoric of violence, reports describe Down Low men as a problem because of their deceitfulness and secrecy. In article for the *Washington Informer* in June 2001, George Wilson criticized the Congressional Black Caucus for neglecting to examine the role that “men who masquerade as family men...while engaging in sex with men by night” play in the high AIDS rate in black communities, claiming their behavior is a “risk...to all of us.”¹⁷²

Although not always described in such explicitly violent terms, African American media often presented Down Low men as a threat to the African American community. Down Low men were predominantly portrayed as immoral—they caused both a health and social crisis, which needed to be solved. Writers such as Bobby Glanton Smith typically advanced the solution from a socially conservative position. Others echoed his conservative point of view. In her article “Menace to society,” Deborah Simmons used the Down Low to attack the “demands made by the gay/homosexual/lesbian/transgendered/transsexual community.” According to Simmons, the “women’s rights” movement and gay activists who refer to gay rights as “civil rights,” are “distractions” from more serious issues such as the high HIV rate in black communities. In Simmons’ article, there is again slippage between “Down Low” men and all gay men, as Simmons claims that the Down Low shows the “irony” of gay men’s claim to marriage as a “right.” Instead, Simmons advises readers that their takeaway from the Down Low should be to recognize the dangers of promiscuity and the importance of monogamy.¹⁷³ Ironically, Simmons does not recognize how her opposition to same-sex marriage might undermine her call for

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low*, 85. Though anecdotal, this quote contributes to the understanding of Down Low men as violent, even murderous.

¹⁷¹ Deborah Simmons, “Menace to society: The low down on the ‘down low,’” *Washington Times*, April 24, 2004, ProQuest (409806282)

¹⁷² George Wilson, “From Capitol Hill: The color of an epidemic,” *The Washington Informer*, June 20, 2001, ProQuest (367785699)

¹⁷³ Simmons, “Menace to society,” *Washington Times*

individuals to be less promiscuous. Simmons criticizes gays for their perceived inability to lead monogamous lifestyles even as she advocates against allowing gay men legal access to stage-sanctioned monogamy and legitimacy. For Simmons, the alleged sexual promiscuity and deceitfulness of gay and bisexual men are essential characteristics of homosexuality, and she does not recognize how these behaviors might be shaped by a homophobic society.

Morality was not the only motivating factor for African Americans to denounce Down Low men and express their desire for such men to be more open with their sexuality. Writing in the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Veronica Hendrix told readers that, “abstinence may prove to be the best path to peace of mind,” since many Down Low men are, “not ‘swishy,’ but strong, solid, masculine men who are...staunch providers, and leaders in their communities,” thus making them hard to identify.¹⁷⁴ Hendrix expresses frustration at her inability to identify Down Low men because she has trouble understanding how “strong, solid, masculine” men could be having sex with other men.¹⁷⁵ Several other authors share Hendrix’s frustration about Down Low men. In an opinion piece in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Cynthia Tucker complains that, “Despite their homosexual sex, they [DL men] refuse to describe themselves as gay or even bisexual.”¹⁷⁶ James Campbell similarly laments the “fundamental sexual dishonesty,” of a man who “crawls out of his comfortable closet,” and abandoning his wife or girlfriend to experience “hedonistic pleasure” with other men.¹⁷⁷

Even when writers expressed sympathy for Down Low men, anxiety about the inability to identify gay or bisexual men is often raised. One writer urges readers to “figh[t] against

¹⁷⁴ Veronica Hendrix, “Veronica’s View: The Perplexity and the Pain of Down Low Living,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, May 20, 2004, ProQuest (369315663).

¹⁷⁵ See also article from chapter 2

¹⁷⁶ Cynthia Tucker, “Our Opinion: Blacks’ silence on AIDS crisis already deadly,” *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, June 3, 2001.

¹⁷⁷ James T. Campbell, “Sounding Board: ‘Down Low’ has victims: black women,” *Houston Chronicle*, May 10, 2004, ProQuest (396067505).

homophobia,” in the black community, yet also complains that Down Low men, “don’t go to gay agencies or clubs, making it difficult for them to be identified.” They then go on to list a number of “signs” for readers to identify if a man is on the Down Low.¹⁷⁸ J.L. King apparently faced such a great demand from readers and audience members how to identify Down Low men that in addition to dedicating a chapter of his book to the subject he produced a DVD, *The Top 10 Signs of ‘Down Low’ Behavior and More*, in 2008. In African American media, the espoused desire for individuals to be “more open” in their acceptance of gay and bisexual black men appeared to represent not only their desire to help Down Low men, but also to identify them. Given the violent rhetoric surrounding Down Low (both as the imagined capacity of Down Low men to commit violence, and in the violence advocated for *against* Down Low men, as a form of physical coercion) the desire to identify Down Low men should be taken cautiously.

Indeed, such a desire fits with the response of government officials to the early outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. In “Is The Rectum a Grave?” Leo Bersani explores how the Reagan administration prioritized research designed to identify HIV infection in individuals over the development of treatment or a cure. Bersani argues that this project is inherently a homophobic one, and that the only conclusion we can draw from such measures is that “having the information necessary to lock up homosexuals in quarantine camps may be a higher priority in the family-oriented Reagan Administration than saving the heterosexual members of American families from AIDS.”¹⁷⁹ A similar priority is advanced in the desire of many members of the media to identify and out Down Low men.

¹⁷⁸ Makebra Anderson, “Undercover brothers: life on the ‘down low,’” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, June 6, 2002, ProQuest (369370545)

¹⁷⁹ Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” 201. According to Bersani, without assurance of confidentiality, individuals will refuse to take tests to determine their seropositive status, this increasing the spread of AIDS.

In both mainstream and African American media, more space was dedicated to discussions of how to identify Down Low men than to education about safe sex, condom use, or attempting to figure out why black men feel pressured to go on the on the Down Low in the first place. Even more so than in mainstream media, African American writers wrote about wanting to identify Down Low men. Many authors published “guides” or tips to how to spot them. Considering that Down Low men were predominantly considered a threat to the health of black women, it is not surprising that many women expressed a desire for easy ways to tell if their partner was a member of this secretive group. Advice to women on how to recognize Down Low brothers was most frequently given by other black women, and many memoirs or self-help books about the Down Low include a section informing women about ways to identify these men. Unfortunately, many of these messages about spotting Down Low men were misleading. Nubia, author of *20 Warning Signs of Down Low Brothers*, suggested that she received a particularly well-attuned “gaydar” as a gift from God, and claimed that if a man was molested as a child, it could be a sign of Down Low behavior. Brenda Stone Bowder, the ex-wife of J.L. King, made a similar claim in her memoir. She relayed the story of a man she met who told her that if he had not been molested as a child by his uncle, then he would not “choose” to be gay. Some of the advice authors gave was unhelpful, if only because the advice seemed very idiosyncratic. One writer suggests that men who shaved their genitals or chest hair might be Down Low. She justifies this claim by writing that since all men are naturally hair, women are “disappointed” when men shave. Another suggests that a man who requests anal sex is a potential red flag behavior. However, it is difficult to say applicable these tips are, since there are many men who identify as heterosexual but desire anal sex, or women who prefer men with small amounts of body hair, for example.¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Nubia, *20 Warning Signs of Down Low Brothers*, self-published by author: 2004, 176; Brenda Stone Bowder

The tips and suggestions offered by women as a way to detect the Down Low men in their writing are ultimately more harmful than helpful. For example, suggestion that childhood molestation could lead to Down Low behavior reinforces the false myth that homosexuality is the result of sexual abuse. The writings encourage homophobia and paranoia than they do to encourage either personal safety or making black communities more inclusive. Bowder, for instance, is adamant in her belief that MSM and MSMW are inherently immoral because of their sexual activities, whose behavior is not acceptable in the eyes of God and thus are unwelcome in black churches. Marie warns readers that many Down Low men are “absolutely gorgeous, fine-looking men who look straight. Some list their occupations as engineers, lawyers, business owners, and even doctors.” As with several other sources, Marie is confounded by the fact that black MSM and MSMW can “look straight.” Her comments illustrate her assumption that gay men are essentially and measurably different from straight men. The frustration about Down Low men stems from the dissonance between her essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation, and the reality that sometimes gay men and straight men are physically indistinguishable. The fact that Marie perceives there to be a conflict between a man’s same-sex desires and his profession (her surprise that there could be a gay doctor or lawyer) illustrates the extent to which negative stereotypes of gay men influence paradigms through which black women viewed the Down Low.¹⁸¹

with Karen Hunter, *On the Up and Up: A Survival Guide for Women Living with Men on the Down Low*, (New York: Dafina Books, 2005); Joy Marie, *The Straight-Up Truth About The Down-Low*, (Manassas: Creative Wisdom Books, 2008), 90.

¹⁸¹ Bowder and Hunter, *On the Up and Up* (2005), 122-132; Marie, *The Straight-Up Truth About The Down-Low* (2008), 12.

Conclusion

In 2010, African American filmmaker Tyler Perry released a film adaptation of *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, a 1975 stage play/chromeopoem written by Ntozake Shange.¹⁸² In addition to directing the film (released as *For Colored Girls*) Perry also wrote the screenplay. Like the original play, *For Colored Girls* attempts to depict the breadth of experiences African American women face, and deals with controversial topics such as rape, abortion, and drug abuse. In updating the play for the screen nearly 35 years after its initial release, Perry takes some creative liberties with the original text, perhaps none of which is more apparent than his inclusion of a storyline where one of the film's women (Jo Bradmore/"The Lady in Red," played by Janet Jackson) contracts HIV. Perry's decision to include an subplot about HIV in the film is a sensible decision: since black women contract HIV at higher rates than women of other races,¹⁸³ HIV is certainly an important issue facing black women in the twenty-first century. It is reasonable to speculate that if Shange wrote the play after the outbreak of the epidemic, she might have included HIV in her play. Less commendable is Perry's decision to portray Jo's infection as the result of her husband, who is on the Down Low. Considering the majority of black women's infections are the result of intravenous drug use or sex with heterosexual men, the decision to portray Jo's infection as the result of a Down Low man is somewhat disingenuous.

Perry's decision to include a story about the Down Low in the film *For Colored Girls* shows his belief that both HIV and the Down Low are important issues facing African American women. However, the inclusion also demonstrates the extent to which the problem is one that is

¹⁸² *For Colored Girls*, written, directed, and produced by Tyler Petty (Lionsgate: 2010. DVD)

¹⁸³ In 2010, black women had approximately four times the number of new infections of white women (5,300 to 1,300). When taking into account that whites represent nearly six times the number of African Americans in society, the disparity becomes even more evident. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV Incidence," <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/surveillance/incidence/>. Last accessed April 10, 2014.

exclusively black: *For Colored Girls* suggests that HIV infection from a dishonest Down Low husband is only one of many concerns facing modern black women, even though in reality “Down Low” men are not a common vector for transmission. Finally, the depiction of the Down Low in *For Colored Girls* gives evidence to the persistence of the Down Low in African American imagination even after the CDC had distanced itself from the term. Considering the degree to which African American fiction and publications seized upon the Down Low, it is important to note that it was not until a series of articles mentioning the topic in papers such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, and *USA Today*, that African American media engaged explicitly with the term, “Down Low.” Even later, many authors referred to either television programs (*The Oprah Winfrey Show*) or news articles (such as *The New York Times*) as helping to raise awareness of the Down Low in both mainstream and African American communities.

Yet even as coverage of the Down Low in African American communities drew upon mainstream media coverage, their concerns often differed. Mainstream sources frequently depicted the Down Low as a sensationalized topic meant to shock, and continually reified the mythos as an exclusively black set of behaviors. While some African Americans (most notably, Keith Boykin) refuted this characterization, many authors took it for granted that the Down Low was a specifically African American behavior and responded accordingly. Frequently, authors speaking about the Down Low looked past the connection to HIV, and focused on addressing other issues of the African American community, such as the community’s homophobia, the question of black masculinity, and a desire to shape the behaviors and lives of black MSM, typically through the lens of morality. This is not to say that black writers ignored the HIV epidemic in their writing; in fact, much of their early coverage of the Down Low, like early

coverage in mainstream media, focused on high rates of HIV in black gay and bisexual men.¹⁸⁴ Reports certainly had the desire to increase awareness about HIV and to encourage women to be vigilant about Down Low men as a way to ignite the risk of infection. Rather, this chapter has argued that often the concerns of HIV became secondary to other anxieties about gay black and bisexual men, and the “threat” they posed not only to the health of black women, but to the organization and health of black society at large.

¹⁸⁴ See, for instance, “CDC Reports AIDS Resurging Among Gay and Bisexual Black Men,” *Jet*, June 18, 2001. Accessed via Google: <http://books.google.com/books?id=F7QDAAAAMBAJ>.

Conclusion

When the Down Low narrative began in 2000, America was not particularly welcoming to gay and bisexual men. At the turn of the twentieth-century, sex between two men was a criminal act in 16 American states through “anti-sodomy” laws.¹⁸⁵ When the Supreme Court ruled in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) that such laws were unconstitutional, 14 states still had laws in place criminalizing sodomy. Even as late as 2014, many of these laws remain on the books—mostly in conservative states such as Kansas and Mississippi—even though they are unconstitutional and largely unenforced.¹⁸⁶ In 1996, the federal government passed the Defense of Marriage Act, which defined marriage as between one man and one woman, and allowed federal and state governments to discriminate legally against same-sex couples. Of course, the federal government had no pressing need to “defend” the institute of marriage from gays and lesbians. It was not until 2003 that any state government allowed two individuals of the same sex to be married, and Massachusetts remained the only state where gay men could marry one another until 2008. Despite the passage of DOMA and the incredibly limited possibilities for same-sex individuals seeking marriage, the federal government considered amending the Constitution to prohibit gay men and women from marrying one another. The Federal Marriage Amendment (FMA) never passed, despite the best efforts of the Bush Administration, which supported defining marriage as between one man and one woman, and paid journalists with federal funds to attack publically “gay marriage” and endorse the FMA.¹⁸⁷ In the military, “Don’t

¹⁸⁵ Although there is not a universally accepted definition of “sodomy”—that “utterly confused category”—I here refer to oral and anal sex between same-sex partners.

¹⁸⁶ A.G. Sulzberger, “Kansas Law on Sodomy Stays on Books Despite a Cull,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/21/us/sodomy-law-remains-official-in-kansas.html?_r=0.

¹⁸⁷ “Bush to agencies: Don’t hire columnists to promote agendas,” *USA Today*, January 26, 2005, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/washington/2005-01-26-bush-columnists_x.htm.

ask, don't tell" prohibited "openly gay" men and women from military service. Of course, even if gay men didn't "tell," they could still be discharged if they were "caught."

Of course, this brief examination laws regarding of gay men and women does not fully illustrate the reality of these individuals' lived experiences. Yet I believe this context is necessary when thinking about why some black MSM and MSMW chose to keep their sexuality hidden. Homophobia and anti-gay discrimination were codified into both federal and state law as gay relationships were legally considered unworthy of the recognition and benefits bestowed by the state on heterosexual relationships. For men living in one of the 14 states that criminalized sodomy prior to 2003, every same-sex encounter meant the potential for arrest. For many black MSM and MSMW, there was little incentive to "come out" as gay or bisexual. Indeed, many of these men did not identify with the labels of "gay" and "bisexual," which were often considered to be loaded with cultural associations that tied them to white culture. Instead, it was easier to many of these men to pretend to be straight.

Down Low black men are not responsible for the disproportionately high rates of HIV infection present in African American women. Instead, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest, black women are more likely to be infected from intravenous drug use or heterosexual black partners. Nor are Down Low men responsible for the structural elements that affect rates of HIV in black communities, such as African American men's high rates of incarceration. Yet Down Low men represented such perfect bogeymen that the decision to implicate them as responsible for HIV in black communities made sense to a great number of people for nearly a decade.

The decision by many black leaders to neglect the HIV/AIDS epidemic when it first emerged in the 1980s is understandable in the context of African American history. Engaging

with the disease during the early- to mid-1980s, when AIDS was still a “gay disease” would have required an acknowledgement of gay, bisexual, and intravenous drug-using black men. In the time of the Moral Majority movement, and given the long history of pathologizing black masculinity and sexuality explored in Chapter 1, a refusal to engage with the disease was a way to ward off charges of immorality or impropriety, allowing middle-class blacks to affirm the moral sanctity of both themselves and the community. By 2000, when the CDC began reporting on a black bisexual “bridge,” and mainstream news media sources were reporting on the threat Down Low men posed to black women, it was inevitable that a response was necessary.

Both the mainstream media and African American media were fascinated with the topic of Down Low men, even if the specific themes of their coverage often differed. While the ostensible goal of mainstream media is to provide “objective” news coverage, such objectivity is frequently impossible in practice. Thus, much as early mainstream media coverage of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s was homophobic, coverage of the Down Low was complicit in furthering racist stereotypes about black men and their sexuality. The myth of the Down Low man fit neatly into longstanding historical imaginings of black men: his sexuality was promiscuous, dangerous, and diseased. Unable to deal effectively with his sexual desires, he was effeminate (for not conforming to proper masculine behavior), a coward (for keeping them hidden), and a threat (through his potential to transmit HIV). These concerns were displayed perhaps most visibly by the “Lowdown” episode of *Law and Order: SVU*. In the depiction of the black, Down Low murderer and his white, gay victim, the sensationalist nature of the Down Low coverage is apparent. By suggesting that the difference between the two men at the center of “Lowdown” are fundamentally different because of their race—without elaborating precisely *why* one man is on the Down Low and the other merely “closeted”—“Lowdown” illustrates the racial essentialism

apparent in the Down Low media narrative. In making the Down Low man a murderer, *Law and Order: SVU* literalizes the subtext that Down Low men imperil the lives through the spread of HIV.

African American publications similarly treated the Down Low as a specifically black problem, but again their concerns were different from portrayals in mainstream media and popular fiction. Down Low men practiced such an extreme breach of acceptable social behavior (homosexuality, polyamory, infidelity, deception, HIV infection) that they represented easy scapegoats for African American publications to pin blame upon. For black community leaders who were previously unwilling to address HIV/AIDS because of the moral stigma attached to the disease, the Down Low narrative offered a convenient way to belatedly engage with the epidemic. In other words, the Down Low narrative lacked ambiguity: Down Low men were clearly the “bad guys” whose selfish and immoral behavior made “victims” of virtuous and undeserving black women. This narrative provided a way for HIV-positive black women to be showered with sympathy and compassion, without the need for their own behavior called into question. While a woman who uses heroin or has unprotected sex with multiple men might be considered complicit in her infection, it is nearly impossible to blame a monogamous woman infected by her lying partner for her status. The desire to “own” the Down Low as a community problem that needed to be addressed thus came from multiple sources. On the one hand, responding to the Down Low was necessary because of the topic’s coverage in the mainstream media. If African American media neglected the story, they would lose the ability to shape it, ceding authority to mainstream media. On the other hand, discussing the Down Low was a way to educate African Americans about HIV and to possibly fight the high HIV rates in African American communities through promoting dialogues about HIV and safe-sex education.

Ultimately, it is unclear how much education the media sensation around the Down Low actually provided black men and women. After all, in mainstream media, the Down Low coverage drew on racist stereotypes in its portrayal of black men's pathologized sexuality. Similarly, both mainstream and African American media coverage was often homophobic. Rather than attempt to understand why black MSM and MSMW felt a need to keep their sexuality a secret in favor of living publically heterosexual lives, these men were vilified as selfish and sexually transgressive. Additionally, both mainstream media exhibited little sympathy for Down Low men, who received almost no attention for their own health. In contrast to the innocent women they were accused of infecting, Down Low men were treated as guilty and therefore undeserving of understanding treatment. In terms of numbers—black MSM HIV in both greater numbers and at higher rates than black women¹⁸⁸—there was definitely a disconnect between the low amount of concern expressed for HIV-positive men in contrast to the concern shown for HIV-positive women. Three decades removed from the outbreak of the HIV epidemic, homophobia in both the media and society meant that it was more appealing to discuss AIDS in “innocent” heterosexuals than “guilty” gay men. When HIV risk is removed from discussions of Down Low men—as was frequently the case in African American publications—the homophobic underpinnings of the Down Low become even more apparent, as the Down Low narrative becomes a stand-in for fears that gay and bisexual men threaten heteronormative patriarchal order.

The Down Low obscures more than it illuminates. If the discussion of the Down Low, particularly in African American publications, was partly motivated by a desire to educate at-risk about HIV—and I would argue it was—then the messages transmitted by the Down Low

¹⁸⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “HIV Incidence,” <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/statistics/surveillance/incidence/>. Last accessed April 10, 2014.

narrative are unlikely to be very helpful. For heterosexual men, the message the Down Low sends them is that if they are not having same-sex relations, then they are not at risk. Invisible in the Down Low story are men who contract HIV from sex with women or intravenous drug use. Though men who have multiple partners should wear condoms regardless of the sex of their partner, the Down Low informs them that they are only at risk if they have sex with other men. Media coverage of the Down Low ties risk to sexual identity rather than sexual behavior. Similarly, women seem more concerned with “detecting” Down Low men than with practicing safe sex. Turning such a bright spotlight on the threat posed by Down Low men allows other, more pressing means of infection to hide in the shadows. The desire to educate black women about HIV risk through both fictional projects, such as *For Colored Girls*, and through news media coverage is both admirable and necessary. Unfortunately, the Down Low limits the positive benefits of such a safe-sex education campaign. Instead of spreading knowledge, media treatment of the Down Low traded on racist and homophobic stereotypes. Located at the intersection of blackness and gayness, Down Low men were given the worst traits of both groups: sexually promiscuous, deceitful, unable to commit to a monogamous relationship, unmasculine, diseased, and threatening. That these harmful stereotypes went unquestioned is unsurprising—American history is rife with examples of how black men and their sexuality were scrutinized, policed, and condemned. For modern readers, the Down Low illustrates how these historical stereotypes do not disappear over time, but instead adapt to contemporary circumstances. Instead of placing the blame on Down Low boogeymen, a more effective way to ameliorate HIV rates in black communities is to work towards making society that more tolerant and inclusive of difference; by enhancing understanding and welcoming diversity; and by

working together to dismantle harmful and oppressive stereotypes about race, sexuality, and gender.

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