

2-2018

Race, Sexuality, and Masculinity on the Down Low

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RACE, SEXUALITY, & MASCULINITY ON THE DOWN LOW

by

STEPHEN KOCHENASH

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2018

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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Stephen Kochenash

Advisor: Dr. James Wilson

In a so-called *post-racial* America, a new gay identity has flourished and come into the limelight. However, in recent years, researchers have concluded that not all men who have sex with other men (MSM) self-identify as gay, most noticeably a large population of Black men. It is possible that a tainted history of Black enslavement in this country that is inextricably linked with ideas of space, surveillance, subversion, and survival inform a Black male's self-identification as being "on the down low" (DL). This begs the question: What does mainstream society view as *gay-ness* and how is the DL constructed differently? In addition to examining the issue of race, notions such as privilege, gender, and masculinity must be accounted for in order to delineate between a contemporary gay identity and being on the DL. First, I summarize the history of the DL from slavery to its current iteration. Next, I review the existing literature on the DL to understand how the mainstream media narrative has placed blame on Black MSM bodies, mostly for the spread of HIV transmission within the community. The media has mostly recycled biased tropes that falsely represent what the DL might actually signify for the Black MSM. In addition, I explore how the DL could be better evaluated taking into account the legitimate fields of race, gender, and sexuality. Most importantly, I will address the questions of the DL as a racialized construct and how the DL differs from living openly as a gay man in an increasingly sexually

tolerant society. Can we subsume the DL into a queer identity? To answer these questions, I examine how Black DL men represent themselves using social media hook-up applications such as Grindr and Jack'd as well as the popular online community forum Craigslist. All of these platforms which facilitate sexual activity between men, particularly men on the DL, represent the core element of the DL lifestyle by relegating sex with men to a secret or private sphere. Finally, I hope to contribute to the existing research by offering actual interviews with self-identified Black men on the DL who can provide invaluable first-hand accounts of the DL lifestyle. Using these case studies to address these questions, I unpack the intricacies of living on the DL including its manifestation as an authentic generative space for Black MSM to express themselves sexually in a still racialized country.

Foreword

This is an explicitly interventionist project conducted by a White-identified, politically progressive, queer cis¹ man. The impetus for engaging this subject critically had been a matured desire to investigate the gay male community's fascination with the "straight guy" fantasy; that is, engaging in homosexual relations with a straight-identified man and possibly "turning him."² At the core of men who have sex with other men (MSM) who consider themselves heterosexual is the concept of the "DL." This specific thesis was born in a course titled "Black Intellectual Thought" and was presented, in part, as a term paper that attempted to explore the intersections of race with sexuality, gender, masculinity while incorporating a historical and contemporary ideological analysis. Some of the questions this thesis presents interrogate the limits and the liberations attendant to particular identities. Are Black MSM men simply confused about their sexuality? Or is the DL an appropriate and self-agentive description of an identity that does not imply a cognitive dissonance between reported identity and behavior?

However, there is the question of why this topic has not been taken up by more women or White researchers. I must include an assessment of this. I wonder if the appeal of this research does not extend itself to those who do not identify as Black, male, or queer and why this is. At the same time, in an age disrupted by the onslaught of identity politics in the mainstream media, popular culture, and social movements, I question whether one's identity precedes an interest in the subject of the DL. Are Black, male, and queer populations the only ones with a vested interest in it? This could be. However, it could also be possible that outsiders such as myself worry about the disingenuousness of taking up the topic.

¹ Cis refers to cisgender, when one's biological sex is congruent with their gender identification.

² Converting him into wanting to identify publicly as gay.

To be frank, I have not wanted to be seen as an imposter or worse, an exploiter of the Black DL subculture. This type of research poses problems like outsider membership that could make this work more challenging. Also, there is no doubt that my identity comes with an access to power and privilege; yet I have tried to maintain transparency throughout this project and pursued authentic interactions that seek to diminish insincerity and, as much as possible, any imbalance in power dynamic.

One way I am able to complete this project is by incorporating an element of going on the DL by contacting Black DL men. When I started, I struggled with how this could be implemented knowing my own limitations in regards to time and group membership. With a limited number of close Black acquaintances, assumably no DL acquaintances, it would have been difficult to follow through with this project in addition to hurdles such as the reversal in visibility that would not allow me to inhabit Black DL spaces. I decided that transparency and honesty would be the most valuable to me. I wanted subjects to know this research would be published as a Master's thesis on race, sexuality, and masculinity. Knowing that informants could not be compensated for their time, I made this disclaimer obvious from the beginning.

Furthermore, as an academic, it is fruitful to explore a subject from multiple perspectives. A new interpretation of the DL may reveal itself and it will help advance future scholarship in the right direction. This project has the possibility not only to surprise people but to uncover a new perspective and be a fresh voice. I hope to avoid sensationalizing and come with an open heart and mind as well as a place of understanding. My intention is to resist any forms of discrimination, or stereotyping including sexism, racism, and ignorance. I am conducting this project with a genuine interest and not as a source of entertainment and exploitation. In fact, I have specifically combed this thesis for language that could be easily misread or deemed

insensitive. I have tried maintained ethics throughout and treat this subject with respect, the study's subjects notwithstanding.

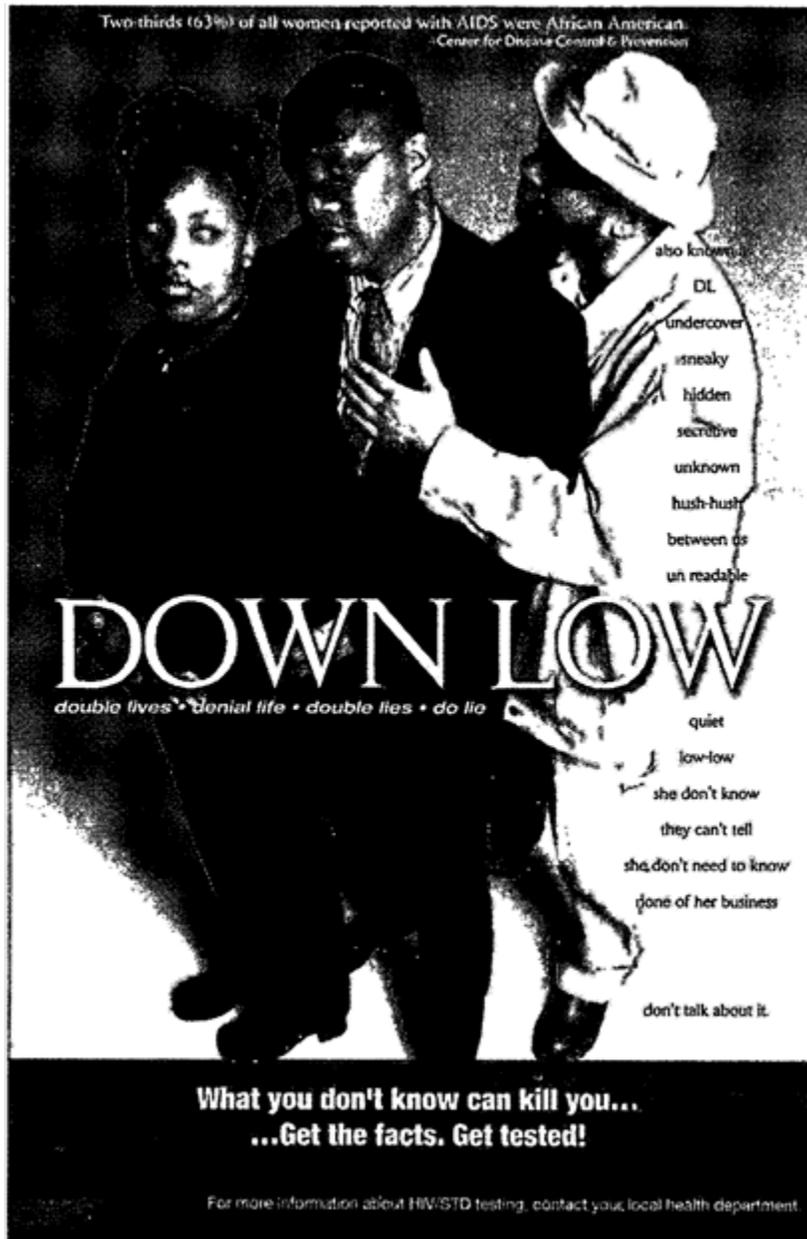
My intention is not to assume what I do not know. On the contrary, it is to give voice to Black lives that are so regularly ignored or discarded as incredible and invalid. I have attempted to critically engage the gaps in research and literature on this topic. It is my genuine intent to add to a canon of scholarship on a population of people that have been historically marginalized and often misrepresented in popular culture in addition to academia. It is also my hope to add value to this subject.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge all those whose work I have pulled from in addition to those who have contributed to the research study by participating. Thank you for your time and trust, as well as your permission to publish your thoughts and voices on these pages. Thank you also to Jessica Zeicher-Saca for guiding me through the IRB process and of course, to my advisor, James Wilson. Your patience and understanding has exceeded your guidance.

For all those who have been marginalized in this life due to their identities.
For all those whose queerness produces a difference that society chooses not to accept. You contribute to the rich tapestry of diversity that makes this world beautiful and unique.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
History of the Down Low	5
The Closet Paradigm	5
Black Bodies in a Whitewashed History	8
Going Down Low Today	12
Review of Literature	17
<i>On the Down Low</i>	18
<i>Beyond the Down Low</i>	20
<i>Nobody is Supposed to Know</i>	23
<i>Sexual Discretion</i>	27
Journal Scholarship	30
Theoretical Foundations	36
Medical Discourse	36
Black Is... Black Ain't	38
The <i>Architexture</i> of Black Masculinity	40
Gender Performance	43
Section Conclusion	46
Methodology	47
Results & Findings	55
Theoretical Analysis	67
Looking to the Future	79
References	83



“What You Don’t Know Can Kill You...” HIV/AIDS prevention poster (2004)

Reprinted from McCune (2014:67)

By now, popular discourse on the subject of the DL is not new. For years, I have heard the terminology employed in casual conversations with acquaintances and used in jest by members of the gay community who often refer to these men as gay. With the advent of social media like smartphone applications like Grindr and Jack'd that facilitate sexual transactions between members looking to enact same-sex desires, I have witnessed an increased exposure to the DL's usage as a personal identification on personal profiles. Moreover, the DL descriptor has most commonly been attached to a specific race of people, Black men,³ who are often the target of the gay community's and mainstream media's jokes who conclude that these men are simply gay men who should "come out of the closet." This prominent belief has been reiterated in music, television, movies, and even the news. The oft heard question is: Why don't DL Black men just admit they are gay and come out?

This interrogation has fascinated me. As a gay man with a particular ease living an "out" lifestyle afforded to me by the urban environment and the contemporary political and cultural landscape, I have had my own questions about DL men: How can men have sex with other men (MSM) and not consider themselves gay? They are, right? I was confused how an MSM could not be gay as my understanding has been that having same-sex intimacies was the exact definition of being gay. I have tried to be understanding and respectful in understanding difference, but I thought Black DL men might simply be denying their true sexuality by refusing to assume the gay label. I did not think it was wrong for them to not identify as gay, but I wanted to understand how they could not view themselves as gay even if it was a secret publicly.

³ For the purpose of this project, I am referring to Black men as such because my intent is not to connote an ethnic heritage. For example, African-American. In fact, the ethnic origins of the men I write about here are irrelevant to the study, which is the racial otherness that is indicated by a darker skin color. I believe ethnicity of the Black man is not important; whether one is from Jamaica, Ghana, Venezuela or France, their skin tone produces a reaction from a White hegemony in which they are all grouped together visually.

It was from here that this project unfolded and came to fruition. While taking a course for my Master's coursework, I was given an opportunity to examine this subject and its attendant themes of sexuality and gender within the nexus of race. I wanted to critically examine the racial component of DL men in detail in order to understand if the race of a subject was the determining factor in publicly rejecting a gay identity. Furthermore, I wanted to investigate whether this population of Black men privately and thus personally identified as gay, and if not, how that could be since they have sex with other men. I also sought to understand the *why*; that is, another perspective which would allow these Black men to have sex with other men yet conceptualize their sexual identity in a completely different way. What I found was a possible explanation that implicated more than just a straightforward analysis of sexuality in that it intersected with a history of racism, White privilege, gender performance, space, agency, geography, and more.

This project aims to add to research concerning Black men secretly having same-sex sexual behavior with each other from an intersectional perspective employing a sociological methodology in combination with critical race theory, queer studies, psychology, and history. It is important to objectively study the DL phenomenon as a multi-layered issue and not just from a particular angle or for the expressed intent of passing judgment or sensationalizing a population of people. Most introductions to this topic invariably begin with mentions of the transmission of HIV/AIDs within the Black community and an adherence to a mainstream media script that recycles narratives depicting Black men on the DL as confused, irresponsible, and dishonest. Owing to this, it is also vital to examine the DL from a more holistic perspective than a particular angle so it may reveal a more nuanced and intricate narrative of DL Black men. In addition, I hope to add honesty and integrity to my investigation of a group of people who are simply living

their lives. It is my expressed wish to see if I can change the narrative and/or flip the script through a respectful analysis of an identity and group of people to which I do not ascribe. This is a concerted effort to bridge some of the gaps in research and reassess how future research might be done in an attempt to minimize personal prejudices, misinterpreted data, and faulty conclusions.

To begin, I review the historical background of the DL and its emergence into a cross-cultural spotlight. From its roots in a centuries old history of racial suppression through slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation, I briefly trace its re-manifestation in R&B songs of the 1990s. When it suddenly appeared in music, the coining of the linguistic phrase “the DL” changed its meaning. From there, I will show how it took on new meanings in the 2000s as a way to put a name to a so-called sexual phenomenon.

In the second section, I conduct a review of literature in order to address individual author’s perspectives and positionalities in engaging this topic. I also pinpoint the strengths and deficiencies in their research, and explore how the DL has been framed thus far. In addition, an attention to their methodologies allows me to locate any gaps in DL scholarship or identify areas of increased and/or special interest.

In the third section, I lay out some theories that are useful and can be applied to this research topic. This serves as a foundation for my own research and gives me the opportunity to weigh my findings against theories that have been proposed. This section may also fill some of the existing gaps in literature that have been missed or ignored. Also I provide alternative epistemologies that may underpin the existing shortfalls in literature.

In the fourth section, I provide a narrative of my methodology as this project is both theoretical *and* ethnographic. Here, I outline how I devised my study, created a control group,

screened subjects for *DLness*, and conducted the research. My particular study is focused on the current phenomena of social media and how it is being utilized to facilitate sexual transactions between individuals. Specifically, Craigslist personal advertisements and smartphone applications such as Grindr and Jack'd that cater to men seeking other men, I will explain how I fill a gap in existing research as well as if and how electronic interactions between men have changed the narrative of Black DL men.

In the fifth section, I report my findings. When asked open-ended probing questions, how did subjects respond about the DL? Additionally, how much did they write about the DL? Variances in language, personal outlooks, and explanations may or may not exist.

In the sixth section, I analyze, weigh, and interpret my findings through theories that have been offered already and that I have laid out in section two. Were the findings similar to or different from what I expected? Do my findings support previous theories or do they refute them? I hope to add to existing research which is necessary in a new age of technology and social media that can facilitate sexual encounters in a new way.

In the seventh and final section, I provide a conclusion of my work and recommendations for moving ahead with future research. How can we continue the discourse on the DL in an academically responsible way?

HISTORY OF THE DOWN LOW

For the purpose of this project, a brief introduction is essential to show the study of the DL as an ideology borne out of slavery. A historical review offers alternative etymologies that have evolved over time to the development of its current iteration. I present what is already known about the history of DL discourse in order to begin the more critical analysis that is the ultimate goal of this thesis. Understanding its historical roots provides a clearer lens with which to take on the project of later critiquing the literature written on the subject as well as its examining theoretical foundations for it.

The Closet Paradigm

An analysis of the DL phenomenon would not be complete without tracing its historical roots and the formation of the “closet” paradigm. Most importantly, the dominant ideologies to which most is held standard were formed by European schools of thought formed by a privileged elite of White, educated, upper-class men. For centuries, the West has posited its ideology as developed and has used that as justification for the colonization of what European thinkers believed to be undeveloped, backwards cultures. Professor of African American, Gender, and Sexuality studies, Marlon Ross argues this created a White and monolithic worldview that inherently condemned the cultural *other* that did not meet the same values and standards proposed by a Western elite (2005:162). Also, in the seventeenth century, we see how race becomes marked on the body, and as Robyn Wiegman argued, becomes the primary organizing principle around which differences are classified (1995:21). Thus, whiteness becomes an ideal to which every other race was held up to.

Foucault argues that homosexuality in the nineteenth century becomes marked on the body as well and Euro-American thought effectively established “coming of the closet” as the

ideal paradigm for sexuality. This deviates from other theories of sexuality by defining it in accordance to other factors such as power dynamics and sexual roles but by making the gender of one's object choice the sole contributing mode of classification. Thus, the gender of one's object choice becomes wedded with the "closet" paradigm and the idea of a "sexual orientation" emerges in the 1800s (1990:43).

However, it is crucial to understand who a dominant construction of gender and sexuality has been formed by and who it privileges. Without attending to the naming of homosexuality as a subculture in the nineteenth century, one cannot understand how sexuality has been shaped by a Western educated and elite class of people. Ross provides an excellent alternative theory that implicates race, saying it is *the* causative factor to producing a very specific interpretation of sexuality that may ignore the intersections of race with socio-economic status, privilege, education, and slavery. Ross proposes a theory that others have not in "Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm" published in *Black Queer Studies*. He claims that for those who married the term "gay" (meaning a man who has sex with another man) and the phrase "coming out of the closet" are White and economically privileged and did not consider how race could be a factor in the conceptualization of sexuality. Moreover, "out" gay men fail to comprehend how a historical racism can play into the conception of the DL. Therefore, they continue to view "coming out of the closet" as the ideal paradigm in which one's sexuality is privileged above all other intersections with one's identity and is founded solely on the gender of one's object choice (2005:161-189; Sedgwick 1990:8).

This problematizes sexuality in many ways. First, race and sexuality are determined by a few elite men shaped by European literary cultures that value "deep hidden meanings as a sign of

high intellectual labor” (Ross 2005:171). This fails to acknowledge that many types of intelligences exist and are valued around the world.

Secondly, quoting David Halperin, Marlon Ross argues that the closet paradigm problematizes sexuality by creating a “material condition of black skin that produces a vulnerability” (2005:177; 1995:11). This makes invisible racial identifications that “play a large unanalyzed role in the conceptualization of desire and sexuality, knowledge and normativity” (McCune 2014:13; Ross 2005:171). The closet paradigm suffers from an implicit racial and class sameness and a racial unawareness that becomes a universalizing project that stigmatizes all those who are *other*. Again, he is positing that when one’s experience as Black is factored, positionalities can change that affect one’s conceptualization of sexuality. Blackness, as a visible marker, plays a significant role in how ideologies are born because it affects the extent in which the Black community can achieve the same goals as their counterparts, or if they even have the same goals. Does one’s *blackness* limit their realm of possibilities?

Third, the closet paradigm creates not only an ideological but also a spatial *claustrophilia*, where in this case, Black men on the DL, are trapped (Ross 2005:162). The foundation of the American economy and White hegemony since the United States was established has been at the expense of Black bodies in the form of slavery, Jim Crow, and segregation. Beginning with slavery, the Black identity has suffered under a practice of silence, dismissal, and denial in addition to being subjected to the social and judicial rule of the White majority (Carpenter 2005:323-347). When race becomes marked on the body in the seventeenth century, it becomes visible as a vertical identity in which whiteness is established as the standard and Black men automatically become *visibly* inferior without taking into account other factors

that keep them disenfranchised. Therefore, Black men who have sex with other men suffer from even further stigmatization and marginalization.

In addition, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), the closet paradigm privileges those who come out of it and have less to lose in way of class and status. More importantly though, the closet fails to consider the implications of itself on a group of people historically viewed as carceral objects. Same sex relationships have been reported throughout history, but the naming of the DL phenomenon in mainstream media comes at a specific time in contemporary modernity that is the result of centuries of laws that have existed to restrict the behavior of the Black community which rested on the construction of Black men as inferior and/or criminals.

Black Bodies in a Whitewashed History

In fact, the DL is *not* new; it has its epistemological roots in a historical suppression that the Black community has endured and formed coping mechanisms in order to survive. In the face of a White hegemony, Black people have developed several ways to subvert the status quo by refashioning religions, adopting different public and private personas, and generally, trying to reduce their visibility by going *on the DL*.

Due to this, community among Black people took precedence over differences in class or education, for instance; together, they could unify to attempt to move beyond the realm of discipline and punishment. Community became the vital lifeline under White surveillance of Black lives and the exploitation of their bodies. To the White hegemony, they became carceral objects; to each other, they reclaimed their subjectivity and value.

The restrictions imposed on their lives forced slaves to develop coping mechanisms to survive. One example of this is the Underground Railroad, where escaping slaves avoided

capture by going *on the DL*. Slaves not only wanted to remain invisible to their masters and White society at large but also needed ways to cope with an everyday existence that exploited them for their labor. This is where self-surveillance becomes integral. Peggy Phelan writes in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), “Driving the mechanism of performed identities is a need to blend in, not to be noticed. The power of the unseen community lies in its ability to cohere outside the system of observation which seeks to patrol it” (McCune 2014:1). Here, we observe the ways that slaves reclaimed their self-agency and engaged in self-surveillance practices that allowed them to exist beyond the White gaze. It is important to note the trope of visibility/invisibility that characterizes the beginning of an existence where Black lives needed to live *on the DL* in order to survive. In this way, the DL was divorced from the idea of a Black man’s sexual practices and instead became an ingrained part of slaves’ beings in order to subsist in a White hegemonic society and at the same time, resist it through covert action.

This also adds the element of spatial confinement to a group of people who have been viewed as the object of White confinement. This forces us to consider the White gaze upon black bodies and introduces a newfound surveillance of them. When Black men on the DL are factored into the equation, membership in the Black community has been a tremendous source of survival in regards to coping with and overcoming slavery, surveillance, the White gaze, and socioeconomic marginalization, for example. Rather, for many Black men on the DL “coming out” is a distraction because it is subsidiary to more important identifications with family, community, and race (Ross 2005:161-189).

E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson published *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (2005), in part, to forward the notion that we must therefore investigate Black identities and assess the ways in which “coming out” does not fit into the Black experience as

well as it might in the White experience. Living in a White hegemonic society, the Black community has carved out a cultural space uniquely their own against dominant threads of culture associated with the ruling status quo. In the context of this project, the gay identity does not fit neatly into the Black experience that is formulated by divergent perspectives, performances, and the maintenance of gender and sexual identities.

In fact, Black DL men may not identify as gay because the descriptor was created by educated elite White European men in the nineteenth century who occupied a different social and political location. Also, to use the term gay as a catch-all for all men who experience homosocial intimacy neglects a rich history of sexuality in which men of all races, cultures, and positionalities have demonstrated same sex behavior but have *not* been referred to as gay. Rather, a genuine and worthwhile project would be to focus on the DL's roots in a Black culture that has been historically marginalized and thus empowers it with a specific meaning and value. Any slippage of the term between different groups or interests should be noted and assessed in respect to each one, as the primary function of the DL may have different implications depending on the group employing it.

Moreover, the inherent hegemonic racism in the mainstream media's message failed to be addressed by anyone until queer theorists started publishing on the topic in the years to come. Lena Saleh and Don Operario were two of the first to see the ways in which it problematized further a community of Black men without recognizing that *not only* sexuality, but also a historical analysis informed the lives and decisions of a group of people plagued with a marked racial *otherness* (2009:390-5). What Saleh and Operario write in "Moving Beyond 'the Down Low'" is that the naming of the DL phenomenon publicly comes at a specific time in contemporary modernity that is the result of centuries of laws that have existed to restrict the

behavior of the Black community which rested on the construction of Black men as inferior and/or criminals. In fact, the DL is *not* new; it has its epistemological and genealogical roots in a historical suppression that the Black community has endured and formed coping mechanisms in order to survive (2009:392-3).

Angela Davis in *Are Prisons Obsolete?* (2003) and Ruth Gilmore in *Golden Gulag* (2007) have written extensively on the existing prison industrial complex as a modern day form a slavery that aims to keep all People of Color (POC) suppressed. If this is argued, the logic of the closet may not fit into the narratives of Black lives due to the limitations implied or imposed by a confined space. The policing of Black bodies today as a way to limit one's behavior and actions is most recognizable when statistics showing a primarily incarcerated population of POC. McCune nods to Davis and Gilmore when he asserts that Black men are part of a group that have been constructed as criminals, and for Black men on the DL, the closet may resemble a cell that does not allow for freedom.

Moreover, if sociopolitical circumstances that led to the mass incarceration were remedied, Black men on the DL might possibly find more correlation with the closet paradigm. But until the prison-state that policies Black bodies is abolished, it seems difficult to see how Black men on the DL would want to envision themselves confined to a closet, as the paradigm suggests, when the image of a closet can be associated with a prison cell. If systemic and structural racism was confronted from bottom-up and top-down, one could argue that the desire to incarcerate Black bodies would naturally fail to manifest itself and the prison industrial complex itself would cease, thereby freeing up the space that it haunts in the minds of Black men altogether.

Until that happens, however, all Black people, not just DL men, must continue to engage in self-surveillance that limits the visual and corporeal space they occupy in a White hegemonic society and suffer from due to multiple marginalized identities including the sexual. For Black men on the DL, one could argue the desire to reject a sexual liberation rooted in an articulated sexual identity formed by their oppressors for the sake of pleasure, protection, and politics. Thus, how they would privilege ideal masculinities in order to move outside queer affiliation and suspicion becomes clearer. It is not enough to be Black, but to be Black and perceived as gay in America is tantamount to triple jeopardy in the maintenance of racial, gender, and sexual norms. Thus, the DL may be established as a more desirable place to navigate oneself sexually because it invokes a sense of a self-made community that allows for homosocial desires to be enacted both discretely and discreetly from one's public life. This signifies a desire to keep their sexual behavior a secret but also separate from their other identities and affiliations. In addition to the corporeal stigmatization of Black male bodies, there is an added stigmatization when biopolitical warfare is enacted upon them. This is primarily the result of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) who created a script that framed Black DL men as perpetrators of horrific crimes.

Going Down Low Today

The public's consciousness of the DL phenomenon increased sharply in the early 2000s due to the increasing amount of media scrutiny over the rise of HIV infections among Black men and women. This came after the apogee of the HIV/AIDS crisis that started in the 1980s and lasted until the first protease inhibitor was introduced by the FDA in 1995; HIV infections were subsequently decreasing among White men due to Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART) and an intensified vigilance towards protecting one's self from contraction. This caused significant alarm for the CDC and consequently the mass media which vigorously

searched for an explanation as to why HIV infections were on the rise in the Black community (Ford et al. 2007: 209-10). In the DL phenomenon, they found a scapegoat.

When the DL catapulted into the national spotlight as the phenomenon of Black men having covert sexual relationships with each other, an unfortunate stigmatization was placed on an already racially marked community. Reports from the CDC announced that, in a decade when HIV infection rates were finally decreasing due to the introduction of an antiviral cocktail and increased self-vigilance in engaging in safer sex habits, a group of people existed who exhibited disproportionately high infection rates: Black men and women (Ford et al. 2007:210). Naturally, the CDC scrambled to understand how that could be as HIV/AIDS crisis in America was purported to be a thing of the past. After the havoc wreaked by the HIV/AIDS crisis of the previous two decades, scientists and researchers were stunned that Black men and women were contracting the disease at high rates in comparison to their White counterparts.

The medical and scientific community, along with mainstream media coverage of the DL phenomenon, aimed at their target, Black DL men. Citing a high prevalence of Black men who have “bisexual” relationships but do not disclose their homosexual acts to their female partners, the CDC and national media were able to pin HIV/AIDS transmission on Black men who infected unsuspecting women. The argument made by prominent researchers and journalists was that Black men on the DL were unequivocally responsible for spreading the disease to Black women.

Even though the CDC reported that in 2002, the leading cause of HIV infection for both Black women *and men* was sex with a man (Millet et al. 2005:52-9), they did little to investigate the linkage between self-reported sexual identification, self-reported homosexual *and* heterosexual behavior, safer sex practices, and Injection Drug Use (IDU) to support the claim

that specifically Black men on the DL were responsible for the public health crisis. This also did not present a reality that HIV/AIDS is not spread by a group of people who exhibit specific sexual acts but rather by a group of people who do not (1) discuss their Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) status with their sexual partners; (2) use protection during intercourse, both males *and* females; and (3) make their sexual behavior habits known such as vaginal/anal penetration, “swinging,”⁴ or non-monogamy for instance (Phillips 2005:3-15). That one’s sexual orientation was determined by scientists and mainstream media as the culprit of the HIV/AIDS epidemic refused to acknowledge that it is *not* the gender of the person one has sex with that causes infection. At the same time though, while most people were willing to point fingers, an exact definition of the DL failed to materialize.

First, it is necessary to address the characterizations of the DL that have varied widely from source to source. If the CDC and mainstream media covered the DL phenomenon, they would first have to define it. The problem was that explanations of the DL differed which resulted in confusion and faulty conclusions. In my own experience, I have most often heard the DL terminology used by men of all races who simply want to convey that they are not “out” and only have sex with other men in private while enjoying the privileges of heteronormativity in public.

Unfortunately, many misrepresentations of the DL subculture exist and have been recycled via various news outlets both print and media, gossip blogs, and street fodder. But because the mainstream media introduced the label into the cultural milieu, it might be pinpointed for explaining the DL to the general public. This is due to a lack of deep historical

⁴ When a couple, such as husband and wife, agree to have sexual encounters with others in addition to each other. This is usually an agreement made between them and can have various limitations and/or rules. Sex parties are common in which a platform is provided for couples to experiment with others while maintaining a committed relationship to each other as primary partners romantically and sexually.

and intersectional analysis of why it emerged among Black men and how it has been shaped by other factors and not simply sexuality. One of Keith Boykin's most effective arguments in *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (2005) is that multiple versions exist and contradict each other. One, the DL was first publicly named earlier in the 1990s when R&B musicians such as TLC and R. Kelley made reference to it to describe a type of infidelity outside of a relationship *regardless* of gender. That is, in its inception it did not provide *any* allusion to secretive same-sex relationships between men within the Black community.

Secondly, in *The New York Times Magazine* cover story by Benoit Denizet-Lewis, "Double Lives On The Down Low" (2003), informants Rakeem and William said that "the DL label is both an announcement of masculinity and a separation from white gay culture." To them, they exclude White gay men from being able to describe themselves as being on the DL but Denizet-Lewis explains further that they also "don't risk losing their ties to family, friends and black culture." So which is true? For instance, in the example of Rakeem and William above, one must be Black to be on the DL. But there are other factors as well. How much does self-agency and self-identification play a role? Also, if a Black man goes to a traditionally queer space such as a bar or a club where visibility and coyness can become public, are they still on the DL? These questions implicate the roles that race, self-agency, and visibility have a role in determining who qualifies for DL status.

Furthermore, the CDC has wedded the cause of HIV transmission primarily with the idea that men are practicing unsafe sex, contracting HIV, and then passing it others, particularly women, who they claim are innocent victims. But this interpretation does not allow for men who *only* have sex with men and *not* women. Nor does it account for the possibility of other racial groups of people to be on the DL because the public health crises focuses only on the Black

community. Furthermore, popular songs by TLC and R. Kelley in the 1990s contain lyrics that being on the DL is not gender-specific and this suggests it simply refers to being unfaithful in a committed, supposed monogamous relationship. Does the DL more generally allude to any action committed in secrecy or is the DL a way for White America to pathologize Black lives? It becomes a questionable subject when considering all of the different possibilities of what the DL could mean.

Due to this variance in who qualifies and how it is defined, I focus solely on Black men who self-identify as being on the DL. This is regardless of who they have sex with, safe sex practices, HIV status or any other minute factor that could change the way these men are identified in a particular time, location, or situation. In the research that follows, the primary employment of the DL terminology will be that Black men themselves self-identify. This will allow me to explore the emergence of the DL phenomenon without any slippage of the term between different groups or interests. Furthermore, I do not doubt that the usage of the DL terminology may vary for different subsets of people, so I focus on its foundation in a Black culture that has been historically marginalized.

After this, I determine what Marlon Riggs meant by title his documentary, what *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1995). This offers perspective into how Black people construct their blackness and which identities are privileged and which are not. Once examined, I see how being on the DL becomes a coping mechanism, a form of self-surveillance in a society where Black bodies are constantly policed.

Then, performances of gender will be analyzed and whether Black men see *DLness* as a gendered identity or a sexual preference and why. How does self-agency and the “architecture”⁵

⁵ See page 49.

of Black masculinity come into play? Also, what does it mean to be both simultaneously discrete and discreet? Here language, space, desire, intimacy, and pleasure all play an integral role in Black men's fashioning the DL for themselves.

Moreover, the purpose here is to remove ethical assessment from the examination of the DL subculture that seeks to stigmatize and exoticize a unique Black male experience and conflate sexual orientations. Instead, it is to provide a brief overview and disciplinary critique that argues for endogenous expression of identity that operates outside of the surveillance of hegemonic structures associated with race, class, gender, and sexuality.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the past fifteen years of major national conversation surrounding the DL, there have been a few groundbreaking and influential pieces of work published. What follows is a review of literature intended to be the foundation of what could be taken up as a more extensive analytical project that addresses nuances in more detail. What is presented here is a starting point, outlining major strengths and weaknesses with considerations on how a better canon concerning the DL phenomenon might be produced. The overall objective here is to demystify and demythologize a taboo and complex subculture in a way that resists essentializing or engaging in a universalizing project.

The most substantial works include published books (from oldest to most recent): *On the Down Low* by J.L. King (Broadway 2004); *Beyond the Down Low: Sex Lies, and Denial in Black America* by Keith Boykin (Da Capo Press 2005); *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* by Riley Snorton (University of Minnesota Press 2014); and *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* by Jeffery McCune (University of

Chicago Press 2014). In this section, I review these works, including their crucial arguments, and locate any strengths and/or deficiencies that may exist.

On the Down Low

No review of literature on the DL can ignore the contribution J.L. King's *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men* has made.

Published in 2004 with Karen Hunter as coauthor, this was the first book fully dedicated to the DL as a subject matter. Furthermore, it broke from previous discourse by providing personal accounts of a man who claimed to have lived on the DL. It was also the work that brought the subcultural phenomenon into the limelight and sparked a national controversy as it became an instant *New York Times* best seller. King, author and previously-identified DL Black man, also appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to talk about his former lifestyle and for the first time, revealed this secret to the mainstream public, most who had never heard of it before.

In *On the Down Low*, King gives a personal account of being in relationships with women, including his wife, while secretly looking for other Black men with whom to have sex. Having lived twenty-five years on the DL, he was exposed by his wife who caught him with another man. It was around this time that he became a public speaker, traveling across the country to give lectures about DL men and the spread of HIV within the Black community. Yet, he did not want to reveal that he himself was living on the DL. Finally, he recounts that the lies became too much for him and so he disclosed that this lifestyle his career revolved around was in fact the same life he was living.

His account provides numerous personal examples of relationships he had with other Black men on the DL as well as other "brothers" own DL situations. His authority on the subject is his connection to the subculture; that is, he has first-hand accounts of what living on the DL is

like. He recounts cheating on the women in his life, divorcing from his wife, his sexual preferences in the bed, picking up “brothers” at church, and many examples of working with DL men while they were in the military or incarcerated. He provides a number of instances of what he considers DL behavior and this undoubtedly serves as a strength from his decades of experience.

However, King’s work suffers for a few reasons. First, while he gives many examples of DL behavior, there seems to be little to no analysis. Although this is not an academic work, rather one targeted to a more mainstream population of readers, he might offer his thoughts on why the DL exists, if and how it may be different from being gay. Instead, he merely presents stories about his life and fellow DL “brothers” while begging for forgiveness from all those whom he has hurt. Complicating this is that he seems to conflate being on the DL with being gay, referring to himself several times as a *now* self-professed gay man who was too afraid to admit it before. Furthermore, he also conflates being on the DL with being bisexual. In addition, it may have been beneficial to explore how living on the DL and being gay or bisexual are similar and/or different. Rather, he simply suggests that DL men exist far and wide and that he wishes to continue the conversation in hopes that DL men can come to a place of self-acceptance and his book can be a “catalyst to change.” He also dedicated his work to the women who have been hurt or “compromised” by DL men and wish to protect themselves in the future. In other words, he fashions himself a self-help guru that has exposed a disease but at the same time, has given practical advice on how to cure oneself from it and how other women can use this book as a guide to identify and avoid future DL men.

King is right to address the nuances in DL behavior that can exist when a Black man is also a man of faith and is tightly connected to and dependent on their community and the Black

church. Also, addressing the complications of sexuality that can exist when a Black man is in the military or jail, but he does not offer explanations; he only brings up personal examples and opines what he thinks without any references, theory, or analysis. He explains a lot about DL-related terminology too, vocabulary that mainstream audiences are not familiar with. He introduces words like “top” and “bottom”⁶ and “thug brother” but for no other reason than to make others, mainly the women who read his book, better understand the full picture he is painting. King reveals clues to how DL men communicate or how they keep their behavior a secret so that women can be on the lookout for anything suspicious or “suspect,” a widely used descriptor that refers to men who, for some reason, have been flagged as potentially DL.

As the first to publish an entire book dedicated to the DL, King laid the foundation for a national discussion. However, he also proved that there was still much to be done in the way of research and analysis. What he presented was a behind-the-scenes story with a subjective point of view. The advantage is that he is the only prominently known former-DL living Black man who has penned a book on his experience. Though there was an opportunity to explore if and why the DL is the same or different from being gay or bisexual, his book no doubt provides numerous empirical insights into the behavior and cognition of a Black DL man. In regards to this, it would be interesting to study this work as an academic, such as a psychologist, as a first-hand narrative/expose to delve deeper into the psychology of a native informant.

Beyond The Down Low

In a follow up and rebuke to King, *Beyond The Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* was published by Keith Boykin in 2005. Unlike King, Boykin writes as a Dartmouth College and Harvard Law School graduate, political campaigner, and a White House

⁶ “Tops” assume the sexually insertive role-the penetrator-while “bottoms” assume the sexually receptive role-being penetrated.

aide to President Clinton. Also unlike King, Boykin grappled with his sexuality growing up and never considered himself DL; instead, he identifies as an out and proud Black gay man. These differences result in a very different perspective when addressing the topic. In fact, it was Boykin who King initially contacted to help him in co-authoring *On the Down Low* but Boykin declined citing issues of tone, credit, and legitimacy.

Indeed, Boykin provides legitimacy in his work not so much as a first-hand account of living on the DL, but as a gay man invested in politics and the prevention of the spread of HIV within the Black community. Boykin, in response to King, provides extensive coverage of the phenomenon from the many different meanings it encompasses and the various lies and myths that follow it. Chapter by chapter, Boykin dedicates each to examining a different angle. For example, in chapter two he traces the etymology of the phrase “DL” through time, how it has evolved into its current iteration, a reference to secret sex between men. In “It’s Not Just a Black Thing,” he spends a chapter debunking claims that the DL solely refers to Black men and gives numerous instances of well-known people like Elton John, Rock Hudson, and New Jersey governor James McGreevey who had secret affairs with men that were eventually exposed. In a chapter titled “Down Low Detectives” he takes some time to grapple with King’s faulty detective work in the way the former seemed more concerned with helping others identify men on the DL by providing clues rather than engaging in an ethical analysis of it. He also takes issue with how mainstream outlets seemed all too ready to publish reports about DL men without utilizing sound methodologies or engaging in a genuine effort to demystify the subculture. In another chapter titled “Victims and Villains,” he reminds us that while Black women who may have been cheated on by DL men or even infected with HIV may be coming to terms with their anger and grief, it is important to focus on the facts. Therefore, the blame is shifted off of innocent men

who may not have cheated in relationships or engaged in risky sexual practices that would result in the spread of infections within the Black community. He admits that the experience of being betrayed or infected makes some victims but urges his readers not to cast Black DL men as a whole villains because it is irresponsible and untrue. Furthermore, he engages in a critical examination of how society can reimagine a discourse that focuses on honesty and prevention rather than blame and denial.

In all, Boykin covers many perspectives when it comes to the DL and his research is invaluable. He adds a genuine engagement with the subject from an academic perspective that had yet to be published and offers many valuable insights. His work is not a critical examination of the topic, but rather a concerted research effort into the history, statistics, and media coverage until 2005. What he lacks in theory, he makes up for in an endeavor to challenge preconceived notions of what the DL means, who DL men are, and how we can better represent a population of people while also attempting to address the health crises in a more productive way. His work resists demonizing Black DL men or sensationalizing their story but rather emphasizes the facts and works towards a solution for a better future. This would be, as he writes, a way for Black DL men to walk a path of self-acceptance and for healing to begin so that we may remove focus from sexual stigma, shaming, and blaming. His insertion of personal narrative also generates a sense of sincerity and sympathy towards the subject.

However generative Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low* is though, it serves as a non-academic piece of work. He proves himself a credible researcher, and inserts general in-text citations throughout, but without references, it is difficult to fact-check his sources or simply refer to his sources if one conducts their own research; this would be helpful. Another critique is Boykin, at times, seems more interested in personally attacking King as he identifies as a gay

Black man who wants to undo the damage he believes King has caused. Rather, it would be more useful and productive to spend more time focused on the main purpose of his work which is debunking various falsehoods. This is to provide an investigation into the history of the DL including resolving misread statistics and elucidating the myths he believes are entangled with it.

Furthermore, when considering his methodology and overall purpose, it may have been more beneficial to leave lengthy personal anecdotes out in order to synthesize his work as a whole. At 293 pages, it is not a difficult read but many pages are filled with tales of his own life instead of the facts that shine light on truths not previously examined and serve his ultimate purpose. Both King and Boykin reflect a closeness to the subject matter in different ways which accomplishes a sense of duty and compassion towards the subject matter. However, the difference is the latter's main objective is not to provide a first person narrative about his life. What Boykin has achieved is praiseworthy and he brings integrity to the subject of the DL even though his work may benefit from more focus.

Nobody Is Supposed to Know

The years after the publication of Keith Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low* saw a marked silence on the subject matter by researchers aimed at reaching a mass audience. There were a smattering of journal publications in the medical and academic fields, but the next book to be published was another contribution by King titled *Coming Up on from the Down Low* (2006) which included more first-person testimony of living on the DL and the responses he had received since releasing *On the Down Low*.

It was not until 2014 that the DL was once again the devoted interest of an entire book. This project is named *Nobody is Supposed to Know: Black Sexuality on the Down Low* by C. Riley Snorton, a graduate of the Communication and Culture Ph.D program at the University of

Pennsylvania. Now Associate Professor of Africana studies and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies at Cornell University, Snorton also has a vested stake in the DL as a Black-identified transgender man. Unlike others, he is the very first to draw from established theories in analyzing the DL and at the same time, use them to propose and advance his own theory; he comes from a similar academic background. Thus, Snorton is well-versed in critical theories that run parallel to and directly address topics which implicate gender, race, and sexuality. This works to his advantage if one seeks a critical analysis that is more focused on the how and the why. Snorton is engaged in a rigorous examination of how Black sexuality is portrayed in contemporary media and popular culture and how that is framed through the lens of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of the "glass closet."⁷

After a review of how the DL had been portrayed in the media and popular culture, Snorton constructs an argument that is founded on Sedgwick's theory. Using his background in communication, race, gender, and sexuality studies all in tandem, Snorton weaves depictions of the DL from pop culture such as music, television, cinema, and literature to demonstrate how black sexuality is surveilled and policed. It is a convincing argument that is reinforced with citations and references to some of the most prominent theorists as well as representations of Black sexuality in the media and popular culture. His examples reflect the breadth and variety not only of his research, but also the manifestations of a troubling national discourse of Black sexuality.

In "Down-Low Genealogies," Snorton compasses history to argue how blackness has been queered due in part to dominant attitudes to sex that accompanied the Victorian era in addition to capitalism. He emphasizes that by characterizing Black men as hypermasculine and

⁷ See Even Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*.

hyperheterosexual, the White status quo was able to reimagine blackness. This was the result of a temporality, a change in history when Black identities and intimacies had to be reconfigured in the wake of the abolishment of slavery. Starting with slavery, Snorton introduces the semantics of the master or “overseer” and the enslaved, stressing the visuality in which blackness was inferior on one end, and whiteness superior on the other. Citing *My Bondage and My Freedom* by Frederick Douglass, he notes that “most narratives about [racial] undecidability are also morality tales about control” (2014:47). Blues music by Gertude “Ma” Rainey and Kokomo Arnold introduced a Black sexual identity through music that indicated a change in privacy, interpretations of gender identity, and reflected problems of urban industrialization. He shows how the Moynihan Report of 1965 functioned as a “document principally concerned with the interlocking questions of race, sex, and visibility” (2014:58) that was a reaction to new freedoms obtained by the Black community. He argues that it represents the desire of White people to surveil and initiate intraracial conflict and thus foreshadows the current discourse that surrounds the DL. Furthermore, he shows how respectability politics was taken up by government and media to frame a narrative of Black crime. All of these employ visual logics that are inextricably tied to the “glass closet.”

“Trapped in the Epistemological Closet” is a chapter devoted to the epic music video hip-hop opera *Trapped in the Closet* by R&B singer R. Kelley in which he explores the concept of shame, a “knowing-all-too-well-about the dominant, oppressive modes of domination” as the performative opposite of ignorance (2014:88). This is important because the “glass closet” does not afford Black folks subjectivity and questions their sexual intelligibility within a contradictory space marked by concealment and display. In conclusion, Snorton contends *Trapped* demonstrates that the DL “signifies a process and paradigm that signals a gap in the critical

literature of sexuality studies as well as an absence of epistemological frameworks that can address the complexity of black sexual expression” and also “the discursive formation of the DL is the presence of that absence; it is black sexuality placed under the magnifying glass of the microscope” (2014:93). Snorton is perhaps the first proffer the idea that the DL is inseparable from the White status-quo’s intense and constant scrutiny of a racial difference and at the same time the necessity for new epistemological frameworks that may be able to more accurately describe and understand the DL phenomenon.

In “Black Sexual Syncretism,” Snorton examines Bishop Eddie Long’s sexual scandal, the figure of the church choir or musical director, and the discourses that surround and constitute them. He recounts that much of the DL hysteria has been due to the Black church in its participation of actively denouncing homosexuality while also holding the common view of “Punish the sin, not the sinner.” This is refrained as rationale in accepting LGBTQ members and doing HIV/AIDS community outreach. Building on his previous arguments, Snorton introduces the theory of duplicitousness on the DL as a stand in for a broader fear and blame related to Black moral and sexual culpability. He argues that in many ways, the Black church is held responsible for queer Black figures’ failure in practicing personal responsibility. Moreover, it is the idea that Black DL men “cannot control their sexual yearnings” and the outside suspicion that ensues that stems from a paranoid reading of the relationship between the DL and the Black church.

He follows this with a discussion of panopticism that “regulate queer and black bodies through seemingly innocuous acts of consumption” (2014:122) in the final chapter titled “Rumor Has It.” Snorton examines gossip blogs that focus on Black celebrities which he says reflect an extended definition of the DL that includes a range of genders in addition to sexualities. He

writes, “recurring narratives of sexual deviance occurring in black celebrities’ private lives are pervasive because this remains an inexhaustible source of titillation and an invaluable resource for panoptical imaginaries, concerned with designating clear distinctions between and among categories of difference” (2014:127). The multitude of people engaging in the fascination of Black and queer sexualities is further evidence of how a reading of the DL must include an intersection of race with masculinity, sexuality, notions of public versus private space, personal culpability, and systems of power among others.

As a result, Snorton has achieved a nuanced and attentive analysis of the DL that draws from prominent theories by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Michel Foucault, Laurent Berlant and Michael Warner, Cathy Cohen, and Patrick E. Johnson. Where Snorton’s research diverges from his predecessors is in the way he focuses on theoretical underpinnings that support a new formulation of the DL through an intersectional methodology. He focuses on understanding the constitutive discourse instead of an explicit rebuttal of assumptions he deems wrong. In many ways, his work cannot be easily summed up and thus a review of *Nobody is Supposed to Know* becomes more intricate. In many instances, only Snorton’s own words suffice in encapsulating the main thrust of his various arguments and this serves as a testament to his talent and skill as a scholar and not just a talking head or pundit. His research also benefits from the passage of time which he has used effectively to expand on previous literature in order to offer an updated and expansive analysis. To his credit, he has undertaken an incredible effort in providing in what I believe to be the first scholarly review of the DL’s epistemology.

Sexual Discretion

Jeffrey McCune’s *Sexual Discretion: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Passing* (2014) is the most recently published book about the DL and is also the most relevant to my own

project. McCune was the first to offer up theory in combination with his own ethnography of DL Black men. Although he recycles some references that preceded him, such as R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet* and Oprah's high-profile expose on DL subculture, his particular angle investigates the identities of Black DL men from the inside and outside in tandem with theory and practice. McCune is an Associate Professor of Women, Gender, Sexual Studies and Performance Studies at Washington University in St. Louis. As such, he differs from Snorton in that he does not take contemporary media and popular culture to task. The lens he has applied in *Sexual Discretion* centers around constitutive identity and not negative attention or respectability politics applied from outsiders. Nor does he chart the emergence and circulation of the DL; rather, he shifts the focus towards the subjects themselves to understand how they conceptualize their identities and performances as Black DL men. He is analytical, skillful, and sensitive in approaching the topic not to mention his informants themselves.

It is crucial to note that McCune is the first to explore the racial and sexual politics of this subculture by placing the agency on the individuals who may not have previously been able to control their own narratives. His intention is to illuminate masculinity in relation to gender performance as well as homosocial desires. Although his and Snorton's books were both published around the same time, McCune's methodological work engages the public versus private space by offering up new meanings of *discreet* and *discrete* by going on the DL. McCune personally dared to traverse these spaces to advance our understanding of the lived experiences of these men. This adds a poignancy and richness to his work as he has allowed his subjects to tell their own truths. Also, because no examination of living beings can forego the voices of those being studied nor can subjects only be viewed as objects. In *Sexual Discretion*, McCune joins them not as an imposter, but to minimize their objectification and see first-hand how they

live. Thus, he avoids publishing an expose on sexual practices and avoids objectifying his subjects in favor of undertaking a genuine study of sexuality in general. As a gay Black man, McCune is as personally invested in the subject matter as those before him.

McCune's strength is his introduction and advancement of integral DL terminology such as "discreet," "discrete," and the "architexture" of Black masculinity. First, his delineation between "discreet" (guarded) and "discrete" (separate) is essential to the conceptualization of the DL and future research. He is apt to attend to the pluralities of "discreet" as the terminology has flourished in the contemporary gay male lexicon. This is timely as being discreet has oftentimes become inextricably linked with being on the DL. At the same time, he expands on the significance of "discretion" in matters sexual and racial to describe a separateness that Black DL men apply to the White status-quo, larger Black community, and the mainstream gay culture. This play on two words as homophones reveals multiple meanings that advance scholarship in the right direction. So far, research has been overwhelmingly focused on the past and finally, after a decade of missteps and catching up, McCune tracks how Black men treat the DL as a meaningful sexual identity.

Second, McCune employs "architexture" as a discursive term to tell more about the "feeling" of space, the "expansive cultural fabric that dwells in specific sites of queer production" and as a description of the "dialectic between the interior and exterior manifestations of masculinity" (2014:96). McCune coins "architexture" as an appropriate term since it refers to not only physical space but also ideological frames of culture and gender (which often change depending on context) (2014:96-7). This is one of the shrewdest interpretations of the physical space that Black bodies inhabit, the places where they perform, find liberation, tension, or satisfaction. This is evident at the Gate, a gay nightclub located in Chicago that held a weekly

party marketed and catered to Black DL men. By going to the party, McCune was able to explore the tropes of space and visibility figuratively and literally as he navigated a “heterotopia” where Black DL men were privileged and where they could “engage in, enjoy, or perform same-sex desire” (2014:99). This is significant because the club does not function as a closet; in fact, McCune proposes that it is more of a playground where possibilities can be explored and temporal pleasures enjoyed. Most importantly, it is a physical space that allows Black DL men to articulate their sexualities on their own terms while remaining discreet and abiding by a traditionally masculine framework.

Overall, *Sexual Discretion* is a blend of theory and practice that looks toward the future by letting go of the past. It is noteworthy that McCune went on the DL and this undoubtedly adds legitimacy and authenticity to his work. The sincerity in which he approaches his subjects allows them to be more than just bodies without voices. While Snorton presents a responsible piece of work that pulls from critical theory, McCune is able to advance formulations of the DL that do not solely see the subjects as objects.

The full-length projects reviewed here span 2004 to 2014. It is worth mentioning that all four texts were produced by self-identified Black men.

Journal Scholarship

Studies published in journals such as the *Journal of the National Medical Association*, *Psychological Bulletin*, and the *Journal of Bisexuality*, just to name a few, are tailored to the individual journal and may not explore the DL phenomenon holistically. In 2005, a comprehensive analysis titled “Focusing ‘Down Low’: Bisexual Black Men, HIV Risk, and Heterosexual Transmission” published in the *Journal of the National Medical Association* utilized three databases and found 24 articles and two conference reviews that were suitable for

review. Focusing on reported statistical data in order to separate fact from fiction, Gregario Millet et al. drew four critical conclusions. First, unlike what mainstream media outlets had reported, “black MSM are more likely than MSM of other races and ethnicities to identify themselves as bisexual and to be bisexually active” (2005:53).

Second, Millet et al. found that subjects of all races who self-reported as heterosexual displayed incongruent homosexual behavior. White men were least likely to have an agreement between their professed identity and actual behavior at 34.7% while Asian men were the most likely at 78.4% (2005). This means that Black men reporting at 43% were not, in fact, the group most likely to exhibit a discordance between professed sexual identity and reported sexual behavior. More importantly, this reveals that *all* subjects were reported as exhibiting homosexual tendencies despite not identifying as gay, bisexual or DL. They also found that HIV-positive men who self-reported as gay or bisexual were much more likely to have sex with women, thus dispelling the myth that HIV/AIDS is contracted primarily from men who self-report as heterosexual (2005:52-59).

Third, while the data seemed to show that Black men (and minority men in general) are significantly less likely to “come out” about their homosexual behavior, Millet et al. concluded that they appear to engage in fewer sexually risky acts (2005). There is also evidence that a proportionately higher number of Black women who tested HIV-positive reported to have had sex with a male IDU user rather than a bisexually identified man (2005:52-59). Thus, researchers must remain committed to reading statistical data accurately as a deeper analyses may reveal some unexpected results.

Furthermore, a study by Michael Chaney and Geneva Gray in *AGLBIC News*, “Men on the down-low: Nomenclature grounded in heterosexism and racism” revealed that “African

American men who are currently bisexually active account for a very small proportion of the overall population of African American men, approximately 2%” (2006:9). In addition, Chandra Ford et al. showed in a 2007 study, “Black Sexuality, Social Construction, and Research Targeting ‘The Down Low’ (‘The DL’)” in the *Annals of Epidemiology*, that the media downplayed a decrease of HIV/AIDS rates among the Black population from 2001 to 2004 in which they represented just 50% of HIV and 40% of AIDS diagnoses respectively, showing that it is not just the Black community who is getting infected or should be targeted (2007:210). Furthermore, among HIV-positive Black women, 80% acquire HIV through heterosexual contact while among HIV-positive Black men, the rate of HIV transmission through MSM contact is only 49% (2007:210). Here, quantitative data has been misread yet it shows there are other factors involved in the transmission of HIV including IDU use, supposed sexually irresponsible behavior, and homosexual acts. Moreover, these reports show that Black men may not be on the DL due to feelings of shame nor do they always hide their sexual identity or behavior.

These findings highlight the ways in which statistics can be read to serve a particular purpose and how factual evidence can potentially dispel falsehoods that fit a specific agenda. It also indicates when evidence may not be sound. Reports regarding Black men on the DL should also indicate the intricacies in self-reporting and respect subjects’ self-agency when it comes to how they identify sexually. The usage of MSM should be taken up more extensively to describe not the sexual orientation of Black DL men, but their behavior. Furthermore, researchers must remain committed to a specific goal when they conduct their studies. For example, is self-identification valued over reported behavior? Researchers conducting studies within the fields of social sciences tend to prefer qualitative examination while researchers conducting studies within

the medical community typically look for quantitative data, hence the utilization of MSM rather than gay in an effort to focus on the behavior and not the cognition of the subject.

If one examines the psychology of Black men on the DL, one must remain neutral and resist the urge to assign identities to subjects that may fit their worldview but not their subjects'. In many cases, researchers are quick to identify MSM sex and link it to a gay identity; however, it is negligent to create this linkage between behavior and identity especially when the purpose of one's research is to understand how the subjects' cognition in relation to reported identity and behavior is formed. Researchers must remain sensitive to the population they are studying and be careful to not apply their bias which are shaped by an individual's particular culture, geography, education, politics and so forth. To assign the gay label to Black men on the DL may be insensitive to their subjects and disregards them as agents free to identify in a way that feels true to them.

In addition, based on the reported discordance between sexual identity and behavior, another argument can be made for the diversity of sexual experiences among all races of men. This raises more questions on the importance of hegemonic and monolithic view of accepted sexuality that serves a rigid and chief identity. A largely Western conception of sexuality has placed precedence on a sexual binary over all other degrees of nuanced homosocial interactions. Indeed, these studies do not provide enough answers but give general clues as to why the CDC and mainstream media's depictions of Black men on the DL may often be unfounded.

More recently published articles have utilized structured and unstructured interviews,⁸ focus groups, and are often informed by an interdisciplinary approach such as communications, psychology, race, and gender. One of these studies was published by Maria Lapinski et al. in the

⁸ A structured interview has predetermined questions prepared by the interviewer in advance. Contrastly, an unstructured interview has questions that are not set in advance.

Journal of Homosexuality. In “The Down Low, Social Stigma, and Risky Sexual Behaviors: Insights from African American Men Who Have Sex with Men,” Lapinski et al. conducted thirty-two structured interviews with Black DL men and analyzed them using both a qualitative and quantitative approach. Lapinski et al. noticed there was a void in existing literature in addressing the benefits of culturally appropriate health communication interventions. Through this, Lapinski et al. wanted to “draw some conclusions regarding appropriate interventions for this population, particularly regarding sexual risk behaviors” (2010:611). This research goes further by providing possible solutions. At the end of the study, several conclusions were made.

First, they found that the labeling process is a critical step in stigmatizing a group, whereas certain labels may be acceptable for ingroup members but not external others. Moreover, respondents reacted negatively to the gay label because they saw it as being weak, emotional, and feminine (2010:627). This may indicate that Black men on the DL identify see the gay label as a negative stigma not so much determined by the object of their sexual desire as other factors. Additionally, while the DL may be constructed to engender privacy related to homosexual desires, it may also be an assertion of masculinity and toughness (2010:628).

Work by Chong-suk Han published in both the journal of *Sexuality and Culture* and *Social Identities* reiterated many of the same issues as McCune and Snorton.⁹ Han found that at times, Black DL men are critical of a gay culture and community that has been constructed as White and feminine, thus unrepresentative of their personal experiences; however, representation matters especially when it comes to studying disenfranchised and/or minority populations (2014:95). He also noted that men and women of color see the gay community as unresponsive

⁹ See “You’re Better Respected When You Carry Yourself as a Man: Black Men’s Personal Accounts of the Down Low ‘Lifestyle’” (2014) and “No brokeback for black men: pathologizing black male (homo)sexuality through DL discourse” (2015), respectively.

to their needs, suggesting that the White gay community may be at odds with the Black community (2015:239). For example, a Black DL man's relationship to the Black community may be privileged over the gay community not only because of lack of representation and unresponsiveness, but also for reasons of survival. Here, identity politics play a major role in navigating the world and advancing in it. If we also consider socio-economic factors, Black people may largely rely on each other for economic opportunities and depend on each other for advancement. For them, identification with the Black community necessitates the usage of the DL in the face of racism and homophobia which they commonly view as a reaction against femininity whereas being on the DL is a performance of masculinity.

Lapinski et al. and Han explore the nuances of what it means to be on the DL in order to portray it accurately in the media and better understand the cognitions behind reported identification and behavior. Valuable scholarship benefits from interviewing and listening to Black DL men and offering up alternative explanations and solutions. Historically, Black voices have been muted, yet listening to their voices provides us with endless opportunities to get research right. If the DL does not lend itself to making itself known, these studies have shown that Black DL men exist and are available, and may not be hiding due to fear or shame as previously thought. In fact, by allowing our informants to be the primary agents, we are pledging to give historically marginalized populations, both racially and sexually *other*, the chance to take up space, and control their own narratives. Moreover, it is necessary to respect one's identity wherever they may be situated culturally, racially, or sexually. If this is done, a generative space could be affirmed for Black DL men. When researching a population such as this, it is best practice to go to the source even if we have to put in the work and forget everything we may have been conditioned to believe before.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

What follows is a critical examination of the theoretical underpinnings that have been produced thus far on Black DL men in order to provide a foundation for which my own research can expand and build upon. First, I must examine the notion of a deviant and irresponsible Black man in a collective American consciousness that has undermined a genuine undertaking of scholarship that purports to critically examine both sides of the issue that does not simply make Black men on the DL easy scapegoats for a health crisis. Throughout all of this, my intention is to locate the emerging theories in an attempt to compare and contrast them to my own findings. Now more than ever it is necessary to build upon a strong yet still relatively unexplored foundation of theory. By reviewing these hypotheses, I will be able to analyze my own findings through the framework of critical studies that make use different lenses.

Medical Discourse

The medical community and subsequently mainstream media have placed an unfortunate ethical valuation on Black men who are often presented as the culprits for an increasing HIV infection rate among Black women. However, the trope of the perpetrator/victim binary is another way to pass blame and shame to Black men without examining DL men's sociosexual realities. McCune gives an example of this in *Sexual Discretion*. He refers to a HIV transmission prevention poster targeted at DL men that has an image of a smiling young Black girl with her chin resting on her knuckles (as if thinking) and reads:

You Hurt My Mommy!
It's more than just about you
Always Practice Safer Sex (2014:26)

The use of a prepubescent girl to conduct sexual warfare is just one of the many problems with the poster. For one, it presumes that DL men have kids, lie to women, have sex with them, and

infect them with HIV. Furthermore, it is evidence of the discursive demonization of Black men on the DL that has developed due to a blame and shame game. Most alarmingly, it perpetuates the mythology that Black men on the DL are selfish, irresponsible, and hypersexual.

Another example of how Black men on the DL are vilified through the HIV/AIDS framework that situates them “within a narrative of savagery, disease, and dysfunctionality” is a poster released by the CDC in 2004 (McCune 2014:66). It features three Black figures: a pregnant female dressed in black, a man standing directly behind her dressed in a black business suit, and another black man wearing sunglasses and dressed in a white suit. The man in the middle is sandwiched between the woman and the other man, whose left hand is placed on the businessman’s chest.¹⁰ On the bottom of the poster, a caption in white reads, “What you don’t know can kill you... Get the facts. Get tested!” (McCune 2014:66).

Reading the image, it is clear that the pregnant woman is unaware that the one presented as her partner standing behind her is on the DL. It also positions her as the sole victim of deceit and what could possibly be a sexually transmitted infection (STI). This assumption neglects to take into account that HIV/AIDS is not exclusive to Black females and that men should be vigilant about protecting themselves sexually and getting tested regardless of who they have sex with, men or women. The pregnant woman and her partner, both dressed in black, reflect heterosexuality while the man dressed in white functions as a threat to the institutions that are privileged by heterosexuality such as marriage, child rearing, and the Black community. Also, the undertones of race emerge as a direct message to imply that homosexuality, a White man’s disease, is a threat to the Black community. Images such as this feeds into cultural anxieties, particularly Black women who are rightfully worried that their partners might be on the DL.

¹⁰ Refer to page xii for image.

However, to reimagine a publicity campaign that focuses on the rise of HIV infection rates within the Black community would be to resist criminalizing Black men on the DL and instead, address the systematic and structural racism that infiltrates the daily lives of Black people who seek education, employment, housing, and, medical care. The studies by Ford et al. (2007) and Saleh and Operario (2009) remind us that it is critical to understand how simply a lack of opportunities to education or employment can affect adequate access to healthcare services. The prominent message also disregards the utility of *all* people receiving sexual education and being proactive about protecting themselves, regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or perceived monogamy. Separating the idea of contracting HIV/AIDS from same sex relationships would be progressive, as a high-quality and proactive self-care regimen is beneficial to all citizens. This includes addressing substance abuse and mental health issues as well, which can often lead to public health crises, the spread of HIV/AIDS notwithstanding.

Black Is... Black Ain't

Hierarchies that privilege particular Black positionalities over others is a crucial component to the construction of identity in Black men on the DL. According to E. Patrick Johnson, Marlon Riggs's documentary, *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1994), "'quares'¹¹ 'queer' by suggesting that identity, although highly contested, manifests itself in the flesh and therefore, has social and political consequences for those who live in that flesh" (Johnson 2005:141). Arguing for a "quare theory" to replace an inadequate "queer theory," Riggs emphasizes the "material reality" of Black America and how the black body has "historically been the site of violence and

¹¹ Johnson argues that "queer" is a useful umbrella term for unifying all races, ethnicities, and classes in times of solidarity, as *others*. However, he proposes a new term, "quare" to emphasize an individual's particular perspective and lived experience and how they may inhabit multiple subject positions. He argues that "queer" is not an effective term for queer people of color because it does not take into account class, gender, socialization, and the locality of an individual that intersects with their sexuality. It is a theory of the materiality of everyday life, the tangibility of material bodies, in this case, Black bodies. "Quare" recognizes a person's social construction and consequently, the very real repercussions it can have for them.

trauma” (Johnson 2005:145). He believes queer theory has opened up new possibilities for theorizing gender and sexuality but criticizes it for failing to live up to its critical potential. He proposes a new theory, a *quare* theory that takes into account what blackness is, a lived Black experience, and the Black body. Therefore, Black identities must be investigated and the ways in which “coming out” does not fit into the Black experience as well as it might in the White experience assessed.

Language, music, food, and religion are all vital components of a shared Black culture that brings Black people together as a community and thus may be privileged over Black positionalities that do not reflect their lived experiences. McCune writes that “Riggs suggest that we move beyond these categories and these hierarchies that define and confine in order to realize that depending on where you are from and where you are going, black is and black ain’t.” Furthermore, the Black community “must put their differences aside and learn how to communicate effectively with each other” while “calling attention to the differences between blacks and their ‘others’” (2014:144). Many factors like gender performance and sexual behavior are all sites in which Black people try to justify their claims to a cultural capital or a claim to blackness that does a disservice to the community as a whole.

When Black men on the DL are considered, the Black community has been a tremendous source of survival in regards to coping with and overcoming slavery, surveillance, the White gaze, and socioeconomic marginalization, for example. In regards to Black men’s homosocial desire for intimacy that extends beyond simple platonic friendships, identifications of sexuality that involve “coming out of the closet” would not signify progress. Rather, for many Black men on the DL, it is a distraction because it is subsidiary to how racism has defined blackness and the psychology, economic, political, and social effects of it (2005:144).

Alternatively, William G. Hawkeswood, an anthropologist who produced an ethnographic study of black “men-loving men” in Harlem, reaffirms this but takes it one step further by detailing how his native informants did not believe not “coming out” to family precluded their family’s knowing about their behavior due to the strength of their kin relations within the community. One of his native informants explains his non-coming-out experience:

You know, they could tell I was gay. Even before I knew it. But I didn’t think it was bad... I think because I thought it was natural then they all thought it was natural. No one ever caused any trouble... My brothers and sister know... I didn’t have to tell nobody. Everybody just kinda knew. (1997:138)

Despite this informant identifying as Black and gay, Marlon Ross has noted that his response says a great deal about the power of his family and friendship ties in addition to a continuum of knowing that did not depend on a binary of secrecy versus revelation. It demonstrates that “such attitudes express a strong sense that it is impossible not to know something so obvious among those who know you well enough” and also that “it would not necessarily change one’s identity from closeted to liberated as conceptualized in the dominant closet narrative” (2005:180).

The Architecture of Black Masculinity

Jeffrey McCune coins “architecture”¹² insisting the “addition of ‘texture’ tells us more about the ‘feeling’ of space--the expansive cultural fabric that dwells in specific sites of queer production” (2014:96-7). He adds that “architecture” is “a term that describes the dialectic between the interior and exterior manifestations of masculinity” and the “contours of black masculinity with regards to spatial characteristics and cultural dimensions” (2014:96-7).

Architecture invokes the layers of Black masculinity and is essential to acknowledging the complexities of a Black male construction of the DL and raises the question if they see *DLness* as a gendered identity or a sexual preference and why. Also, how does self-agency come into

¹² See page 29.

play and what does it mean to be both simultaneously discrete and discreet? Here language, space, desire, intimacy, and pleasure all play an integral role.

McCune also notes that Black men on the DL also “practice discreet sexual acts while privileging spaces that are more heteronormative” (2014:4). Their blackness marks them vulnerable to the ruling status quo but at the same time, their sexual behavior marks them vulnerable to a Black community they may seek to remain in harmony with regardless of want or need. This double-stigmatization explains why the DL has “always acted an imaginative and physical space where blacks could create, produce, and pronounce their own meanings” outside of surveillance (2014:5). Black men on the DL take a queer desire that is taboo and relegate it to the private, invisible space not at the expense of performing an idealized masculinity and articulating how they can make sense of their sexual experiences with men. It enables them to act with self-agency, and together with sexual discretion, the DL transforms into a creative, generative, and transgressive space that allows for discreet acts (McCune 2014:73-101). Dominant White male narratives of gay life have whitewashed and disabled alternative epistemologies that exist for any person not fitting neatly into the ruling elite that created the bounds of gender, sexuality as well as race and class.

A reading of the *architexture* of Black masculinity must also include attention to the role of respectability politics in the construction of the DL. If sexual discretion is a negotiation between what is acceptable and hence respectable, then Black men may desire to navigate the unmarked space of the DL that still provides for their sexual autonomy and self-agency while remaining publicly respected. The distinction between the closet and the DL is the end goal of the latter is not “coming out,” which would be the antithesis to the liberation Black men experience through the privacy of an intimate life (2014:70). The DL gives Black men the power to subvert

the distant associations, intentions, and connotations that come with a compulsory closet formula and a representation of them by the mainstream media as sexually irresponsible and backward people.

When sexual discretion is applied to the material, more value is given to queer spaces such as clubs that operate as distinctly separate locations with a specific purpose. Foucault might suggest that purpose is to create a type of *heterotopia* contingent on time and where DL men can temporarily reside. *Heterotopias* as a concept was introduced in his public lecture “Of Other Spaces” and they function like mirrors; when one looks into it, they are transported to a different world for a specific amount of time to which a special meaning is attached devoid of the everyday consequentiality to which one is accustomed (McCune 2014:95-101). Furthermore, actual spaces for DL men to meet allow them to explore often unavailable or inconvenient possibilities with understanding where one’s positionality can shift without scrutiny. Hence, they are safe spaces for sociosexual engagement where blackness and *DLness* can be performed simultaneously (McCune 2014:98-100).

In a paradigm in opposition to the closet, the club offers DL men a space that welcomes them but does not require them to become an official member; “coming in” signals a shift from visibility to invisibility, public to private, a temporary relief from the constraints of a hegemonic culture imposed on DL men that permits them to be Black and do straight differently. Homosocial intimacy can be sought while maintaining a racial identity with a community of temporary members that is not undermined by a dominant critique. This leads us to unpack the complexities of performing a heteronormative gender that is *not* in conflict with a DL identity.

Gender Performance

Finally, I examine performance of gender that coincide with and run parallel to performances of sexuality. This is not to imply an adherence to the dominant scripts of sexuality such as heterosexuality, bisexuality, or homosexuality; rather, it refers to a sexuality that is encompassed in one's *DLness* and does not conform to an easily reducible standard that can be essentialized as either *this* or *that*. Many of the difficulties that inform a labeling of Black men who have sex with other men as simply gay or bisexual have been noted. But how does Black masculinity manifest itself to provide a new rendering of what it means to be a *man* who has sex with other *men*? Part of this project examines masculinity and the role it plays in living on the DL. For example, being DL may be a way of reasserting one's masculinity while enacting homosocial desires and intimacies. Perhaps the DL is a way for Black men to maintain their gender performance as men or possibly rebuke gender performances seen as *unmasculine*.

No critique of masculinity would be complete without mention of how patriarchy informs the way we view gender and sexuality. Terrence Real makes a case for the permeance of patriarchy in our collective psyche in *How Can I Get Through to You?: Closing the Intimacy Gap Between Men and Women* (2003) when he writes:

Psychological patriarchy is the dynamic between those qualities deemed "masculine" and "feminine" in which half of our human traits are exalted while the other half is devalued. Both men and women participate in this tortured value system. Psychological patriarchy is a "dance of contempt," a perverse form of connection that replaces true intimacy with complex, covert layers of dominance and submission, collusion and manipulation. It is the unacknowledged paradigm of relationships that has suffused Western civilization generation after generation, deforming both sexes, and destroying the passionate bond between them. (hooks 2004:32-3)

Due to this, bell hooks contends in *The Will to Change: Men Masculinity, and Love* that from a young age, boys know the rules and engage in a sort of passive acceptance of patriarchy. Boys should certainly not express feelings or "do anything considered feminine or womanly"

(2004:42). To continue, in identifying seven norms and stereotypes of the male sex role, psychologist Robert Levant lists avoiding femininity, restrictive emotionality, seeking achievement and status, self-reliance, aggression, homophobia, and nonrelational attitudes toward sexuality” (hooks 2004:118).

However, a hegemonic White culture that has painted Black men as heterosexual and hypersexual aggressors or sexually deviant thugs who should stand as powerful leaders has engaged in a universalizing project that does a disservice to the representation and character of Black men. In failing to critically examine the entire spectrum of unique textures that exists among Black men, they have been reduced to a single metonym of the thug. Instead of assigning the qualities of patriarchy that are considered negative to Black men, it is more fruitful to understand the layers of a psychological patriarchy that is complex and most importantly, is more than a simple aversion to homosexuality and femininity. Researchers studying Black masculinity should give proper credit to men who may already understand the intricacies of gender and sexuality and consequently navigate these terrains through performances that make the most sense to them or through a reinterpretation of the terrains themselves.

For example, the performance of gender rests on the ability to “pass” as straight by maintaining proper performances of gendered expectations. This is especially revealing because for many Black men on the DL who exclusively have sex with other men, straightness is determined by their gender performance and *not* the consummation of actual sex (McCune 2014:82). In contrast to men who have sex with other men and define their sexuality based on the gender of their object, Black men on the DL define their sexuality based on a *straight* gender performance. Here, the nexus of this gender performance and sexual identification is a “coolness” factor. Marlene Kim Connor discusses the relationship between coolness and hip-hop

culture in *What Is Cool?: Understanding Black Manhood* (2003) and understands coolness as a “guiding ethic on how to dress, behave, and interact with approval from a largely black and male spectatorship.” Furthermore, “Coolness is a theory in practice--an embodied rubric that regulates and monitors what is and is not acceptable among black men under and outside of white surveillance” (McCune 2014:78-9).

Thus, coolness, while not a uniquely Black expression, serves as a “modern descriptor for a historical tactic. Most importantly, coolness acts as a way of survival, a coping stance/pose that black men utilize, in order to make do with what they do or do not have” (McCune 2014:79). Furthermore, depending on the place/space, those involved, and who is reading the scene, the performance of coolness can vary. In some situations, one may be dressed in baggy clothing and hat, a type of hip-hop disguise. In other situations, it may be the addition of some accompanied behavior such as the deepening of one’s voice. In fact, McCune makes an apt assertion when he redefines what can be queer and what can be straight.

An example is McCune’s friend Tavares, a self-identified straight Black man who surprises McCune with his willingness to visit the Gate one night. Though he had established himself firmly as a “hood street thug” in its most popular incarnation, McCune notes that

Tavares’s willingness to go the Gate registered as a queer idea, but not queer in the sexual sense. It was queer because it became an instance when heterosexual man was doing ‘straight’ differently and defiantly. In this moment, Tavares showed me that his understanding of himself as a man was not contingent upon the disavowal of the effete or homosexual but the ability not to be preoccupied with my sexuality or overdetermine what his participation would signify. (2014:92)

It is certainly an interesting observation of the transgressive possibilities for hip-hop and coolness. This becomes more evident later at the club where Tavares is enamored by what he calls “femme cats” who are voguing on the dancefloor. Without birth-assigned femaleness, they

embody feminine characteristics and behaviors that allow Tavares to view them as distinctly female while he remained a “dude.” This is referred to as a “production of difference” because a man is a man because he desires a woman; Tavares and his sexual object choices may have been biologically same yet Tavares reconfigures his queer desire as heterosexual through the production of difference. Due to this difference, Tavares removes the transgressive queerness from the act of having sex with another biological man and places it on a mode of classification that establishes a difference ideologically between him and his sexual partner though a literal/physical one does not exist. He anchors his ability to establish heteronormativity through his desire choice, biological men who perform a female gender and thus takes something queer and makes it *un*queer and something unqueer, queer simultaneously (McCune 2014:93-95).

In addition, McCune notes that in his research of Black men on the DL and “femmes” that the “investment in these relationships are often predicated on something different from those of many gay men.” He continues, “It seems that many DL men engage in a gender attraction, whereby they are captivated by certain ideals that are grounded in hetero-patriarchal ideals” (2014:181-2). Here, reinforcement and acceptance are in a dichotomous relationship with resistance and subversion in the way that DL men like Tavares can identify and perform their queer desire but still participate in the rituals of patriarchy. Even in chanting lyrics like “faggot-ass nigga” in the hip-hop room at the gay club, their meanings are taken into possession and reclaimed which reduces their power (2014: 89).

Section Conclusion

Black men on the DL have often been demonized, black grief exploited for narrowly-focused sensationalist stories by a mainstream media narrative dominated by a privileged White racial standard to which everything else is held. This introductory section explores other

possibilities of critical analysis on the DL phenomenon through historical, sociological, and ethnographic lenses that intersect with tropes of racism, space, visibility, culture, and desire. To do justice to Black lives is to assign Black people the dominant role in a complicated narrative of their lives. This includes giving Black men on the DL self-agency and the ability to be seen as historical and cultural products of not only racism but also as emanating from different perspectives. Pause is necessary to consider, for one, who created the ideal closet paradigm and the people to whom it is beneficial; how privilege and surveillance of Black bodies play a part as well. When we position Black men on the DL first and foremost within a history wrought by systemic and structural racism and bound up with carceral logics, the production of difference between them and White gay men becomes clearer; they possess an integral sense of self-agency to construct their own unique Black culture, blackness, and ways of performing gender and sexuality. The low-down on the DL is not an inherent inferiority or subversion to a White standard; it is a completely alternative imagining of a way to live devoid of ethical or moral assertions.

METHODOLOGY

The previous sections provide a foundation for research conducted about the DL, including the ethnography completed for this thesis. Now, I describe the research study conducted to complete this project. Here, I outline how I devised my study, created a control group, screened subjects for *DLness*, and conducted my interview. My particular research is focused on the current phenomena of social media and how it is being utilized to facilitate sexual transactions between individuals. Specifically, examining Craigslist personal advertisements and smartphone applications such as Grindr and Jack'd that cater to men seeking other men, I

consider if and how electronic interactions between men have changed the narrative of Black DL men.

To complete this project, I needed to contact Black men on the DL, but I was not sure how to recruit participants. I devised my study to be done electronically on platforms for communicating that have not existed until more recently. These include Craigslist, an online non-profit community board that serves a global community. It contains a personals section in which different groups of people can post personal advertisements free of charge. For this project, I have perused two sections: “men seeking men” and “casual encounters.” On these, men can write personal ads and include photos in hopes of soliciting platonic or sexual homosocial encounters. Most men posting in these sections are in search of sexual encounters and within the message of the advertisement, they detail exactly who they are and what they are looking for. This usually includes personal information such as age, weight, height, and race but can also include details like penis size, if they are circumcised, sexual desires they are looking to fulfill, whether they are “tops” or “bottoms,”¹³ and their gender presentation. This can range from descriptions like if they are feminine in the bedroom but “straight acting” publicly, a masculine “top,” a “power-bottom,”¹⁴ into “water sports,”¹⁵ looking to enact a role-play fantasy¹⁶, or are seeking group play.¹⁷ As stated before, they can also upload a number of photos which usually consist of images meant to reflect their body type,¹⁸ penis or butt size.

¹³ See page 20. There are also “vers” men, referring to versatile – they enjoy both roles.

¹⁴ A “power-bottom” refers to a man who enjoys the receptive role but likes to maintain dominance. This dominance can entail being verbally aggressive or in control to physically being on top of their partner to receive them. In this case, even though the “bottom” is physically on top, he is still the partner assuming the sexually receptive role.

¹⁵ “Water sports” refers to a type of kink that derives pleasure from the exchange of fluids, most commonly, urine. Usually the erotic play has two participants, one who urinates on the other.

¹⁶ Common fantasies include doctor/patient, coach/player, teacher/student, master/sub and so forth.

¹⁷ An orgy.

¹⁸ Chest size and the existence of abs being the most common. Photos uploaded also almost always do not include a face.

In this way, a user also searching for a partner/s can decide if they are a match or not. To be clear, personal interest is usually determined by one of these factors, as the Craigslist personal sections are mostly for facilitating quick sexual transactions. There are rarely personal ads listed in “men seeking men” or “casual encounters” that seek friends or lovers, two types of relationships that require longer term habitual and contact and involve romantic context. At the same time though, personal ads seeking “friends with benefits” (“FWB”) or “fuck buddies” are not uncommon; however, these are premised as longer term sexual relationships that could potentially reduce or eliminate the need to continue posting personal ads. Thus, matches are usually not intended to lead to personality matches, result in friendships, or most of all, romantic relationships. They are mostly for the expressed purpose of satisfying a sexual desire that eliminates the need of visiting a physical space such as a bar or club where face-to-face interactions are required and may entail negative emotions such as embarrassment, shame, and disappointment. Another important facet of Craigslist personal ads is that they are free and easy; one does not need to spend money on an entrance fee as well as drinks when sex is the primary objective. There is a democratic element to this in that a person’s wealth, race, gender, sexual, kink, location, and time are deemed irrelevant factors.

These categories are especially pertinent to my research because my screening process necessitated an adherence to labels like “DL” and even “bisexual” and “straight-acting.” I scoured personal advertisements for the direct use of “DL” or “DL” terminology either in profile headings or within the body of the personal ad. “Discreet” was also a common search criterion as *DLness* has often been linked with discreteness; that is, keeping one’s actions secret and in the process, not drawing attention to oneself. This could be through the way men perform their gender, for instance, how they dress or behave. Therefore avoiding stereotypical gay fashions

and behaviors is priority for DL men who wish to keep questions about their sexual preferences to a minimum. To be “discreet” would to not advertise oneself as engaging in same-sex relations or even hinting at it; to be “passing” and not “suspect.”

I used Craigslist’s built-in search engine to scan for a key combination of words: “Black” and “DL.” By performing this search, I was able to significantly narrow the personal ads listed in the results. From there, I personally inspected each ad to try to ensure the person who wrote it was (1) Black and (2) on the DL. This did not prove very difficult and with the addition of photos, again, many participants were visually marked as Black in addition to their own admissions. When a potential informant was identified, I sent them a message via e-mail using an address that Craigslist automatically anonymizes to protect its users. In fact, users e-mail addresses are anonymized on both ends if the parties each select it. Within the body of the e-mail, I pasted an IRB-approved screening script followed by interview questions. The script and interview questions appeared as follows:

Hey, what’s up? Are you on the DL? (If not, I apologize, please ignore.) I’m Stephen and I’m a gay/queer guy doing research on Black DL men for my master’s thesis. The purpose of this research study is to understand what the DL is because I hope to argue that it’s different from being gay because of factors like race/racism, space/visibility, community, and gender presentation. Could I send you a few questions to answer? You can skip any question or opt out at any point. However, if you agree to answer these questions electronically, it’s because you identify as a Black DL man 18 years or older. Also, you’re providing consent to participate in this research. There are no risks involved and I don’t need to know your name, location, or other personal information. Any info about your identity will remain anonymous and when data is stored, it will be de-identified and password protected on my personal device. I’m only interested in details about living on the DL. By remaining anonymous and de-identifying your personal information, your confidentiality will be maintained. If you have any questions, you can contact me (Stephen) through here or I will be happy to share my e-mail or phone number. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or if you’d like to talk to someone other than the researchers, you can contact CUNY Research Compliance Administrator at 6466648918 or HRPP@cuny.edu. The questions are below. Thank you SO much!

This was a stock script provided for several reasons. First, it introduced me as a researcher and attempted to briefly explain why I was responding to their personal ad. Second, I wanted to reveal a bit about my thesis topic in the hopes that it would (1) garner their interest; (2) hint at a line of thinking that attempted to debunk popular myths about Black DL men; and (3) motivate them to participate in the study. Putting myself in their place, I tried to imagine what would primarily deter them from wanting to participate and I hypothesized that they would be less likely to respond if they believed I was planning to portray them negatively. I tried to be honest by stating simply: “I hope to argue that it’s different from being gay because of factors like race/racism, space/visibility, community, and gender presentation.” This allowed me the room to be objective but also afforded me the benefit of a doubt. To clarify, I wanted to earn their trust in that I would not capitalize on an opportunity to reduce Black DL men to simply being gay or “confused” or as irresponsible liars and cheaters. I hoped my screening script would convey a tone of neutrality but also an interest in authentic and generative research.

The screening script also included points on confidentiality and consent. For ethical and legal reasons, I stated:

If you agree to answer these questions electronically, it’s because you identify as a Black DL man 18 years or older. Also, you’re providing consent to participate in this research. There are no risks involved and I don’t need to know your name, location, or other personal information. Any info about your identity will remain anonymous and when data is stored, it will be de-identified and password protected on my personal device. I’m only interested in details about living on the DL. By remaining anonymous and de-identifying your personal information, your confidentiality will be maintained.

Although 18 years of age is required by Craigslist as well as Grindr and Jack’d to manage personal ads and profiles, electronic consent was necessary according to IRB guidelines. More importantly, however, I wished to stress the confidentiality of the agreement. Once again, due to the nature of the DL, I respected the rights of the informants to remain anonymous. Also, I did

not personally contact them by phone nor need any personal details that would identify them; I was only interested in details about living on the DL. From the beginning, I hypothesized that if they thought their privacy would be compromised during this study, they would be less likely to participate out of a fear of being “outed” as DL.

Furthermore, I endeavored to make this study as convenient as possible by giving potential participants the option to skip or opt out at any point and the opportunity to reply to the questions directly within the first message. In fact, inclusion of the questions within the first message became a reason for which I submitted an IRB amendment. Originally, I only sent potential informants the screening script and if they responded that they would like to participate, I sent them a follow-up e-mail containing the interview questions and a reiteration of the script. However, to streamline this process and maintain greater transparency, I believed sending the interview questions along with the script in the first message would be better. This allowed potential participants, especially those who were wary of participating, to see the entirety of the study’s questions from the beginning. This also allowed them to have a better idea of what the study entailed so they could assess how much time and effort it would require. By allowing them to answer objective and open-ended questions, I hoped any potential informants would see an opportunity to express themselves in an authentic albeit expedient manner.

Most of all, I wanted potential informants to have the sense that I was an ally. Even if I remained objective, I hoped they would perceive me as an innocuous researcher and not one on a crusade against Black or DL men. I wanted my script to engender a sense of safety in communicating with me and the ability for self-identified Black DL men to tell their own stories.

Regarding the smartphone applications Grindr and Jack’d, the screening process and communication method differed. Grindr and Jack’d are arguably the two most popular

smartphone applications that facilitate (mostly) sexual encounters between men. Both are offered free of charge for the basic services and in order to use them, one must create a written profile. Most profiles feature photos of the user in various states of undress. For Grindr, there is only one photo upload offered, which serves as the user's main profile picture that will appear to other users in the hope of catching their attention. Grindr proves to be stricter when it comes to photo guidelines and the app has a dedicated team that approves each profile photo. On the other hand, Jack'd's photo regulations seem to be a bit more relaxed, as they often contain partial nudity, suggested nudity, and advertisements; this is probably because photos do not need to be approved to be uploaded to one's Jack'd profile.

For this project, I received a free trial week of Grindr but when that finished, I subscribed to a one month membership in order to unlock the filter feature. This allowed me to filter specifically for ethnicity (Black) and "tribe" (discreet); thus the grid of results was immediately narrowed to better screen for potential DL informants. This is how I proceeded on Grindr. First I filtered for "Black" and "discreet," assuming "discreet" would more likely result in DL men. Next, as Grindr allows users a few characters to write a title to accompany their profile picture when it appears in the results grid, I would scan these boxes for coded language such as DL or "thug"¹⁹ or "bi." At times, I was able to identify potential informants by inferring from their screen name which connoted they were on the DL. Additionally, there were also non-written clues such as the absence of a profile picture or a face in the user's photo or a blurry image. This would follow the argument that Black DL men wish to remain private or "discreet."

¹⁹ "Thug" and variants of it have been identified by Snorton and McCune as terminology within the Black DL community. It refers to a particular style and way of representing oneself that contrasts a "feminine" presentation of one's gender. This may include wearing baggy clothes, hip-hop gear, and using terms like "faggot" openly.

Grindr works by using one's currently location as the epicenter for the search but by filtering the profiles that appear in the results, I had the ability to scan potential informants up to two hundred miles away. This is an exception as the surfeit of individuals using Grindr almost always limits the distance of users that appear in results to a few miles. Also, Grindr only filters profiles of users that are currently online or that have been online within the last hour. Therefore, signing on at different times of day and different locations will result in different profiles that appear in the filtered results.

Another feature of Grindr XTRA is the ability to see six hundred profiles in contrast to the free Grindr option that limits results to one hundred profiles. This feature allowed me to scan for possible informants in places as far away from New York City as Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. While scanning profiles that appeared in my filtered search grid, I looked for DL terminology and if it was found or assumed, I sent the user two screenshots that contained the script and interview questions. Grindr XTRA also allows subscribers to send more than one photo at a time, so this facilitated the process to make it a bit more efficient. At this point, I could not determine if a user read or ignored my message. However, if they were interested in participating, I received a reply from them, typically a brief message answering the interview questions. Most respondents forwent pleasantries and skipped directly to answering my interview questions.

On Jack'd, this procedure was not as efficient. Similar to Grindr and as a free user, I could filter profiles by age, height, weight, and ethnicity. However, the biggest difference on Jack'd is that a user cannot write a short screen name that appears with their main profile picture when it appears on the grid of search results. Therefore, in order to scan for DL terminology, I had to tap on each individual profile and scan what was written within the body to see if they

qualified for this study. This took considerably longer. Also unlike Grindr, Jack'd seemingly permits an unlimited number of written characters within one's profile; thus profiles range in length from concise and direct to sections titled "Intro," "Activities," "Interests," and "Books" to be filled out at length. These sections allow users to give more of a description of their likes and dislikes, habits, and moreover, personality. If I noticed any DL terminology within one of these sections, I contacted the potential respondent, sending two screenshots of the script and interview questions. The benefit on Jack'd is that when a user reads a message, the app indicates so; therefore, I was able to discern who had read my message and not replied and this allowed me to make the assumption that they were not interested in participating in the study or did not have the time to complete the questions.

RESULTS/FINDINGS²⁰

During the months of November and December 2017, I positively screened 138 personal advertisements on Craigslist as matching criteria to be included in this study. Over the two months, I sent out 138 recruitment scripts to potential informants across the United States. Of those who replied, three completed the study, two responded that they were not Black or on the DL, one contested the intention of the study, and four agreed to complete the questions but never did.

²⁰ All direct quotations here have been transposed exactly as written unless a reasonable guess could be made as to the intent of the informant. Some responses contain spelling and grammatical mistakes which have been automatically fixed unless the true meaning could not be discerned. Furthermore, in some cases, responses contain the informants' original language in order to provide for the authenticity of this project. This is not meant to disrupt or offend any readers but adds value to the project as the informants were able to express themselves using their own voices, which include their own words. I hope this also adds diversity and integrity to the project.

Using Grindr, I identified 115 potential informants. Of those, four claimed they were not on the DL, three were confused, four contested the intention of the study, and one agreed to complete the questions but never did. This left three Grindr users who completed the study.

On Jack'd, I sent thirty messages intended to recruit potential participants. Of those, six messages were never read. Of the twenty-four that were read, two replied that the study was not applicable to them, one contested the intention of the study, and one replied that they would complete the interview questions but never followed through. This left two Black DL men who completed the study.

In total, of the 283 contacted for this study, eight completed the study. This outcome may be disappointing but it was expected for several reasons. First, these platforms are not intended for engagement in communication that is not related to the fulfillment of sexual transactions between users. Also, it is likely most users may have been suspicious of being contacted for research purposes on these forums as it probably has never happened before. In my years of using Grindr personally, for example, I have never been contacted by another user for research purposes. In addition, screened individuals may have been irritated or confused as the findings suggest that at least six thought something about the study was problematic and expressed that to me. Furthermore, participants were not offered compensation for their time and thus had a little incentive to complete the study except to add qualitative value to a project conducted by a researcher to whom they were not familiar or personally connected.

I also hypothesize that a deterrent was my identification as a White gay/queer man. It was not explicitly stated when potential participants were contacted on Craigslist due to the absence of my photo or biographical data; however, at least one user, "Chance," expressed concern that I was interested in Black men when there are other racial groups who also use the DL label.

Though “Chance” only implied that he objected to my study due to my Whiteness, it is unclear how he determined that I identify as such. It could be a number of factors, such as the presentation of my language in the recruitment script or my name which could reasonably be determined to be of White, Eastern-European descent. Furthermore, my identification as gay/queer in the recruitment script may have posed a threat to those living on the DL merely because it can be argued that the two identifications are at odds with each other. This study was undertaken, in part, to understand how the DL is different from being gay and one theory that has been advanced suggests that while being gay is a public, even White, assumptive identity, being DL is not.

However, on Grindr and Jack’d, my profile picture was visible and thus, my Whiteness was visually marked. One user on Jack’d, “Meat Head,” asked, “Why do u care about black men’s sexuality? What about Asian, Latino or others ???” [sic]. One guy on Grindr suggested I ask if the Black men I message are actually on the DL because “it’s very disrespectful to assume.” To add, he gave a possible solution by writing, “I would rephrase your message if you want to be respectful in your approach, also considering it’s a sensitive issue.” [sic]. To conclude, he also mentioned that he was not on the DL but wished me good luck. Another guy on Grindr, “Dre,” wrote “To tag the DL to African Americans is ignorant and very offensive. That lifestyle stretches far beyond racial lines.”

Of all the probable reasons for the limited quantity of replies, I conjecture that the two main factors that deterred individuals from completing the study was the non-interest in helping an unknown researcher on a platform intended to facilitate quick sexual transactions. Secondly, I believe that when working with a possibly marginalized population such as racial and sexual minorities or “others,” economic compensation for completing a research study is a beneficial

incentive. Unfortunately, I was not able to offer this and in an increasingly busy and economically competitive country, potential participants simply might not have had the time to devote to completing a study even if they were interested. A third yet unprovable hypothesis is that those contacted had some objection with my research, feeling that I was engaging in tokenization or taking advantage of them. Further research would be needed to prove this and it would be interesting to see if this was indeed the case.

Additionally, of the 283 contacted for this study, several screened individuals replied that the study was not applicable to them. One user on Craigslist, “Eddie,” wrote that he was not Black but looking for someone who was Black. Another, “Guy,” wrote that he was not DL and just interested in DL White guys. Four users on Grindr responded that they were not on the DL. “T-Money” wrote, “This sounds like a great but I’m not DL just sleeping around in my boyfriend” [sic]. Another user, “Romeo,” wrote something similar: “Its just a stage name lol I have a bf” [sic]. One on Jack’d simply responded “Not dl.”

Finally, a few individuals responded with what I understood as confusion. A few more agreed to complete the study but did not follow through. Craigslist user “Raphael” responded “Sure only because you came about it so professionally and I gotta commend you on that” [sic] while another wrote that he was “very interested” but wanted to call and give his opinion. When I told him I was advised not to give out my number, he responded, “ok im just going to use my mic on iphone to write it so it wont be like typed well but ill send it” [sic]. Unfortunately, after following up with him, I never heard back. “Dl masc” on Grindr wrote that he was in a meeting and would answer my questions before the close of the day but I also did not hear back from him after two attempts to follow up. Similarly, “Malik” on Jack’d wrote “Sure” but when I followed

through, he responded: “Give me some time to fill it out for you I work and I’m in Grad school as well” [sic].

It is evident that some individuals were excited and willing to participate but after some time passed, did not complete the interview questions. In each case, I followed up with each once or twice with a message along the lines of “Hey, what’s up? It’s Stephen – the guy doing research about the DL – just seeing if you were still interested. If not, no worries! Cheers!” In only one case of seven did an individual eventually follow through with the study. On the last day of the study, Grindr user “DL” answered the interview questions and wished me good luck. This resulted in the final tally of those who agreed but did not follow through at six.

In sum, there were eight total research participants²¹ from Craigslist, Grindr, and Jack’d and the interview included nine questions. They were as follows:

1. What is the DL to you?
2. Do others know you are on the DL? How?
3. How would you describe your sexuality in your own words?
4. Do you know anyone famous who is gay? If so, how do you know?
5. Do you know anyone famous who is on the DL? If so, how do you know?
6. Do you think the DL means the same thing to others?
7. Is being on the DL part of your identity as a person?
8. Why have you chosen a DL lifestyle and not a gay lifestyle?
9. Is race a factor in being DL? How?

These questions were formulated to probe informants on the subject of the DL and the study’s attendant themes of race, gender, public/private, space, and visibility. I wanted to ask open-ended questions that would not draw particular conclusions and therefore allow participants to express themselves freely in their own words. In this way, I tried to remain objective and open to any range of possible responses that were not biased. The responses to each question are presented below.

²¹ All research participants screen names or other identifying information have been anonymized and coded.

Question One: What is the DL to you?

Unequivocally, all eight of the informants agreed that the DL refers to keeping a secret that nobody else should know. Although, responses on exactly what should be kept a secret varied. One respondent wrote that to him the DL means that you “identify as straight” and “no one knows that you sleep with men other than the men you sleep with.” He also added that “you sleep with women as well.” Another informant explained that to him, a person on the DL is someone who keeps their “sexuality” a secret. Another wrote that being DL meant nobody knew he found men attractive. Furthermore, he revealed that it’s a secret that “no one knows *yet*” [emphasis added]. Similarly, “DL-2” wrote: “DL to me is someone who hasn’t revealed their sexuality to anyone besides the same sex partners they’ve been with.” Diverging and expanding from this, “TOP” wrote that how he looks at it is “being DL is acknowledging the gay part but knowing it’s not strong enough to change the outlook of the big picture.” He continued that it’s just a component and “being gay is a lifestyle.” When I probed him if one can be bisexual and DL, he answered: “Most bi guys are DL unless they are out, but this is rare because by being DL, we have the best of both worlds. Whereas one extreme cuts possibilities away from the other extreme.” It is clear that the DL involves some sort of secrecy, whether it is tied to being gay, bisexual, or cognizant life choices.

Question Two: Do others know you are on the DL?

This question also elicited nearly universal agreement. Most informants were clear and answered succinctly “no,” but a few expanded on that to provide some more perspective. “Ricky” wrote that the only people who know he is on the DL are the ones he meets online. “Jay” responded “no” and clarified that he didn’t really want others to know. However, “DL” revealed that “No one knows I’m on the DL but at this point I don’t care who knows because I’m

learning to accept myself slowly.” I followed up by asking: “And you don’t care if people know you’re gay in the future?” He replied, “I did but I changed my perspective of how I would of what [sic] people thought about my decision being gay. But I haven’t told anyone close to me that I am bisexual but if the topic was to ever come up, I wouldn’t reject it!” Another interesting response came from “D” who mentioned that he was DL and “proud.” When I asked him: “You said you were DL and proud, but even if it’s a part of your identity, you don’t want to tell anyone. Why is that?” He answered: “I don’t think we need to share everything we are proud of... also it’s fun keeping it a secret.” Most informants though simply wrote “no, only the ones I meet” or “have sex with.”

Question Three: How would you describe your sexuality?

Breaking from the overall agreement in questions one and two, informants in question three answered quite differently. Five of the eight men explicitly stated that they used the bisexual label, although “WADE” mentioned that he also sleeps with women just to be able to say he still does it. “D” wrote that he likes sex and men are “easier to get it from as well as NSA”²² so he considers himself both bisexual and DL. “DL” noted that he is also very attracted to women. One outlier, “TOP,” while he labeled himself bisexual, added “but also confusion.”

Three men who did not explicitly use the bisexual label gave different responses. “Ricky” wrote that he was a “quiet person” about his sexuality but did not offer any explanation of what that meant exactly. “Jay” was forthright about his sexuality being the “same as a normal straight man.” I asked him: “What do you think a normal straight man’s sexuality is?” and he responded that it was “not that different” from him. I continued: “How are you similar and how are you

²² NSA refers to “No Strings Attached” sex, a sexual relationship that can be short term or long term but rests on the tenant of not needing to make any type of commitments or obligations to each other, unless both partners later decide otherwise. It is meant to be a strategic but fun way of have sex with the same person, without having to worry about the formalities of a romantic relationship such as dates, meeting friends, romantic gestures and so forth.

different?” and he replied: “Well, I’m not really gay because I really look as I’m a straight guy. My favorite thing about sex is anal and oral sex and since both parties can give me [those] I took it upon myself to test which sex is better.” Finally, “DL-2” wrote that he describes his sexuality as being “strictly attracted to men on every level while still finding women attractive on a way smaller scale.”

Question Four: Do you know anyone famous who is gay? If so, how do you know?

Question Five: Do you know anyone famous who is on the DL? If so, how do you know?

These two questions are grouped together because neither generated many responses. One wrote that he was “not really into titling things” and two others simply responded “no.” “Jay” offered up names of movie stars like John Travolta and Vin Diesel as being gay and that he didn’t know anyone famous on the DL but he thought Kevin Hart was. “D,” a Jack’d user with a profile picture showcasing six-pack abs wrote, “Yes, this person tried sleeping with me.” In response to the next question, he continued, “Yes, the person that tried sleeping with me.” “WADE” replied that he did not know anyone mainstream famous who was gay but he has had sex with local “rappers” and “producers” in his area [his quotations]. “DL” answered that he watched a lot of gay Youtubers and “DL-2” knew that Magic Johnson’s son is gay²³ because “he’s open about it.” In total, six of the eight respondents either left question five blank or stated that they did not know anyone famous who was on the DL.

Question Six: Do you think the DL means the same thing to others?

²³ This has been confirmed by several media outlets in which Magic Johnson has been quoted as such.

Five of the eight informants replied that they did not think the DL meant the same thing to others. “WADE” expanded by writing: “Everyone has their own interpretation. A lot of people think DL and discreet are the same thing and they’re not. Just because you haven’t come out doesn’t mean you’re DL.” “DL” wrote: “No because I was talking to some guy and he was an openly gay guy but he was on the DL because he had a boyfriend.” “DL-2” proffered: “No, I believe some people who are DL disclose to certain people (ex: friends but not family). But DL to me doesn’t disclose to anyone but their same sex partners.”

Two of the eight informants believed that the DL did mean the same to others and one, “Jay,” was unsure. He wrote: “I honestly can’t say but DL is different if you’re a top or bottom. It’s harder in a way if you play the bottom when meeting someone.”

Question Seven: Is being on the DL part of your identity?

Four of the eight informants replied that the DL is not a part of their identity. “Jay” explained that it is not for him personally because he doesn’t think about it as a lifestyle or “let it define” who he is. “DL-2” revealed that he thinks “it’s something that hides or hinders” his true personality, but “DL itself isn’t a part of it.”

Conversely, four of the informants replied that they thought the DL was a part of their identity, however “WADE” lamented, “Unfortunately, all my decisions revolve around it.” Interestingly, “D” wrote: “Yes, I’m DL and proud.” But he qualified his statement with: “I don’t think we need to share everything we are proud of....” Lastly, “DL” replied that it is because “you don’t want people to find out about this other part of your life that your [sic] not ready to show.”

Question Eight: Why have you chosen a DL lifestyle and not a gay lifestyle?

This question generated the lengthiest and most honest responses. Two informants cited their family and job or their friend's reaction as reasons. One Craigslist respondent wrote that he cannot let others know he is bisexual and that he has to have his "alternate lifestyle under the table." "WADE" added to this: "Take notice that although I'm not, a lot of DL men that I've fucked with like fem dudes and tranny's [sic]. The complete opposite of being DL." When I pressed him on why, he answered: "Because if you're fem or tranny, you're out. IDK²⁴ – some say they're attracted to the womanly form. Some say they're not attracted to dudes really. And for the fem, they say they still sleep with women so they like feminine beings period." He finished by admitting that if family and friends knew he was bisexual, they "would probably dissociate" from him.

"Ricky" wrote: "I'm curious about the gay lifestyle" but "I chose DL because it's better for me. I think it's because people are always going to judge someone else who's gay etc..." I probed: "What's the difference between gay and DL?" To this, he responded that "gay is two people of the same sex and DL is when somebody says they like the same sex but maybe they have a GF."²⁵ I continued: "What is the 'gay lifestyle'?" He answered: "I think it's something that people choose, maybe they like the same sex and not women. I think that once a man is with another man, he rather be with him than her."

"Jay" answered that it's "not hard to understand" and he is DL because he is not sure if he wants to be labeled as something."²⁶ "D" revealed that the "discreteness" [sic] of being DL is more fun and he also wants to "have a wife and kids one day" so he does not "want this lifestyle to be brought up" because "it will cause too much confusion."

²⁴ "I don't know."

²⁵ Girlfriend

²⁶ He also admitted that he had never "been with a guy before" so he did not know if he could help much with this study.

In the same vein, “TOP” wrote that he is “still attracted to girls” and wants to “pursue having a family in the future.” In response, I asked him what he considered a gay lifestyle. He answered, “Instead of just keeping it a sexuality, it becomes a way of life. A gay lifestyle is trying to make every aspect about your life gay or gayer, especially gay circle [of] friends, only watching the gay TV channel, gay bars/clubs etc. Most people do that when they are ‘out’ whether or not they know it.” I pursued this by asking: “Do you think someone can identify as gay and not adopt the lifestyle? Or is identifying as gay inseparable from living the gay lifestyle?” He elaborated:

Yes and no, it’s stronger for some than others. If someone outwardly identifies as gay, their lives will change solely because they recognize that the gay part is more than just a sexuality but an identity. When that happens, then it’s hard for it not to become a lifestyle. On the flipside, you can be DL and identify as gay, but this might change how you see yourself and how you want people to see you.

“DL” explained that he was “afraid of what people would think” but also that if he would “come as a straight male and I don’t think anyone would ever expect me to be gay.” “DL-2” followed suit but distinguished between his past and his present. He wrote, “At a younger age, I was nervous that I wouldn’t be accepted by friends or certain family members. Now I don’t want to be identified as a stereotypical gay male.”

Question Nine: Is race a factor in being DL? How?

Three of the eight respondents did not receive this question in the initial interview. About halfway through this study, an amendment was made to the research design and approved by the IRB.²⁷ Of the five informants who received this question in the amended interview, two believed that race was a factor in the DL. “WADE” wrote, “Yes and no. I mean, technically it shouldn’t

²⁷ This eliminated two questions (1. Are you on the DL? 2. How do you identify racially?) and added what would become question nine. Therefore, only five respondents contacted later after the amendment was made received this question.

but it does. For some reason, black and Latino get a pass (as far as it's not strange to hear somebody black or Latino say they're DL, that's all). It's weird hearing that a white man is DL. It's an urban term." In a similar fashion, "D" responded that it was a factor for White people because "for white people, life is much easier. Society has been tearing down black people for centuries. In the white community, being gay is expected. With black people, we have to be tough men and take care of our women so being gay isn't an option." He added that although this is what he believed, being gay is "definitely more expected [sic] today than ever."

Two others two were split, and one opted out of this question. Of the two that were divided, "TOP" wrote: "Racially, maybe... but I wouldn't be the best person to ask. I was born in England. My family is cosmopolitan. We have many races in our family so racially, everything blends together." In contrast, "DL-2" wrote: "I believe that race isn't a factor but cultures and ethnicities are. The black communities aren't as accepting as others, but I wouldn't compare it to the race as a whole."

In sum,²⁸ these responses reflect a wide range of viewpoints that touch on the fields of gender, sexuality, and race and can be read through different lenses. Tropes of visibility and space are revisited throughout as DL is employed as a metonym for secrecy. The qualitative data presented here signifies a richness and diversity of perspective from informants that have their own lived experiences as Black DL men. To parse through these would be to reveal something about the DL itself and expose it in a way that is fundamentally at odds with the desire of the DL itself, that is, to stay on the DL. What I am about to do is examine this feedback through a critical lens, applying theories that have already been presented and determine if they hold true.

²⁸ May it be noted that a draft of this paper was made available to each of the research participants who were invited to read it and make any comments about statements or quotations they believed to be inaccurate. I did not receive any corrections or edits in response before the publishing date.

In the following section, I provide an analysis intended to draw upon Black critical theory and queer theory in order to understand how Black men understand the DL in which they live. My hypothesis was that Black men on the DL view that identity as a generative space for them to express themselves sexually, in part due to their racial identification. The intersection of race, gender, and sexuality was the underpinning of this experiment as I wanted to probe subjects on why they had chosen the DL label and did not identify publicly as gay. Moreover what the DL is to them, how they exist in this space, and how it differs from a mainstream gay identity.

THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

Until this point, this project has been mainly straightforward. First I provided the history of the DL and then reviewed the literature on the topic. Then, I introduced the prominent theories that have been circulating within academia as to the meanings, functions, and embodiments of the DL. Next, I presented my own study and findings which purported to investigate Black men living on the DL in the year 2017 that incorporates digital space and race into the equation. I aimed to pinpoint blackness as a defining feature of the DL and wanted to test the boundaries of DLness and a gay identity. How far would the DL stretch? Where does the DL end and where does the gay identity begin? From the responses that I received, there are many inferences that can be made.

All informants agreed that the DL was a metonym for secrecy yet they differed as to what that secrecy was about. Notably, none employed the phrase “in the closet” in their responses. These findings seem to corroborate Ross’ positioning of race as the primary factor in ideological conceptions. Conversely however, this can also be applied differently when the primary factor becomes blackness. If race is the primary factor for the White majority, why would it not be the

same for the Black minority? It appears that in theorizing, race becomes interchangeable, meaning that if the White status quo makes Whiteness the priority, the Black community would also make blackness a priority. This can be understood through the closet paradigm.

“Coming out of the closet” stipulates that a portal must exist between two spheres: a public and private life. It also conveys the intention of traversing from one sphere to the other, in this case, from the private to the public. But how many of these informants confirmed that they would ever do that? In fact, none of those interviewed gave any indication that they intended to make public their sexual tendencies. All seemed consistent on the point that the only people who know they are on the DL are their sexual partners and that they do not want anyone else to know nor intend to tell anyone else at a later date. Furthermore, none of the informants were confused about their sexuality; most stated directly that they were bisexual and others who mentioned the possibility of identifying as gay also did not demonstrate confusion about their sexual attraction to other men. Whether or not an informant identified as bisexual or possibly gay, they all agreed that they were DL without hesitation, when DL is a metonym for secrecy. Even if they acknowledged that they have only had sex with women or only had sex with men, none expressed any desire to go public about their sexualities; all wished that their homosexual desires remained a secret that not even friends nor family knew. In this way, the closet standard does not seem to fit with their experience as “coming out of the closet” is suggestive of a move from what is not known to what is known. However, those interviewed did not confirm that they ever wanted to be public about having sex with other men.

In addition to race, it is evident that the DL is a cultural phenomenon whether it is produced by a racial otherness, ethnicity, kinship, religion, or community. This is telling when all informants agreed that being DL and being gay are different and result in different lifestyles.

Some mentioned that one can be bisexual and on the DL, others suggested that one could even be gay and DL, but all maintained that to be publicly labeled as gay would not be desirable and thus was not the end goal for them. Here, the usage of DL is re-imbued more with the meaning of secrecy and less with a definition that is connected to sexuality. Informants referred to sexuality which can be read as either a bisexuality or homosexuality that they do not want anyone else to know about.

One can be gay and DL because the latter does not require that one express both heterosexual and homosexual desires. In two cases, subjects mentioned that they had never had sex with a man and the other, a woman, which suggests that their sexual inaction is not prohibitive of identifying as DL. For example, “Jay” confirmed twice that while he considered himself DL, he had in fact never been with another man before. “Ricky” also revealed that he has only been sexually active with men because he has not had sex with a woman *yet*. These two responses may indicate cognitive dissonance between perceived sexuality and stated behavior, but neither “Jay” nor “Ricky” expressed confusion about their DL status, perhaps suggesting once again that DL simply refers to something that is secret regardless of what that something is. This is corroborated with responses that being DL is largely a secret while telling anyone else other than the people one sleeps with is contested as *not* being DL.

Sexuality for the informants appears to be intertwined with race, ethnicity, and community, and not just the gender of their object choice. All men demonstrated a tendency to think beyond themselves by citing concerns for family, friends, and their career as reasons for living a DL life. Here, the Black experience appears to be a factor that changes one’s positionalities and also they may not have the same goals as the White gay community. Furthermore, it suggests that normativity for Black DL men is *not* divulging their secret to

anyone because they want to remain congruent with the broader Black diaspora. This indicates a desire to fulfill carnal pleasures without the necessity of making a commitment to changing their lives completely, which is what they believe would happen if they were not publicly gay or bisexual. The qualitative data also stipulates that even if the informants used the gay label, they would not adopt what they view as a stereotypical gay lifestyle, especially when that lifestyle is associated with being White.

It does not appear that blackness limits their realm of possibilities. In fact, the DL shows different options are available to reap maximum rewards from life. For instance, being DL does not preclude the opportunity to get married to a woman, have a family or pursue a career. There is no evidence to suggest that the subjects feel disenfranchised. On the other hand, the DL may contribute to a feeling of empowerment because being Black and DL allows them to navigate life choices on their own terms and take back control over decisions affecting their lives. This is an iteration of subverting the status quo by refashioning personas in regards to the public and private spheres. What may be a learned behavior from a historical suppression appears to have manifested itself into an ability to also deftly navigate their own lives *within* the greater Black community, not just in the face of the White hegemony.

Responses also do not suggest the presence of an outside pressure to keep their sexual desires a secret; subjects seem to agree that being on the DL is better for them and their own individual ideologies align with other DL men in their communities. Moreover, this does not reflect a cognitive dissonance over being able to live authentic lives on the DL privately while publicly presenting themselves as heterosexual. Their responses suggest that sexuality does not take precedence for them, and family affiliation, friendship ties, and their careers are more important to their general wellbeing. Being on the DL does not represent a negative coping

mechanism because Black DL men's lives are not dependent on their sexual acts with men to be fulfilled and successful.

Furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that the DL is the result of a conceptualization of them as criminals and/or as inferior by the White hegemonic culture. In reality, subjects may want to move beyond the realm of discipline and punishment by *not* telling anyone their secret, but that punishment does not come from the status quo; rather, the punishment comes from within the Black community. Making public one's bisexuality or homosexuality appears to be deterred by the maintenance of social relations and kinship ties within their own communities. This reflects a priority of race over sexuality in part because they prefer a DL identity over a public sexual *other* identification in order to remain in harmony with their communities. However, while it may be a coping mechanism, responses do not suggest this is negative; in contrast, this coping mechanism may be a very powerful tool that enlightens and empowers them. Furthermore, coping with the DL may be easier than coping with centuries of historical violence enacted on Black bodies. As McCune noted, it may be a "coolness" that acts as a way of survival, a pose utilized to make do with what they do or do not have (2014:79). The DL may very well be an escape for them which would make signing onto apps like Grindr and Jack'd desirable. Also, there is no consequence that is rooted in respectability politics.

Negative emotions associated with being DL are few. Most responded that they do not feel restricted by being on the DL. "D" wrote that he was DL and "proud," that it was "fun" to keep it a secret. "DL-2" denied that the DL is part of his identity; "Jay" wrote that he does not think of it as a lifestyle or let it define who he is. This makes it seem that being DL is nothing extraordinary for them. At the same time though, "WADE" admitted that unfortunately, all his decisions revolve around being DL and that he also sleeps with women to be able to say he still

did it and because it made him “feel better.” “D” wrote that he did not want this “lifestyle to be brought up” because it would cause too much confusion. These responses indicate that while there may be negative emotions such as shame, denial, and confusion related to being on the DL, experiencing those emotions is not a motive for living openly as bisexual or homosexual or identifying as gay. That is, practicing self-surveillance and self-discipline in order to live a DL life are coping mechanisms that are still valued and prioritized over revelation and truth.

Furthermore, qualitative data from this research study signifies a desire of Black individuals to keep the Black community banded together; responses to interview questions were notably less individualistic and more oriented towards a communal goal. The semantics of language, the repetitive usage of nouns such as “family” and “friends” or “others” suggests that informants are generous and thoughtful. That is, they think beyond themselves so that being public about their sexuality becomes subsidiary to important identifications. In reality, for Black men, the primary function of the DL may be to maintain peace and order within their social environs. Solidarity, brotherhood, and sisterhood bespeak a tendency to tie oneself to others despite a true biological relationship.

Both Ross’s and Hawkeswood’s conclusions are supported here. Ross states in *Black Is... Black Ain’t* that “coming out of the closet” would not signify progress because it is distraction from more important identifications with family, community, and race (2005:144). Similarly, Hawkeswood found in his ethnographic study of Black “men loving men” in Harlem that his native informants did not believe “coming out” to family precluded their family’s knowing about their behavior due to the strength of the community (1997:138). This is hinted at in “WADE’s” response to my interrogation: “Do you think your friends and family care if you have sex with men but they just don’t want to know or hear about it? He answered: “That might be true, yes.”

In another, “DL” wrote that he “hasn’t told anyone close” to him that he is bisexually active “but if the topic was to ever come up” he would not reject it. Reading into these responses, it may be that “WADE” and “DL” are merely waiting for family and friends to come to terms with what they might already know and moreover, allowing them to possess the control in initiating the conversation. This also gives us the possibility to imagine situations in which the Black community may be less homophobic than previously thought and more attune to each other. It suggests that the issue may not be Black men having sex with other men but rather, simply keeping it a secret in order to protect their family’s status or honor. It may suggest that individual people or families do not see bisexuality or homosexuality as intolerable but that they prefer not to publicize such identities.

In his documentary, Ross also proposed that a continuum of knowing did not depend on a binary of secrecy versus revelation (2005:161-189). Of his native informants, one said that his family could tell he was gay, that is, everyone knew but they just did not want to hear about it. This begs the question if the same could be theorized for contemporary Black DL men. It is possible that the DL may just be a pretense in many cases; it is feasible that in reality, some family, friends, or other community members know about one’s *DLness*, but that the secret itself is kept on the DL to maintain social relations. The informants here demonstrate Ross’s proposition that revealing one’s sexual behavior or identity “would not necessarily change one’s identity from closeted to liberated as conceptualized in the dominant closet narrative” (2005:180). I hypothesize here that gender norms could be more enforced and policed within the Black community than others; whereas it is not the gender of the sexual object, it is the continuum of masculine identified presentation and behavior. As is common, gender and sexuality are often inextricably linked. What many deem a sexual object choice, others view as a

lifestyle that encompasses more than a sexual act. “TOP” wrote that sexuality becomes a way of life for gay identified people. This reveals the primacy of a Black way of life over what many of the DL informants here refer to as a White, gay lifestyle.

When I asked “TOP” if one could identify as gay and not adopt the lifestyle or is identifying as gay inseparable from living the so-called gay lifestyle he answered yes and no. “TOP” is a clear example of one who understands the intricacies of identity politics as well as the advantages and disadvantages of identifying as gay versus DL. While he admits that he considers many options for his sexuality, mostly identifying with the label bisexual, it produces some confusion. Nevertheless, he relents that he is not ashamed or afraid if someone finds out he is bisexually active. For “TOP,” it is more related to his privacy and what others view as “normal.” To him, his bisexuality is not abnormal nor something shameful but he acknowledges greater and more influential forces that do signify alternative sexualities as abnormal. This is most evident when I asked him if he felt the same way about keeping his sexuality with women private as well. When I probed him about the production of difference between being open about his relationships with women yet private about his relationships with men, he wrote: “I can be more open with women because that is ‘normal.’ I don’t need to hide anything. I’m not detached from those relationships because they are a part of my life.” “Ricky” also confirmed this by admitting that although he is curious about “the gay lifestyle,” he chooses to be DL because he thinks “people are always going to judge someone who’s gay etc...”

“TOP” and “Ricky” seem to understand, like others that I interviewed, that sexuality and identity cannot always be conflated with each other but more interestingly, that life is a game where there are clear winners and losers. They seem keenly aware of the possibilities life has to offer them and if being DL is a coping strategy to overcome any potential obstacles to achieving

their goals, they can be viewed as successful. Both subjects are aware of which lifestyles are privileged which is why they keep their relations with men on the DL. “TOP” does not exhibit any shame or self-loathing, depression or otherwise negative emotions other than some confusion. He realizes that society privileges heterosexuality and perhaps, its attendant heteronormativity, and thus he prefers to keep his bisexuality a secret. He wrote that being DL is just a component of who he is but it is not a lifestyle like being gay. He also wrote that by being DL, he has the “best of both worlds” where veering to one extreme would cut the possibilities away from the other extreme. This is an adept observation of the material conditions of society. In this way, being DL can be viewed a contemporary sexual survival tactic shaped by a historical racial tactic. Fortunately, “TOP” is still attracted to women and this affords him his own privilege of playing the game even though it has been established that the DL refers to a secret that may not solely be related to one’s bisexuality or homosexuality. That is, attraction to *only* the same sex (men) does not a disqualify one from using of the DL label.

Furthermore, many respondents invoked an *us versus them* narrative, positioning themselves in contrast to what they call the White gay lifestyle. This is in agreement with findings by Lapinski et al. and Han whose previous ethnographic studies concluded that Black DL men were opposed to the gay label because they saw it as being weak, emotional, and feminine (2010; 2014). They also corroborate the idea that to be gay is to be White and feminine and the gay community as a whole is unresponsive to their needs. Here, the issue of race is once again linked to the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality. As “WADE” mentioned, “Black and Latino get a pass” but “it’s weird hearing that a White man is DL” because “it’s an urban term.” To unpack this would be to examine what qualifies as “urban” if White men are not. Urban refers to a geographical place, usually belonging to the inner-city, and it must be

determined who occupies this location. The term “urban” is employed often in the Black community and this implicates race as well as class, which may allow many White gay men to distance themselves from a familial community in favor of a gay community. This is not to conflate being gay with being DL; however, it does indicate that in regards to this project, sexuality nor race are straightforward factors because they unavoidably intersect with factors like class and community.

Han found that *DLness* may also be an assertion of masculinity and toughness, a trope reiterated in a response by “D” who wrote: “With black people, we have to be tough men and take care of our women so being gay isn’t an option.” “WADE” goes a step further when he provides commentary on alternative gender presentations. He noted that although he is not, a lot of DL men that he has had sex with like “fem dudes and tranny’s [sic]. The complete opposite of being DL.” When I asked him why, he wrote: “Because if you’re fem or tranny, you’re out. IDK – some say they’re attracted to the womanly form. Some say they’re not attracted to dudes really. And for the fem, they say they still sleep with women so they like feminine beings period.” This comment is telling of a gender presentation that he feels typically accompanies a DL identity. To be DL is not to be perceived as feminine or as a woman, nor to be interested in men visually marked as anything other than masculine. As “Jay” wrote, he is the same as a “normal straight guy” because he *looks* as if he is a “straight guy.” At the same time, “WADE” implicates a group of self-identified DL men as being attracted to a feminine gender presentation. This is most revealing in that it reaffirms the disassociation of the DL with the gender of one’s object choice. Furthermore, it confirms that the DL may just refer to secrecy about one’s own sexual behavior. Gender presentation of one’s object choice becomes divorced from the idea of a hyper-masculinity but at the same time, is re-imbued with a meaning associated with masculinity. It is a

conundrum; to be DL, in one way, is to be masculine by having sex with other masculine presenting men; on the other, it is to be masculine by having sex with other feminine presenting men. These are proven to be queer identities that are formulated by divergent perspectives including the maintenance of gender and sexual identities.

The Black DL men I interviewed appear to understand that living on the DL is a high quality and proactive self-care regimen not limited to just medical speak but also the psychological, spiritual, and perhaps even religious realms. Though there were no references to physical space, the responses I received, refer to the DL as a free space. For them, it represents a choice of freedom rather than the limits imposed by restriction and confinement. They seem to understand the beliefs and/or misconceptions their communities hold regarding sexuality and thus want to avoid negative attention. Perhaps prioritizing a bisexual or homosexual identity over a shared racial identity is more difficult to do than their White counterparts as “D” wrote that “being gay is expected” and “DL-2” believed that the “black communities aren’t as accepting as others.” Much of the DL is about space and the physical and ideological boundaries of it. McCune notes that Black men in general must define a space for themselves that is separate and distinct from White space; in addition, it is also integral to maintain an ideological space that positions them out of the surveillance of the Black community. The responses I received appear to confirm a theory that Black DL men want to be owners of their sexual autonomy and perform an idealized masculinity in order to remain publicly respected. It gives them self-agency, the ability to make sense of their sexual experiences with men, and ultimately, the privacy of an intimate life which may be valued over all else. *Heterotopias* like Craigslist, Grindr, and Jack’d function as places where Black men can enact same sex desires in an electronic space rather than physical space. Similar to The Gate, users can log on and log off without becoming an official

member indicating the temporality of what is visible/invisible, public/private, and queer/unqueer. Hoping to perhaps find a fellow community of temporary members that would not be in conflict with their racial identity or heteronormative gender presentation, many personal advertisements on Craigslist and profiles on Grindr and Jack'd blatantly invoked the usage of "DL" terminology in seeking sexual partners.

As Johnson writes on *Black Is... Black Ain't*, queer theory offers new ways to reimagine gender and sexuality in regards to evaluating the ways in which "coming out" may not fit into the Black experience. The conclusions presented here support this and other findings that negate the importance of a monolithic view of accepted sexuality. To realize the potential of queer studies, sexuality must be seen as more fluid than a simple binary of heterosexual or homosexual that serves as a chief and rigid identity. In his documentary, Riggs asserts that there are multiple sites "in which Black people try to justify their claims to a cultural capital or claim to a blackness that does a disservice to the community as a whole" (2005:144). I propose that the responses reflect an understanding among Black DL men that issues such as location, gender performance, sexual behavior and other positionalities that can affect one's identity are essentially less significant than race which acts as the common denominator between all Black people.

In an era of mass social and political restructuring, LGBTQ individuals have witnessed the results of more positive representation of other genders, sexualities, beliefs, and lifestyles. This includes an overall trend in accepting LGBTQ individuals that has accompanied policy changes at the highest levels of government to protect and promote them. But while many agree that progress has been made, what is happening now must also be addressed. With the fervor of identity politics currently shaping national dialogues regarding race, gender, and sexuality, it is crucial now more than ever to examine how the constitutive analysis of each field might have

changed. This can provide an update to outdated modes of thinking while at the same time, survey the post-2016 presidential election political climate and a new age of race relations. Thus, the study of Black men on the DL undeniably provides an entry-point for reconfiguring how race, sexuality and gender intersect; it also provides the possibility to challenge a White monolithic way of thinking that views sexuality as a binary and issues of race as easily reducible when in fact, they can be much more complex.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The ethnographic study I have conducted, while small in quantity, provides an analysis of Black men on the DL that aligns with many of the prominent theories proposed on race, sexuality, and gender. Some general conclusions can be made, but naturally, new questions also arise. Future researchers including myself may be directed to answer these questions, many of which compel alternative imaginings of ideas long held true and accepted.

First, what is liberation for Black DL men? The closet paradigm suggests a binary of revelation/secretcy, truth/privacy that is not ideal and in fact, proposes that secretcy/privacy may ultimately engender revelation and truth. It is necessary to study how this process is conceptualized by them and why it might function this way. It appears that secretcy and revelation do not have to be a binary; that is, revelation may stem from secretcy itself.

Secondly, research on sexuality must be advanced to encompass more variations. The responses here reflect the continuing argument for the fluidity of sexuality as opposed to a rigid binary. Gender must also be taken into account as it is often inextricably linked with sexuality. Outdated modes of thinking that define one's sexuality as solely the gender of their object choice must be cast aside for new modes of thinking that do not depreciate the field of sexuality studies

as a whole. Moreover, linking sexuality with the gender of one's object choice, has the potential to devalue other cultural renderings of sexuality that have existed throughout history and exist today around the world. This may be a disadvantage of research done in the West as it can often fall into a trap of essentializing, offering reductionist viewpoints, or tokenizing a group of people. In addition, it may stem from a place of Western bias or Eurocentrism that fails to consider other possibilities. Although this research may be situated in the West, it must be acknowledged that a wide range of diversity exists even within the United States and reductionist conclusions are not a catch-all for all people.

Third, in regards to identity politics, applying an intersectional lens may be the best approach to engage in research but also to question prior research. If a study has a particular agenda or motive, it is others' responsibility to uncover what it may be and filter the findings through a new lens. Identities change due to multiple sites that intersect, class, gender, race, religion, and geographic location notwithstanding. Identities may also change due to ability, ethnicity, education, and time. It is researchers' job to understand this and factor these intersections into the ultimate equation to see how an identity can shift.

Finally, studying Black men on the DL is a queer study and thus what might be a queer idea may actually be revealed to be an *un*queer idea. That is, the subjects I interviewed seemed to understand the intricacies of navigating life when their sexual behavior was factored and they gave many common and relatable reasons as to why they preferred the DL, mostly citing family and friend reaction. Furthermore, being bisexually or homosexually active did not register as a queer idea to them; they appeared to understand their behavior as normal and did not experience many, if any, negative cognitions due to it. They mostly gave mundane reasons as to why they preferred to keep it a secret, reasons many can relate to: maintaining harmony within the family

and the community, not wanting to label themselves in a way that would make them subscribe to one specific identity, or simply staying out of surveillance. These are not foreign ideas to anyone in gender and queer studies. It can be reasonably assumed that most people cherish their family and community units as well as their privacy.

As far as identifying as DL, this could be tantamount to being tokenized or stereotyped due to that one particular label. It may be the subjects I interviewed did not want to be seen as gay because it lacked other options, for example, being a father, an athlete, a successful businessman. A fear of becoming primarily associated with the gay label is not unlike how many people feel about other labels because we all recognize that we can never be just *one* thing nor do we want to be. Our identities change as much as time and it is comforting to be acknowledged for more than just one ad nauseam. This is perhaps why intersectionality is the most integral to our lives. For instance, I am more than just a queer or White or cis man; I am a skateboarder, biker, world traveler, student, teacher, beer drinker, animal lover, vegetarian, music and spicy food fiend, hard worker, runner, polyglot, son and brother, and New Yorker... All of these identities make up the person I am at different times, spaces, and locations. Some are more important and/or permanent, others, less important and/or more temporal, but not one represents my entire being.

It is plausible that Black DL men feel the same way, and whatever reason, being gay merely does not accurately describe who they are as individuals. Nor is being gay a chief identity they want to assume. Rather, the DL functions as a safe space to be whoever they want to be without needing the approval of outsiders or society at large. It gives them the control to make decisions that affect not only their lives, but also those around them, and from this stems a power that they have not historically held in this country. The subjects showed an alternative imagining

of a world they could live in and fulfill their *all* their desires without needing to play by the rules or assume a specific position. The DL flips the script and changes the way future *others* may live successful lives on their own terms and that, no doubt, is something to look forward to.

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