NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Doin' the Down Low, Remixin' the Closet: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Sexual Passing

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

for the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Field of Performance Studies

By

Jeffrey Quinn McCune, Jr.

EVANSTON, ILLINOIS

June 2007

ABSTRACT

Doin' the Down Low, Remixin' the Closet: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Sexual Passing

Jeffrey Quinn McCune, Jr.

This dissertation project explores the relationship between the architectures of black masculinity in America and a specific performance of discreet sexual identity. Through critical ethnographic and discursive exploration, I look closely at a group of black men who describe themselves as being on the "down low" (DL). These men, who dis-identify with normative descriptors of sexual performance (i.e. gay, bisexual, closeted, etc.), are constantly defining and refining their gendered and sexual identities to maintain a certain amount of credibility and respectability within their communities. DL men often perform both heterosexual and homosexual acts, while privileging heteronormative social spaces. In the process of this "doing," they challenge the hetero-homo normative divide, constantly blurring the lines of "readable" identity. Through bodily practice, linguistic constructions, and subversive silence these men have created a world that seems only accessible within media discourses—their "everyday lives" seem like a discursive formation, where they are marked as problematic ("dishonest," "deceptive," and "demonic") and dangerous (primary "carriers of HIV/AIDS into black communities"). With an interdisciplinary lens, I attempt to understand more fully the construction and everyday maintenance of DL identity, while also being attentive to the discourses surrounding this "newly articulated" identity. Most importantly, this project continues the legacy of demonstrating the

ways that dominant paradigms of gender and sexuality continue to evade how people of color construct their identities.

The first chapter of my dissertation introduces the DL as subject, while laying out the theoretical and methodological framework for this project. The second chapter narrates a history, or historiography, of queer sexuality amongst black people in America—moving from the Harlem Ball and historical race passing novels to the contemporary sexual passing novel, made popular by E. Lynn Harris. This chapter connects historic use of the "passing" literature drama with its contemporary resurgence in media and literary novels. The third chapter examines media texts, HIV/AIDS discourses, and the (in) visibility of black women within public dialogue concerning the DL. In the fourth chapter, this study moves from the queer page to the ethnographic stage—the black queer club of the 21st century which foregrounds some case examples of "passing" performances in motion. The fifth chapter journeys into the virtual "passing" worlds, the internet chat room and live phone-chat line, where the rules of queer engagement shift and men commit to a politics of "masculine sincerity." The final chapter of this project examines the deployment of *suspect*—a term which signifies the regulatory effects of DL discourse, as media and public discussion continues the historical criminalization of black males through the socio-sexual framing of "deviance."

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As much as it may seem, a dissertation does not get written in isolation, sitting in a room with books and paper alone. It is the product of numerous contributions: the folks who taught you that learning and teaching can be fun and exciting, the parents who made you perform dissertations long before they were ever fully realized, and the community of individuals who constantly reminded you that what you do can, and most likely will, be a reflection of them. I have been blessed to have many teachers, students, and friends, who added much to this project, through their wisdom, support, guidance, and knowledge.

I must first thank God, who made this prophetic journey possible—as he mapped this project and importance before I even knew the direction. My mother, Rev. Sandra Brown, the woman who has always made it clear that "you must put positive things into the world to get things out." She has been a pillar of strength, a wealth of wisdom, and an undying support for my intellectual and spiritual growth. My father, Ronald Brown, thank you for saving me during all my computer-generated issues and also being a strong, but quiet presence in the construction of my "manhood." Finally, to my grandmother, Edna McCune, for reiterating the gift that is "be still and know," while also being a huge financial support for my educational endeavors. To all members of my family, thanks for your faith and firm foundation—the willingness to let me be me, even when it was outside the box. Indeed, it is this "outside" positionality, that made my intellectual journey, and this project, most possible.

Within my family are brilliant friends. Northwestern University Graduate Cohorts of 2000, 2001, 2002, enlivened dialogue around issues of race, gender, and sexuality that changed my living, as well as my thinking. Specifically, Rashida Braggs and Tamara Roberts (1942

Wesley House)—my roommates who helped make real the New Harlem Renaissance in Chicago—were helpful in the rehearsal and development of this project. Renee Alexander, you are a ray of sunshine—who models what graduate life can look like, feel like, be like. Christine Dunford—mother of my two God children—thank you for your consistent support and being in my corner on days and nights when I even doubted the outcome of the future. Finally, but far from least, to the man who edited, helped shape my thoughts, and was an unrelenting supporter of this project—Gerald Hankerson. To all of you, I can't wait to read your dissertations, books, and witness the growth of your careers.

Indeed, a journey is never complete without good mentorship and guidance. While at Northwestern, God could have not have given me better teachers, scholars, mentors, and friends. First, Dwight McBride has been a mentor, consultant, friend, and a motivator to be "tight." Jennifer Brody, words can not express my gratitude for the lessons you have taught me from your own everyday practice, as well as your sharp, but sensitive treatment of my work. The late Dwight Conquergood, your voice speaks to me even when I am sleep—telling me to make ethnographic and critical moves with purpose, responsibility, and poise. E. Patrick Johnson, you have been the rock at Northwestern who taught me to "be still and know." My experience at Northwestern, and my career beyond, is indebted to you for helping to find my own voice, discover my own contribution to the field, pushing me beyond mediocrity, and being a radiant model of how scholarship and teaching can make a difference. Finally, I must acknowledge all those who traveled this path before me, illustrating what can be done and how to do it.

DEDICATION

For Dwight Conquergood, Assotto Saint, Richard Highbaugh, and Elvie Thomas—those who taught me the power in reading, writing, and living with purpose.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1/Introduction:

Doin' the Down Low, Re-Mixing' the Closet: Black Masculinity and the Politics of Sexual Passing

The contemporary lesbian and gay movement since Stonewall has made living one's life as an openly gay or lesbian person a criterion of "liberation."—Mark Blasius[1]

Driving the mechanism of these 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—Peggy Phelan[2]

...alot of black folks don't come out...doesn't mean they are closeted, but that they wish not to utilize terms that have too many distant associations, intentions, and connotations.—Tim'mWest[3]

In 2005, controversial and creative R & B superstar R. Kelly made history with "Trapped in the Closet," an innovative video series for what he terms "hip-hopera." This twelve-part epic tells the story of Sylvester, taken from Kelly's middle name, who is literally and metaphorically inside of a closet as the first "chapter" unfolds. In this episode, he hides in the closet in order to avoid being discovered by the husband of the woman with whom he is having an affair. Each episode in the series follows the same plot-formula, unfolding the angst and anxiety of a particular clandestine relationship, while the uncovering of secret acts is the rising tension that leads to the cliffhanging close. One of the most fascinating features of this series is the construction of each filmic music video: dramatic plots, absent chorus, stylized employment of half-sung/half-spoken lyrics, and the God-like omniscient narrator Kelly employs. Indeed, this ability to conjoin these often disconnected components is a masterful artistic accomplishment, as

well as a site of pop-cultural fascination and controversy. The news of the "releases" of each chapter were highly anticipated within media and amongst his fans. However, what is most memorable about this moment of R. Kelly's artistry is the public controversy that he evoked with the closing of chapter two in the "Trapped in the Closet" series.[4]

After Sylvester (Kelly) is found in the closet holding a gun, the husband decides that "Since we're all coming out of the closet today," he would too. After a dramatic and well-timed exchange, as Sylvester threatens to shoot both the husband and the wife with whom he is involved, the husband makes a phone call and says, "Baby…I just need for you to get back right here now." As we, the audience, anticipate the entrance of his mystery lover, Sylvester and the husband's wife also wait pensively for the arrival. As there is a creek up the stairs and then a knock, Kelly narrates, "A knock on the door…and the gun's in my hand…he opens the door…I can't believe it's a man!" Seemingly, neither could the masses of people who witnessed the debut of this chapter, as I counted approximately twenty radio conversations that posed the question, "Sister, what would you do if your man was sleeping with another man?"

This question has been central to black public discourse for the past three years. Recently, black men who sleep with other men while maintaining relationships with women, have received a considerable amount of critical mass-media attention. These men who often dis-identify with traditional descriptors of sexuality (gay, bisexual, etc.) have been referred to, and refer to themselves as, "men on the down low" (DL). Often DL men practice discreet sexual acts while privileging spaces that are more heteronormative and which often protect or conceal their queer sexual practices. Indeed, the momentum of the DL topic within media caught my interest, as the discourse conjoined issues of black masculinity and queer sexuality. While mass-media attention

has focused on those men who travel between sexes, the term DL is often employed by men who only have sex with men and simply employ a sexual politics of discretion. The disinterest in the men who solely have discreet relations with other men makes clear what is at the core of popular fascination with this phenomenon: a crisis over sexual certainty. The black press has often framed "DL brothas" as being the primary carriers of HIV/AIDS, while implying that the solution is for DL men to "come out" to the black "community," as the anxiety around sexual uncertainty grows.[5] Consequently, it is the ability of some men to "pass for straight" that has become the central focus of mass media. The anxiety created through this perpetuation of "black male crisis" has cast DL men's "private" practices as fodder for public consumption and obsession.

This dissertation explores the relationship between ideals of black masculinity and queer sexual desire—taking the DL and public media attention as a sign of not only their incongruence, but as contemporary signs of the public anxieties over postmodern sexuality. To understand the construction of this phenomenon, and how people do what they refer to as the DL, this dissertation employs critical race theory, performance studies, anthropology, queer theory, gender studies, and explorations of space and politics. Through the use of this interdisciplinary lens, this project continues the legacy of contesting the ways that dominant paradigms of gender and sexuality continue to evade how people of color construct their identities. I arrive at a better understanding of the construction and everyday maintenance of DL identity, while also being attentive to the discourses surrounding this "newly articulated" identity. This dissertation is as much about the silence of the black "community" about sexuality, as it is about the sexual silences that have always existed, but remained unspoken. This project is also about a historical

mode of performance that has been reincarnated, or re-mixed, under a new name: the down low. This nomenclature is not only a contemporary metaphor for discreet sexual acts, but also a signifier of a people's being in the world—a location that conceals private desires for the sake of pleasure, protection, and politics.

R. Kelly's video is clearly informed by the heightened public awareness of the DL phenomenon. The choice to use the male-male affair as the cliffhanger for chapter two plays into the mass hysteria that sustains public interests. As the CDC distributed their 2001 HIV/AIDS statistics, stating that black heterosexual women comprise 64 percent of new infections,[6] almost instantaneously fingers pointed down low, to the deviant sexuality that would slowly become the new "closeted" face of AIDS. In 2005, the four-year stretch of heightened alarm had fueled much discourse—making the DL a central topic of interest for those most concerned with black sexual health. Thus, Kelly's production of the "Trapped in the Closet" series was both timely and economically savvy.

However, what is most compelling for me, as a scholar who engages work that interrogates critical race theory and queer studies, is how Kelly forges a conversation between a historical racial trope and the construction of what can be called the black "epistemology of queer sexuality." Though the public focuses on the male-male sexual affair, the most sophisticated element of Kelly's creation is the exposure of the many "closets" within black (and arguably all races) lives, more generally. Hence, what Kelly accomplishes in this artistic experiment, is crafting a video series that uniquely adapts the "closet" as a stand-in for the black vernacular phrase "down low." The DL, as it has been commonly referred during its long history within the black expressive tradition means, "something kept very quiet and secretive; also

something done on the sly" (Smitherman 109). To extend this idea, I understand the DL as a continuum of historical passing performances, which embraces a positionality that privileges a discreet way of being in the world. In the video series, it is clear that this is a functional theme, as characters wish not to draw attention to themselves or their doings. Rather, they move in and out of various positions—contingent upon who's looking—preferring to avoid surveillance and contain their private desires.

Oddly, however, this hip-hopera employs the closet as a generic metaphor for various types of discreet human behaviors rather than embrace the colloquial "down low," which has more racial specificity. This move illustrates the ways in which dominant terms penetrate marginal life and often become the "official" terms of use, rather than those that are more indigenous. In this case, though the DL may actually better encapsulate the experience of black male sexuality, the "closet" is employed for the sake of clarity or coherency. The common assumption, within and outside of the media, is that umbrella terms produce simplicity and reduce ambiguity about meaning. However, Kelly's move here seems to elide the importance of the cultural experiences of black people, which frames the closet as a term outside the black lexicon. Nonetheless, he appropriates the closet and conjures all of its cultural history as a historically white and monolithic term, which, as Patricia Hill Collins has reminded us in Black Sexual Politics, predicates itself on being a prison-state and a place from which people want and need to escape (91-93).

In general, the closet has become a universal metaphor for secret-holding containers. For Eve Sedgwick, the closet is "the defining structure for gay oppression in this century" (71)—it is the space which houses homophobia, binaristic thinking (homo/hetero), and hatred. In his film

The Celluloid Closet, Vito Russo understands the closet as a container of hidden stereotypes and visual repression. As Patricia Boling argues in Privacy and the Politics of Intimate Life, the closet is a space where "all are urged to come out in order to do their part in breaking down stereotypes by giving gay America a human face" (135). Likewise in 2006, the closet is employed as the metaphor which houses all the "discourse" and debris of society—a space that eventually implodes or explodes. For all these "closets," the expected act of resistance is "coming out": the act of opening the container and revealing one's secrets to the world. As the opening epigraph suggests, "coming out the closet" is now the criterion for "gay liberation." Because the closet has become a universal apparatus that describes an oppressive space where individuals dwell, the given solution for finding freedom is located within the process of "coming out." This move from the closet outward, however, commonly describes the sexual development and experience of only some men and women whose understanding of sexual identities is often not filtered at the intersections of race, class, or gender. Marlon Ross puts it this way:

> …the fascination with the closet as a primary epistemological device defining sexual modernity—results in a sort of racial claustrophobia, the tendency to bind both intragender desire and modernity within a small but deep closet containing elite European men maneuvering to find a way out. Beyond the claustrophobic closet, these men's discourses—and the closet that functions in them—are shaped by cultures whose deeply embedded and thus invisible racial identifications play a large unanalyzed role in the conceptualization of desire and sexuality, knowledge and normativity. (171)

While I accept Ross's premise that the closet's popular construction as a pre-Stonewall (pre-modern) apparatus is dangerous, I question whether the closet has utility—at all—when discussing raced men and women. For how does one who dis-identifies with white homonormative descriptors, find his or her "liberation" or freedom? This question is central to Ross's analysis of the whitened "closet," as he interprets the closet as a continued separator of the white "progressives" from the colored "digressives." However, his discussion of the closet as a "raceless paradigm" does not fully address how those who are always already surveillanced, as Peggy Phelan's epigraph alludes , find efficacy in the act of being "unmarked" rather than marking oneself through public confession. This project—in its examination of the down low as a positionality for social and sexual "doings"—illustrates the central role invisibility and quietedness has played in people of color's freedoms and fragile dreams. My research illuminates the ways that the closet, as popularly understood and theorized, disregards the complicated circumstances created for queers of color as they attempt to steer away from the violence that can be epistemology. This project recognized, as Jose Quiroga has explained, that "the closet [is] part of the equation, but…not the only part of the equation" (1). Therefore, it becomes important to delineate the moments where the closet does not end in an outing or an "identity," but rather, a positionality we now call "down low."[7] As various cultural groups employ discretion as politic, or re-fashion the closet, we must recognize how cultural differences move this construct from a place of pain to one of possibilities.

As we witness R. Kelly's narration of the closet in black face within his epic video series, the rubric of the traditional closet is apparent as its construction is riddled with ideas of pain and embarrassment. As the title suggest, the individuals in his series are "trapped" in the closet.

While typically the word "trap" connotes a feeling of no escape, I argue that Kelly attempts to narrate a state that is not applicable to the conventional closet metaphor. As the cycle of secrecy continues to manifest, from the beginning of his video series to the end, the idea of the trap becomes a natural state of unfolding possibilities. In other words, Kelly's closet—unlike Sedgwick's or others—has agency and provides an ability for other experiences outside of "shame." The closet metaphor is typically employed to suggest that there is little or no agency. Interestingly, Sylvester (Kelly) still has agency in his version of the closet, as the first and second chapters show him narrating (almost directing) the whole video. Though he has limited mobility, he clearly has control over action and outcome, as his words speak the scene into being. He even stages his exit from the closet. Here, the pain of the closet for Sylvester (Kelly) is that the door is opened—that he is exposed to the gaze of the "other" man in the room. This is an important distinction between notions of the closet and the DL, as the latter does not typically end in a "coming out, but sees the "privacy of intimate life" as a liberating experience.[8]

Kelly's framing of the closet in the video series may be similar to the traditional closet in form, but the content is different. Inside Kelly's appropriation of the closet, there is room for agency and pleasure. Here, he utilizes the "closet," but actually unveils the workings of the DL in black communities, or society in general. Though he does not mention the DL specifically, its presence and meaning is invoked, as it is a part of the current media discourse, as well as key notion in Kelly's own repertoire. In 1996, Kelly released a song entitled "On the Down Low," which detailed the life of a man who was propositioned by a woman who was already involved in a committed relationship for an affair "on the down low," or "in secret." "Trapped in the Closet" is like a re-mix of "On the Down Low"—in its change in structure, characters, and the

use of the closet instead of the DL. Like a good re-mix medium of the song is changed—though not the message—to tell a similar story, with additional riffs and re-visions. Indeed, Kelly is "Doin the Down Low," while remixing the closet.

The significance of R. Kelly's choices is emblematic of how individuals can (mis)appropriate terms for the sake of clarity. Moreover, the importance of Kelly's creative project for this dissertation is his ability to construct a narrative that revisits the closet for black people. Unconsciously, it calls back to the black traditions of using the DL to avoid the mark of stigma and move outside the gaze of surveillance.[9] Kelly's video series draws parallels between the down low as a traditional trope within black life, while illustrating the ways in which the DL as a sexual metaphor is a mere extension of this tradition. Though much of public attention has been given to the queer version of the DL, his video series recognizes that this "re-mix of the closet" has utility across sexual lines. While Kelly's artistic efforts serve as examples of how one can, and should, understand the sexualized DL as a product of history, the public interest in the queer side of his series illustrates the overwhelming anxieties present because of the ideals set for black men and their acts of sexual passing.

Black Masculinity and the Politics of Sexual Passing

On August 3, 2003, in a *New York Times Magazine* article, the DL was mainstreamed, or shall we say, was "brought out of the closet." The emergence of "DL" into this other discursive space would not only mean a continuance of fingerpointing, but would also invoke another re-inscription of the dangerous, irresponsible, and violent black male stereotype. In his *New York*

Times article, Benoit Denizet-Lewis takes us on a journey from an opening scene in a bathhouse in Cleveland, Ohio to the backseat of a DL brotha's car, where the DL brotha's son sits, while his father tries to make a "hook-up." As Denizet-Lewis documents a day in the life of a DL man, citing HIV/AIDS statistics, making broad claims about DL culture, and attempting to include input from cultural studies scholars, he neglects to register the nuances of DL men's gender and sexual performances. This uncritical, often haphazard, approach to doing what I call "pop" ethnography, introduces the public to a seemingly corrupt group of men, whose moral character is dubious and immoral, and marks them as participants in a "lifestyle" of unhealthy and suspect sexual practices. In the context of white, elite media culture, this linear representation has significant implications for the continuing surveillance of DL sexual identity, as well as blackness in general. The proliferation of media texts, often absent of DL voices, or fractured in their exploration of DL life as performed and embodied, is the catalyst for what has become for me a critical and necessary exploration of the dialectical relationship between black masculinity and black male sexuality. This lacuna in much of the scholarship on black masculinity is what attracted me to this project. In the pages that follow, I will outline the theoretical aims and methodological approaches for this project.

There have been a number of books and articles exploring black masculine identity.[10] These works engage critical discussions of black masculinity and uncover the ways its construction has been performed in compliance with and in opposition to white hegemonic patriarchal systems. Nonetheless, these works primarily focus on heterosexual black male experiences, with an occasional peripheral glance at black queer men. Black masculinity and sexual identity are not mutually exclusive. It is imperative, therefore, that we continue to work to

find ways to expand our understandings of black masculinity beyond the heteronormative paradigm. Critical work concerned with black male constructions of identity must take a closer look at how specific black masculinist ideals inform, influence**,** and alter individual and collective performances of sexual identity.

This dissertation explores the relationship between the architecture of black masculinity in the United States and discreet constructions of black male sexual identity. Employing an ethnographic approach, I focus on men who have sex with other men who "dis-identify" with normative articulations of sexual identity. This project looks closely at DL men in Chicago by historicizing the cultural constructions of, and ideological challenges to the DL, tracking the everyday labor and maintenance of black masculine identity, and examining the implications of the discourse surrounding these men in understanding the relationship between race, sexuality, and masculinity.

This study of the DL questions the primary assumptions within heteronormativity and its recent homonormative counterpart. These ideological structures have traditionally framed sexuality within the confines of the known and the unknown. Often, the assumption is that the performance of sexual identity is contingent upon a politics of visibility and invisibility—the closeted and the out subject. The normative heterosexual discourse on sexuality posits that individuals are either heterosexual or homosexual.[11] The gay post-liberation response has attempted to undo this binarism by including in its scope of sexual identity those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered.

While this move to publicly recognize multiple sexual and gender categories exists, it does not negate the investments in specific sexual practices. In the move to being political—in

the sense of creating a queer "norm"—certain normative traditions are commonly reinforced. For example, as a result of the common emphasis on visibility—as cited earlier—many are excluded from the "queer" community because they choose not to align themselves with a specific sexual category. As Kenji Yoshino highlights in his work on bisexuality, one mode of exclusion can be located within the "monosexual/bisexual binary" (413). Intuitively, he understands this as the "epistemic contract," which conjoins homosexual and heterosexual investments in normativity. As queers attempt to be as "normal" as non-queers, they subscribe to this allegiance to monosexuality—practicing the "erasure" of those who prefer having more than one partner, or interest.[12] To this end, many queers enact the same violence of exclusion as their heteronormative counterparts. In the case of the DL, this is ever-apparent as both black homosexuals and heterosexuals join forces to ridicule this move toward bisexual practices by some DL men. This tendency to demonize certain groups of men for their sexual "deviance," contradicts a major tenet within queer theory itself.

Queer theory has claimed to account for categories beyond those established by gay and lesbian studies, accounting for other identities outside the traditional norms. Admittedly, queer theory has been quite successful at challenging linear notions of sexual identity and embracing non-normative performances of identity. However, it still suffers from "race trouble" (Johnson 4-5) by eliding the concerns of people of color. I am interested in not only the inclusion of people of color in queer epistemology, I am also committed to the important project of acknowledging the ways queers of color perform and describe sexual identity differently.[13] As queers of color are not often afforded the same political options that white queers possess, this dissertation joins the black queer studies agenda, which engages the project of "destabilization of identity

categories" (Cohen, "Punks," 223). In these aims, it as important to locate the presences of queers of color, as it is to recognize the ways in which their multiple identities intersect, conflict, and complicate notions of sexuality. This becomes central as I explore how black men practice discreet sexual behavior within a socio-political context that continues to privilege and praise visibility. Through this dissertation, I hope to close the gap of research that neglects and negates how people of color engage queer desire—recognizing the various stakes at the center of racial subjectivity.

Indeed, there has been a substantial amount of recent writing about black gay male subjectivity.[14] The common focus has been on the ways in which black men negotiate issues of race in the often separately constructed world of sexuality. I also recognize the minimal, but valuable work that has been produced examining performances of discreet sexual identities.[15] In fact, my project is in conversation with this body of research. Nonetheless, my research is more focused on what Gayle Ruben describes as "sexual ethnogenesis—the desire to understand more fully, "how sexual communities [are] formed" (94). My project examines how a particular group of black men organize, define, and refine their understanding of self in their everyday lives in relation to hegemonic constructions of the black masculine.

To bridge practice with theory, I pursue these critical issues using a performance-centered approach. In my disciplinary location of Performance Studies, I have come to accept performance as a way of knowing. DL culture is a montage of passing performances; men who successfully pass as heterosexual, dis-identify with the optic politics of hegemonic homosexuality, and whose bodies and identity are always in process. This idea of identity as process is foregrounded in performance-centered research. In this project, performance (discreet

sexual identity) and performativity (discursive and material coding of this behavior) are useful tools that provide a self-reflexive, critical lens for analysis. It is performance as epistemology that reinforces the notion that black masculinity is always ambivalent, complicated, and in conversation with varying exigencies of personal and institutional power. In addition, a performance-centered approach to critical cultural issues reinforces the idea that all identities are constructed through the (re) iteration of ideological rules and regulations. As I watch DL men navigate between the rules of black masculinity and their sexual desire, I am able to better understand and interpret the complicated narratives through examining not only their everyday performances, but that of literature, media discourse, and cultural spaces.

Through the exploration of the following research questions, I uncover some of the rules that guide not only DL subjectivity, but also its relative discourses: What genealogies of performance are in conversation with this contemporary manifestation of tacit sexual identity? How do these historical performances inform contemporary understandings of the DL and the way DL men see themselves? Who are the participants in DL culture and how is this culture or community maintained and sustained? How is the DL shaped through various modes of representation and what role does the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality play? I recognize the importance of allowing these inquiries to assist in my intellectual and physical journey, while not blinding me to other questions that can and will arise in the process of the "doing." Performing research, like performing texts, is never a bounded event. There is always room for ruptures, re-direction, and re-vision. By closely examining DL culture, its maintenance, and the discourses that shape its meaning, this project is as concerned with the performance of

identity as with the performance of research. As I am writing these men's present, I am always aware that I am also writing their history into the future.

Going Down Low: Methods and Movement

In order to do much of this research, I had to literally go "down low." Central to my methodological approach is my own move to a DL positionality, as I had to learn how to navigate within spaces and collect information in a way that did not endanger the "privacy" of those with whom I spoke. In the process, I learned codes, terms, and practices that were specific to DL men and the construction and maintenance of their positionality. As I have traveled into the chat rooms, "real time" phone chat lines, and to The Gate dance club, I have begun to understand not only the exterior performances of black masculinity, but also the interior work that is so complicated, yet palpable. As I sit, discretely but aware, at my table and in my little chair at Starbucks, I also encounter men and women who have been involved with DL men, as they offer critical insight into the impact that such performances can have on individuals and communities. This also becomes important as I investigate the "stigma" that has now been attached to the DL as being carriers of HIV/AIDS who are responsible for the rise in infections in the black community. Such interests have lead me into the archives—examining passing literature and media texts—uncovering how the power of discourse reveals itself in the conceptualization of the DL within the pubic sphere.

While growing up on the south side of Chicago, I watched young and old people strategically construct "theories in and of the flesh"—bodies, words, memories, and action committed to survival. Indeed, in the midst of this "urban black mecca," I became aware of the indigenous theoretical principles that were guiding the lives of those at the margins.

Accordingly, it is important in this project that DL men theorize their own lives. I hope to make this clear in my re-telling of their narratives, the careful crafting of their life-worlds, as I witness the many continuities and contradictions within their constructions and negotiations of identity. To map such flow and flux, I employ critical ethnography and performance historiography as methodological approaches. By juxtaposing these two methodologies, I avoid what Dwight Conquergood has described as "hegemonic textualism" ("Performance Studies Intervention" 6). Instead, informed by a performance-centered approach, I interweave "disparate and stratified ways of knowing" (16). Through the incorporation of these two methodological approaches I attempt to ensure that this dissertation places the historically situated DL subject as central, cultural and performance theory as integral, and "experiential, participatory epistemology" as necessary.

Dwight Conquergood, George Marcus, William Hawkeswood, and the most recent critical interventions of Jonathan David Jackson heavily influence my understanding of critical ethnography. Critical ethnography's account of "subjugated knowledges"—those everyday ways of knowing, often illegible to those not in the know, that are often placed at the bottom of the socio-political ladder—excites me both intellectually and personally.[16] This commitment to uncovering the multi-layered dimensions of cultural communities undergirds my desire to utilize this disciplinary tradition in my own research. Ethnography, as I envision it, is "committed to unveiling the political stakes that anchor cultural practices-research and scholarly practices no less than the everyday (Conquergood, "Rethinking Ethnography" 179). This emphasis on the "everyday" and its "stakes" elucidates the importance of my research examining the DL, both as a discursively constructed identity and as an individually embraced concept. So many DL men

have shared with me a commitment to black masculinity, which holds as its primary concern finding a way to negotiate everyday performances of masculinity and the stakes of engaging non-normative socio-sexual environments and practices.

This focus on the "stakes" and the "everyday" is also central to Conquergood's notion of "co-performative witnessing." Conquergood conceives of ethnography as "an embodied practice; it is an intensely sensuous way of knowing. The embodied researcher is the instrument" ("Rethinking Ethnography" 180). This conception of ethnography as performance, a doing and a dialogue, situates the ethnographer in a position not above but alongside the people with which we work. Co-performative witnessing demands that I never forget my role as an "uninvited guest," while working toward relationships that establish open lines of communicative exchange.[17] This becomes most important as I discuss with men the intimate details of their sexuality and the inner/outer workings of their masculinity. As a black male in the academy talking to black males outside of the academy, I situate myself at a position that enables dialogue, not distance. This can only be accomplished through "deep listening" and never forgetting that "opening and interpreting lives is very different from opening and closing books" (Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act" 2). When I encounter DL men in chat rooms, clubs, and phone chat lines, my role as "scholar" co-exists alongside that of "brotha," "homie," and even friend. As I move in and out of spaces/zones of interaction where I may normally be uninvited, I act strategically—learning codes, performances, and attitudes that will not only provide welcomed entry, but also encourage disclosure and trust. The "critical" in the term "critical ethnography," then, signifies the type of sensitivity to not only history and its

constructions, but also the necessary transformations or alterations that the ethnographer's body must make in order to do substantive research.

George Marcus's multi-sited ethnographic approach is the most cohesive and rigorous for more fully understanding the dynamics of DL cultural activity. He defines the multi-sited approach as a "mobile ethnography that takes unexpected trajectories in a cultural formation across and within multiple sites of activity that destabilizes the distinction [. . .] between life-world and system" (80). In Marcus's conceptualization, the ethnographer moves in and out of multiple sites of interest and recognizes the individual's relationship to certain spaces, while also being attentive to the role played by specific ideological commitments. For example, DL men can be found in multiple sites from traditionally gay club spaces to internet chat rooms, in phone chat lines and public restrooms. While this multi-sited method to ethnography clearly offers insight as to the various levels of risks and/or activities that DL men engage, it also suggests something very fundamental about the larger social structure. Indeed, an inability to express certain desires as a "straight" man requires explorations and experiences outside of the heteronormative gaze. DL men, in their desire for discretion, inadvertently challenge larger socio-historical commitments to some pure form of hetero/homo sexuality.

With this knowledge, as I engage spaces where DL men construct various identities and constantly refine their passing performances, I too must pass. DL men, as they dis-identify with optic politics, tend to reside in sites where anonymity is guaranteed or can at least be achieved. As a "co-performative witness," I must also acknowledge the shift in landscape and remember that in these many sites the "identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation" (Marcus 97). In this study, I have witnessed three major sites of inquiry: internet sites for men who wish to meet

other men (commonly known as "m2m" chat rooms), the "Bi-Blade" phone chat line, and a club called The Gate on Chicago's North Side. While negotiating these varying planes, I ensure that I am aware of the space itself, my body within the space, and multiple possibilities for the way my body can be (mis)understood. With a critical consciousness, I transform, transplant, and make the self translatable in order to gain access to DL (br)others and to learn more about the inner-workings of DL culture and its various meanings.

An example of an ethnographic project that has examined closely the multiplicitous nature of space and identity, is the late William Hawkeswood's ethnography entitled, One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem. This research explores a community of black gay men in Harlem, locating the ways in which race functioned in their identifications and dis-identifications with each other. Hawkeswood's ethnography locates the systemic structures that impede black gay male acceptance into "mainstream black life," as well as highlights the role stigma plays in not only this rejection from the community, but also the internal, psychic dissonance it may cause as well. This exploration of stigma, the critique of the heteronormativity, and the complicated analysis of what happens within black gay male networks, is an important example of how to perform an ethnography that accounts for the relationship between the history of black male sexual identity, hegemonic gay politics, and its contemporary manifestations. Hawkeswood's study "focuses on the intersection of racial identity and gay identity as two culturally definable phenomena that come together in gay black men and how such men express and manipulate each in different circumstances" (Hawkeswood 11). Similarly, my study seeks to understand the ways in which DL men negotiate their relations with men and women, while

also managing the anxiety created by their compliance to the heteronormative demand that says that same-sex and different-sex desires are mutually exclusive.

Also informing and inspiring this project is the new and innovative work of Jonathan David Jackson, which addresses similar methodological challenges when researching the lives of black gay men. Jackson refuses "imposing any one political theory" on men and women of the "ball scene" of New York and Philadelphia, by allowing the subjects to theorize through their own bodies and lives. He incorporates theory post-observation and interpretation, giving the subject his/her own agency, accentuating the importance of reclaiming power for those often deemed "powerless." Likewise, as I construct the scenes of action in which DL men perform, I am careful to allow their bodily discourse to direct and guide my interpretation and theorization rather than the converse.

DL men often articulate a discomfort with the relationship between their sexual desires and societal disdain for, and displeasure with, how they engage sexually. This concern illuminates what Erving Goffman has called the dissonance that dwells within communities, which he terms "stigma." Goffman suggests that stigma "will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed" (3). Ironically, many DL men possess views about homosexuality that coincide with the dominant society, but somehow displace these views when they are engaging their same-sex desire. Goffman notes that when stigma is thought by the subject to be unknown it functions as a discreditable attribute (4). I argue that DL men unconsciously and consciously attempt to escape stigma—and this fear of discredibility within the black community contributes to their construction of discreet sexual identity. While I acknowledge Goffman's tendency to use

stigma to pathologize behavior, I want to employ the terms "stigma" and "discredibility" to articulate how DL sexual performances with men are framed amongst themselves, within media, and other heteronormative institutions. I assert that Goffman's use of these terms highlights how discourses around the "abject other" performs materially and discursively. Most relevant to this discussion, however, is the way in which Goffman alludes to the relationship between stigma and passing. While he reduces "passing" to mere play, I argue that it is a strategy for survival. Using Goffman's theoretical frame, I assert that passing as heterosexual assists in DL men's ability to sustain their credibility. This may be discussed as a part of the historical, but ever-evolving "politics of respectability"[18] in which these black men choose discreet sexual identities to sustain "respectable" membership in and outside of the black community. This performance of discretion may more aptly be called, as Cathy Cohen suggests, a "politics of deviance"[19]—DL men perform non-normative sexual behavior in light of their recognition that it moves them outside or beyond standard ideas of heterosexuality. This fear of being "discredited" or marked "discreditable" by other self-identified heterosexuals—along with the recognition of the potential social, economic, and political consequences—necessitates that many black men keep their sexual desire and sexual practice "down low."

In order to fully map the "down low" and understand its manifestation as a sexual metaphor, one must engage certain genealogies and histories. In order to draw parallels and dissimilarities between racial and sexual passing acts, for example, I perform careful and critical analyses of historical texts such as racial passing. I assert that to more fully understand constructions of black male discreet sexual identity, it is necessary to identify the cultural work

and history that preceded this DL moment. In a sense, I am positing that the DL is a vernacular term and culture, which encompasses the past as a part of the present and future.

My use of performance historiography is indebted to the work of Michel de Certeau, Lisa Merrill, and Shannon Jackson. In The Writing of History de Certeau writes: "Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is an odd procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and yet that denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge" (5). The DL subject, through his body politics, enacts and enables a sexual historiography. DL men are calling back to a Pre-AIDS, pre-visibility moment where homoeroticism and homosexuality were tacit presences. I argue that this tradition is linked to the discourses of race often associated with the black male body. This project attempts to mark how discourses and material action on the black male body has instigated, perpetuated, and constructed the necessity for a "down low" positionality. Informed by Foucault's work on *genealogy*, which accounts for "a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc." (Foucault 117), this project seeks to recognize both discursive and material practices that have constituted black male sexual subjectivity. DL performances, as I understand them, excavate a very important reality about the effects and impact of black male oppression in America. The black male subject, in addition to his relation to specific power structures, becomes most relevant in this project, as it concerns itself with *how* black men have survived and are surviving in a world that keeps their bodies under constant surveillance.

Lisa Merrill's approach to the discreet sexual performances of Charlotte Cushman in When Romeo Was a Woman illuminates the value of the subject in historiographical work. As

she maps out the trials and triumphs of Cushman, she never forgets the systemic sexism and homophobia with which her body is always in competition. Merrill's text, in its attention to the multiple ways that Cushman performed her sexual discretion, highlights how, according to Judith Butler, gender is composed of a "series of socially constructed, repetitive acts" (231). This is something that cannot be ignored as I follow the path of black masculinity and its relations to discreet sexual practices over time. Furthermore, what becomes most important is how these gendered acts are performed, read, and understood when they lie outside of normative expectations. Lisa Merrill, influenced by Jennifer Terry, desires to be a "reader against the grain who recognizes traces of deviant subjects through the conflict within dominant accounts" (13). Given the current times in which we live—the AIDS epidemic, homophobia, racism, and other "isms"—I find it essential to account for the roles these structures play in how the DL is performed, read, and understood.

Shannon Jackson's historiographical research in Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity is most explicit about her location in performance studies. She asserts, "performance analysis incorporates critical theories of social interaction, of the relationship between space and subjectivity, of human behavior as signifying practice, and of the material and embodied basis of identity formation" (9). Such a clear and coherent perspective illuminates how performance analysis can benefit multiple methodological approaches. Jackson's attention to the performance of the researcher within their sites is in line with my conceptions of what it means to situate oneself in his or her work. Her "thick description" of her moments in the archives, her "haunting" experiences as she visited the Hull-House highlights not only the work, but also the pleasures of archival research. In my project, I use the archive of

passing narratives, as well as other representations of black people and queer sexuality between the slave era to this contemporary moment, in order to craft a more cohesive history for DL men that will challenge claims that tacit sexuality within the black community is a "new arrival" (Venable 101).

Mapping black discreet homoerotic and homosexual tensions is recognizing and locating the history of what José Muñoz has theoretically coined as *dis-identification.* Muñoz explains that, "dis-identification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). This articulation is in line with much of the critical thought exploring black male navigations within the dominant, white capitalist heterosexist regime of America.[20] In light of Goffman's insight, dis-identification works as a performance strategy to manage stigma. Muñoz's theoretical ideas not only speak to systemic challenges for men on the DL, but also to the ways in which these men, in their everyday walk through the city, must doubly "negotiate" a material "phobic sphere" that continues to privilege whiteness over blackness and privileges sexual visibility over discretion. This project serves to more fully investigate the relationship between black masculinity and the constructions of sexual identity in America.

This dissertation, which incorporates ethnography and historiography, finds itself akin to three very specific models. First, Leon Pettiway's Honey, Honey Miss Thang: Being Black, Gay, and On the Streets, a unique ethnographic rendering that explores the life histories of five incredibly fascinating black transvestites who work as prostitutes. Instead of crafting "deviant subjects," Pettiway chooses to present the words of each woman, without interpretation—

beyond, of course, Pettiway's own arrangement of the text. While I am interested in the importance of the spoken word, my study recognizes linguistic richness while also being attentive to the socio-historical circumstance from which it derives. Pettiway's study, in its choice to *only* present the womens' words, does not adequately provide a social, cultural, or political context in which to read these narratives. My project recognizes the importance of giving power to the subject's voice, while also taking into account the necessary tasks of setting and situating words in a world. In addition, Bill Leap's edited collection of essays, Public Sex, Gay Space, brings together anthropology, sociology, literary criticism, and history. This cross-disciplinary approach, as well as his effort to posit such a critical and provocative discussion marks Public Sex as exemplary scholarship. While I wish not to necessarily exoticize public sex, I, like Leap, wish to look closely at discreet practices in both "public" and "private" spaces—recognizing the constant blur between these spatial distinctions. Public Sex illuminates the slippage between the performed reality of male-to-male sex in "public" (i.e., washrooms, parks, etc.) and the interpreted reality (i.e., media, moralists, etc.). Likewise, I explore discreet performances of sexuality, noting the constant disconnect between what is done and what is often reported.

Fiona Buckland's Impossible Dance :Club Culture and Queer-World Making, also engages "public" space, in which she makes critical use of historiography and ethnography, simultaneously. In her re-reading of the New York "queer world-making," Buckland uses performance theory to map the ever-evolving and changing musical world she explores. Through her ethnographic exploration, she engages a spatial analysis, which complicates both the notion of "queer" and the movement of the body within the club. On one hand, her analysis provides a

good framework for my later discussions of DL men in the club; however, her greatest contribution to my thinking here is her location of "queer" in minoritized bodies, even within minoritized spaces. Such a reading is useful as I discuss DL brothas, who are almost always situated as neither/nor as they traverse public gay/straight spaces. Together, these three studies help inform this project and provide frameworks that are useful and innovative, allowing me to craft a stronger, more rigorous ethnography informed by performance historiography.

In order to pursue the aims of this project, in Chapter 2, "Navigating the Lines: Re-thinking Passing, Historicizing the Down Low," I draw parallels and dissimilarities between racial and sexual passing. This chapter introduces the contemporary sexual passing novel—marking the significant differences between the historical and contemporary passing narratives. Before the mainstream attention to the DL, novelist E. Lynn Harris had written several books about the glamorous life of what we now know as DL men. This chapter suggests that in discussing people's understanding of the DL, much of what is missing in our assessment of representations of DL men that contribute to and largely construct what we know about them and their performances of identity, has been laid out by E. Lynn Harris. His novels, like race passing novels, take us on a journey into the life of a sexual, rather than a racial, subject who explores and navigates his dual identity. E. Lynn Harris novels, however, rarely articulate this process with as much rigor and complexity as writers of race passing novels. In this chapter, therefore, I engage E. Lynn Harris's novel Any Way the Wind Blows, which preceded the DL presence in the media. Here, I analyze media responses to his novels, personal reflections, and materials from my "talk sessions" with readers. Ultimately, I argue that these books function as a kind of

pedagogy or "epistemology of the DL," that "teaches" black women how to discern whether a man is "passing" and to "beware" of his performance "down low."

My concern for discursive production of texts continues in Chapter 3, "Yo Daddy's Dysfunctional: Risk, Blame, and Necessary Fictions in Down Low Discourse," as I explore how the DL is constructed within media. This chapter looks closely at media because the DL arises as a media event, or frenzy. In this chapter, I extend the discussion beyond the effect of discourse on the DL, examining how "scripting" the black masculine body has (re)constructed black female sexuality, as well as the black community in general. Central to my unpacking of the evolution of DL media discourse are articulations of "risks"—in terms of HIV/AIDS—and "blame"—in the sense of black male demonization. As this chapter travels within different visual frameworks—from healthcare materials to *The Oprah Winfrey Show*—I illustrate how various modes of representation enact violence upon black bodies, as well as understandings of blackness.

Chapters 4 & 5 are the most classic ethnographic examinations of the DL. Although the other chapters employ ethnographic approaches, these chapters perform a sustained examination of DL men within space. Chapter 4, "'Out' in Da Club: The Down Low, Hip-Hop, and the Archi-texture of Black Masculinity," explores what it means for DL men to go "out" to a black queer club. As I look closely, enacting a "deep listening," I establish how the shape and style of masculinity in the club unexpectantly enables, or unleashes, queer desire. Chapter 5, "Goin Down Low: Virtual Space and the Performance of the Masculine Sincerity," explores DL men on phone-chat lines, as well as internet sites for male-male sexual desire. Here, I examine how DL men represent themselves in virtual space, in the absence of the body. While being self-

reflexive about my own use of these mechanisms for communication, I am able to practice, navigate, and examine the coded DL men use to perform queer desire in virtual space and beyond.

These chapters begin an investigation of the DL, its discursive presence and it complex positionality. I hope this study, in its move between different texts, will provide a broad beginning for others to begin to unpack so-called "sexual phenomenon." This ethnographic exploration illustrates how understanding culture is enhanced by looking at multiple sites of cultural performances, while moving outside of what is considered "traditional" spaces of inquiry. Likewise, this project's focus on discreet, non-normative sexuality, challenges the conventional practice of examining queer practice through attention to the queerly visible. Indeed, it is as important to go "down low."

Chapter 2:

Navigating the Lines: Re-thinking Passing, Historicizing the Down Low

I know that in writing the following pages I am divulging the greatest secret of my life, the secret which for some years I have guarded far more carefully than any of my earthly possessions; and it is a curious study to me to analyze the motives which prompt me to do it.—James Weldon Johnson[21]

Codes always expose their own sense of camouflage, and they call attention to the ways they seek to "pass" by denying their own passing, so that any unmasking of the code places the subject…at the level of the invader, the one who ruptures a fragile transparency that then needs to be reconstituted in exile.—Jose Quiroga

Visibility is a trap.—Michel Foucault[22]

From the Middle Passage to the slave quarters, the experiences of freedmen and freedwomen living under white surveillance, to the experiences of full citizens trapped between the confines of racism and its many injustices, black people have kept many secrets. They have hidden their religion, beliefs, thoughts, and ultimately, their spirits.[23] In a sense, black mobility in America has always been predicated upon the agreement that we maintain codes. Black people, under the surveillance of whiteness and white people were often compelled to keep private those things they considered precious and in need of protection from those who potentially served as threatening forces to their humanity. Secrecy has often been a part of how those who live "furthest down below" attempt to make sense of, and make do with, how those in power establish and maintain control.[24] For this reason, most of the secrets of the marginalized are related to identity, community, and interior struggles. Passing has always been an available option to keep "down low" those secrets that, if exposed, could threaten the stability of a more "respectable" image of black people. Passing, as an act of creating and maintaining codes,

attempts to steer attention away from stigmatizing characteristics, which are often delegated arbiters of the racial "other's" fate within a racist society.[25]

The DL subject resides at the intersection of sexual regimes of power, navigating between racialized identity and sexual desire. Indeed, these men who commonly identify as "straight," or do not identify with traditional sexual descriptors are what I call "sexual passers." The anxiety over this enigmatic positionality creates popular discourse and public rhetoric which figures the DL man as a problematic figure. The common (mis)conception of DL men is that their primary concern is self-gratification and individual mobility, while they allegedly discard the "dis-ease" they cause those within their community. Indeed, as Jose Quiroga aptly suggests in the epigraph above, as popular discourse attempts to unmask the sexual passer it constructs a nefarious invader. I argue here that such simplistic, yet popular, claims are informed by the history and historical understanding of the racial passing subject. Like the DL subject he racially passing subject was often accused of being a "trickster," or solely concerned about the welfare of the self. To better understand the doings of the "DL brotha" beyond deviance and dis-ease, we must review the lineage of misunderstanding about the racial passer in order to revise contemporary readings of what I call sexual passing. This performance, like racial passing, is the act of being framed, or framing oneself as "straight," while being (an)other.

It is instructive, then, to examine the relationship between the historical racial passing subject and those who pass within the realms of the sexual. This chapter turns to the archives of such historic performances and uncovers the parallels between historic and contemporary passing novels and performances in order to demonstrate the ways in which the privilege given to the (in)visibility of identity categories has created a complicated trap that explodes and

confounds us. I contend that the legacy of the racial binary thinking—"you are black or white"—informs how we understand sexuality in this contemporary moment—"you are either "gay or straight." Such binary thinking reduces and simplifies the complexities of our racial and sexual lives. Moreover, this logic works to construct those who affix stable or fixed categories to their bodies as more "normal" than the "unstable" and unfixed passing subjects. However, as performance theory has shown us, "…liminality and the phenomena of liminality dissolve all factual and commonsense systems…" (Turner 25). Likewise, the passing subject—as she traverses the liminal spaces of race and sexuality—exposes the faulty logic of stability as a given. The DL subject dis-identifies with what is traditionally labeled gay or bisexual, in order to maintain his role as a respectable citizen, a "real" man. Moreover, those who passed as white subverted the social arbiters of who was and was not "white," demonstrating the unreliability of phenotypical features to determine racial belonging. Indeed, these figures re-calibrate our understanding of racial-sexual categories as stable and fixed. Nonetheless, as noted above, communities remain committed to constructing cohesive narratives that produce feelings of clarity. Yet, racial and sexual passing figures within literature and everyday life unveil the fallaciousness of this logic, as literary and embodied performances disrupt the logic of fixed identities.

After re-reading the passing novel and passing performance histories, this chapter reads E. Lynn Harris's contemporary novel, Any Way the Wind Blows through the frame of sexual passing. I introduce sexual passing as a nomenclature for a particular performance of identity and as a specific genre/form of writing, but duly acknowledge the importance of recognizing other categories in the construction of the self. Like E. Patrick Johnson, Dwight McBride, and Philip

Brian Harper,[26] I realize the co-constitutive workings of identities, while understanding the oscillation of their centrality within literary work. As Harris is the foremost writer who addresses issues of black discreet sexuality in novel form, he draws tropes from historical passing narratives as he constructs various representations of DL men for a large public.[27] The historical construction of the racial passing subject (read: also sexualized, gendered, and classed) foreshadows the DL subject who is now popularized in literature, but was ever-present in previous eras. When reading Any Way the Wind Blows, the operational similarities between the historic color line and contemporary sexual line become most evident. Whereas what Robyn Wiegman refers to as "economies of visibility" became the measuring system by which the racialized subject was judged, it is now active amongst those who gaze at the sexual subject. Parodoxically, the very system that depends on the visual produces impostors and impersonators in the art of racial and sexual discernment. Today, cultural expectations in regards to a subject's sexuality is heavily dependent on that which is visible—leaving many disappointed when what is visually available deceives them. Often it is this impulse that marks DL men as impostors and impersonators. Indeed, as Marlon Ross informs us, "the logic of race and the logic of sexuality (dangerously) bolster each other" (4).

Finally, I will illustrate the ways that such fallacious logic has moved from within the voice of literary texts and resurfaced in contemporary media via DL discourse. Our contemporary views of sexuality, seemingly closely aligned with modernist perspectives on race, signify a deaf cultural ear toward the multiplicity that is most apparent in post-modern America. As I examine a two-part segment in Essence magazine, entitled "Passing for Straight," I identify how these articles reinstitute the anxiety of "passing" within the sexual realm. Most importantly,

what is central to this analysis is the presence of anxieties which are rooted in the presence of sexual uncertainty. Here, fixed notions of identity paralyze critical thought and reproduce the very identities that are deemed problematic. Through recognizing the continuum of the "one-drop" rule on sexual terms, I locate how media discourses perpetuate the system which dis-allows for the recognition, performance, and normality of a "bi-sexual." In this case, the DL is a direct descendant of decades of commitment to racial fixity, whereby sexuality is a predetermined and "common-sense" category.

While both the black and white press provides cautionary and criminalizing tales of the DL man "passing for straight," they re-inscribe the racist, sexual imagery that reduces black men to deviants rather than diverse and complicated subjects. Societal blindness to the union of racist and homophobic ideologies has produced, as Patricia Hill-Collins makes clear in Black Sexual Politics, a community of people who "miss the mark" and do not realize that "too much is at stake for Black antiracist projects to ignore sexuality and its connections to oppressions of race, class, gender…" (114). Consequently, more and more black male images that frame sexual passers as men of "deception" and "disease" are circulated and blindly legitimated under the guise of saving and sanitizing the race. This chapter cautions against such moves, urging us to adjust our critical eyes to re-examine our understanding of the modes and motives behind sexual passing. To this end, we can move from views of discreet black male sexuality as an ahistorical phenomenon through learning from history rather than literary lessons from E. Lynn Harris, and establish a more sophisticated assessment of this explosion of sexual ambiguity within the public sphere.

Passing Literature and the Genealogy of Sexual Passing

No other texts have complicated, dealt with, and exposed the secrets of race, gender, sexuality, and class performances so specifically as the texts now known as passing novels. Passing novels and novellas typically illustrate the complicated lives of individuals of mixed-race ancestry who passed for white during a period when one drop of "negro" blood was thought to contaminate and corrupt the blood line of white Americans. Mostly written between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, many of these texts included novels such as, Jessie Fauset's Plum Bum (1929), Charles Chestnutt's House Behind the Cedars (1900), and Nella Larsen's Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929), and countless others.[28] While earlier narratives of passing often punished the passer on the basis of racial treason, these texts seem to complicate issues of passing. The aforementioned texts upend traditional passing narratives, by not only inadvertently critiquing the arbitrariness of the color line, but also revealing how one can perform within and outside of the system as a tool of survival.

Joining this critical lineage is James Weldon Johnson's The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man. Originally published in 1912 and re-published in 1927, Autobiography stands as one of the most celebrated passing novels of its time. This novel offers a unique self-consciousness and self-reflexivity that is driven by the auto-ethnographic impulse that carries the protagonists' narrative. This novel, like Harris's Any Way the Wind Blows, allows us to be witnesses to the inner thoughts of the passer in various contexts. This ability to see the passer navigate under various conditions enables a more generative reading of passing as a complex act that involves more than just the passer—but the spectator, societal constraints, and the dynamics of space. For a moment, I would like to use this novel to illuminate some important parallels that

I have discovered in Johnson's narration of racial passing and Harris's structuring of sexual passing.

Autobiography begins with the ex-coloured man's lament about the burden of secrecy and ends with a final chapter in which he fully discloses a secret to his fiancé—telling her that he is a light-skinned mulatto who has "passed" as white. This disclosure causes her hands to become cold, transfixed with his body, demonstrating both her fright and frazzlement over the seemingly instantaneous shift of the familiar to the foreign. In response, the narrator becomes self-conscious—as if he was "growing black and thick-featured, and crimp-haired" (204)—a visceral effect that has its roots in an awareness of cultural stereotypes, as well as minstrel leftovers from previous eras.[29] The ex-coloured man's fiancé's external and internal repulsion is a symbolic summation of white imaginings of the "negro," that sends her into an isolation period, which, in turn, sends the narrator in route to becoming ex-coloured. However, the narrator only becomes "ex-coloured" through a post-confession performance, whereby he commits to a life as "white" rather than as mulatto and/or "negro." With this act, he successfully reduces his and his future wife's anxiety over the race question. His turn to whiteness, and her ability to see his whiteness plays out in a piano selection, leads to the manifestation of a more consonant love that leads to matrimony and the birth of their children.

Unlike other scholars, I argue that this escape from the "label of inferiority," is enabled through the manifestation of the "interracial" marriage and family, which concludes the novel.[30] I believe that this somewhat strategic move acts as not only the affirmation of his coming into whiteness, but also his journey into full American manhood and heterosexuality. Though his wife dies at the close of the novel, his commitment to his children and their welfare becomes his

justification for his choosing to remain white. However, his constant refrain concerning the "inconveniences of being a Negro" suggest otherwise. As he characterizes, critiques, and even sometimes condemns "negro life," it seems clear that the narrator attempts to escape the tragic narrative that seems to accompany the twentieth century mulatto figure in literature and life—death, or absence of belonging. Key to the ex-coloured man's act of moving into whiteness is how the narrator allows the audience to decide his racial fate—he never denies his racial past per se, but allows the misleading dependency on visuality to serve him. In a racist America, where those features which appear as optical guarantees mark him as white, he is insured a certain degree of mobility for himself and his family.

Such negotiations of racial identity may, at first, seem significantly disparate from my project. However, when one reads the "secret" within the Autobiography closer, one can see, as Siobhan Somerville in Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in America Culture has noted, that this passing narrative is about anxieties that are "at once racial and sexual" (125). The secret of the narrator's racial history poses problems for the fiancé because it 1) exposes that she loved a man who was not white, and 2) admits that she was involved in an interracial (read: taboo) relationship. The Autobiography, then, is not only about choosing to be properly white, but also sexually normal.[31] It is clear that both the narrator and his wife wished to avoid being queered, or marked abnormal—even if that meant passing out of "Negroness" or ending the relationship with the negro altogether. Such negotiations are akin to contemporary narratives describing the down low dilemma, whereby the female partner and the DL brotha are engaged in similar trials, attempting to avoid being sexually and racially marked by either passing or admonishing the act of passing. These aversions of "outsiderness" clearly

move racial and sexual subjects to "pass" out of any categories of abnormality, or "deviance," as it is often referred. Autobiography is one of the few passing novels that understands "passing for white as a result…of cultural alienation and divided racial loyalties" (Fabi 100). Autobiography uniquely removes passing from a solely racial move, to a performance from multiple positionalities. James Weldon Johnson recognized what Erving Goffman would later teach in Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity, as Autobiography represents passing as a move away from all forms of stigma for the sustenance and/or achievement of status, as well as the right to remain "normal" (125). To avoid being marked abnormal or stigmatized, one must employ multiple methods of passing across multiple lines that not only includes race, but also involves gender, class, and sexuality. In essence, all passing subjects—for the sake of status and normality—must remain "down low."

At the center of cultural moves "down low" is the recognition of the residual effects of the "one-drop rule." Various investments in linear narratives of racial and sexual identity, particularly claims of authenticity, have created an academic and social conversation where the passer is always operating within a "one-drop rule" system where they never can inhabit multiple identities at once, but must choose between the "true and the false." Such conventions are obvious in both novels where specific characters insists that the narrator choose an identity, as well as by critics who impose the same imperative through their readings of the texts. Often, within literary texts and by the reading audience, the racially/sexual passing subject is expected to choose their marginal identity over whiteness, in adherence with both the social and legal laws of the given period. It is because of these acts that I conclude that blackness had, and often still has, *a surplus value* that upstages the significance and weight of other factors in the construction

of the self. Unfortunately, the one-drop rule that had been forced upon black people pre- and post-slavery has now become a more broad-reaching racial narrative—a way of keeping racial identity in check. For example, though Tiger Woods publicly proclaimed his own racial identity of "Caublinasian"—to speak to his "Caucasian, Black, Indian, American, Asian" backgrounds—he is still recognized as a "black golfer." This type of socio-cultural regulation, based on one drop of African blood, uniquely keeps people together and divided, all at once. Where on one hand people can gather around a certain sense of solidarity, on the other, they are divided by the blatant disregard for diverse presences within the community. When discourse forces the passer to choose one category or another, the discussion is limited and disallows for the real presence of mixedness that Angela Davis suggests may "problematize the notion of race (or sexuality) as an unreflected site of community building" (328).

Though passing novels are often about mixedness, rather than dealing with both black and the white, gay and the straight, or even the in-between, the passer is almost always reduced to only having an either/or option. This literary formula provides for a simplistic understanding of the passer's circumstance. The force-fitting pressure of making a racial choice, of following the one-drop rule, demands that we ignore the presence of the both/and racial reality in the lives of many who "pass." Such requests illustrate not only the socio-political climate of the moment, but also the dilemma with which many passers are faced. Autobiography, as a racial passing novel, and Any Way the Wind Blows as a sexual passing novel, are only two examples of literary representations of the everyday enactments of such complex decision-making. Nonetheless, they serve as strong examples of the compelling parallels between the operations of racial and sexual hierarchies.

Where Autobiography's narrator seeks sexual normalization through the coherency and consistency of race, the central protagonist in Harris's Any Way the Wind Blows seems more concerned with racial normalization through a cohesive and consistent understanding of sexual identity. Similar connections have been made more indirectly by such scholars as Deborah McDowell (1999) and Mae Henderson (2003) in their introductions to such classic passing novels as Nella Larsen's Passing, where they suggests that passing novels are almost always as sexual as they are racial. In their re-reading of these "classic" passing novels, they acknowledge the sexual secret hidden between the lines of fiction and illustrate how traditional focus on race is both a result of history and critical mal-attentiveness. Though they do not speak, as I do, of a specific role reversal of sexuality and race between the historical and contemporary, they both draw attention to how these two constructions work cooperatively.

Acknowledging the absence of such "alternative" views of passing novels, several other scholars have began to do more explicit interrogations of the role of categories other than race in the construction of self. For example, in the edited anthology Passing: Identity and Interpretation in Sexuality, Race, and Religion, Maria Carla Sanchez and Linda Schlossberg insist on the inclusion of other categories such as religion, sexuality, and class in our discussion of passing. Furthermore, Sanchez and Schlossberg critique the centrality of the logic of visibility, or occularcentricity, as they suggest that generally "we trust that our ability to see and read carries with it a certain degree of epistemological certainty" (1). Cultural critic and scholar Jeffrey Weeks in Inventing Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty, warns us that though we are witnesses to the flux and flexibility of identity "in a world of constant change people apparently need fixed points, points of alignment" (33). The inability to let go of this quest for

fixity, coherence, and constancy, has often produced critical work that misses the full picture of any one passing novel, as certain writings illuminate the very problem of this genre—the centrality of the (in)visible.

Harris, in his earlier work attempts to conjure the role of the "invisible" in his book, Invisible Life—a text which deals with the discreet sexual world of a central male protagonist. In Any Way the Wind Blows, he similarly creates a dialogue with the notion of "ex" (e.g., "ex-coloured"), to demonstrate what happens as black queer men are pulled up from "down low." Indeed, sexuality and our interpretations of sexuality are informed by embodiment and individual and collective understandings of sexual categories. To best understand the mark or appropriation of "ex" or specific dis-identifications with certain common identity terms, it is necessary to recognize the multiple levels of influence that other identity loyalties may have in our selection of social positions. When seeing from this perspective, the ex-coloured man's move away from blackness is the inverse of Basil's, Harris's protagonist, mark of "ex-straightness." Whereas the ex-coloured man was privileged with white skin and had an interactive role in his ex-relationship to "Negroness," Basil is almost stamped with a scarlet letter and has limited control over his identity after being seen as "having sex with another man." In Johnson's ex-coloured man's era, a move outside of blackness was greeted with certain luxuries, while Basil's mark of "ex-straight" in the contemporary moment ruptures and shatters his expected sexual role, as well as his masculine definition. Thus, it is no coincidence, but rather representative of the respective eras, that the ex-coloured man's "true" identity comes through an interpersonal confession with his fiancé, whereas Basil is discovered and exposed by his. This difference affirms Corinne Blackmer's belief that the "vast majority of African Americans under Plessey could not (or chose

not to) 'pass for white,' whereas the vast majority of lesbians and gays do pass for, and are assumed to be (unless declared otherwise), heterosexual" (4). Nonetheless, both passing characters in Autobiography and Any Way the Wind Blows have the potential of returning to their initial categories of race and sexuality. Both characters, like Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry, are "always stepping on the edge of danger" (Larsen 143). Yet, at the close of Autobiography, Johnson allows the ex-coloured man to transition into safety and security through white identity, while Harris in Any Way the Wind Blows constructs the passing figure Basil as always oscillating between sexual normalcy and sexual nuisance. In conversation, these novels assists in narrating the disparate, distinct, yet interconnected histories of passing in terms of race and sexuality. In addition, forging a conversation also illuminated the separate, but similar traces that are involved in racial and sexual passing performances and public perception of such complex cultural moves.

The Ending of Ex-Coloured, The Beginning of the Ex-Straight Man

E. Lynn Harris's Any Way the Wind Blows serves as an exemplary text for my engagement with the imbrications of race, gender, class, and sexuality amongst DL men and within contemporary writings on the subject. Any Way the Wind Blows is the final novel of Harris's "trilogy" of texts that chronicles the complicated life of Basil Henderson, the "terminal bi-sexual" man who passes as "straight."[32] The primary literary strategy used to prevent Basil's life from being marked as "tragic" is the emphasis placed on his development and his stellar performance of what Fiona Buckland would call his "heterogender"—the constant commitment to patriarchal norms and heterosexuality.[33] This gendered performance has become popularly

associated with the DL male—the man who wears his masculinity on his sleeve, in his stride, and his privileged choice of (female) love-object—though such commitments are never guaranteed.

Any Way the Wind Blows is the first novel to explicitly engage the discord and disconnect between black masculinity and queer sexual desire. Its basic premise is most significant as its publication coincides with the popularization of the DL in popular media.[34] In this novel written in 2001, Harris's call upon the DL is no act of coincidence, but rather an appropriation of what was then a black colloquialism and newly established "sexual identity" for those who kept sexual acts outside the radar of the larger public. While the term's usage is a testament to Harris's awareness of this term as in vogue, his invocation of the DL is also a sign of his own imagining of discreet black male sexuality and its possibilities.[35] The effects of such imaging and imagining became most apparent when, in the same year of Any Way the Wind Blow's release, several women approached me in a panic over what they had read about these "closeted" black men. One woman, who was carrying Any Way the Wind Blows around at a conference I attended in Seattle, stated her central concerns were with "deception," "disease," and the possibilities that "the DL was spreadin'." The connection she made between what she had encountered in these novels and "newspaper material perused in the Seattle airport" alerted me to the type of pedagogy that these books performed for all of Harris's readers, particularly for black women. E. Lynn Harris's novels were instructional manuals—uncovering the secrets of characters, while passing as a window into clandestine queer relationships of black men.

The outraged, but fearful woman's elaborate rant had a quality very much like that of the wife in Johnson's Autobiography. Though the woman had no contact with a DL man, she crafted graphic illusions and imaginings of "an encounter," registering her anxiety over queer sexuality.

The wife's anxiety, triggered by the narrator's confession of his bi-raciality in Johnson's Autobiography, likens the situation of Basil Henderson in Harris's Any Way the Wind Blows, whose bi-sexuality becomes the source of anxiety. In his novels, Harris creates male and female characters who express anxiety over (homo) and/or bisexuality. The creation of characters who respond in this manner to sexuality, I argue, is Harris's way of manipulating his mostly female black readership to respond in a similar way. I do not believe it is a coincidence, for example, that Any Way the Wind Blows was released during the same period as the emergence of what is now referred to as the "DL phenomenon."[36] Accordingly, Harris's influence and impact on the popular understanding of black bisexual performance, particularly the DL, is evident in the references made to his text in popular texts and public discourse. Thus, Harris becomes the voice of precedence and prominence when discussing the evolution of how many men and women learn about black male discreet performances, especially the "DL phenomenon."

In Any Way the Wind Blows, the sexual passing subject is Basil Henderson, an ex-football star turned sports management consultant. The novel begins a year after the foiling of Basil's marriage to Broadway actor turned pop-diva Yancey Braxton, after he confesses that he is sexually attracted to both men and women. Ironically, both Basil and Yancey relocate to New York, where their paths cross again when Basil realizes that Yancey has released a song titled "Any Way the Wind Blows." The song, about a woman who says good-bye to a man that she finds "in the arms of another man," is a smash hit with the listening public. With the increasing popularity of the song, Yancey tries to make her mark in the music business, while Basil attempts to maintain his sports consulting reputation. His occupational integrity is constantly being threatened by the distribution of his ex-fiancé's song, when anonymous informants (read:

people he has done wrong, who want revenge) and his new young "trick," Bartholomew Jerome Dunbar (a.k.a."Bart"), make him aware of their knowledge of his connection to the song. Basil, like most who attempt to manage stigma, attempts to navigate between his "private" sexual practice and his public image.

Like the Ex-coloured Man, Basil witnesses his own transfiguration, as he is never able to "purely" be that which he once was—bisexual and "unclockable"—now that so many are aware of his passing performance. Basil experiences the classic passer-reality, where regardless of the performance that he (the passer) would like people to see, he is always subject to an interpretive gaze. These interpretations, often informed by multiple ideologies, will often deem the performance inadequate or incomplete. Yet, Basil is unlike the Ex-coloured Man, as he is condemned as a blatant deceptor who consequently is framed and (re) configured as a deviant, sexual "other." Basil is "found out." This critical tension positions Basil as not only what Goffman refers to as "discreditable," but discredited—the former which infers the possibility for loss of status and the latter which insists that such loss has taken place. Nonetheless, Basil's character shows us that as much as his "disguise" is not eternal, neither is his discrediting. As he moves outside of certain social circles and spaces, he is able to renew his chosen anonymity and retain his sexual discretion. As he locates trusting bedfellows in both genders, it is clear that for every suspicious spectator there are many who find his performance of gender and sexuality inconspicuous and authentic.

When writing Any Way the Wind Blows, Harris had established an anticipatory and faithful following of readers who are often cited as stating that his novels are "fun and easy to read."[37] Indeed, there is a significant pleasure in reading and watching the unraveling of secrets

held by Harris's male protagonists and their counterparts. But, in a socio-political climate of so-called "sexual crisis," what is most important here is how his work acts as a form of pedagogy that warns and informs the public of what was once referred to as the "dreadful bisexual."[38] Initially, the discourse had no detailed or nuanced explanations of the DL subject; therefore, the public was left to draw their own conclusions. As the primary voice of representation for DL men, these novels read as if they are "authentic" narratives of DL experience and what Harris's website frames as "cautionary tales." I argue that through his simplistic passing formula, Harris constructs more of a panic novel that passes for informative, stirs controversy and creates various forms of alarm in the black public sphere.[39] Because of Harris's influence on the public's view and perception of the DL, it is necessary to critically examine how he (re)constructs the passing subject.

Any Way the Wind Blows picks up where Autobiography leaves off. The novel begins with Basil engaged in "pulse-popping sex" with a woman who Harris later establishes as the character who wants to be Basil's "baby's momma."[40] After his moment with the "baby's momma" figure, Basil confesses to the reader that he plans to continue his bi-sexual excursions—a journey that those who have followed the Harris trilogy anticipate. Basil, the passer, is engaged in an act of "duping" while avid readers of Harris's books are aware of his game. This narrative structuring evokes what Amy Robinson has called the classic passing novel framework—a triangle: "the passer, the dupe, and the representative of the in-group" (719). In Any Way the Wind Blows, and most of Harris's novels, there are three consistent figures: the passing sexual character, the naïve believer(s) of the passer's identity as performed, and queer men who are involved with the duper, or are aware of what Basil refers to as his "switching."[41]

Harris's sexual passing novels use the "switch" to move his narratives forward and create heightened drama and conflict around Basil's move in and out of sexual normalcy.

Although Harris frames the DL subject as almost always conscious of his "duping," his awareness is never a product of other character's perception or readership. I argue that such a construction is at best misleading; at worst, it fuels the cultural anxieties amongst women around this topic. As almost all characters in the novel are unaware of Basil's acts outside of heterosexuality, except those to whom he confesses, readers are left to believe there is no room for the passer's pass to fail. However, as I have become an E. Lynn Harris reader, I know this invincibility is what keeps a reader attracted to and angry at the central characters. As one reader told me, "it's unreal." Indeed, it seems odd that there is never a successful "spoiling" of the passer's identity. Hence, Any Way the Wind Blows becomes a passing novel that includes other aspects of identity, but overemphasizes sexuality by suggesting that sexual passing is easy, an unconsidered choice, and attempted with all disregard to questions of ethics or personal consequence. Consequently, the reader often loses sight of the ways in which constructs of race, gender, and class create circumstances where sexual passing might be an act of survival or subversion of hegemonic sexuality. Moreover, Harris's imaginings mirror racial passing histories where the passer is often understood as individualistic, void of a moral compass. I am interested in not only how Harris's text resembles racial passing novels, but also the way they employ the tropes of those texts. Indeed, though entertaining, his novels perpetuate a cycle of imaginative violence from which he monetarily profits, while potentially damaging public understanding of the socio-political circumstances of black men and queer sexuality. While passing as an activity may captivate audiences through its social gymnastics, a unilateral focus

on one identity position ignores the macro-cultural conditions that provoke and perpetuate the desire to pass.

In Any Way the Wind Blows, Basil is always attempting to make sense of a world, or at least a social situation, that repudiates him for his sexual desire and the unforgivable secreting of his sexual actions. Still, he finds resolution through the disavowal of his discursively disdained identity—silencing what he knows to be a part of himself, to live and survive in a world which seems to only value him most when he chooses one part over an(other). In this context, Basil is unable to embrace both of his sexual identities, or disclose his sexual moves, while maintaining his right to be a "race man," or his commitment to a certain style of black masculinity. For every moment where Basil demonstrates integrity or proper "manhood," Harris juxtaposes the voice of a disheartened lover or distrusting character, who reminds us of his betrayal. Or often, Basil's self-conscious reflections remind us of his lack of remorse for his duping—almost prompting a spectatorial punishment for his unapologetic arrogance. The problem becomes not that he passed, but that he duped a woman using heterosexual privileges that was, to his future wife and society in general, not his property to possess. Heterosexuality, like whiteness, in this instance, is a property whose ownership affirms a certain hierarchical relation [in this case, between "queer" and normal] (Harris, "Black on White," 118). Thus, in order to own "straightness" one cannot embrace queerness. To do so would inherently disrupt any notion of stability attached to our assumed categories of identification. Thus, Basil becomes not only the man who Yancey finds "in the arms of another man," but also the man who she "must let go." Though, in this case, Yancey sings of letting go, while she seeks to literally destroy the manhood Basil has built over the years as a public emblem of manliness. This is not only her revenge, but also her attempt to

un-queer herself. For if Yancey embraces and/or accepts Basil and his queer sexuality, she must admit that she loved queerly.[42] In this way, Yancey tries to "pass" through her admonishment of Basil's passing performances. It is necessary that she make this strategic move, showing the gravest disdain through framing Basil as the grossest and most disgusting "faggot" she can, in order to purify her own self-image. Ironically, when Yancey attempts to create a song about Basil—making him the spectacle of a song lyric—she jump-starts her own musical career. On one hand, his sexuality is the deceptive and problematic presence that causes her pain; on the other, it is his DL status that becomes the conduit for her own economic wealth.

In many ways, Harris predicts the conundrum that has become apart of the DL madness that has taken black and popular press by storm since the New York Times article in August 2003. For many, the criticisms of the DL have become therapeutic devices that not only have emotional gains, but financial possibilities as well. Though Harris constructs Yancey as a character who would not be opposed to this criticism—as her greed for money and wealth has been ever-present from her first appearance in his novels—he justifies her acts with claims of hurt and revenge. However, Harris does not grant such redemption for Basil's acts of deceit and/or secrecy. Instead, Harris paints Basil as a character who is simply burdened with "masculine anxiety," who outrageously attempts to compensate for his absent manhood through irresponsible and unapologetic acts. Almost unrealistically, Basil hardly shifts in character and his sexual agenda remains, even after numerous anonymous emails and phone calls questioning his DL status as if he is unmoved by the potential of being discredited.

Harris's figuring of Basil's unnerving boldness dismisses what is central to the passing subject's performance: controlling the disclosure of discrediting information about oneself to

conceal the stigma entirely. Basil, as the literary embodiment of the "DL Brotha," confounds the performance of sexuality as simple betrayal, thereby legitimating acts of homophobia within the text and by his readers as statements, thoughts and doings of innocent fear and frustration. Harris further perpetuates the cycle of homophobia, as Basil's acts of "deviance" produces masculine anxieties within himself and is re-packaged as a deep internal homophobia, where queer sexuality is situated as a lesser, meaningless, and valueless activity for strict self-gratification. This need for Basil to lessen the value of queer desire, or to re-position his homoerotic relations to a level of insignificance, speaks to the masculine performance that is privileged by many DL men. Here, we see evidence of the complex dilemma with which black men are faced as they attempt to subscribe to accepted gendered roles which often produce more societal rewards.

A similar dilemma is articulated by Johnson's ex-coloured man when he repeats "it's no disgrace to be black, but it's often very inconvenient" (155). Here, he speaks with a disregard for the contextual contingencies that mark blackness as "no disgrace," but admits to its compromising potential in his everyday life. What makes being a "negro" inconvenient for the ex-coloured man is the constant markedness of those who are identifiably black. Nonetheless, such iteration also calls attention to the convenience and absence of shame felt when the ex-coloured man gets to be "ex-coloured," or perceived as white. On these "unmarked" occasions, he is able to walk the world with individual governance over his travels and can better manage his identity-reception. His admission of the "inconvenience of being a negro" draws attention to a kind of Du Boisian "double-consciousness," whereby, a negro is always already trapped by "being at once negro and American" (Du Bois 215). The "inconvenience of being a Negro" implies not only his acknowledgement of being part Negro, but also an unspoken, unwritten

feeling of obligation to the race. Concomitantly, Basil exemplifies the dynamic tension of being caught between two sexual worlds—DL men are "cursed" with "twoness"—the desire to know (in the biblical and literal sense) men and women. However, Basil's situation is not a question of a sexual allegiance, but rather how to act out sexual desires in a discreet, unmarking way that would allow him to remain credible and respectable. Basil and the ex-coloured man reveal that in "twoness" (or even multiple-ness) there is pleasure and pain, pride and shame, hope and despair. Indeed, both subjects express the pleasure in moving between worlds, while also understanding that they are "stepping always on the edge of danger." The lever of the "danger" is often contingent upon what role either subject chooses to play in the racial-sexual theatre and who acts as spectators for their gender, racial, and sexual performances.

While racial and sexual economies are different, the force-fitting societal solution to "chose" is the burden of both racial and sexual passing subjects. The major difference between the two passing subjects is that the racial passer must selectively edit his racial past, while the sexual passer conceals his sexual present. Harris attempts to privy the reader to some of the internal struggles of Basil's sexual present, where he seems oddly placed between what the world wants him to be and what he feels he should be. Unlike Johnson's careful construction, Harris's honesty about the social rules and laws are often left unspoken. Consequently, we only understand Basil's position as one of deception and deviance, never understanding the difficult reality of the sexual line that for many men is never to be crossed. It is the critical absence of the socio-political circumstance that encourages a reading of the sexual, or even racial, passer as possessing self-hatred and a harmful interior that is selfish and self-destructive. Additionally, due to the absence of a more generative and complex discussion of sexual passing, the importance of

the external gazer on the constitution of the passer's identity is discounted and DL men reduced to arbiters of their own sexual desire and disclosure, performers of extreme and grotesque individualism. A pivotal moment in Any Way the Wind Blows is when Basil explicitly disavows his sexuality. This moment can be read easily as an act of selfishness, or as an example of his "internal homophobia." In a conversation with Sallye—one of his many "sexual flings—she inquires about their relationship, in turn scrutinizing his sexual orientation:

> "Are you gay or bisexual?"
>
> I tried to keep my cool. "Damn baby, if you thought that was the case, then why did you come home with me?
>
> "My girlfriends and I always ask these questions. You don't look or act gay or bi, but answer the question," Sallye said as she stopped unzipping her skirt from the back.
>
> "No, I'm not either one of those things, I said confidently. As far as I was concerned, that was the truth. I wasn't gay or bisexual. She didn't ask if I was on the down low and I didn't tell her. Besides, she wasn't looking at my lips but at the bulge in my pants. I could have said "hell yeah" and Sallye would have heard "hell no." (46)

Sallye's gender stereotypes withstanding, the socio-political situation that prompts this interrogation is left unexplained. Most importantly, no part of the narrative explicates Basil's reaction or his internal dialogue thereafter. The picture of the passer is incomplete and paints Basil as having sole control over his actions and their interpretation. This inaccurate reading removes responsibility from those who contribute to the necessity of certain performances of discreet identity through verbal judgments and punitive gazes—and random and unwarranted interrogation—while placing the central focus on what Basil did not say. This has been the case

largely for public imagining of the passer in general, but for DL men specifically. In this passage however, we witness an explicit confession from Basil. I argue that this is an example of Harris's literary heavy-handedness, as he attempts to explain most candidly what the DL is for his reading audience. As Basil conceals his attraction toward men, based on the misnaming of his positionality by Sallye, the reading public is provided with an implicit definition of the DL: men who don't claim "gay" or "bi" identity in order to avoid being denied male-female sexual opportunity. Indeed, this may be one aspect of DL men's objection to embracing these terms. However, it detaches Basil's dis-identificatory move from a history of minoritarian individuals disconnecting themselves from terms that do not fit their understandings of themselves. Furthermore, it also relinquishes the public of its accountability in terms of constructing a socio-sexual climate where such terms signify both emasculation, as well as sexual abnormality.

In the context of reading Harris's novels, such inaccurate understandings of the sexual passer's circumstance is highly dangerous, as individuals attempt to better understand themselves, as well as the complex sexualities of others. In the next example, as Harris illustrates the consummation of Basil's "relationship" with Bartholomew, he successfully characterizes the tension created on the trapeze of sexual desire. Yet, I argue, in the context of Harris's construction of Basil, a reader is more likely to pathologize than to engage productive discussions of Basil's marginality. In Any Way the Wind Blows, Basil first meets Bart when he was answering a modeling call advertised by XJI Sports Management firm. Their sexual attraction turns this modeling call into a booty call. The heat leads them to Basil's home, where they engage in an episode of sexual intercourse. When they finish Bart inquires:

"….when can we 'hit it' again?"

> "Let me take your number and I'll get back to you," I said. [The "I" signifying Basil]
>
> [. . .]
>
> "Can I have your phone number?"
>
> "I'll give you a call. You see, my shit is on the down low. I'm dating a female pretty seriously," I lied.
>
> "I don't date bisexual men," Bart said.
>
> "Then we're on the same page." I said.
>
> "But sometimes I make exceptions when they look like you," he said.
>
> "Hey, let's just take it slow and see if we gel. But you'll get your chances," I said as I walked toward the bedroom. I went to my closet and pulled out a dress shirt and began to put it on. I figured if old dude saw me getting ready for work he would finish dressing himself and hit the road. (67)

Not only is Basil dishonest in this passage, but he also uses the "down low" to scapegoat any definitive answer for Bart's inquiry for further meetings. When Bart tells Basil "I don't date bisexual men," Basil responds, "we're on the same page." While Basil's complacency with this re-categorization of DL as synonymous with bi-sexual seems displaced, the larger message here is clear. Basil is not interested in dating at all and here, he and Bart have met common ground. The cited episode above demonstrates Basil's post-sex anxiety, in which he attempts to escape his sexual reality. This attempted escape exposes the heavy burden placed onto Basil's body whenever he engages in same-gender sex. Most interestingly, Harris poses Basil's post-sex ponderings "in the closet." This moment is fascinating. It is in this space where Basil waits for

the exit of his queer reminder—a waiting room par excellence. Like the ex-coloured man's children, young Bart becomes the constant reminder of what Basil wishes to escape, evade, or ignore.

While the temporal placement of male-male sex "on the down low" is an area of inquiry that I will explore in a larger project, it is important to make note of it for my purposes here. On one hand, Harris suggests the compatibility of the closet for Basil's sexuality. However, he re-constructs the epistemological closet as Basil is constantly returning to it within each of the novels. I argue that this constant return, or residential status in the closet, re-configures Eve Sedgwick and popular understandings of the closet—pointing toward its possible permanence and comfort, rather than its temporality and torture. Michael Hardin, in his brief discussion of racial-sexual passing subjects in Harris's early texts, presumes that all those in the closet want to be "free" (116-177). This assumption, I argue, is guided by contemporary readings of sexual subjects as always being in search of freedom. While "freedom" may be a desire of all who seek humanity, the characteristics of such desired freedoms seem to differ. Here, in Any Way the Wind Blows, I suggest that the character Basil is free in the closet, "on the down low," and enjoys navigating the sexual line. Though it is not all pleasure, Basil never suggests that his circumstances would be improved if he were to establish an open "bi-sexuality." In fact, in the passage above he rejects such an assertion; rather, he chooses to dis-identify with this label and opt for a discreet sexual identity. This may be one of the most critically queer moments in Harris's construction of Basil's character as an agent who subverts normative structuring of the discreet performance of identity. Instead of opting for the simple, less culturally specific "closet," which Marlon Ross has critiqued, Harris attempts to complicate the sexual position of

Basil through a clear act of dis-identification. Harris, through the character Basil, re-constructs the closet—known as a space of so-called captivity—as a location of potential freedom and possibility. Nonetheless, much of this passage's critical possibility is lost as Harris places greatest emphasis on the play rather than the complexity of the DL as a "remixing of the closet."

The aforementioned passage accentuates Basil's skill and appeal. Though Basil clearly treats Bart like a "trick" for the night, Bart still insists on continuing relations with him. As Bart expounds on Basil's good looks, it becomes apparent that Basil's aesthetics play a major role in his attraction. Basil's asides to the reader make us most aware of his ability to keep an emotional distance from his male partners, still acting upon his desires and ensuring future sexual encounters. Harris's reliance on the "playa" rhetoric and performance, most popular in heterosexual contexts, warrants a discussion of Basil and Bart's relational dynamics. First, the "relationship" between Bart and Basil seems to posit the former as non-masculine and the latter as masculine. This seems necessary, as Harris clearly is attempting to create contrasts between these two characters.

Such a gendered dynamic is instructive in terms of the reproduction of heterosexual norms within a homoerotic, or homosexual, context. Basil is clearly performing the "man" in control, while Bart is positioned in a submissive, non-dominant role. This role-construction is amplified when looking closely at Basil as "the man" who holds the future of Bart's career in his hands. In the patriarchal culture in which we live, such relational dynamics is clearly complicit with certain conventional understandings of hetero and homo normative relationships. This characterization in a queer context only reifies the "top-bottom" binary that has been passed down from hetero-patriarchy. David Buchbinder asserts:

> Patriarchal masculinity derives much of its power through the exercise of a particular logic. By imposing…a system of oppositions—for instance, male/female, masculine/feminine, heterosexual/homosexual—which not only give meanings through difference, but equally give those meanings certain social, moral, ethical values…. (74)

In the sexual realm of the Basil-Bart saga, the installation of this top-bottom binary allows Basil to re-construct a female-male fantasy while performing his "alternative" sexual relations. This illusion offers him an opportunity to be masculine, while also engaging in queer sex—in short, normalizing the queer not to feel, or appear, *too* queer. Before Bart departs for home, he gestures toward seeing basil another time. Basil interrupts his assertion and chimes in with "I don't think so." Basil continues to tell him "…a good-looking brotha like yourself can have your pick of dudes and bitches." By opening this discussion, "bitches" assist him in transitioning out of Bart's homo-normative ideals into a more hetero-normative and misogynist mindset. This need to re-contextualize this situation demonstrates his desire for Bart to partake in hetero-normative performances—a desire to normalize their relations as more homosocial than homoerotic. As Bart does not concede to his wishes, he pushes Bart to leave. As Bart is departing, he inquires, "So I got the job?" and Basil responds, "If you think so. It's a good thing to think positive." Bart, thinking he has landed a winner, like everyone else before him, is duped. Basil winks.[43]

As Basil winks, performing the ultimate "player" persona, or the duper extraordinaire, we are distracted from the work involved in his performance of a masculinity shaped to shadow Basil's queer sexual desire. Yet, no matter how much we are distracted by Harris's representation of Basil or Basil-like figures, their presence forces us to recognize not only the

presences of DL men, but also the pressures on black men, in general. As Mae Henderson explains, "by re-writing modernist notions of a constative, immutable, unified notion of self-hood with a conception of identity that is fundamentally performative, the narrative of passing interrogates the idea of a transcendent or essentialized identity" (xxxix). Thus, the very presence of a contemporary passing sexual subject calls attention to the instability of sexual identities. As a result, we are seduced to think about the actual movement between two fictionally stable identities—seeing their fractures, ruptures, and fissures. Unfortunately, however, Harris's representations tend to be more linear than expansive, more "cool and sexy" than complex—reducing societal pressures to insignificant forces rather than the force-fitting, fiery presences that they are. Consequently, his writings are more likely to prompt a less sophisticated reading of the circumstances of DL men and those in their lives. Harris, more often than not, conveys the idea that DL men are men who prey on the gullible and survive on their insatiable lust that serves to destroy all with whom they come in contact. Basil is the embodiment of the ex-coloured's fiancé's gross imaginary at the close of Autobiography. Basil, in Any Way the Wind Blows, is always framed as the "ex-straight man,"—he is the sexualized reflection of the racial conundrum that the ex-coloured man was. As the ex-coloured man sought after a move to racial and class hierarchy, Basil longed for the masculine stability and the privilege of heteronormativity.

It is Harris's construction of this hyper-sexual DL figure, that Basil is the victim of our punitive gaze. Basil, as the quintessential black male representative in what is undoubtedly is a queer novel, sets us up as readers. As Basil is critical and conscious of his own sexuality and sexual games, the reader is left to conclude that Basil is no more than a pretender, or impersonator. Consequently, the disapproval of Basil's behavior is unquestionable amongst

readers of Harris's novels.[44] Consequently, our cultural ethos forces us to understand Basil as a criminal impostor, and we are only satisfied when he is punished within the novel. When Any Way the Wind Blows begins with Basil concluding "pulse-popping" sex with his new girlfriend Rosa—who fools him into believing she is pregnant with his child—we are left to enjoy the trickster being tricked. For the many who read Harris's books religiously, or simply for research, it is not surprising that Rosa confesses to Basil that she is pregnant by someone else. This is the classic moment where Harris's trickster is framed, making him a pun of the reader's joke. Basil has been tricked and his heteronormative masculine status is challenged by Rosa's announcement that she is carrying a child that is not his. Here, Basil is the witness to a different type of pass—Rosa has shifted from "baby's momma" to "not your baby's momma." Yet, in Basil's imaginary she was—for the initial moment when she announced her pregnancy—the mother of his child. The parallel that Harris constructs between other forms of passing and that of Basil's is significant. In this opening, he clearly articulates what I have argued earlier is the pain of dominant understandings of passing: general perceptions of identity as singular always disappoints and disarms the spectator. Where typically passing ends in surprise and disappointment, Rosa's pass sends Basil on the path to deviance. In Harris's novels, it is common that moments of crisis lead Basil on the path of unapologetic and uncontrolled sex and rash acts.

In Any Way the Wind Blows, Basil commits to the "freeway of lust" where he is going to be "sexing everybody, and the good ones twice." Rosa's rupture to Basil's masculinity produces a desire to re-affirm his manliness through lascivious sex. This, of course, leads to the earlier discussed episode with Bart. Following that sexual escapade, Basil sets out on other sexual

endeavors. Basil's sexual conquests, indeed, help move the narrative forward. However, such acts also shape the DL discourse and ultimately elicit a punitive gaze by those who are reading witnesses to his sexual adventures. Throughout the novel, he is continuously persecuted for his own "fleshly sin" by his own articulated guilt and various criticisms and accusations from others. Our (the readers') eyes constantly surveillance Basil's body in (sexual) motion. Our eyes are guided to not only persecute Basil, but also to be constantly titillated by his ability to "stunt" not one, but multiple individuals in one narrative episode. Within this novel, Basil's move between two sexual worlds is constructed as stunts—deceptive acts driven by individualistic impulses that work for his own self-gratification. Once again, because Basil is the *essential* DL character within the text, he performs the master narrative of black male discreet sexuality. In this case, this form of passing is understood as only able to produce problems, rather than numerous possibilities which include privacy and upward mobility within a racist, homophobic society.

In the end, according to Harris's plot graph, the only way Basil can redeem himself from his deviant (read: queer) behavior is to embrace heteronormativity—that voice which haunts him throughout the novel. With every female encounter, there is a deep desire to articulate his "comfort" with women. For example, in the chapter titled, "Breakfast at Tiffany's," he holds Tiffany and reflects on how much more comfortable he feels sleeping with her than when he was with Bart. These smaller episodes foreshadow the ultimate redemptive moment, which arrives when Rosa returns to disclose that she is, in fact, carrying Basil's child. Basil assures her that "we gon make this work for the baby." Initially, this comment may suggest that Basil may give up his "double life" for the sake of his child. However, as an avid reader, one knows that there are no Harris novels without the DL subject as the central figure. Therefore, Basil's comment

can be understood as a concern for the welfare of the child, his affirmation that he and Rosa will raise the child together. It is in the final chapter that Basil shares the true intent behind his original response to Rosa's admission that he is her "baby's daddy":

> When Rosa, with tears streaming down her face, passed Talley to me and I looked into the baby's face, I cried, but this time the tears that streamed down my face were tears of pride and joy. This crying thing ain't that bad after all. I know I might be alone again in my life, but I will never be lonely. The girl I've been waiting for has finally arrived. (342)

The melancholic tone underneath this passage strikes me as odd. On the one hand, it sounds like a sensitive, supportive dad who takes pride in seeing a part of himself in the world. On the other hand, however, the tone signifies a certain selfish fulfillment found in the birth of Basil's newborn child. He speaks as if he finally got the "thing" he always wanted. I am sure there is a hint of both. Nonetheless, in the frame of the novel, such a dramatic episode serves to redeem Basil in his own eyes. I am less certain, however, of the extent to which he is redeemed in the eyes of the reader. Indeed, by this point in the novel, Basil has lost most reader's favor, rendering this particular "Kodak moment" nothing short of disturbing.

This passage reveals that Basil, in his reproductive bliss, like the ex-coloured man, who presents his children as a major impetus for his final "pass." In Any Way the Wind Blows, Basil's daughter gives him the ammunition to abandon worldly confines, at least for the moment, and to perform ex-straight, being comfortable with whatever. As Basil states, in the close of the novel, "Any way the wind blows is fine with me." This final statement has double meanings. Of course, it is a gesture toward the idea that with his new-found love in his newborn daughter, nothing really matters. However, the statement also suggests that because he has performed the

penultimate act of heteronormativity—i.e., fathering a child—that he can be more comfortable with his sexual oscillation. In contrast to the ex-coloured man's decision to pass for white, Basil's choice is to remain queer. In this sense, Basil completely inverts dominant paradigms that deem queer as abnormal and non-queer as normal. Basil, the ex-straight man, may re-configure this structure, with his move out of queerness being read as an escape from that which he deems uncomfortable and unfairly mandated. On the flipside, his move into normalness is an arrival in a comfort zone where he can be a subject who controls, condemns, and owns desire. In this construction of the world, Basil can desire both men and women without shame. Indeed, this reading is generous and may possibly sound utopic. However, the ending suggests a utopic possibility, where the subject can potentially navigate, rather than pass, between identities. Here, Basil finds some normalcy in being queer, while at other moments finding queer those things society has deemed as "normal." This moment predicts a moment where "passing" is a historical construction of the move in and out of identity. Here, I am suggesting that Basil's desire to live as a man who happens to be bisexual, rather than as a man who "passes as straight," re-constructs our present narrative of identity. Unfortunately, ill-informed readings of sexual passing influenced by racial passing constructs, deems DL positionality as wholly problematic, rather than potentially instructive and even progressive in terms of dominant notions of sexuality. Our cultural subscriptions to the politics of visibility create unrealistic and unnatural expectations of sexual stability, rather than seeing the natural multiplicity amongst us. Consequently, we categorize sexual and racial multiplicitousnness as "passing," rather than performances of identities that are extensions of what we may think we already know.

"Passing for Straight," Aberrations in Black

When reading contemporary accounts of DL men and their "lifestyles," I am often struck by the many references to these men as "passing for straight." This consistent call back to "passing" as a historical-contemporary construct confirmed my intellectual suspicion that DL discourse is largely a combination of historical understandings of racial passing and Harris's pedagogy through his sexual passing novels. The construction of passing within historical and contemporary public rhetoric clearly contributes to broader conceptualizations about sexual passing subjects. July and August 2004 issues of Essence magazine, which contained a two-part "report" entitled, "Passing for Straight" and "Deadly Deception," respectively, are two examples that illustrate the impact of such constructions on a very narrow and limited understanding of the sexual passing subject, now understood in black society as the "DL brotha." Yet, the classification of "brotha" is misleading and disguises the marginalizing tendency of black press in their discussions of black male discreet performances of (bi) sexuality.

Jeffrey Weeks in his text, Inventing Moralities: Sexual Values in the Age of Uncertainty argues that society's ambivalence toward uncertainty creates great anxiety over sexual values (28-34). In many ways this explains the overwhelming demonization of DL men within the black public sphere, as well as mainstream presses—the DL confounds the certainty that has become traditionally attached to heterosexuality.[45] This historic tradition of understanding heterosexuality as a stable production has produced great angst over the presence and pronouncement of any sexual performance that would suggest sexual instability. Tracy Vaughn's reminder that "whenever there is a seeming crisis in some assumed stable category, passing figures appear in discourse—and public anxiety prevails," becomes most insightful.[46] The truth

of Weeks and Vaughn's claims are recognizable in many contemporary texts addressing the down low and sexual passing. For my purposes here I shall examine a contemporary exposé on black men who "pass for straight" in Essence magazine's two-part series in the July-August issues.

The first report in Essence covering the seemingly ubiquitous subject of the "down low," is literally entitled "Passing for Straight." This "report" introduces a discussion group appropriately hosted by E. Lynn Harris, framed as one of two popular "experts" on the DL,[47] and a resident reporter for Essence magazine. This article begins with an attempt by the authors to historicize the DL beyond the present. Yet, their efforts are undermined by the "beware: they are still here" tone with which the article is imbued. Such a discursive combination discounts not only the role of history in the lives of these black men for the sake of moral panic, but also shapes the discussion around deception rather than navigation. With this intention, the second report is entitled "Deadly Deception" and addresses the dangers of the "fatal secret" that DL men carry when they "sleep with other men." Here, like most discussions of the DL subject, there is a reduction of male-male sex to disease prone behavior. Together, these reports are responding to a crisis of male shortage and the predominance of unstable sexuality amongst black men, not to mention the coupling of this crisis with disease. The mythologized direct relationship between HIV and the down low serves to explain a long ignored cycle of disproportionate rates of infection within African-American communities.[48] Yet, it is important here to highlight how disease is called upon to incite community awareness, while also distilling community homophobia. While such reports do make reader's more conscious of HIV and move these specific health concerns beyond the historical "gay men's disease" paradigm, it also encourages

homophobia and comments that become central to popular angst about these men who "pass as straight."

These "reports" are important in my discussion of passing for several reasons. First, as the report utilizes the term "passing for straight," it calls attention to the connection between race and sexual passing. This article demonstrates the ways that historical tropes of "passing" have made their way into contemporary discourses. As explained earlier in this chapter, passing is often employed as a move toward a singular identity—to simply marking passing identity performances as artifice. The problematic logic of passing as almost always deceit creates a situation where this is the default analysis of the DL circumstance. In addition, the use of E. Lynn Harris as the "expert" facilitator of this dialogue with DL men—and indirectly with the female readership—is an invocation of all the cultural baggage that his books have brought into the DL discourse. In Harris's narratives and contemporary conversations on the sexual passing subject, claims that these men are putting on a "false identity," which serves to "dupe" rather than to deter stigma, becomes the dominant construction. Hence, this discussion of passing continues to excise the most important aspects of identity politics: the socio-political circumstances that warrant certain identifications. Because Harris's texts began as texts to entertain, rather than inform, his "DL men" are de-contextualized and re-called for the gaze of the Essence readers who may be familiar with his work. Thus, his role in the dialogue becomes pivotal to the reader's understanding of the conversation being performed on the printed page. Indirectly, and directly, Harris's presence and literary texts endorse a linear reading of DL men and consistently characterize the DL as always "deadly" and "deceptive." Consequently, what

may be potentially gained through reading the article closely is lost or reduced, as most readers have an established understanding of DL men and their practices.

When examining Part Two of the report entitled "Deadly Deception," we can see a direct attempt by Taigi Smith to salve black female anxieties, panic, and angst through invocation of "passing" for the purposes of critique rather than critical conversation. While the first part of Essence's report was a descriptive essay of the "illness" within the black community, this second look is the prescriptive section for those who have been affected by the "DL syndrome." Here, the author attempts to psychoanalyze DL participants and their behavior and provide "new rules of engagement" for black women in what she calls "these confusing times in African-American history" (Smith 148).[49] Consistent with Essence's "mission for the women" politics, this article provides a salve for black women's anxiety, but mis-recognizes what is essentially the force that is at the core of black male secrecy. Together, these "reports" are not reports at all. Instead, they are continuations of misled investments in understanding passing as "fakery," suggesting that we may still be embracing modernist notions of identity. Thus, the postmodernist view of the sexual subject may be better equipped to handle performances of sexuality that are more fluid, evolving, and not racially specific.[50] The presence of the DL and other alternative ways of being in the world demand that we must account for the multiplicitous nature of all communities. Rather than continue to embrace "passing" as a way to describe the move between identities, we may want to consider the present as a "post-passing" moment— where such a description for managing identity may be too historically loaded to be useful. If we understand this moment as an "age of uncertainty" or a "postmodern" moment, identity is always fluid and thus, "passing" as a

functional operation is deemed obsolete. In this equation, we are all postmodern subjects moving between identities that are never stable or fully coherent.

Indeed, DL men are not conventionally straight. However, the circulation and invocation of this maxim "passing for straight" marks a significant component to the DL discursive construction. Essence's report "Passing for Straight," and other texts on the DL topic, easily call these men "closeted homosexuals," "gay," and "bi-sexual." Why do we attribute so much elasticity to queer categories, but limit the expansiveness of "straight?" If DL men are doing "straight" majority of their lives—and most people identify them as such—then isn't their predominant performance heterosexual? The fact is that most DL men do not identify, mingle with, or even often associate with "gay" individuals. Therefore, it is odd that these men are often placed in relationship to this sexual category. However, when DL men do identify with queer social settings, why are there no claims that they are "passing as gay?" Here, the logic suggests that "straightness" is equated with fixedness and is deemed a pure form, while gayness is framed as a tainting presence that is eternally stigmatizing. Nonetheless, at best it seems most appropriate to consider DL men as practicing "bi-sexuals." "Gay" and "homosexual" seem to be inaccurate and unfair descriptors, as these associations of DL men with gayness, connect these men with more marginal identities and further away from so-called categories of normality. Such ability to box DL men in with the "decadent homosexual" comes with great rewards to those who are attempting to maintain their sexual purity and normality, while enforcing the sexual hierarchy which has homophobia at its base. In addition, associating DL men with gay men delimits the possibility for heterosexuality to be considered queer, or deviant. Largely, it seems that Harris's character Yancey Braxton, Basil's ex-fiancé, may have been a symbolic

representation of the larger society and its treatment of all that lies outside normative sexuality. Her individual use and popular installations of "gay" to describe Basil, and subsequently DL men, simplifies more complicated notions of sexuality—such as bisexuality—where the definitions are often blurred between desires and actions. Yancey, like other readers of DL performances of sexuality, are often too uncomfortable with more complicated, dare I say honest constructions of identity, finding it easier to situate these men in what may seem more legible sexual categories.

Many who criticize the DL attempt to make use of the more visible, popular, and coherent identity of "gay," in order to more easily lump these men in a category that has been marked intelligible and readable. Interestingly, the public ambivalence over the DL subject clearly reveals that coherency and continuity is largely absent from the discourse. In fact, the "crisis" and "anxiety" over the DL are the result of what many can't interpret, read, or understand about men's travels across sexual borders. Yet, the employment of "passing for straight" suggests that these men are impostors who borrow identity for their own benefit and discard the border that marks who does and does not belong in the "straight" community. Therefore, ascribing the term "gay" to describe DL men's sexuality frames these men as outside of black cultural belonging, while placing them inside a sexual identity that has been historically depicted as "other." Here, through the naming of those who want to remain unnamed, Taigi Smith attempts to give visibility to the decidedly invisible. This move, coupled with the claim that DL men are impostors, re-affirms what Blackmer notes about the major difference between racial and sexual passing— that is, in general, it is difficult for blacks to pass as white, but

gays/lesbians are often able to pass for straight because they are always already assumably heterosexual until proven otherwise.

This reality in post-segregated civil-rights America significantly explains the anxiety over sexual passing. Herein lies the problem of naming. The naming of subjects as "heterosexual," or the verbal claim of this identity, sets spectators' expectations. The challenge of naming, as Gayatri Spivak has made clear, is that "names we are given are not anchored in identities, but rather secure them" (53). So whereas racial passing, or re-naming ourselves, was thought to confuse, confound, and corrupt white society's optic accuracy—the sexual passer (DL man) mystifies certain coherent, comfortable sexual securities. What is most striking in Blackmer's passage is how he recognizes that people both choose to pass, or are named heterosexual. In Essence's discussion group, it is this naming that prompts a participant named Jason to exclaim, "…understand that my sexuality is not all I am …don't label me this bisexual bogeyman" (210). His pleading for people to see beyond his sexuality calls attention to the saliency of this issue in society and the ability for sexual postionality to become the totality of one's being. Through his admission of being labeled "bogeyman," Jason highlights how DL men are thought to be ghosts—deviants lurking in the shadows of HETEROSEXUAL BLACK AMERICA. "Passing for Straight" attempts to expose the "bogeyman" through an "open" dialogue. I argue that in the context of the agenda-driven setting, at the self-proclaimed gay author's dining room table, these men are indeed "passing for straight up." (?) Due to ample editing, tailor-made questions, and the minimal opportunity for sustained commentary by any one participant, the information obtained is extremely generic. This report serves as another shallow introduction not only to the down low, but also as a reductive summation of sexual passing in the context of contemporary society.

Indeed, "Passing for Straight" re-introduces black women and other readers to the DL as a subject of inquiry, but does not effectively inquire into DL subjectivity.

In Essence's second report "Deadly Conception," DL men move from "passers" to "liars." Here, Taigi Smith explains that her report seeks "to explore why men on the down low view dishonesty as survival." The deception here is that the "dishonesty" is the source of survival. Historically and in the contemporary moment, as I have argued earlier, passing has acted as "struggles over racial (or sexual) representation in a context of the radical unreliability of embodied appearances" (Wald 6). Yet, in this report there seems to be a conflation between passers and liars. This collapse signifies a presence of what Patricia Hill Collins has called a "past in the present" performance—where this contemporary text appropriates historical treatment of passing identities by reducing them to falsehood. While there is truth that often passers are dishonest, as they selectively edit information about their multiple identities, "liar" connotes an act of violence with no reasoning. The ex-coloured man's fiancé's alarm and anxiety in Autobiography was heightened because she was blind to the impact that racial constraints placed on individuals with multi-racial backgrounds who appeared aesthetically white. Likewise, this article and several other critics of the down low suffer from the same blindness. Those who simply charge DL men as liars, or deceptors, seem to possess a selective amnesia about the socio-political climate of queer sexual agents in a homophobic and heterosexist society. The term liar is too reductive, as the truth of DL men's sexual doubleness is neither socially acceptable, or without consequence. Such assessments of the DL, denies the social reality of both the larger black and white communities, as they promote and privilege a respectable heteronormativity that does not include a queer subjectivity.

Taigi Smith speaks in the voice of the collective "we," demonstrating that she knows her concerns are those of many black women.[51] This brings me to the problem of much of DL discourse, which I will return to in more detail later: the emphasis placed on the impact of the DL on black women leads to a very limited and incomplete discussion about sexual passing, and the DL in general. In fact, I argue that this discursive focus tells us more about black women and their cultural concerns than about DL men. As Taigi Smith laments on the new issues facing "African-American history," her hyperbolic call reveals a growing anxiety amongst black women caused by their absence from our history. As Essence considers passing as a part of African-American history, sexual passing is situated as dangerous in the age of HIV and sexually transmitted disease. However, as a brother said in "Passing as Straight," "the issue is cheating." These articles, and many similar writings for mostly female readerships, reveal that homophobia and the conjoining of HIV with male-male sex are as pervasive amongst women as with men.

When Taigi Smith attempts to appropriate a neo-liberalist stance on sexuality as she remarks that gay men and gay sex is often imbued with "shame and stigma," she follows up with a poor psychoanalytic assessment of "why now more black men are having sex with other men." Her answer? The "over-sexualization" of American culture: sexual images of video girls, women shaking their booties, and sex set to music. While I can see how these things could possibly "desensitize" men to sex with women, in this complicated web we call sexual desire, such an assessment for the general population of black men seems quite absurd ,particularly in a context where such sexual imagery serves as the impetus for male-female attraction, or at least conversations which erotically address what the eye consumes. Put simply, her claims seem short-sighted when one looks ethnographically at what images are privileged by black men and

also what conversations (in barbershops, gas stations, public streets) men engage. This article seems to suggest that passing is an easy choice. Indeed, the leading of a "double life" may sound appealing aurally; it is, however, a physical and logistical nightmare. This reality continues to be unacknowledged in all constructions of DL men as dangerous sexual passers. Taigi Smith, in her commitment to black female health and safety, denies black DL men the care and consideration necessary to fully understand their sexual subjectivity, or even the "true" ethos involved in their passing performances.

Together, "Passing for Straight" and "Deadly Conception," offers little more than dangerous information for the reading public. Passing, for these authors, is always an act of betrayal. Each article assumes a specific intentionality by the passer—to deceive those who are witnesses to their everyday lives. Neither article addresses the role of the spectator's vision in establishing if, or if not, a subject passes. For example, is it the DL man's fault that we continue to understand race, gender, class and sexuality according to visible traits that we believe are guarantees? The articles also suggest that the passing is the culprit for the outcome of high rates of HIV-infection amongst black women. Is it not the act of "unprotected sexual activity between the DL man and his female partner" that creates such tragic circumstances?[52] Because these and many other articles are more fascinated by simplistic understandings of passing, more sophisticated and productive conversations about identity, passing, and spectators are often elided within contemporary interpretations. Unconsciously, there seems to be a reproduction through discourse, of the cultural situation that produces the necessity for men to live "down-low." As the public continues to embrace linear notions of sexuality, consume linear fictional narratives, and misunderstand passing as a performance of fakery, the DL will remain a secret.

As passing is a performance always in motion, it is only through the engagements with actual bodies and texts that we can best understand how subjects navigate racial and sexual lines. Indeed, my reading of these sexual passing performances is informed by the history of racial passing in the U.S. context. This allows for a more nuanced reading of how people perform as sexual passing subjects, as well as locates the origin of how they are interpreted by society. I understand the DL as not only a contemporary manifestation of the passer in sexual terms, but also as a subject who refutes notions of sexual purity and stability—while attempting to balance his multiple identities. Nonetheless, the pedagogy of historical approaches and contemporary representations of passing play a significant role in how we understand sexual passing, and particularly, the DL. In this next chapter, I trace the representation of the DL male within media—an extension of the mythologies constructed within the literary traditions of passing novels.

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Chapter 3:

Yo Daddy's Dysfunctional: Risk, Blame, and Necessary Fictions in Down Low Discourse

...the statistics—figures—regarding HIV infection are fraught with complications, not merely because they are changing so rapidly, but because they have an uncanny way of slipping into figuration. This means two things: on the one hand, these numbers seem to lift off the page and signify to us something other than literal, living, dying men and women. On the other hand, they are often read too literally—as representing the "reality" of a situation that is in fact much more complex, and implicates many more people.—Barbara Browning[53]

We have to get used to these anxieties, this mathematics of probability intruding into our intimate concerns, this bogus objectivity, this coding of risks in our present culture. If anyone ever thought that the complex coding of taboos was more restrictive, the work of the modern safety officer should give them pause.—Mary Douglas[54]

In a candid conversation at Starbucks coffee, a 27 year old black woman told me that, "there is so little information out here on *these* (DL) men, that *anything* seems helpful." It is the search for and acceptance of "anything" that seems to guide public consumption of discursive material around the "down low" (DL). As the DL arose out of media texts as a sexual nomenclature, it became the new buzz word for racially deviant sexuality—the blame for the rising spread of HIV/AIDS—a product of "spectacular consumption."[55] In the course of a year, the DL moved from being the ironic, contradictory, and paradoxical hip-hop "homo-thug" of simple intrigue, to the linchpin in the 2001 report that black women comprised 64% of all new HIV/AIDS cases amongst U.S. women.[56] Somehow, the previously unknown "homo-thug" was pegged as the culprit of transmission, and "Brothas on the Down Low" became the metonym for the new plague within many black houses. In other words, as the discourse transitioned from a more oxymoronic term (homo-thug) to one from within the black vernacular (down low, or DL), there was more attention given to how these men allegedly infected and endangered black women, as well as threatened the imagined stability of black heteronormativity. This threat to

black women—and particularly the black heterosexual, often middle-class family— issued an alarm that would spark articles in almost every major news press in this country (*USA Today, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, St. Louis Dispatch)*, black magazines (*Essence, Ebony, Jet)*, as well as mainstream television (*ER, Law & Order, Girlfriends)*, including the incomparable *Oprah Winfrey Show*. As discursive interests spread throughout the country, the myth that the DL threatened to infect all facets of black life spread concomitantly. The possibility for media to propel a myth of DL ubiquity and contagion speaks to the power of discourse in the construction of not only social fear, but also social drama. For this reason, this chapter concerns itself most with the particular myths constituted within the circulation of DL discourse.

While the last chapter looked closely at the genealogy of DL performance through a comparative examination of racial and sexual passing, here I explore the DL in its contemporary manifestations. Specifically, how the consequence, or punishment, for contemporary sexual passing performance is constructed in terms of disease. This construction of the "new black phenomenon," as the blame for the disheartening and startling HIV/AIDS rates, is not only a response to the fear that black women are at high risks, but also that the health of the black family is being threatened, once again.[57] Most importantly, this defense of family rhetoric appropriates the narrative of dysfunctionality, historically ascribed to black women, and inscribes this fiction upon black male bodies. This so-called discursive strategy frames black men irresponsible figures within a heterosexual sphere; thus, in some ways rewarding black women, while punishing black men.[58] Whereas, the Moynihan report attributed much of the detriment of the black family to black women playing "untraditional" roles, in a moment of

perceived high black female mobility, it is easy to flip this narrative—using the DL as an example of how black men destroy black families.

I first realized this reconfiguration of the destruction of black family narrative, in the DL context, when I encountered a privately produced DL targeted "outreach" poster. The "prevention" poster, which included an image of a smiling young black girl, about five-years old, with her chin resting on her knuckles (as if thinking), read "YOU HURT MY MOMMY!: It's more than just about you , Always Practice Safer Sex" in bold print. Beyond the problematic use of a young pre-pubescent girl in the service of sexual welfare, the poster spoke loudly to, and pointed directly at men who infected black women via heterosexual sex. The young girl speaks on behalf of the mother, as an innocent, yet personal representative of the mother's "hurt"—a result of the black man's, or her daddy's, dysfunctional behavior. Here, the narrative of the father acting out recalls not only a historical understanding of black men's natural inclination toward deviance, but suggests an intent to do harm to black women. The young girl's body is used as a tactic to invoke empathy and sympathy, and a punitive gaze from those who identify with her concern for her "mommy," while also sympathizing with her obscure awareness of what daddy did to mommy.

However, one of the most problematic components of this construction is how it assumes that DL men are selfishly ("it's about more than you") acting out their sexual desire, without concern or care for the women that they may, or may not, be involved with. In addition, it presumed that DL men have kids and participate in heterosexual sex. Largely, this is representative of the DL discourse most generally. This representation has become the template of the DL type: a black man who has sex with men, who lies to his wife/girlfriend, putting them

at risk for sexually transmitted diseases. This poster is emblematic of how DL discourse, and various other "official" discourses, are highly informed by the mythologies and historical constructions surrounding black men's sexual behaviors and historical constructions, rather than the DL men's socio-sexual realities. As the subtitle of this chapter suggests, "risk, blame, and necessary fiction" are at the center of DL discourse. For this reason, this chapter is organized to illuminate how "risks" and "threat" are constructed as media engage in reading DL men's culture; the role of blame (and shame) as a (dis)empowering technique for those who enter DL discourse in search of power, or "mission-work";[59] ultimately, this discourse— predicated upon the misconstruction of risk and threat— relies upon the necessary fiction of black women as non-agents and passive victims, who are solely the recipients of black men's disease and pathology. Together, these demonizing inscriptions upon the black male body mark him and the larger black community, dysfunctional—substantiating the urgency of a moral and health crisis.

Indeed, DL discourse explains more about the working ideologies amongst consumers of DL discourse, than the complex network of male subjects who engage same-sex desire "down low." In this way, the thirst for any possible knowledge about this "new (sexual) phenomenon," is akin to the common excitement over anything representatively black. As the DL subject has arisen out of a media context, as well as been sustained within this domain, the so-called DL phenomenon can more aptly be understood as what John Fiske calls a "media event," in which "we can no longer rely on a stable relationship between a 'real event' and its mediated representation" (2). The DL has been constructed as a new phenomenon—a construction I challenge in all parts of this project—while also being framed as the "major vector of HIV/AIDS contagion within the black community" (Browning 12). Important here, is that neither claim has

ever been empirically or socially substantiated. Indeed, the DL story is not simply a representation, but "has its own reality" (Fiske 2). This narrative is a summation of historic understandings of sexualized black bodies, contemporary mythologies around disease and contagion, as well as a by-product of certain perpetuations of hysteria by those who understand themselves as the "safety officers" of the black community, and more often black women's bodies. While there are some differences between black and dominant media coverage of the DL, in terms of perspective, much of the representation acts like ready-made press material, constructing a slightly modified version of black men acting out. As Elizabeth Alexander suggested in a public lecture on December 2003 at Northwestern University, the collaborative agreement between black and white understandings of "blackness" is a sign of the times—a moment where "black doubt" may be an enemy which stands on the side of white superiority.[60]

At the core of DL representation is the need to make sense of the seemingly hyper-presence of disease; DL men provide a convenient sense of clarity and a body upon which we can inscribe blame. In the epigraph which begins this chapter, anthropologist Mary Douglas clearly predicts the moment of down low frenzy that now preoccupies much of media's discussions of HIV/AIDS within the black community. Sexuality outside of heterosexuality is, still indeed, a taboo subject in American society. Sexual taboos undeniably facilitate and encourage comfort in more normative sexualities, pushing all outside performances to the margins in order to retain some kind of moral center. Consequently, when non-heterosexual relationships are placed at the margins, they are removed from having the cultural intelligibility that is often associated with normative sexuality. As a result, many rely on the decoding of sexual taboos by those whom they believe to have greater knowledge, or authority, in terms of

discussing sexuality and its complexities. In the case of DL men—or any performance of non-normative sexuality—media, health officials, and self-appointed "experts" (modern safety officers) are too often the generators of inaccurate and incomplete explanations of queer sexual presences for the general public. Most pointedly, media and its texts is often accepted as *the* authority on issues of sexuality, removing the power from the voice of the actual sexual subject, neglecting more nuanced discussions of the socio-cultural aspects of our constructions of sexual identities. Instead, DL discourse provides a necessary fiction which attempts to reconcile the enigmatic nature of the sexual uncertainty within our society. Public and official discourse, in this case, work in tandem to explicate not only what constitutes the DL, but also how it functions in relationship to what is often thought to be the sexually certain—heterosexuality. Often, we use the ideological tools given by history and contemporary constructions of blackness to do what Ronald Jackson II has referred to as "scripting the black body" (pg. number only). Here, the DL is scripted not only with the cultural baggage of the demonized and dangerous male of yesterday, but the threat to the future of black community well-being.

This chapter looks closely at the rhetorical implications of media discourse around the DL—how the black male body is scripted—the dual effect of media representation on hetero-homo constructions of community. I am interested in the seemingly insistent effacing of the complexity of sexuality, for the sake of uncovering the potential mystery of HIV/AIDS' rapid growth in Black America. Media, and even state agencies, enact three violences in their public renderings of the "official" DL narrative: 1) as the DL is labeled a new BLACK phenomenon, which is dangerous and a spin-off of the homo-THUG, it unfairly constructs black queer, and non-queer, men as being sexually irresponsible, peculiar, criminal, and generally dysfunctional;

2) when the rising HIV/AIDS rates amongst black women are placed as central to public inquiry, black women are positioned as convenient conduits for demonizing black men—enabling continued gender tensions between black men and women—while framing women as being simple "victims" of black male sexuality; and 3) when emphasis is placed on both the lack of "outness" amongst DL men and the "heightened homophobia" within black communities, an image of black people as unreasonably backwards and socially underdeveloped emerges—without giving recognition of racism's effects in static constructions of blackness. Acknowledging such possibilities, this section of the dissertation engages "critical pedagogy," which Douglas Kellner explains in Media Culture as a pedagogy that:

> …develops concepts and analyses that will enable readers and critically dissect the artifacts of contemporary media and consumer culture, help them to unfold the meanings and effects on their culture, and thus give individuals power over their cultural environment (10).

As I have engaged questions around DL men and their performances of sexuality, one of the most problematic tendencies amongst consumers and producers of discourse has been the lack of scrutiny given to source material, as well as the case studies used within quasi-documentary narratives. This chapter re-reads the discourse in a historical context, understanding how, as Patricia Hill-Collins puts it, "the past is ever present….The new racism relies heavily on the manipulation of the ideas within mass media" (54). Rather than seeing the construction of the DL as an extension of black male criminalization, much more attention has been given to the intent, ethics, and behaviors of the DL subject. As one woman told me, "I wish these men would just come from down low, put it out-in front-and on the table!" For this reason, and many others, many women and men embrace circulating narratives of DL men as irresponsibly parading as

straight, while infecting "our sisters" with HIV/AIDS, often left to assume that the motive behind these men's secrecy is simple deception, without accounting for the socio-political circumstances of men of color, more generally.

Such conclusions are too simple, leading to reductive renderings of black male sexuality, as well as the complexities of HIV/AIDS transmission. Because DL men typically remain "down low," or choose discretion in terms of their (homo) sexual behavior, there is little opportunity to hear actual explanations for discreet sexual practices by DL men themselves. For this reason, the voice of the subject is often absent, leaving the general public to absorb information that reflects more about those who do the reporting, as well as their own anxieties around issues of sexual uncertainty, more than actually representing the population of men on the DL. Specifically, the construction of "disease might be read as a literalizing or making manifest of the social atrocities against those afflicted…here, gays, the urban poor, women of color…" (Browning 23).

In this sense, the dominant reading of the down low is an interpretation of absence. DL discourse attempts to give textuality to an inaccessible/invisible presence that is void of cultural recognition. This, in turn, produces more negative attitudes toward black men, facilitating intra-margin tensions, whereby "brothas" are always scrutinized and policed. As black women search for the "signs" of DL men—often finding nothing—they collect misleading data on DL men. I argue that this desire for *any* information, as well as the robust dissemination of "knowledge," has led many to embrace, and perpetually cycle incomplete narratives, which portend to provide greater clarity and valuable answers to those concerned about the "deadly" and "dangerous" deceptors. Through close readings of popular media texts and their constructions of the DL subject, I uncover the somewhat coded meanings that are inscribed within DL discourse. First,

through an examination of the shift in DL men's construction from "homo-thug" to "down low," I map and trace the residue of the "thug" representation, which I argue, is never detachable from its most recent manifestations in popular mediums. Second, I look closely at the emergence of a physical representation of the Down Low, through J.L. King, who provides a visual image and affirms highly scrupulous explanations for the presence and "prevalence" of DL men. Since the beginning of the Down Low media frenzy, James L. King has been a central figure in its momentum. As a self-proclaimed "DL Brotha," he "outed" the culture, and himself, to the public. Here, I am really interested in how black popular discourse makes use of, and relies on, what I call a "Messiah" mythology, as a mode of understanding King and his "knowledge" of community health issues. Third, I reevaluate the popular ethos of "save our women," which has become the central explanation for discussion around the "dreadful bisexual." Finally, I offer some examples of HIV/AIDS outreach in communities of color, as well as pose a challenge for cultural constructions of "queers of color" in terms of disease. Most importantly here, I argue that these contemporary portrayals of DL men recall historic laments of black men as poor fathers, always acting out, and leading to the wholly dysfunction of the black society. Similar to various representations of black women—where she is framed as the central problem within black families[61]—a new, working-class "monster"[62] has now invaded black familial territory, endangering all that has been gained post-civil rights—DL men.

From the "Homo-thug" to "Down Low": Constructing Black Sexual Deviance

The negro is eclipsed. He is made into a member. He is the penis. – Frantz Fanon[63]

To be an American Negro male is as to be a kind of walking phallic symbol; which means that one pays, in one's own personality, for the sexual insecurity of others.—James Baldwin[64]

As black men who have sex with other men, while sometimes maintaining relations with black women have received much public attention, their moniker "down low" (DL) is often discursively flipped to "low down" (LD). Generally, DL discourse offers contemporary representations whereby black men are reduced to what David Malebranche has called "a black weapon of mass destruction."[65] As discourse focuses on "the secret sex" black men have with other men, it only draws attention to how the black man functions sexually, ignoring the socio-cultural factors of DL life. Thus, the black man is reduced to how his penis performs in his everyday life, rather than how either socio-cultural forces act upon him (such as homophobia), or how he negotiates socio-cultural expectations or constraints. Yet, when journalists or so-called activists, do attend to such issues, they construct a picture of the black community as being peculiarly homophobic, or "backwards." For example, an April 22, 2002 St. Louis Post-Dispatch article explains that "homophobia -- the irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals— has deep roots throughout the world. But in America, the fear of ostracism may be greatest in the black community, where masculinity is especially prized" (Hollinshed A1). Such renderings juxtapose the "black community" against the larger American society, as a unique space which enacts homophobia at higher proportions. In the context of a post-Stonewall America, then, the black community becomes backward and "underdeveloped." It assumes a certain advancement in addressing homophobia and acceptance of homosexuality in other communities, while black communities appear committed to some age-old commitment to masculinity that is less present in other communities. While there is some merit to the centrality of masculinity in creating the necessity of the down low, this is not culturally-specific to black people. Nonetheless, this telling of the narrative in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, and many other newspapers and magazines across

the country, unfairly racializes the down low as always already black, not to mention "homosexual." In this way, the Fanon epigraph above is appropriate—as these men and their way of being in the world is eclipsed, while focus is placed on what they do with their penises and the dangers caused by them. Rather than viewing these men and their everyday encounters, we are presented with a fragment—penal activity—which acts as the representative "member" of black male dysfunction and destructiveness.

Long before the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, or the now popular Benoit Denizet Lewis's New York Times exposé of the DL, there were several media representations of black men who had sex with other black men, who allegedly pronounce a heterosexual identity. The initial conversation taking the "down low" as subject began exactly where it most likely will end—the black male as thug. [66] In July 2001, Malcolm Venable published an article in Vibe magazine which featured the "homo-thug," a descriptor for men on the DL in a hip-hop context. This presumably paradoxical nomenclature, "homothug," is as provocative as it is problematic; particularly, in a black socio-political economy that tells us that "there is no homo in hip-hop."[67] In this value system, hip-hop culture is at the center of the thug's life, while gay culture is often assumed to be its antithesis. Though the Vibe article's central focus is the "unmarked" heterosexuality of DL men that becomes possible through a stylized masculinity, its usage of "homo-thug" overpowers and reconfigures the potential possibilities for any critical exploration. The incorporation of such a loaded term, while potentially transgressive in its connection of seemingly disparate representations, highlights the discord between societal constructions of homosexuality and hip-hop. Consequently, as both homosexuality and thugism are often static within public imaginings, the transgressive possibilities for the presence of a "homo-thug"

dialogue is limited. The homosexual is largely (mis)understood as white and effeminate, while the thug is often (mis)interpreted as black and virulently masculine. Nonetheless, one may propose that if we understand hip-hop and homosexuality as polysemic entities, then we can see that the economy of hip-hop that makes room for a space where the homosexual and hip-hop are in conversation. As both respectively disrupt the normative structures of sexual and musical histories, they call forth a politics of resistance and dis-identification. In this way, hip-hop and homosexuality may be seen as two peas of the same pod. Thus, their meeting at the nexus of DL discourse seems more appropriate than odd-placed.

Vibe's introduction to the DL has largely framed the popular aesthetic that would become the prominent representational figure for DL men. Pitted above its large caption "A Question of Identity," the Vibe article begins with a photograph: black men, and a woman, dressed in hip-hop fashions, dancing asymmetrically, while postured in a way that suggests an identification with everything that is considered properly masculine within a hip-hop sphere. These men dance at the Warehouse, a once historical black gay club space in the South Bronx of New York City. Malcolm Venable emphasizes that we are "more likely to see them in rap videos, in music videos, or hanging out on the nearest corner of the hood" (100-101). While Venable's painting of these men as those in "rap videos" and living in the "hood" conjures all that is problematic and essentialist in many contemporary constructions of black hip-hop figures, it attempts to articulate how certain bodies are unexpected in identifiably queer spaces. The figure of the "unclockable" thug-like figure, in his malleability and inaccessibility to the larger public, has become the enabling device for more punitive discussions of DL men—rather than the middle-class affluent brothers who also participate in discreet performances of same-sex desire.[68] As a result, Vibe's

framing of the DL, the black male is often dressed in baggy clothes (read: hip-hop gear), which clearly associates him with a certain class of sexual deviancy. The "DL brother," in this article is never suited, or even dressed in Khaki's, but posed against the backdrop of hip-hop—a historical marker for the black poor, or working-class. Though this has been contested by several scholars, hip-hop apparel is still classed—though it is often appropriated by those who are not of the working-class. This classed character, the illusion of the "irresponsible" and "non-committal" thug enlivens the possibility for the pathologizing of black men. Here, in the context of "thugdom," the alleged deceit and harm of DL men toward black men and black women becomes more palpable. The career of the thug as a violent and deadly hip-hop icon inexplicitly explains the photographic images of the black male bodies clubbing in the shadows of their supposed heterosexual lives, engaging in criminal drug activity, "hating themselves," and participating in what is often understood as black sexual deviant acts.

In many ways, the coupling of hip-hop and queerness has accelerated the circulation of this "deviant" figure within media, as this "new" combination suggests that the presence of DL men within hip-hop space is, in itself, a new manifestation. As this performance of discreet sexuality has been predominantly located within the world of hyper-masculine hip-hop culture, it appears anomalous and is easily set apart from previous historical black cultural productions. Yet, as we reflect honestly upon history, we know this is a highly inaccurate and incomplete claim. Though the DL is new in terms of its mnemonic use, it is apart of a black queer genealogy,[69] as well as a historical tradition of controlling images whereby black men are reduced to the dysfunction—the acting out of their sexual instrument— rather than their negotiation of desire, queer or otherwise, often deemed "deviant" within a white racist, often classist, American imaginary.

In much of the DL discourse black men are reduced to their penises—the use of it, the misuse of it, and the danger of it. I argue that the prevalence of the DL within the hip-hop frame of the HOMOTHUG, constructs black men as class characters acting out through engagements in "risky" and irresponsible sex—giving greater traction to narratives of dysfunctionality and danger. Venable affirms such beliefs when he situates the "thug" within a specific lineage:

> A few of today's successful and popular rappers—DMX and LL Cool J for example—have that buffed, just-got-out-of-prison appeal. What some of the other leaders of the hip-hop pack may lack in gym body—Jay-Z, Mobb Deep, Master P, and Shyne come to mind—they make up for in general thuggishness. And if the scenes in social environments are any indication, young, gay, black men have mimicked their example. (104)

Here, Venable suggests that there is something not only about the anatomical structure and nonverbal presence of these men that speaks "thuggishness," but also excludes "young, gay, black men" from the creation of this aesthetic posturing. Vibe's construction of thug, here, works to affirm historical mythologies, while placing the DL within a construction which is always already loaded with criminality and danger; or, at least, construed as such in the re-telling in Vibe magazine.

What is missing in DL discourse, however, is the ways in which the so-called "thug" persona is often activated to simply stylize, or aestheticize, a brand of masculinity. Put simply, there is often an incongruous relationship between what one wears and what one "actually is." It seems most appropriate to initiate a critique of the thug as essentially black, as well as always constructed as necessarily violent, irresponsible, uncouth, and working-class. If we begin to understand the variant uses of the thug-aesthetic, we become better readers of what actually

occurs within this domain of discourse: black men are made deviant, only as much as our historical and mythological fantasies work to limit the possibilities of their performances of masculinity. Often, the thug-aesthetic is a strategic device used to command a certain amount of respect, or power, through an association with what may be understood as properly masculine. For example, when the main figure in the Vibe article, Malik, expresses his commitment to "doing things to prove [he's] a nigga" (102), he articulates the performative and powerful component of such aesthetics in the context of homophobic and masculinist surveillance. Here, Malik is engaged in somewhat of a strategic assimilation, whereby he uses a strategically essentialist representation for his own purposes. Malik's understanding of the DL embraces a central theme within hip-hop culture and queer politics, as he "articulates a sense of entitlement and takes pleasure in aggressive insubordination" (Rose 60). Yet, instead of reading between the lines, so to speak, the discourse continues to produce simpler, more linear notions of the "thug"—whereas this representation of the black masculine satisfies the need for a cohesive, though problematic, understanding of all that is wrong in the scene "down low."[70] Rather than understand DL men, in terms of how they understand themselves, this article is committed to circulating a new term in order to provide coherency for the reader. The general reading of the "thug" in this article does not examine what lies beneath the aesthetic of both the space of the club, or the clothes worn by DL men. Instead, it refuses to engage in a discussion about an exotic other who does "gay" in thug-apparel. The invocation of Baldwin's epigraph above, as well as the out-set of the Vibe article, speaks loudly. While I believe Malcolm Venable's use of Baldwin in Vibe speaks directly to the pains and pitfalls of black men satisfying dominant notions of the properly masculine, I believe he missed the most important component of this quote. Baldwin

appears to engage in double-speak, as he insinuates how men "pay" in order to attain power and appease the gaze of others. Indeed, the image of DL men as homo-thugs, then, is less a confirmation of their subscription to the hip-hop masculinist, homophobic regime; but, more accurately, a symbolic script used by these black queer men to access power in a world that compensates them for the propensity to "violently act out" (hooks 57).

I recognize, however, that the previous reading does not make interesting headlines. While readers are more attracted to provocations of fear, writers have much to gain from the construction of crisis (Altheide 11). Indeed, DL discourse conjures fear through the construction of the black male thug, while also creating a sense of crisis by locating the origin of rising HIV/AIDS rates within one group of men who sleep with men. When I began this project a few months after the Vibe article, the DL was literally "down low." Within months, it not only piqued my interest, but emerged as a site of media attention throughout the nation. However, over the next few years, DL discourse would serve to produce more questions than provide working solutions. Between 2001-2003, several articles appeared in print media that continued in the trend of shaping the fear of HIV/AIDS "risks," and pointing blame down low—through various forms of tracing the unrecognizable, but present sexual "thug" endangering the black community, distorting HIV/AIDS facts and statistics, and reducing the DL to a simplistic subcategory of underdeveloped gay black men. Though it is impossible here to recount the many essays that were written on the topic between 2001-2003, it seems instructive to highlight some writings that are quite representative of this trend in the larger discourse to provoke fear, at the risk of demonizing not only DL men, but black men generally.[71]

On July 23, 2001, Jet magazine published an article entitled "Why AIDS Is Rising Among Black Women," which attributed the increase in HIV/AIDS rates to DL men. The article focused on a central female figure who contracted HIV in 1991 during a pre-DL moment. In an Essence magazine article problematically titled "Men Who Sleep With Men: AIDS Risk to African American Women," published in October 2001, Tamela Edwards attempts to make sense of the rise of HIV/AIDS through unraveling the possibilities and practicality of DL men being the sole carriers of HIV into the black community. Though she makes a strong effort to complicate the traditional narrative through scrutinizing popular discourses of "blame," her title alone points the finger not only toward DL men, but all men who have sex with other men. This disconnect, between her goal and her rhetoric, is symbolic of something highly significant, yet commonly elided when examining the discourse: rhetoric often doesn't match intended meaning. While DL men are often constructed as "dreadful bisexuals," they are also simply reduced to dangerous "men who have sex with other men." In this logic, the sex between men is constructed as the "risk-factor" and the blame for disease. Here, DL discourse has great implications for its implicit threat to any potential gains in terms of black hetero-homo sexual relationships. Though Tamela Edwards, in her article, admits the problem is unprotected heterosexual sex—in terms of the high rates amongst heterosexual women—she is unclear as to whether the issue is "men having sex with other men," or "men having unprotected sex with other men and their wives." I argue that the opacity in her construction illustrates her own ambivalence. For while the central concern propagated by media is black women's health and safety, the undergirding theme is that men who have sex with other men are inherently dangerous and deviant.

Interestingly, the main narrative in Tamela Edward's Essence article, which acts as a case study for how DL men "spread" HIV, is a woman who supposedly was married to a man, had children, and was never infected. While this demonstrates the tension around homoerotic possibilities by self-proclaimed heterosexual men, it does not substantiate any evidence of HIV-infection as a result of his acts. Likewise, a Los Angeles Times article, published December 7, 2001, pathologizes black men in prison as having an almost natural connection to the down low, but does not provide any examples where such speculations that this is at the center of HIV-transmission amongst black women have been solidified. As Keith Boykin informs us in his book, Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America, "After a year of media hype in 2001, the media could not produce a single example of a man on the down low, who had recently given HIV to his female partner" (105). He later goes on to explain that the actual HIV/AIDS statistics were potentially too "boring" and "complicated" for the general public; whereas, the DL provided an easy target.[72] Boykin then adds that between 1991 and 2001, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's 2001 report, there had only been a 3% increase in the number of black women who contracted HIV/AIDS from heterosexual sex—a minor increase considering that only 1.6 % of those women admitted bisexual sex as a possible means (107). This reading corroborates with the research and findings of Greg Millett and Dr. David Malebranche, who have spent much time examining both DL discourse and public health implications. Millet and Malebranche argue that "few studies of MSM (men who have sex with men) recruit sufficient samples of men of color or collect information on bisexual activity to properly evaluate the level of risk that bisexual men pose to women in minority communities" (52S). With no real substantive evidence, but a circulation of articles and blurry images of DL

men, the face of the AIDS victim became the black woman, while the criminal agent, or victim, became not only the enigmatic DL man, but all men who have sex with other men.

Though the aforementioned media attention was important in the construction of the DL, particularly within black communities, its momentum became most prominent in an August 3, 2003 New York Times Magazine article. The front cover of the magazine was almost predictable, its caption reading "Living (and Dying) on the Down Low: Double Lives, AIDS, and the Black Homosexual Underground."[73] Not only did the first NYT magazine, which looked closely at the lives of black men who have sex with other men, position their discussion within the context of AIDS, but called back to the "homo-thug." On the front cover, underneath the caption emblazoned in white bold lettering, we witness an extremely problematic urban setting. Two black men face each other, standing between two older vehicles, in front of a crackled wall--staring at each other, dressed in so-called hip-hop gear. Both men place their hands in their pockets, a suggestion of closedness, yet the stare operating to signal desire, or interest. Placed below the larger font "DOWN LOW," these two bodies—though not clearly recognizable—are representations of DL men. While the static dress code poses questions, the lack of clear recognition is clearly an apt, yet strategic, choice. The Down Low, up to this point, has no face—except the images that are conjured within the American imaginary when black men are posed as "thugs," criminals, and painted as silhouettes in the background of the queer club space.

Inside the NYT magazine, is French, gay journalist Benoit Denizet-Lewis's article, which attempts to better explain the image on the front cover. This article, titled "Double Lives on the Down Low," begins with somewhat of a definition, with the tone of an elegy:

To their wives and colleagues, they're straight.

To the men they are having sex with, they're forging an exuberant new identity.

To the gay world, they're kidding themselves.

To health officials, they're spreading AIDS in the black community. (28)

First, it is important to note how the NYT magazine article, whose patrons are largely middle-upper class and white, begins with the discussion of "wives and colleagues." Unlike the earlier Vibe magazine, it quickly addresses the audience who it serves most frequently. Consequently, I argue that the discussion here begins with an attention on the infiltration of the DL within middle-class communities. This moment is worth noting, as this article prompted what I call the "mainstreaming of the DL"—making its entrance into larger public discourse. As I will discuss later, this article not only became the sort of biblical text for popular understandings of the down low, but also began a cycle of attention by way of other newspaper and magazine articles, television shows, and public discussions. Nonetheless, the residue of the "homo-thug" past always seems to inadvertently find its way within DL discourse. As this introductory poem/elegy/news report gives a sense of urgency to the DL topic, it operates as a signal of crisis, as well as a device to captivate interest. In this passage, DL men are constructed as men masquerading as "straight"—participating in a grotesque drag—which brings forth the presence of disease within the "black community." It is this latter concern that makes the DL a strange bedfellow within the NYT magazine. In the context of this magazine, a cover story discussing black men who have sex with other men is a historical phenomenon within itself. What makes the NYT magazine, after all these years of silence on the topic of black queer men, publish an article about the DL? What work does this supposed problematic DL subject perform that sparks more interest than gay black men? I believe, in this upper-middle class media context, it

alleviates this reading public of having to be accountable for the disproportionate rates of HIV/AIDS within the black community. Specifically, this article distracts us from the realities of the disparaging amount of health care treatment and prevention methods geared toward minorities, in general. Instead, it refocused our attention as it situates black men in a position of blame—as the new "vectors of contagion" for HIV/AIDS. Whether conscious or unconscious, such representations within popular media provide a moment where white men can define themselves against black men—as having more courage, strength, and progression (in terms of sexual freedom/safety). Such affirmations negate the strength of these black men, in order to affirm the place of not only white middle-class, heterosexual men, but also the lives of those who are white and queer. As is common in discourses that take HIV/AIDS as its nucleus, this article participates in the tradition of locating new "risk groups, a community of pariahs" (Sontag 25). In the popular and highly regarded NYT magazine, this article could further re-construct the face of HIV/AIDS as being everything but white and/or gay, reinforcing the circulation of blame placed upon the black and sexually deviant.

Benoit Denizet-Lewis's NYT article did everything *but* veer away from the sexiness of the "thug," as he paints a scandalous picture of two lives of DL men—one that involves dishonesty with women and the other that involves unsafe, unapologetic practices with men. By his title, one may assume, as with many articles written about the DL, that the conversation would include the "double" lives that DL men lead, as they travel in and out of homo and hetero-normative spaces. Such a text would undoubtedly explore how DL men negotiate travel, cleverly and strategically, between two distinct, but often overlapping cultural spaces—heterosexual and "queer" communities, particularly examining the language employed within specific spaces, and

perhaps the impact of DL presence on the social climate of certain institutions. However, such negotiations are rarely discussed or pursued in this article, or media discourses surrounding the DL more generally. Instead, we see another representation of the black male sexual subject as both deviant, deceptive, and down-right irresponsible. Unlike most articles, with a central location of interests, Denizet-Lewis travels across the country. This approach, of course, allows him to implicitly map the presence of DL men nationally, rather than locally. While this might offer a comparative viewpoint, which could illustrate the heterogeneity within DL populations, this article further homogenizes this group. As he travels from place to place, he makes no assessment of how geography changes the expressions of race, masculinity, or sexuality. Rather, he provides a sort of filmic pan across the nation—"framing blackness (and queerness)" as always already deviant and, thus, in need of white surveillance and explication. After all, as a young, white female scholar-friend told me, until the Denizet-Lewis article, "there had never been a sustained study of DL men across this country." While this may be the longest article written about this topic, it neither sustains a consistent reading of any one particular scene, nor does it provide critical insights as to what is happening in terms of disease in the black community and DL men's negotiations of sexual identity. This article, like much of popular discourse, participates in the exoticization of black sexuality, in order to perpetuate fantasy and deem the black male body as a site of sexual intrigue and disgust, simultaneously.

This trend to exoticize is most obvious as we follow Denizet-Lewis at the start of the article, into a Cleveland bathhouse called *Flex*. This space is one riddled with negative historical baggage, as it is often thought of as one of the first institutions implicated as one of the birth sites of the American AIDS epidemic. Beginning the conversation here, right after the public service

announcement opening, solidifies speculations that DL men are frequent travelers in what was once, and arguably still is, considered a haven of HIV/AIDS transmission. Throughout this article, the author exoticizes the life of these men, while implicating them as almost conscious criminals who purposely engage in immoral acts. Though he asserts that DL men are not gay men, he also posits: "while intravenous drug use is a large part of the problem, experts say that the leading cause of H.I.V. in black men is homosexual sex" (30). This preposterous statement was, I believe, an unconscious rendering of the logic that is guiding Denizet-Lewis's article. The problem here is not the DL (indeed, in some ways that's "sexy and interesting"), but rather the "revolutionary" act of black men loving black men (Beam 240). It is this perpetuation of same-sex desire as dangerous and contaminating that fuels homophobia; in this case, taking a historical white homophobic mythology and putting it in black face.

The NYT magazine article also dismisses the different articulations of sexuality by these men. For example, as Denizet-Lewis travels to Atlanta and New York, he meets several men who describe themselves as being on the "DL." Though some men state that they still engage in sexual relations with women, while others do not, he reduces them to being "gay." He dismisses their description of identity, in order to position them within a more legible frame for his reader. Whereas, if he was to accept their claims of "DL," or initiate the term bisexual in order to more fully explain sexual behavior, Denizet-Lewis would be mandated to provide a more complicated reading. In focusing on the male-male relations, Denizet-Lewis is able to simplify this article while averting any confusion, or uncertainty, on the part of his reading audience. By utilizing "gay," he calls forth a historically homophobic expectation for "gay" deviance—the difference is that here, his discussion brings forth both sexual and racial cultural prejudice. His, like earlier

texts, provides a necessary fiction—one that explains, though haphazardly and incompletely, the crisis situation amongst black communities: HIV/AIDS. Moreover, his narrative brings together stereotypical depictions of racialized and sexualized subjects to manifest what he calls "concern," but is interpellated as "crisis." This act of constructing "crisis" is apparent as he moves through the narrative, highlighting sexually charged spaces and "risky" sexual acts between men, while masquerading as a simple tourist of DL culture.

Indeed, the NYT article utilizes the voice of its interviewees—particularly their articulations of masculinity—to illustrate the rhetorical significance and attractiveness of the DL, as a cultural group. Through a focus on the interviewees' commitment to black masculinity, a structure I also critique, Denizet-Lewis can establish a central problem in black male life, as well as within the black community. While there is some truth to this claim, he does not complicate this simple equation with other co-constitutive elements of black life—such as dominant ideals of masculinity and the white, racist gaze. With flippant remarks such as black men live "secret lives, products of a black culture that deems masculinity and fatherhood as a black man's primary responsibility" (32), he demonstrates a very limited perspective on not only the black community, but also black masculinity. His readings of black masculinity—constructed as linear—provide an easy point of critique. Here, Denizet-Lewis, participates in a style of journalism that employs the K.I.S.S. method—Keep It Simple Stupid—a problematic, reductionist version of black male life that is easily digestible and relies on stereotypes. Like the Vibe magazine article, he shapes the discourse of the DL within thug-like images. In his mind, the thug-aesthetic is not only the dominant motif of black male subjectivity, but also the way in which black masculinity gets performed. Indeed, there is a presence of thugisms within the

everyday performances of some black men, but it is not the only example of an idolized black masculine figure. Denizet-Lewis, in relying on the thug, forfeits the opportunity to get at the true complexity of black masculinity—a construction where values, rather than images, are often at its core. In Ronald Jackson's new book, Scripting the Black Masculine Body he defines *thug:*

> A thug by nature does not abide by the rules, and that is the work of pride, not disdain. Thugs seek to reposition the black male body as being in control of himself and his women...it is contrary to the definition of the mack to be weak. One of the hallmark characteristics of a thug is his desensitization, his emotional paralysis. (112)

While Jackson attempts to problematize this linear narrative through a longer explanation in the text, he more fully characterizes the imaginary at work in Denizet-Lewis's construction. While Jackson's passage above may sound like a description of thug discourse, it becomes clear that he is committed to the idea that this is an actual embodied manifestation which produces "black masculine scripts." I argue that his distillation is a script often not read, or performed, by all who do what they understand to be black and masculine. The NYT article highlights in bold orange letters, in the middle of its DL exposé, a section where a self-identified gay man seems to side with these linear portrayals of the black masculine as thug-centered. The interviewee, whose name is William, explains, "Part of the attraction to thugs is that they're careless and carefree. Putting on a condom doesn't fit in with that" (32). Denizet-Lewis offers no critique or explanation for such an essentialist remark, or even add an alternative reading to this construction, but rather affirms that condom negotiation would "shatter the [DL man's] denial." Not only does Denizet-Lewis make acts of denial an ontological presence amongst DL men, he also validates a thug-persona as being natural and uniquely black. Indeed, Jackson's discussion

that the "thug is a modern brute, which is revered for his Stagoleean disposition and feared for his out-of-control, haphazard, and volatile behavior" (113), speaks more to Denizet-Lewis's discursive rendering than affirms a belief in the ontological outrageousness, immorality, or irresponsibility of black men. William's explication of his attraction to the thug, as well as Jackson's framing of him, are simply individual responses to isolated situations and circumstances. Rather than allowing such framings to theorize DL men, as Denizet-Lewis does, it may be more productive to examine these statements within the historical contexts of black male demonization and demoralization—particularly the ways in which racial doubt is infiltrated within the black community by means of media, society, and cultural understandings. The words of these men, in terms of defining the thug, are not finite voices, but versions of racist/homophobic understandings beings internalized by those who sit at the margins themselves.

Interestingly, the hinge of the demonization and demoralization of black men in Jackson's visualization of the thug and NYT article is the black woman. The NYT magazine article, like most writings on the topic, start from the premise that "two-thirds of the women who found out they had AIDS were black" (30). However, similar to most other articles, the black woman is the subject who never returns in the article, but acts as an illusory mammy figure—used to help carry out racist imaginings of black men. In Denizet-Lewis's article, we see a broad sweep over the actual voice of black women and how they understand themselves within the discourse. Yet an overwhelming focus on DL men's activities within black "queer" settings and admittedly one female "scholarly" representative of the black female voice—who never is asked to discuss her black femaleness. Such broad sketching of DL life, only serves to exoticize the

"queer" potential of black men on the DL, rather than to address issues announced as significant from the article's outset:

> DL culture has grown, in recent years, out of the shadows and developed its own contemporary institutions, for those who know where to look […]. Over the same period, Down Low Culture has come to the attention of alarmed public officials, some of whom regard men on the DL as an infectious bridge spreading HIV to unsuspecting wives and girlfriends. In 2001, almost two-thirds of the women in the United States who found out that they had AIDS were black. (30)

The core issue, often noted as the impetus for majority of media texts about men on the DL, is the impact of HIV/AIDS amongst black women. Whether there is a direct relationship between DL men and black, heterosexual women's contraction of HIV is irrelevant. The issue of concern here is *how* and *why,* and to what end, are black women's bodies being called forth as "wives and girlfriends." In Philip Brian Harper's Are We Not Men: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity, he argues that, in the case of Magic Johnson, his heterosexuality was called forth as a "shoring up of masculinity" (33). How does the black woman factor into the DL equation? Here, she is the exponential factor who hides in the shadows of the "hot" details of DL men's sexual explorations—who only appears when necessary to further criminalize black men. Though she is often a symbol that raises the value of black male demonization, she is always already present. Throughout Denizet-Lewis's framing, she appears to challenge DL manhood, and/or masculinity, as he is he often framed in the process of acting irresponsibly. She is the diseased body haunting the consciousness of the NYT magazine article, as well as DL men. She is the wife who birthed the child sitting in the back seat; she is the woman to whom phone calls

are made to explain why he is not home; and, she is specter that always appears when DL men affirm their heterosexuality or disavow homosexuality. In the case of Magic Johnson, the black woman was conjured to affirm his masculine status; within this discourse the black woman is simultaneously marked invisible and visibly marked. The distinction here is significant. Magic Johnson, in one sense controlled his image, as he constructed his public narrative and his wife was made highly visible. At this point this is not the privilege of DL men, as there are no men and women who represent themselves and make themselves visible. This would be contrary to the whole notion of a DL positionality. Consequently, the "sexy" tales of DL men are reported to the public by pop-ethnographers, while the women are merely used as bodies for a point, rather than persons of significance in the HIV/AIDS discourse.

The constant displacement of black female subjectivity marks her as insignificant and indispensable to the construction of DL sexuality, while simultaneously positioning her as a victim of DL sex. This black female as "victim," is a highly problematic and limiting frame. First, it poses black women as an open cavity, with no sexual agency. It also pinpoints black male homosexual acts as the problem, locating homosexuality as the key vector in the spread of HIV/AIDS. In this equation, DL sexual acts are always already unsafe and irresponsible, while black women are seemingly always available for transmission. In the context of working racist American mythologies around black sexuality, Leo Bersani's insight in "Is the Rectum a Grave," is instructive:

> This is a fantasy of [black] female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity, in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of infection, is the

> sign of infection. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction. (24)

Thus, in the racist American imaginary, the myth perpetuated by the NYT article may, in fact, be in conversation with ideas about black female and gay sexual deviance as natural annihilators of their own humanity. The black queer man infecting the whole community is clearly apart of Denizet-Lewis's understanding of the DL—being played out from his opening sentence to the very last. Nonetheless, in the NYT article, the presence of HIV/AIDS amongst black women is only acknowledged as a brief aside, marking this socio-cultural reality as unimportant, or at least, uninteresting. Through his manipulation of the black female body for his discursive purpose, he participates in the misogynist tradition of privileging both the male body and voice, while hiding or silencing the "other" until she is "useful" to him. bell hooks refers to this agenda as the "dick-thing," or phallocentrism, where men align themselves with each other under the identification of power, which is not contingent upon, but related to the possession of the penis (87-113). hooks clearly directs our attention to the ways in which such devaluing, through media representation, is deeply entrenched in an indirect version of male-bonding, which sacrifices female subjectivity for male power. In the omission of black women in these discourses, the homoerotic tension between the writer and his male subjects is most evident through the pulse and detail of his pop-ethnographic descriptions.

Within the NYT article, the only follow-up on the relationship between HIV/AIDS, black women, and the DL, comes through the voice of a gay man infected with HIV/AIDS. Chris Bell, a local HIV/AIDS activist in Chicago, critically analyzes the framing of DL men, yet unconsciously supports Denizet-Lewis's erasure of black women within his article:

> They [DL men] became the "modern" version of highly sexualized, dangerous, irresponsible black man who doesn't care about anyone and just wants to get off.… Black men had been dying of AIDS for years, it wasn't until "innocent" black women became infected that the black community bothered to notice. (32)

This final claim does hold some truth. In the context of this article, however, Bell provides ammunition for Denizet-Lewis's silencing of women's voices. Denizet-Lewis's focus on DL men, when combined with Bell's voice, is both justified and necessary. The marking of innocent with quotation marks questions black female "unknowingness" and sexuality. It satisfies a racist imaginary that has continued to hyper-sexualize the black female body. The question of "innocence," or chastity, is one that has historically been posed to black female bodies (Crenshaw, 2000; Smith, 1982; hooks, 1981) and clearly resonates within the contemporary discourses around HIV/AIDS. In the context of this article, such a suggestion, briefly but significantly, feeds the master narrative of a sexually irresponsible and uncontrollable black "gay" community. Such scrutiny over who has the right to speak, however, distracts from the role of racism in systematically silencing both black gay and female voices, within and outside the black "community."

The cynical tone of Bell's statement, while it denotes frustration with certain black community politics, can be read in this context as an invocation of the tension between society and the imagined "sapphire." This figure, as Pamela Smith informs us, is often seen as the "threatening, intimidating, angry…" black woman (124). The black female body is seen as excessive; she is too combative to be taken seriously. By discounting the black female voice and/or attitude, Denizet-Lewis removes the black woman from the sexual equation of the down

low, in order to keep the narrative sleek and sexy. This aversion strategy allows for the reader to engage Denizet-Lewis's fetishistic fantasy, rather than the complex and multiple layered public concerns about the DL. Concomitantly, Chris Bell's statement in the context of this article's frame, reenacts what Evelyn Hammonds has located as the early problems with HIV/AIDS media discourses:

> The sense of powerlessness that African American women who are HIV-positive experience [is] used to emphasize their irresponsibility. Such comments leave unexamined the personal and economic difficulties that these women face in their attempts to get access to good health care and counseling….We are not told about the different opportunistic infections in women that could possibly mask early diagnosis. We are not told how many of these women have lost their homes and custody of children when their HIV status is made known. (437)

Hammonds not only demonstrates the importance of the black female voice in any discussion of HIV/AIDS, but also critiques the manipulation of women's experience to filter questions of responsibility. Hammond's insights are quite instructive. In examining women's role in the discourse of the DL, it is often that she is only evoked to criminalize black men as the physical evidence that these men are "vectors of contagion." Though this does not always prove to be the case, discourse of thuggishness or brute violence convince us of the possibility. In addition, the suggestion that black women are receivers of HIV/AIDS and DL men are givers, grossly genders who is affected by this disease for the reading public. This positing of the villain/victim dichotomy facilitates a discursive rendering that may quickly mention the impact of HIV/AIDS on black women, while neglecting to address those DL men who are HIV-positive. My point

here is not to make a move for representational equality, but to illustrate how discourse can be constructed to focus our attention on one body over another. In essence, the NYT article exploits black women's HIV/AIDS rates in order to make a stronger case for the importance and relevance of the down low. Further, it perpetuates a value system of bodies—the queer black body (here, the DL man) is given less discursive weight than that of black women. I argue that this article established a format, or protocol, for all discussions of the DL to first, present statistics and concerns for black women and HIV/AIDS in order to generate relevance and concern within the public and, second, to encourage a formulaic dismissal of black female relevance; they are utilized as simple attention-getters for the rhetoric of DL deviance. [74]

If black female voices are going to be under-represented or absent from the printed page, why invoke their presence at all? Why employ this sound byte on HIV/AIDS that quickly exits stage left? I contend that Denizet-Lewis and others invoke the black woman as specter in order to contextualize and consequently fuel the antagonistic and anxious attitudes toward black men, specifically those who participate in "queer sexuality." This is another moment where black women, in this spectral position, are positioned as an illusory "mammy" figure who *carries* the racist imaginary throughout the piece, persuading us to see all of DL interactions and sexual discoveries in relationship to the rise of HIV/AIDS in the black community.

The power of organization is important in understanding Denizet-Lewis, and other media engagements with the DL. It is Denizet-Lewis who has the power to construct the narrative of the DL, telling the story he wants to share—no matter how dangerous, or incomplete it is. If this article were an anomaly, my analysis would have no grounding and Denizet-Lewis's work would be just another magazine article that poorly addresses the relationship of HIV/AIDS and the DL

in the absence of the other parties that are involved. However, the explosion of articles, which commit such violence, illustrates the unconscious workings of a racist, misogynist, and uncritical imaginary, more concerned about the "sexy" than the substantive.

Denizet-Lewis's positioning and crafting of both the black woman and the black man are "controlling images," that "naturalizes, normalizes, and legitimates racism, sexism, and homophobia against these 'outsiders'" (Collins 70-71) —be it the women who don't matter, or the men who only matter as sexualized beings with no guiding ethics, or ethical responsibility. In the midst of the circulating discourse, this text has received the most public attention; as it is often uses as primary source material in news media coverage on television, other newspaper-magazine representations, and even within academic texts. The NYT article set forth a cycle of newspaper articles which continue in the demonization of black men—painting a picture of the DL men as villains or culprits. Even academic experts rely on its accuracy to explain, analyze, and critique this so-called new sexual phenomenon (Collins, 2005; Neal, 2005; Guy-Sheftall and Cole, 2003). In addition, it was one of the first article to mention J.L. King as a "former DL man" who speaks out—initiated the first conversations, which would lead to the publication of his now New York Times best-selling publication of On the Down Low: A Journey Into the Lives of Straight Black Men who Sleep with Men.[75] Indeed, this article had much impact on the future career of the DL within public discourse.

While it is understandable that the NYT article may have been the most lengthy and detailed discussion of the DL to date, its romanticizing and exploitative tone deserves a critique that has been heretofore absent from the general discourse. Denizet-Lewis's article teaches us less about DL men and HIV/AIDS, but more about how black culture and sexuality remain

exotic topics of interests. Consequently, we are left with a narrow view of DL men as peculiar, sexually deviant subjects who continue a historical representation of black men—queer or not—as sexual savages to be hated, not loved. The only potentially promising characteristic of this DL discourse is the absence of an actual body for reference. The DL man was conspicuously without a face, yet represented as a collage of social imaginings of deviance.[76] While he was constructed as a working-class brute, he was still an ambiguous figure who potentially threatened black women's lives. The absence of real bodies kept meant that the public could only speculative about who is DL and it was this very absence of a face that—this unseen "presence"—that fueled the sense of hysteria and fear of those who have investments in the politics of the visible. Thus, while this is significantly important in deterring a conscious profiling of DL men, it enlivens a Foucauldian sense of mass-surveillance—the need to always know, or get to know —for those who are most concerned about this "sexual boogeyman."

The Boogeyman Comes Out?: J.L. King, The Messiah Mythology, and Mess

In February 2004, I sat onstage at the new haven for Chicago's black social discourse, The Spoken Word Café. Here, I waited to be apart of a community conversation, a "relationship chat" turned town hall meeting, which would discuss the dynamics of the "down low phenomenon." As I walked around the space, I listened as an audience of about eighty-percent black women expressed concerns such as "this DL thing is getting out of control!," "How do we know some of these men are not on the down low?" and "Girl, I swear, you almost have to go the other way [as in, date white men], in order to find a good one." As I walked past a group of women, I heard one woman say,

"See him, he looks like he could be on the down low." As a young, openly gay man, I could not help but be implicated as a "DL Brotha." This, indeed, spoke not only to the urgency, but currency of this thirst for knowing, as one woman expresses "who is and who ain't on the DL." In addition to these women, there were several reporters dispersed throughout the audience, as well as news cameras. Indeed, this was a high profile event. About thirty minutes after the publicized starting time enters Chat Daddy Art Sims, the emcee and host for this Sunday event. As he walked out, dressed in his all-black two piece pants suit, he spoke in a somewhat sultry, but talk show host-like voice:

> Good evening and welcome to this Sunday's relationship chat …[he then, in the voice of a car salesman, advertises for the next chat session, then changes to a serious preacher-like tone]…HIV/AIDS is a real issue in the black community. It is not a gay male disease, it is a behavior disease. It does not matter if you are male, black, white, whatever, and you are not protecting yourself, YOU ARE PUTTING YOURSELF AT RISK. My guest tonight, we met about three years ago…he was taking his message out to people in Cleveland. I am honored to have him here first, as my friend. Second, I am pleased to have him as an educator; and third of all, to have him as a black man with a positive *message*. Whether you feel the vibe, understand what he's saying, at least he's *speaking up* to let *you* know what's goin on! I ask everybody to rise from your seats and welcome Mr. J.L. King. (Field Notes, February 2004)

With a great sense of anticipation and angst, about 300 men and women stand to their feet, with enthusiasm, to greet the "messenger." There was something unique about the audience's gaze toward the stage. As I peered around, I witnessed people assessing his body, examining his

clothes, commenting on his "look"—gathering together a sense of who this man, the self-proclaimed member of, and expert on, the down low, represented. Indeed, they were trying to figure out how the poster-boy of the DL incarnate figured in the discursive fragments they had received elsewhere. In addition, they were, as I teach in my Speech classes, the credibility (or authenticity) of the speaker. Nonetheless, they were here—comprising the largest audience this chat session ever witnessed—to receive J.L. King's message.

While the "chat" began as a dialogue between Chat Daddy and J.L. King, it became more of a rehearsal for his then forthcoming manuscript, On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men who Sleep with Men. In this conversation, Chat Daddy began with a key question:

> Chat Daddy: Who is J.L. King and why *now*?
>
> J.L. King: First of all—this mission, this ministry, this journey that I've been on was not something that I asked for. You have to be careful what you pray for…I was living in Atlanta…I had a great job, wonderful family…I was a pretty successful Brotha. I was still kinda confused about my life situation and purpose. I was living this life of destruction—I had women all over the country, I had brothas sweatin me all over the country—I had it going on for real [many audience members begin to look at each other like "yeah, right!"]. I was living this life and didn't have any guilt about it…then something said, "tell your story, tell your story." Now I didn't know anything about the stats, HIV—I had never been tested, didn't really want to be tested. I really didn't care. And then it happened...the spirit said 'Do your thang,'… But, then I was at a conference and a

> brotha in LA said he had "a secret that women need to know about." And it was like a train. Keep in mind, I didn't start this DL phenomenon—J.L. King did not start it…I was just the first brotha to step forward and say: "Look at me, let me tell you about my life." (Fieldnotes, February 2004)

Besides the conceit that exudes from King's words and gestures, the "mission, ministry, journey" narrative aligns him within what I call the historical Messiah mythology. This narrative construction, I argue, is the leading paradigm through which black leaders have historically articulated their spiritual, intellectual, and political agendas. It is this figuring of being "called by God," that operates as a legitimating device for those who wish to situate their knowledge as "official" and most appropriate for whatever cause. Here, JL King positions himself within this tradition by selecting a revelatory narrative, which works to encourage his audience to both listen and believe.

Thus, it is intuitive for King to choose to ignore Chat daddy's initial question of "Who is J.L. King?" and instead move to the second part of the question, which establishes his credibility. He recited the common narrative of the "calling," or "epiphany"—a classic revelatory move that is common in traditional religious narratives, whereby a leader (typically a minister) details how he or she was "called" to preach. In this cultural context, amongst an almost all black audience, such religious narratives have great currency. As the black church has been pivotal in producing leaders within the community, the narrative—that a religious epiphany is at the core of one's mission—is more than a passing statement. It is an authenticating narrative that marks one's words as prophetic rather than political, salvation-centered, or self-expressive. In other words, J.L. King's work is not his own, but that of God's. Here, God becomes the sender of the message

while J.L. King is the ordained messenger. Thus, the confession that he recites in this conversation—as "living a life of destruction"— acts to move him outside of the criminal, guilt-ridden "sinner" into the realm of salvation. Now, after his confession, the audience is more able to accept him as an "ordained" minister—a giver of the gospel. As expected, the audience consumes his rhetoric as if he was the Messiah himself.[77]

As the conversation progresses, King describes how to read for "signs" of DL men, as well as provides his own theorizations about why DL culture is "everywhere," particularly in Chicago.[78] King unconsciously, through the telling of his own "dirty laundry" and through specific references to men who "do what they wanna do," misrepresents his own experience as representative of the whole population, while also constructing another illustration of a thug-persona at work amongst black men. The idea that these men "do what they wanna do," suggests that there is a "carefree and careless" nature within DL men. While King may interpret his desires in this way, the rendering of this explication for a mass population is unfair and irresponsible. Yet, he is able to manipulate the audience to set him apart from "other" DL men, as King frames his critics as attempting to "silence the messenger."[79] Like a historic move within the evangelism discourses of the Christian church, King is relegated as a messenger of truth by constructing a me/them dichotomy between himself, DL men, and his critics. According to this theology, sinners do not want to be conscious of their wrong-doing; it is through evasion of sin that the unrighteous can continue in their "wicked ways." King, as a public figure, utilizes religious metaphors and configurations to further authenticate himself as *the* DL spokesperson, while also separating himself from the black sexual deviant.

When Chat Daddy inquires as to his motivation for writing his book on the topic, King responds:

> I was not going to write a book… they [agents/publishers] read about me in the New York Times…and then I got all these calls from all these agents…saying, "you going write a book about your life?" I said, "Naw." Then, they said, "if you write a book, you could make a whooooooole lot of money!" And so, I said "cool!"[80]

This statement contradicts the spiritual motivation that King cited as the initial impetus for his "HIV/AIDS prevention journey." As King's career as the DL messenger continues, it becomes evident that his "mission" is less about being a messenger and more about being a mess-maker. Though I believe that King's intention is not to make a mess, his rather brash discursive choices prompts messy outcomes. In a sense, the choice of King to offer himself as a spokesperson complicates the discourse. Because of the enigmatic nature of the DL in discourse, it becomes difficult for King to be understood as a single irresponsible individual; rather, his narrative becomes a metonymic voice and characterization for the whole community of men. King's physical presence, and telling of autobiographical narrative for public consumption, fulfills the appetite of those most hungry for an embodied representation of the DL. While the DL man was once a disembodied subject, he is inscribed with meaning, as J.L. King positions himself as the DL posterboy. In her book Volatile Bodies, Elizabeth Grosz explains that, "inscriptions on the subject's body coagulate corporeal signifiers into signs, producing all the effects of meaning, representation, depth, within or subtending our social order" (141). In the case of the DL, King is

the representative body on which all public discourse that preceded his physical presence is inscribed, compared, and authenticated.

The ways in which J.L. King, who is often mistakenly called D.L. King, has become the representative voice of DL men was never more apparent than in his appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show.* Oprah Winfrey and her producers were intrigued by the DL after a special segment on ABC television that featured J.L. King and a host of other community voices, academic affiliates, and public health officials.[81] In addition to these individual voices, the segment featured excerpts from the conversation between Chat Daddy and J.L. King, while also cutting in HIV/AIDS statistics. The segment, filled with a range of perspectives, was a strong example of news reporting that was more descriptive than prescriptive. This special segment not only exemplifies the tensions surrounding the DL, but also challenges the dangerous discourse perpetuated by print media and public conversation. This was a great accomplishment for a seven minute segment. To my dismay, the *Oprah Winfrey Show*—in its forty-five minutes—would not have the same impact.

Oprah begins her show with an awkward, but obvious statement: "I'm an African-American woman." This statement positions her in relationship to an issue that has been largely constructed as a "woman's problem" within popular press—DL Men. She then proceeds to cite what is now an oft-quoted public health statistic, marking "AIDS as the leading form of death for black people ages 25-44." Perhaps most important for my purposes here, are her remarks and responses to these "startling statistics":

> Not only are more black people getting AIDS in record numbers, more women, listen to me now, *more women*, more college students, and people over fifty are at

> greater risks than ever before. Here's a shocker. It's one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS—their husbands and their boyfriends are having secret sex with other men. (Oprah Winfrey, "A Secret Sex World")

Immediately, the audience gasps, as we watch the look of a black woman taken aback, as well as a white woman in utter shock. These visceral responses speak loud to the types of hysteria and fear present and produced through a somewhat sensational handling of the DL, especially the emphasis on disease and extra-marital/relational sex between men. For Oprah, however, this cautionary tale of men "in a lifestyle called living on the *down low*," operates to call women once again to their televisions, to consume the latest media event per the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. It is Oprah's mission to educate through the titillation of those things we treasure and value everyday, our public and mental health. Yet, it is fair to say that Oprah does target a female audience. It is the common "mission, ministry, journey" for black women that necessitates J.L. King's appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show.* Indeed, after this experience his calling would lead to a "whooooooole lot of money!"

Together, Winfrey and King, "crack the lid on this sexual underground," a goal she signals in her pre-show voiceover. Her emphasis on sexual, as well as the history of the DL in the media, connotes a judgment of deviance. This show was going to unveil something that was, as Oprah announced, "shocking and unbelievable." Quite different, I may add, than how in prior shows Oprah refers to the underground railroad—a down low way of doing "freedom" during slavery. This episode of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* definitely employs the DL template set by dominant media: it invokes the gross HIV/AIDS statistics, then, proceeds to frame the DL as a central problem in HIV/AIDS transmission, blaming the "risky" sex married or committed men

have with other men. To her credit, Oprah does attempt to veer away from the male-centered focus of HIV/AIDS discourse in the time of the DL, as she allows for HIV-positive women to speak on the show. Surprisingly, these women stand not as simply victims of black male sex, but as agents in their own sexual behavior and health maintenance. More importantly, these women are framed as living with HIV, rather than dying of AIDS. I believe this distinction is only implicit in the actual show, but its presence is made clearer through the actual bodily presence of these women, rather than the rhetorical renderings in media. As Oprah actually places the women, as well as college students and health officials in conversation with J.L. King's rhetoric, she arrives at a more democratic representation of the DL. However, the within the overwhelming presence of King's autobiographical voice, the book hype, and Oprah's sensational remarks, we lose the radical potential of this occasion.

It is the format of this *Oprah Winfrey Show* that limits the opportunity for the valuable and dialogic experience within this DL episode. As is the case with many of her shows where she features celebrities, or soon-to-be-celebrity figures and their written work, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is less equipped to entertain serious dialogue. These "meet the writer and his/her work" shows often act as more of an advertisement for the text and its author, rather than an informative, dialogic situation. This was, indeed, the case for this DL episode in which the focus is placed on J.L. King as a way through which we can better understand "living on the down low." For example, approximately thirty-five minutes of the forty-five minute show (once you extract commercials) is devoted to Oprah attempting to understand J.L. King and his explication of DL culture. His narrative, here again, becomes *the* essential (or essentialized) voice for DL

men. As King promotes his forthcoming book, this conversation benefits him most economically and socially. Meanwhile, DL men are literally left in the shadows of this conversation.

Before the *Oprah Winfrey Show* becomes a J.L. King show, Oprah features pre-recorded footage of three DL men who remain hidden in a poorly-lit room, to avoid identification. In almost identical confessional tones and narrative structure, these men individually discuss their guilt and pain as they navigate between male and female sexual partners. The way in which the interviews are spliced suggests a cohesiveness that appears, at best suspect, at worse, dishonest and odd. For example, as one man says "what we do is very promiscuous," the footage moves to another male figure who chimes in almost the same tone, "sometimes I practice safe sex, sometimes I don't." In this splicing, we are left to believe the age-old adage that, "birds of a feather flock together." In other words, as we hear these almost-identical narratives looped so smoothly, we can conclude that all DL men are promiscuous and sexually irresponsible. This coherency, which often reads as sameness, hides the strategic editorial choices that shape each narrative as responses to identical questions with almost identical answers. Thus, while Oprah features several DL men, we essentially witness one coherent narrative. Ironically, here, the *Oprah Winfrey Show* seems to mirror dominant discourses on this topic.

Nonetheless, the *Oprah Winfrey Show's* choice to shadow the faces of the interviewed DL men, makes it difficult to believe the claims that JL King—as he repeats on the show—is still a real-life "DL Brotha." According to the narratives presented by the men in the video footage, as well as those within popular press, visibility is not the mode of representation for those who dwell "down low." However, on the flipside, it also made J.L. King into somewhat of a heroic figure, as he commenced to "bring it up high, out front" as commanded by one woman who

attended the chat session mentioned earlier. This visibility on a global network, while it can be construed as courageous, disrupts all that we know about DL men through media. For many gay men, the representation of King as DL, in itself, seems fabricated, as he was "popular within the Chicago black gay community for hosting parties exclusively for same-sex couples."[82] This may explain his constant dis-identifications with this community, as always already being critical of his work. In past years, King has been quoted as saying, "black gay community leaders were jealous of the media attention he was drawing and angry [at him] for making it appear that black gay men were spreading the virus in women" (Kiritsy 2). King's inability to see the logic in this critique indicates the type of myopia present in his "mission," as he attends to his supposed "innocent" and lost black female subjects. However, as DL men are constantly referred to as gay in public discourse, it becomes more evident that the punitive gaze that is projected onto what he calls this "fraternity of invisible men," has dire consequences on black gay men and their relationship to the black community.

Within this discursive context King's use of fraternity evokes a conversation about his consistent move to establish the DL as a peculiar cultural group. King's rhetoric in press and on the *Oprah Winfrey* Show, suggests that he feels compelled to combat the reductive impulse within the public to condense DLness to gayness; whereby, in most instances, he demonizes gay culture to create an authentic cultural narrative about the DL. Together, his body and his words produce an understanding of the DL that is narrowly racialized, gendered, sexualized, and classed. King constructs gay culture as white and feminine, while the DL is its antithesis. He ignores the heterogeneity within white gay culture, as well as the presence of a diverse black gay community. In previous conversations, he has evaded both communities in order to generate a

legible, yet unique characterization of DL men. In this commitment to painting the DL black, he allows the demonizing, deadly, and down-right "wrong" acts of some men, to be only the burden of black men.

Ironically, the often unspoken reduction of DL to gay is at the center of J.L. King's appeal to the public. King, through his rhetoric reproduces, reifies, and recalls certain stereotypical presumptions most often inscribed upon homosexual bodies. In one moment in the episode, Oprah asks J.L. King if he still dates men and women. After he responds with an emphatic "Date?!," Oprah then inquires, "Not even have any kind of relationship beyond sex?," as if she is surprised. King responds, "If I was gay, yes! If I was a gay man, I may wanna be in a relationship with another man…and play house. But, when you on the DL, all you want to do is have sex. It's about gratification not orientation." King's insistence upon the centrality of sex and promiscuity amongst DL men reinforces the belief that equates gay sex with the spread of HIV/AIDS. As he attempts to set himself apart from mainstream gay America through dis-identification and reliance on the myth of the domesticated gay man, he describes the DL in ways that are aligned with public imaginings of gays. King does not, or cannot, identify the ways in which marginalized bodies often experience different, but similar projections, as "deviance" is seen at the core of minority communities. In addition, he conveniently forgets that men of color have always done "gay" differently. Thus, as he repels gayness, he mis-remembers the role of race in the construction of sexuality; but, rather insists on remembering a gay self that is most legible by those in Oprah's audience. He misses an opportunity to truly educate or minister, demonstrating how even black gay men choose "discreet ways of being in the world." Instead, he essentializes both gay and DL men in terms of their sexual relations as a way to simplify the

most complicated element in this DL puzzle: the (in)congruous relationship between a racialized masculinity and a normative queer sexuality. Rather than insist on the separation of the DL from a gay understanding, it would be more productive to recognize their (mis)shaping as an extension of historical narratives about marginalized people, more generally.

Unfortunately, though every spectator has a different degree of familiarity with DL discourse, J.L. King's strategic placement of his narrative outside of contemporary gay history inadvertently reiterates and reinforces a narrow perception of the DL as being a manifestation of the thug in queer face. His positioning of DL men as being *so* distant from their gay counterparts, all the while traversing hetero-homo normative boundaries, seems a somewhat dishonest rendering of social interaction. Do DL men, when seeking to locate discreet spaces to engage same-sex desire, simply stumble upon existing homes of eroticism? While DL men are not gay men, they indeed, do share similar socio-cultural spaces. Yet, King insists on separating them in order to provide the most unique narrative—one where the black and masculine can co-exist. Unfortunately, like aforementioned media texts, he can only arrive at this possibility through the evocation of a thug-like figure. As the first physical embodiment and representative DL voice, King's portrayal of this population, no matter how problematic, is charged with making sense of what is predominantly a shadowed presence within press material. Rather than combat the more dangerous constructions of queerness, King often embraces "deviant" and thug-like narratives in hopes of authenticating his voice as quintessentially "down low." Interestingly, King's middle-class position is never highlighted in media text, or his interview on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. I argue, as Martin Favor asserts, that King calls upon the authenticating narrative of the "folk" and the "working-class" (4) to authenticate himself as not only black, but also properly masculine.

However, his linear construction of what constitutes the masculine—"I had women and men all over the country" and "I don't date men"—is complicit with stereotypes that have, at once, been a part of both black male and gay male history. Thus, while King attempts to work himself out of what he sees as deviant sexuality (white gayness), he figures himself within another: thug-blackness.

King's rhetorical move casts DL men out of what is often called the post-stonewall moment where the prevailing discussion surrounds sexual "orientation," by, instead, placing DL men in the pre-stonewall where queers of all color were considered seekers of "gratification." This rhetorical move not only frames DL men as repressive and politically digressive, but also situates black men in a position that deems them socially backwards.[83] As King marks discreet homoerotic experiences as inherently promiscuous, he flips the "down low" to simply "low down." This assertion of the hypersexual DL man is flawed in two ways: first, it presumes that, as King states, "ALL DL MEN WANT TO DO IS HAVE SEX," and that the absence of desire for committal male-male relationships necessitates random male-male sex acts. Oprah facilitates this move as she attempts to force J.L. King to embrace a gay-identification, what Immanuel Kant calls a "categorical imperative."[84] While she is boggled by his refusal to label himself gay, she is adamant about the impossibility for DL men to embrace a "straight" identification. As a result of her discomfort with King's claim that "people look at gay men as less than men," Oprah attempts to counter his position with references by saying, "I see gay men as men." It is clear that she does not want to deal with the sexual uncertainty that seems inherent when sexual desires avoid definitive labels. Consequently, Oprah situates J.L. King's narrative within a gay paradigm, making sense of this "sexual underground," while simultaneously demonizing the

population she means to defend. While J.L. King seems underdeveloped in his theories of DL culture—as he consistently frames his personal collect experience as collective—Oprah's naiveté about the realities of racialized gayness in America misinforms her viewing audience. Together, they embark on a similar journey to simplify a complex cultural network, rather than unravel its complexities.

Unfortunately, it is not until the post-show discussion on cable network television's *Oxygen* channel that we gain access to more complicated notions of sexuality, disease, and the DL.[85] Indeed, this is made possible by the somewhat town-hall meeting format, which facilitates a more dialogic, interactive engagement. This post-show discussion allows for those who have been in the trenches, such as the executive director of the Black AIDS Institute Phil Wilson, to attempt to undo the heavy-handed work of J.L. King. An example of this corrective work is when J.L. King, Oprah, and a college student are engaged in a battle of semantics—they disagree about whether DL men are "gay" "bisexual," or "straight." Rather than claim stakes in this battle, Wilson aptly intervenes: "People actually really don't live their lives in segments. People come in as complex individuals…they bring their race stuff….their male stuff…and their homosexual stuff into the room…," Oprah interrupts, "That's interesting; my mind is still over there" [as in, "left field"]. While Oprah's interjection seems to discard Wilson's remarks, it was one of the more astute assertions in both her actual show and post-show. Wilson's interjection opens a space to discuss the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality, which pushes the envelope on King's misshaping of the DL as simply a black man's libido run amuck.[86] Still, at no point during the course of the actual show, or its post-show dialogue, is there an explicit critique of the homogenous framing of the DL that is produced within J.L. King and Oprah's conversation. It

appears that King offers an acceptable and digestible version of what he understands as "DL culture," while suggesting that DL men do not operate from a place of intersection, but dissection—compartmentalizing the sexual self, from the gendered self, from the racial self. Consequently, he finds himself in a web of contradictions. Even if we accept King's construction of the DL as situational queer thuggery, it is nonetheless a conception clearly informed by race, gender, and sexuality. The interview itself illustrates even King's own commitment to a certain type of racial masculinity, as well as many callbacks to the pleasures of his heterosexual adventures. Nonetheless, Oprah closes her conversation with J.L. King by saying, "Thank you J.L. for the courage to speak out." Indeed, King speaks out, but his courage is questionable as he recites the fictions that continue to reify the narrow understandings of queer men and black people, as always already having a propensity toward deviance.

On the Down Low/Low Down: Construction of the "Double Li(e)fe"

The outcome of the *Oprah Winfrey Show* was predictable. The momentum of the DL accelerated as J.L. King was valorized as its "poster-boy," more articles were written, several television shows employed the theme in their episodic narrative, and King's book, <u>On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black men who Sleep with Men</u>, instantaneously soared to the <u>New York Times</u> best-seller list and remained there for three consecutive months. Immediately after the book was released, I went to Borders to purchase it. As expected, it was already sold out. After the third book store—located in a largely white sub-division of Chicago— I finally apprehended a copy. On my train ride home, I realized who bought many of those copies: black female followers of the DL messiah himself. My choice to

only spend a brief moment looking closely at the text should express my thorough enjoyment of it. Much of the book, however, was narrated in a condensed version on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.

On the Down Low is a uniquely personal and prescriptive book, which takes us on a journey from J.L. King's bedroom of destruction where he is "found out," to his perusals in the black church, all the way into his own theorizations about "DL types." The liner notes for On the Down Low asserts that "he delivers the first frank and thorough investigation of life 'on the down low.'" While I agree that he is "frank," this book is not an investigation, but rather an autobiography. More importantly, the book as a personal narrative masquerades as a generalized exploration, which is what, I believe, is its core issue. The style in which King moves from his own narrative to general readings about the DL as culture suggests that his experiences, or those he witnesses, are representative of the larger population. For example, as he narrates the tensions that arose in his married life, he states:

> I tried to make her think she was crazy when she caught me. I tried to make all our friends think she was overacting…I would complain, I turned the whole thing around to avoid taking responsibility. The bottom line is that I slept with men because that's what I liked—the same as all my down-low brothers. (50)

How can he speak for all DL men? Moreover, how can he conclude that his experience is identical to "all" DL men? This move illustrates the problem with his narrative choice. Rather than tell *his* story, he tries to tell *their* story. He affirms the critique posed by Sidonie Smith and Julia Weston in their book Women, Autobiography, and Theory: A Reader, in which they state, "We are a postmodern society in which the disappearance of the unproblematic belief in the idea of true selves is everywhere compensated for, and camouflaged by, the multiplication of

recitations of autobiographical narratives" (7). Somehow, through his autobiographical narrative, King is able to articulate a true DL self—though his figuring may not be applicable to the whole population. Not only is his move to speak for "all [his] DL brothers" an unfair shift, but it also presumes that all DL men hold the same value of male-male sex; he contradicts his claim that the DL necessitates a desire for both sexes. Nevertheless, it allows him room to construct a universal deviant, who is a "threat" not only to the heterosexual female reader, but to those who believe that DL men's male-male desire is temporal.

This previous example highlights what I argue is the first of four main tasks in the book, King's legitimation of himself as *the* authoritative voice on the DL subject. On the Down Low appears to take on four primary tasks: 1) It legitimates J.L. King's place as the "insider" in terms of his relationship to DL culture and DL men through confessionals and self-persecution (read: DL punishment); 2) It situates male-male sex by DL men within a moralistic discourse of lust and promiscuity; 3) It purposefully creates fear in its reader by rendering malicious acts by men and invoking the drama that propels a reader to keep going; and 4) regenerates a discussion of HIV/AIDS, though in a context of the DL, in order to call the black community's attention to its silence around issues of sexuality and disease.

In the introduction to On the Down Low, King bombards us with religious metaphors and language. As he writes and "reflects," King states, "My heart is heavy with the memory of leaving the arms of these women…to have sex with men," and admits his remorse, "My soul is heavy with remembrances of all of the social gatherings I attended with my girlfriends…while secretly trying to hook up with other men at these events" (xiii). Here, his confessions almost sound like repentance for his "evil-doing." As he invokes such religious rhetoric juxtaposed to

his several sexually immoral "deadly" acts, he situates sex acts with men as being outside of the domain of "righteousness." In essence, "we are invited…to regard homosexuality [or homosexual sex] as indecent and/or obscene" (Watney 61). Though King participates in these acts, he attempts to redeem himself as he confesses, "now that I give my sexual partners a choice—free will—I feel I am no longer living in sin" (75). Nonetheless, the men on whom he reports are sinners in need of punishment and religious reconciliation. This not only separates King from the "brotherhood" he claims to be a part of, but places him above them—a "reformed" DLer.

Why does King write this narrative if he is no longer "on the down low?" In his book, he claims "this work was ordained by God" (xiv), and that "this work is also a testament to my love for the women who are and have been a part of my life" (xv). While such a "mission" is admirable in theory, the execution must also support such aims. As I look closely at his chapter titled "She Can't Compete with Him," the evidence of King's aim to create alarm in women is apparent. He opens with the following passage:

> They [women] feel that if they do their job properly in the bedroom their man will not have to stray. However, if your man sleeps with men, there is nothing sexually you can do that will make him stop…If a man enjoys sex with a man, there's not a woman alive who can compete with that desire, because, it's simple, *she's not a man*. (47)

King engages in an act of competition between the woman and the "other" man. In this case, the "other" man is usually assigned the identification of gay. Thus, King instigates a homophobic response from his reader, while also stirring anger within women as he virtually deems her

inadequate because of the potential of her "man [to] has sex with other men." King relies on the historical feeling of failure that women have internalized when their men cheat; except, in this case, he does not deem them as failing in their relationships, but unable to compete with male-male sex. In a sense, King replays a misogynist view of women's roles in society, as he measures their inability to compete by the absence of the phallus. Indirectly, King positions men, including himself, as always holding the penis and therefore possessing "power and control" (50). Yet, one must wonder, if the man's penis has so much power, why do DL men supposedly return to the vagina? Still, King's point here seems to be that women can never fully gain loyalty from their men who sleep with men. Thus, the penis is a threat not only to the health of these women, but also the stability of their relationships.

On the Down Low is predominantly a text that circulates myths about men who have sex with men, while making sweeping statements that create fear with women. Nonetheless, J.L. King's book does attempt to regenerate a discussion of HIV/AIDS. Yet, through the publication of On the Down Low, and its subsequent career within print media and television, he restores the energy given to thinking not only about DL men, but the role of gender in sexual negotiation. This is clear in his interview on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* where Phil Wilson encourages the public to move outside of the DL, and focus on sexual behavior that could lead to HIV/AIDS transmission. However, King makes similar moves in his book, as he is self-conscious about his largely female audience:

> …most important, she must make it clear that she practice safe sex, and tell him that she wants to get tested together so that she can have peace of mind and share intimacy more completely with him…For women who are married or in long-term relationship where

> condoms are no longer being used, I recommend that they get tested, and ask their mate to get tested without asking them if they are on the DL. (72)

Here, in the middle of his book, King proposes a strategy for condom negotiation. Whether men are having an affair, on the DL, or IV drug users, this assists women in better positioning themselves in the sexual interplay, without fear of emasculating their men or making false accusations. Yet, I cannot ignore that this discussion happens within the context of a DL discourse; thus, HIV/AIDS is still being relegated to the DL man's body. While I have suggested that homosexual sex indirectly becomes marked as the agent of HIV/AIDS transmission while women become the repositories for disease, King's awareness of his audience warrants a discussion of how desire is policed. As we construct the DL in relation to HIV/AIDS, and as men who always already have female sex partners, King's female readers are inclined to become suspicious of their men's "DL status," as one woman referred to it. This surveillance technique, somewhat encouraged by King's rhetoric in and outside his book, creates an alarm for black women in that they feel as if they must not only be aware of their own sex acts, but more aware of the sexual behavior of their male counterparts. Specifically, this rhetoric produces an attitude that somehow contracting HIV/AIDS from a man who has sex with men becomes more deadly than other forms of contraction. But, as Phil Wilson reminds us in the after-show of the *Oprah Winfrey Show*, "the disease is no more nicer to you, no matter who you contract it from." Thus, King's strategy for women is most compelling outside this DL context, and perhaps, as a pedagogy that is helpful in all cultural situations.

On the Down Low operates as an original autobiographical text, which passes itself off as a form of critical research. While King's experiences may, indeed, be his own, the suggestion

that he is engaged in research suggests some theoretical-methodological aim, which he does not outline. The average reader, however, whom he names the "Shanequas and Dr. Shanequas,"[87] who understand "experience as a good teacher," or who may be less inclined to be as critical as I am here, will evaluate the narrative as authentic and new. On the other hand, however, one woman told me, "It's [King's book] nothing but E. Lynn Harris with a little less of a flare." While her comments, I assume about class, are somewhat flippant, they do highlight an interesting observation. Much like E. Lynn Harris's construction of men who engage in discreet homo–sexual/erotic relationships, King specifically shapes much of his DL narrative within middle-class Black America.[88] While he acknowledges the range of men who may be on the DL, his cited examples—the "pastor," "corporate executive," "military man," and now JL, spokesman and writer—belong within a middle-class paradigm. Indeed, this "picture of what a DL brother looks like" is more dangerous than the thug, who we envision as not only unclockable, but somehow undesirable in the long term. On the Down Low, then, not only attaches HIV/AIDS to DL men, but also locates its prevalence within middle-class Black America. This is the greatest crisis of all. Black men, who are thought to uphold the "politics of respectability" as upstanding citizens, those who construct the ideals of black manhood are now participating in deviant sexualities.

In an episode of *Law & Order: SVU* entitled "Low Down*,"* we see representations of middle-class DL men, as well as the type of circulating narratives inscribed onto the black male body. While television shows such as *ER, Girlfriends, Soul Food,* and a few others have pursued the Down Low in their episodic narratives— none have received quite the acclaim given to *Law & Order: SVU's* "Low Down" segment, which aired in April 2004.[89] Indeed, the

excitement around Oprah Winfrey's exposé of the DL contributed to this *Law & Order* episode's popularity. "Low Down" tells the story of the white prosecutor Jeffrey York, who is killed by his fellow black colleague Andy Abbott, after York threatens to disclose their sexual relationship if Abbott refuses to leave his wife and family to pursue a committed relationship. This highly compelling narrative re-articulates the DL story I have excavated in the chapter, but highlights most importantly what Darnell Hunt in Screening the Los Angeles "Riots:" Race, Seeing, and Resistance names as a "raced way of seeing." This construction iterates how certain bodies, because of their race and racial history, are positioned in discourse in different ways (Hunt 11). From the outset, we are witnesses to Black and Latino female and transgendered prostitutes of color—sexual dissidents—walking the "strip" being harassed by the police. In addition, it is on the site of their travels where the police locate the body of the dead district attorney Jeffrey York, and conclude that that one of "them" probably killed him. Though it was not one of them—the prostitutes—we later learn that it is another deviant subject, a "DL Brotha." This framing figures criminality as not only being a natural act of minoritized people and sexual dissidents, but also a relevant threat toward those who reside in dominant categories.

These racialized ways of seeing sexual deviance continues throughout the episode. The first suspect in the murder of Jeffrey York is Kevin Brown, "A.K.A. Keisha Brown," a transvestite prostitute who had a previous criminal record. After she proved her innocence, the investigators were led by York's gym partner to the second suspect—York's last client whose name is reduced to simply Alvarez. Here, we see a pattern of suspects—all of which are individuals of color—only to arrive at the actual killer, who is yet again a man of color, Andy

Abbott. Abbott is a criminal on two accounts: he is the murderer of the district attorney and he is a married man who was not only having an affair with Jeffrey York, but also with several men on his ritual "poker night." As the detectives become aware that Andy Abbott was possibly the last person York saw the night he was killed, they interrogate Abbott at his home. In this conversation, they ask, "Did you know Jeff York was gay," and he responds, "He didn't seem gay." The female investigator then replies, "sometimes you can't tell." Her look is suggestive, as if she is reading Abbott, or inferring that as Abbott pretends to be unaware of York's sexuality, she knows something more. Thus, the investigation continues as the detectives follow-up on Abbott's alibi: he was at poker night with the "guys."

As the drama continues, it is the "poker" night that becomes suspect. The detectives proceed to interview several black men, who attend the Wednesday night poker game. They confirm Abbott's alibi. When they return to the police precinct, they review the facts—baffled by why these men would protect Andy Abbott—until a detective, played by rapper, turned actor Ice T explains:

> Ice T: Maybe they all have something to hide…
>
> Detective: Like what?
>
> Ice T: I think they're on the Down Low.
>
> Captain: Down what?
>
> Ice T: The down low. Black men having sex with other men.
>
> Detective: Every one of these guys is married. Some have kids.

> Ice T: That's sex on the down low. They say it doesn't mean they're gay.
>
> Detective: What does it mean?
>
> Ice T: It's just sex. They hang out, have a few drinks, pretend that what goes on downstairs isn't who they are. You grow up being black, you're supposed to be a man, become a father. Church, your family, your friends, they *all* see being gay as a white man's perversion. (emphasis added)

Ice T is situated as an insider, who seems to know everything about the "down low" because he is black. Somehow his racial belonging privileges him to know all about a culture to which he doesn't belong. Consequently, this is an awkward moment in the episode. It is not a weird moment because of his supposed knowledge of DL culture, but how he is situated as the "official" on this topic, while his white colleagues stand like empty vessels waiting for the word. In an interview on the *Tavis Smiley Show*, Ice T comments on his role of teacher in this scene, stating that the producers had to explain to him what the DL was—he originally believed it was "sneaking around."[90] This serves as a testament to what is most troubling about how this scene configures race—a biological trait which privileges one to have some omniscient gift of understanding all aspects of black life. Interestingly, after Ice T's black history lesson, there is no association of the white district attorney with the "down low." He is understood as gay, while now the black men who play poker are some peculiar group—an oddity of sorts—who not only have male-male sex, but who also corroborate in a murder case. Seemingly, this DL culture is a black thing that white people cannot understand or practice. Because of the assumption that it is impossible for whites to understand blackness or DLness, Ice T quickly

volunteers to interrogate a key player in the poker group a second time—to bring the down low out front.

It is Ice-T who secures a confession from a famous ex-football player, who is a part of the poker group. Yet, more significant than the confession he draws, is the conversation or confrontation he engages as a result of telling Dushaun McGovern, the ex-football player, that not only is he [McGovern] on the down low, but that this makes him gay. When McGovern says, "I have relationships with women, and sex with men," it sounds like the writers lifted a line from J.L. King. Nonetheless, Ice T responds, "I got news for you, that means you gay." Ice-T removes the power of naming from McGovern, calling forth the same categorical imperative that Oprah called forth from J.L. King. This consistent act, of forcing men who consider themselves down low to embrace gayness, is a move to not only control nomenclatural choices, but also levels of anxiety caused by sexual ambiguity. Yet, Ice T's provocations force a confession, almost as if to suggest McGovern's concession to Ice T's argument, or at least silenced by it. In this moment, McGovern reveals that he, Abbott, and other men engage in same-sex acts, though he says, "nobody mentions sex." He continues to explain that Andy Abbott killed Jeffrey York because he started "talking love" and "he wanted Andy to leave his wife." It is the first part of the writing that deserves attention: Do DL men not want love? Do black men not want love from others? This goes unexplained. However, in this world of "just sex," as Ice T teaches us, we are left to believe that not love, but lust, is everything that exists in DL relationships.

Andy Abbott killed Jeffrey York, then, because York loved him. Until we hear Abbott articulate his motive, we never know that the impetus for the murder was York's threats to

disclose his sexuality—the fear he would make public what he understood as private. Interestingly, the scene after McGovern unleashes the silence on the poker group as a sex club, Abbott is arrested. Ironically, the only audible line of the Miranda rights is "You have the right to remain silent." This, indeed, is allegorical. As York (who represents both whiteness and gayness) attempts to force Abbott (who represents blackness and sexual nonconformity) to conform to his mode of doing sexuality, there is great resistance—a greater desire for silence. While York wants to announce their sexual relations as a relationship, Abbott wants to silence those moments, marking them as situational and temporal. It is only through the disavowal, or the killing of York, that Abbott can feel most normal. We know from Michael Warner, however, that the "trouble with normal" is that it produces an opposing category of "shame" (6). Abbott erroneously believes that by killing York the shame of loving another man will disappear. Unfortunately, when one murders, or kills a part of oneself, there is always some trace. This drama is not just an allegory, it is a dilemma.

In this episode of *Law & Order: SVU*, HIV is the trace which announces Abbott's sexual relationship with York; thereby, confirming his motive and guilt. York infects Abbott, while Abbott transmits the virus to his wife. Yet, because we do not get to know York in this dramatic structure of events, his role in this triangle of infection is marked insignificant. The focus, here, is on DL men. Thus, the precautionary tale continues, affirming the mythology that these men pose major "risks" for black women. More specifically, the irresponsible acts of black men lead to dangerous outcomes. Or, more accurately, the sexual activities of some DL men propose "risks" to women. It is worth noting here the ways in which the narrative is similar to the *Oprah Winfrey Show* and King's <u>On the Down Low</u>, as it focuses on middle-class

"DL brothas." In the context of something as heinous as murder, however, "Low Down" facilitates degradation by mainstream media of upwardly mobile black men. As these men engage in social activities, traditionally associated with white men, we are reminded that these men are intruding on white territory. This becomes the explanation for why they cannot behave—their blackness, or biological inferiority, is always present or lurking in the shadows. In addition, the "Low Down" seems to suggest that as black men become more manicured, more in power, and more middle-class they become more white, gay, and low down. The latter, which is the title for the episode, is most problematic. As the show illustrates its knowledge of this network of men as "Down Low," the choice to title the show "Low Down" seems, at best, judgmental. As a result, the final scene of the episode is met with much resistance.

The episode closes with Abbot's wife's visit to her husband in prison, begging him to admit his wrong-doing to avoid the case going to public trial. In the process, she grants him forgiveness:

> I forgive you… for what you did. But, I cannot forgive you, if you let our children, and your friends, and their families be destroyed. A trial will drag all of us through the mud. I am asking you Andy, to be man, and admit what you have done.

However, rather than forgive him, we the audience are left to ask "How could this 'low down' man put his family at risk?" The use of the "low down," I argue, manipulates our assessment of the circumstance. We are led to believe that it is his intention to "put her at risk," by way of having unsafe sex. The "low down" act, in this context, is not only Abbott's sex outside of his marriage, but most significantly, his sex with other men. Even if one is unaware of the

episode's title, the discourse that we have consumed within media, tells us that these type of men are often unremorseful, selfish, and unconcerned with black women's health. Thus, when Andy Abbott tells his wife, "he wanted me to leave my family, I couldn't. I couldn't…admit I'm 'gay,'" it raises several potentially transgressive questions. Is gay only when one makes public male-male relationships? Is there a way to be gay and down low? Or, is Abbott using gay here, as an indicator of the limited nature of our language used to describe sexuality? Either way, we are left here with something that often is unspoken within discourses surrounding the DL: at the core of discretion is a concern for "respectability." This is obvious as Abbot's wife asks him to save the family's face. Likewise, it is apparent when Abbott informs her that he could not leave his family, nor could he embrace a "gay" identity. These two dilemmas have at its nexus a concern for public opinion and personal privacy. While the episode may be entitled "Low Down," we learn that both Abbott and his wife utilize the Down Low in order to negotiate their public and private selves.

Return to Daddy: The Necessary Fiction of Crisis and the State in Black Affairs

One of the most striking moments in the *Law &Order: SVU* episode is when Andy Abbott's wife urges him "to be a man and admit what you've done." The black woman is utilized to not only elicit a confession, but to discipline the black man for "acting out." With her verbal and physical pain, he is called to an apology for his doubly criminal acts of murdering his colleague and potentially murdering his wife. Here, Daddy is definitely understood as not simply low down, but dangerous and dysfunctional. *Law & Order*, like many television shows, articles, books, movies, and documentaries about the DL subject, see themselves as doing critical work to better inform (and often entertain, or excite) the broader public. In turn, many consume

problematic media representations of not only black men, but black male sexuality. Yet, all engagements with this topic—because of its somewhat newness in media—act as an awareness campaign. While these "missions" may have some potentially meaningful purpose, as Renato Rosaldo so aptly informs us, "Benevolent intentions do not erase damaging effects" (xii). As this chapter illustrates, media constructs linear narratives about DL men, while the public consumes images, imaginings, and stereotypes of not only black men, but black people. Together, the presence of deviance, destruction, and death—as presented in media—construct the necessary fiction of "crisis," which serves to alarm not only black women and the black community, but also state-sanctioned institutions whose mission is "protecting the health and safety of all Americans and for providing essential human services, especially for those people who are least able to help themselves."[91]

The damaging effects of such benevolent acts have never been painfully apparent during the course of my research, as exemplified when I entered a pharmacy funded by the Chicago Department of Health on Chicago's Southside. In January 2005, I stumbled upon a poster that I had first encountered in mid-2004 on the abandoned website www.livingdownlow.com, as a J.L. King contribution to HIV safety.[92] This poster, an extension of all the discursive damage King's political-intellectual immaturity has created, attempts to act as a preventative measure in the fight against HIV/AIDS in the black community through a focused initiative toward the DL population. Indeed, J.L. King's work is not the only HIV/AIDS prevention material of this type. However, after his appearance on the *Oprah Winfrey Show* in April 2004, he was proclaimed the "DL posterboy." Therefore, his work and words were deemed "expert" and his DL gospel was understood as truth, leaving room for little scrutiny. Unfortunately, the mass hysteria that rippled

amongst black women—this new "knowledge" about these diseased men living a "double life and double lie," as King espoused on *Oprah*—would encourage further policing of not only the black male body, but the black community as well. As the DL has become a perceived socio-sexual pandemic within Black America, it has created a broad concern amongst those within and outside of black communities. Consequently, community organizations, activists, and state-sanctioned institutions have begun taking action in order to "save black women."

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the primary agent of HIV/AIDS prevention worldwide, is one organization which has made such commitments. The CDC—as the national public health institution that promotes "health and quality of life by preventing and controlling disease, injury, and disability"[93]— is the major distributor of information on HIV/AIDS. Every year, they commission prevention materials, research, and resources that target potential "at-risk" populations. In 2004, as they became attentive to the concerns surrounding the DL, they commissioned what is now referred to as the "Down Low Poster," created by J.L. King.[94] This poster, as well as other prevention materials are available for purchase on their website, and also distributed to health agencies that may service DL men, or those "affected and infected by them." Therefore, as I entered the public health facility, located in the heart of Chicago's historical "black mecca," it was clear that the state saw fit to begin its campaign here.

Together, this state-sanctioned "Down Low" poster and other media coverage on the DL not only regulates the black body, but also constructs what Maurice Wallace has referred to as a "metapicture" of black men. The metapicture, which he borrows from media scholar W.J.T. Mitchell, is understood as "a piece of movable cultural apparatus, one which may serve a

marginal role as illustrative device or a central role as a kind of summary image, what I have called a 'hypericon' that encapsulates an entire episteme, a theory of knowledge" (Mitchell 49). Wallace employs this concept in his book Constructing the Black Masculine to read the historical and contemporary imaging of black men within media contexts as a hyper-iconographic, but simultaneously villainized, subject (21). For my purposes, I employ *metapicture* to discuss how the ubiquity of the DL as topic and figure, has now become a problematically iconographic figure in the discourse surrounding HIV/AIDS, particularly in the black community. Moreover, I am interested in how a certain metalanguage of race and (homo)sexuality, to borrow from Evelyn Higginbotham, operates to construct both a criminalizing and demonizing narrative of not only black DL men, but black people more generally. I argue that the focus by media on DL, or HIV/AIDS as cultural apparati, obscure the ways in which a knowledge is being (re)produced about black people and sexual minorities. As journalist Duncan Osborne argues, "it is much easier…to blame the spread of HIV on these scary, thugged-out, black faggots—that is the subtext in these stories—than it is to grapple with the complicated epidemiology of HIV in America" (1). While his claim is astute, I would add, it is also easier to identify the "criminal" of HIV/AIDS in blackface, as black people have historically been situated within a narrative of savagery, disease, and dysfunctionality.

The CDC's newest poster is, at best, a replica of the dominant media discourses and is emblematic of Duncan Osborne's assertions. This poster pictures three black figures, two male and one female. The female, who is pregnant, is dressed in black while looking over her left shoulder and rolling her eyes at the scene behind her. Standing directly behind her is a man dressed in a black business suit, with a touch of white in his dress-shirt, who touches her hip as

he gazes toward the camera. In his rear—pun intended—is another black man, wearing sunglasses and dressed in a white suit (so-called hip-hop gear) while his left hand is placed gently on the businessman's chest. Super-imposed across all of their waists are the white words "Down Low." In addition, the caption, to which we are supposed to pay most attention—located way down low— reads, "What you don't know can kill you…Get the facts. Get tested!" There are several layers here. Yet, the symbolism is clear: The man in the white suit represents the DL man who penetrates the businessman, who penetrates the black woman, who is only able to penetrate them with her gaze. This image ironically mirrors what I have argued in this chapter to be the evolution of the DL in discourse. First, the discourse began with the homo-thug as the quintessential DL figure, then it moved into the middle-class as the "down-low phenomenon," and finally toward the black woman (middle-class and baby-carrying), as the most threatened by these dangerous "vectors of contagion."

The power-differential set up in this poster is quite interesting. Who is holding the power in this pose? The black man, who gazes out at the camera, as if to say, "I got this!" has the power. Here, I guess, power is equated with not only economic mobility (as the man in the middle is middle-classed by position and aesthetic) and deadly secrecy (as his pose seems to indicate an awareness of deceit). In addition, the caption—"What you don't know can kill you"—also suggests that the person in danger is the female figure, as she is the only one who "[doesn't] know." While I might agree with the premise that being tested regularly is a necessary step toward saving lives, the danger of HIV/AIDS is not exclusive to black females, but everyone. For, indeed, the two men may also be as unaware about their HIV status as the young woman. Nonetheless, her punitive gaze and our understandings informed by

contemporary DL rhetoric, charges these men with the crime of infection, even before we see any test results. Consequentially, this poster attaches a value to the life of the woman, while discarding the ambivalent circumstances behind her. Ultimately, what becomes apparent is that as long as we continue to lose individuals of our community at such disproportionate rates, we are all in danger of a racial and cultural genocide.

It is also possible to read this poster image as a racial allegory. The two black figures, the supposed "straight couple," are adorned in black to represent pure "blackness." While the DL man, dressed in white, represents the way that homosexuality has historically been situated to contaminate blackness and is often seen as a white phenomenon. Consequently, the lettering for "Down Low," also in white, suggests that discreet male-male sex is what Eldridge Cleaver has called the "racial death-wish" (101). Hence, the black man becomes white the more he engages in homosexual behavior; while, in this context, he also writes his own death through same-sex relations, which always already equal death. Clearly, the man in the middle, has not fully assimilated (as he still has his "girl"), but the white dress shirt may put him on his way. The DL Man's gentle hand placement on the suited man's chest might even be a reach for his jacket, an attempt to expose his (undisclosed) whiteness. Here, the white shirt underneath the black jacket re-calls historic discourse that constructs practices of homosexuality as white "infections" within black society. This so-called disease, or "death-wish,"—the homosexual presence—is ironically constructed as the main vector of contagion of HIV/AIDS within hegemonic discourses. Here, the logic of this mythology assists in further persecution of not only the "DL brotha," but all those who participate in same-sex relations. The two men, then, are constructed as active and voluntary agents in their own death, while the woman is purely a casualty.

The possibilities for this poster are multiple. However, the central theme seems to be quite apparent. Black men on the DL are a threat to heterosexual stability and are harmful to the health of black women, their children, and the black community. The punishment for this crime is enforced through two forms. First, when the woman glares at the scene behind her, the image of the two men, she draws our attention to not only their presence, but also proximity. This consciousness, coupled with our own cultural anxieties, forces a punitive gaze from the viewer. Either way, we are aware that the actions in the poster are to be scrutinized, as they are dangerous and "low down." While all forms of prevention have their potential benefits, the drawbacks of this perpetuating image of black men as dysfunctional, irresponsible, and deadly, is as dangerous in this community as it has been as it circulates as fodder for mainstream media's capitalization from black pain. As a state-sanctioned institution is willing to market this image as representative of its campaign against the spread of HIV/AIDS, it legitimates a misguided approach for HIV/AIDS prevention and research. Greg Millett and David Malebranche in the aforementioned study, recommend that public health research and prevention shift focus from identifying "at-risk" groups to "risk" behaviors. Millet and Malebranche explain:

> The role of bisexually active black men in HIV transmission is a more complex issue than depictions of black men on the down-low as sexual predators and black women as uninformed victims. Future HIV research and programmatic activities must reflect this level of complexity by focusing on the sexual behaviors and sociocultural processes that facilitate HIV transmission between black men and women. (57S)

Rather than focus on men who have sex with men, DL men, or even heterosexual women who have sex with men, they suggest identifying *how* people have sex rather than who they have it

with. Some examples they posit is that "black heterosexuals, more than any other racial or ethnic group, have more sexual partners… are more likely to have unprotected sex during anal sex than vaginal sex… black women are more likely to report vaginal douching…" (56S). All of these are sexual behaviors which are categorized as potentially placing people at higher risk for sexually transmitted diseases. This has great implications for not only the practice of public health, but public discourse. Whereas, the media and public health have focused on the discreet practice of sexual identity by DL men as harboring and spreading disease, this approach moves us away from *who's* in the bedroom to what *happens* in the bedroom. Specifically, Millet and Malebranche urge an investigation of not only what happens but also of targeting the socio-cultural parameter that may encourage unsafe and high-risk sexual behaviors. From this data, rather than moving to what I term "life-style" campaigns, we may need to develop better strategies of visual education. In essence, such prevention strategies such as the "Down Low" poster alarm the public, rather than challenge the sexual behaviors of those most affected by HIV/AIDS.

In 1994, in his book Welcome to the Jungle, Kobena Mercer announced that "black people are somewhat immune from media-led panic around issues of HIV infection" (155). Indeed, the discursive scene above contradicts this claim in our contemporary moment. However, the DL has regenerated a form of "media led panic," which tells us that there is still a search for a risk factor that can be blamed, rather than a solution to the socio-cultural condition to prevent the disproportionate and saddening increase of AIDS amongst those Zora Neale Hurston called "the furthest down below." Such construction further deters proper attention toward funding for treatment, prevention, and a cure to HIV/AIDS. In addition, it facilitates a

paralysis in the productive work that is being done toward such aims. As attention focuses on the seemingly untouchable "down low" figure, rather than examining the socio-cultural situations that produce a DL, cultural-specific safe-sex messages and tutorials on sexual practice within marginal communities declines. Ultimately, change in sexual behavior is sacrificed for the sake of sexy subjects for public consumption.

In an essay in progress, entitled "Moving Beyond Respectability," I argue that what may be hindering black mobility and the establishment of a stronger political front is our commitment to a "respectability" politics. These self-regulating and self-policing politics, discussed by E. Frances White and others,[95] creates unhealthy and unnecessary boundaries of blackness. As black people try to uphold "purity" and "morality," they seem more concerned about stigma than the material effects of pain and suffering amongst many black people—men and women living and dying with HIV/AIDS. This focus on stigma, I argue, is what allows DL discourse to be a convenient distraction from significant interventions that could be made in terms of prevention, treatment, and the sustenance of the quality of life. For example, why is there so much attention on "closeted gay black men spreading AIDS" rather than encouraging "straight" people to get tested regularly? If the heterosexual culture incorporates ritual testing, risks for disease is reduced, and the possibility of death by disease can be substantially decreased. Finally, rather than approaching queer sexuality as an anomaly in black America, we may be better served if we normalize queer presence through discourse and recognition, enabling a space to discuss men making responsible choices with the health of *all* sexual participants in mind. If we move the discourse outside the realm of homophobia and debates of "risk and blame," and into the realm of love and responsibility, we may be able to mobilize change.

The black community, which is saturated with masculinist tendencies—yet, no more than white society— could use a black feminist sensibility in its consumption and reproduction of sexual narratives. As Patricia Hill-Collins suggests in here recent work Black Sexual Politics: African-Americans, Gender, and the New Racism, a close examination of "structures of domination" and its effects on multiple communities within the black community, could be a starting strategy to undo the repercussions of the many violent attacks made against the black body through media and other agents. Within this critical attention, a damaging construction of either black men or black women is a violence enacted upon all people, regulations and rules mandated on black queer sexuality is a threat to the possibilities of black heterosexuality. This co-constitutive perspective on oppressions, with its transgressive reconfiguring of how we understand the interrelatedness of our marginalized subjectivities, could help us move toward better treatment of the multiple issues related to not only HIV/AIDS, but our (mis) understandings of sexuality more generally.

I wish to end with a paradox: The Down Low Brotha. This caption, descriptor, and naming device has been pervasive within media and my life for almost five years now. Yet, its paradoxical quality is never questioned. As the DL has become the focus of media attention, it has been framed as not only a "risk" to black women, or the "blame" for black women's increase in rates of HIV/AIDS, but also the necessary fiction which would facilitate a moral panic around black family and health crises. The black man, here, is discursively dysfunctional. Yet, the coupling of DL with Brotha continues. Is this not a paradox? The term "brotha," in this context, seems inappropriate given the black community's disavowal of and unfamilial relationship toward this queer men, in general. Indeed, this tension is felt as some journalists, such as

Cynthia Tucker in her March 14, 2004 Atlanta Journal-Constitution states that "no group support or safe-sex counseling would do these young men as much good as broad acceptance of homosexuality" (8D). As the National Association of Black Journalists met in August 2005, frustration over black male representation arose, as Steven Gray stated that "we have missed the mark…by focusing on AIDS and demonizing black men" (Dodd 2C), which challenged the perception that everyone was on the Anti-DL bandwagon, as they were on the ANTI-AIDS platform. Just last week, in another candid conversation, a woman told me, "…the down low in media is the violence. Black men themselves aren't just messed up. The problem is the community—we have to find a way to embrace brothers, get them to love themselves, so they make less mistakes and cause less problems."[96]

Her words took me back to one of the only billboards I have seen that targeted DL men in Atlanta, Georgia,[97] which ironically, was located just a few blocks from the Martin Luther King Center. The enlarged poster, which featured two black men engaged in conversation, dressed in college apparel and casual slacks/jeans, had a caption, written like a personal letter that read: *Brothers, Know We Love You—Just Protect Yourself and Others*. While this may seem ambiguous, in the "gay black mecca," the message is legible. For those potentially less familiar, the billboard also included the sponsoring health organization, which brought attention to its implicit, or explicit, meaning. However, rather than analyze the image, I wish to turn to the caption. This billboard, in my mind, moved the term "Down Low Brotha" from a paradox to an orthodox. Here, the collective community spoke the words, "We Love You." This one phrase, positioned for public consumption, removed a sense of blame and also urged responsibility in the name of love. Most significant, however, is that after the colon the call is made for black men to

protect themselves (sexually) and others (meaning anyone). This reference includes, but is not limited to, heterosexual safety. The non-specific appeal—the absence of any *one* direct sexual referent— allows space for transgressive preventative sexual politics. Here, the author recognizes the multiple sexual possibilities for black men and has found a way to encourage safety on all fronts. While this outreach poster is an alternative for HIV/AIDS prevention, it is symbolic of an alternative needed within black "community" politics. As we move toward ending the rise of HIV/AIDS and facilitating better methods of addressing the issues of disease in black communities, we must find ways to generate an understanding of multiple sexualities within the context of love.

Chapter 4:

"Out" in the Club: The Down Low, Hip-Hop, and the Architexture of Black Masculinity

For whom is outness a historically available and affordable option? Is there an unmarked class character to the demand for universal 'outness'? Who is represented by which use of the term, and who is excluded? For whom does the term present an impossible conflict between racial, ethnic, or religious affiliation and sexual politics? What kinds of policies are enabled by what kinds of usages and which are backgrounded or erased from view?—Judith Butler[98]

DL offers a new-school remix of the old-school closet, an improvisation on the coming-out narrative that imagines a low-key way of being in the world.—Jason King[99]

In the previous chapters, I argued that the closet functions as an insufficient trope to discuss the complex sexuality of men of color. The closet presupposes that the sexual subjects' desired place of being is "out" and almost always a part of the narrative of white queer history.[100] "Coming out of the closet" has been the contemporary niche phrase to articulate the universal threshold experience of sexual self-discovery and self-fulfillment. Yet, many black men who have discreet sex with other men contest this assumption, as they engage in low-key queer activity and describe themselves as being on the "down low" (DL). As one DL brotha told me, "there is no closet for us (black men) to go in—neither is it necessary to come out." These men, who dis-identify with dominant descriptors and performances of sexuality, often articulate a resistant narrative that is not particular to this contemporary moment, but has historically been a part of black male constructions of sexual identity.[101] DL men are new bodies dancing to an old song.

This dance, both literal and metaphorical, is the focus of this chapter. Here, I am most interested in the ways that DL men negotiate their "private" identity within queer club space. This chapter takes us from the printed page to the stage, focusing on the black queer club space and DL men's participation within it. As DL presences in queer space may sound contradictory,

it unveils the significance of space in expressions of sexual desire. Furthermore, DL men's participation in a queer space, but commitment to discretion, questions the popular perception that one is "out" if he is in a gay club. DL presence within the *The Gate*,[102] a known "gay" club in Chicago, reveals that black masculinity with its diverse textures uniquely enables the possibility for discreet sexual desire.

While I have been engaged in ethnographic research with men "on the DL," popular discourses have shifted from being literally "down low," to a new sexy sound byte in mainstream media. In addition, black men on the DL have been marked as the main vector of contagion for HIV/AIDS amongst black women.[103] This shift in public discourses re-shapes my critical discussions with DL men, as well as those who could share with me their understandings of "down low" subjectivity. The admission of being "on the down low" no longer suffices to demonstrate the discreet performance to which most DL men are committed. With the (re)construction of the "down low," at the hands of the media and others, many men have begun to preface their identity affiliation through what they are not rather than stating what they are.[104] There seems to be a strong attempt to create distance from the "other." As we hear "DL voices" in the pages of printed press materials, we might imagine DL bodies traveling through the "queer" club space while reporters supposedly interact with them. From the various photos of DL types being published, it might also appear that DL men seem less discreet and more "out and proud."[105] Media's investment in this understanding of DL subjectivity as "out" or "public," reflects not only new public gay and lesbian politics of visibility, but also historically privileged understandings of sexual identity within the academy. Both media and queer academic discourse continuously situate "outness" as the ideal and desired place of being for queer men and

women.[106] This chapter cautions such assumptions, highlighting an embodied performance of identity that clearly states otherwise. Media, as it attempts "to get the scoop," uses the trope of the closet and outness as their in-point for accessing a group of men that are only available within the public imagination. Hence, their access is often attained through problematic pop ethnography.[107] This media "work" has consistently focused on the DL presence in the black "gay" club scene— as specters lurking in the shadows of a black queer subculture. This pattern is revealed as writers search for "proof that the DL isn't necessarily a lifelong identity."[108] Such renderings pre-suppose that DL subjectivity is simply a black evolutionary step towards an embraced queer identity, while also framing black men as having a stunted sexual development

In contrast to these problematic media aims, I am interested in understanding "how" and "why" certain discreet performances of sexual identity continue and what allows for their prevalence within certain spaces. Specifically, I am interested in the ways that a certain structuring of the "black masculine" makes it possible, perhaps necessary, for such DL performances of sexual identity in a specific black club space. In addition, this chapter proposes that DL subjectivity challenges the norms of what has been constructed as homo and hetero-normative practices and ways of being in the world. For example, as DL men perform a "heterogender," while participating in sexual relations with both men and women, they call for an expanded notion of heterosexual identity. In their articulation of their subjectivity as men who "get down" or who are "on the down low," they subvert any coherent, consistent narrative about sexual identity. DL performances of sexual identity critique both the master narratives of heterosexuality and the dominant understandings of homosexuality. What is also unique about this particular historical moment and the "down low," is that DL men can "pass" in any space,

performing a brand of masculinity which can challenge and/or adhere to certain hetero/homo normative constructions of sexual identity. This particular chapter is interested in DL men's travel within a traditionally, or predominantly, queer club space—where the diverse performances of a certain brand of masculine identity constitute and give credence to DL subjectivity. As Henri Lefebvre instructs us, "space [….] unleashes desire. It presents desire with a transparency which encourages it to surge forth in an attempt to lay claim to an apparently clear field" (97).

In my fieldwork, the most "transparent" space has been The Gate, a queer black dance club on Chicago's northwest side. In this particular club space, DL men perform "straight" masculine identity, while they also engage their homoerotic desires. Through engaging critical ethnography and explorations of space, queer theory, and critical race theory, I explore this field and its complex landscape. For this critical engagement, I focus on two case studies: the experiences of a twenty-two year old young man named "Shawn" and a twenty-three year-old young man named "Tavares." Of all the men I spoke with, Shawn is the first I saw at a "queer" club. I use his experiences to illuminate, complicate, and outline some of the contradictions and complexities that arise when a DL guy goes "out." Tavares, in contrast to Shawn, is a life-long friend who recently told me of his desire for men. One night, when I mentioned to him that I was going to The Gate, he asked to join me. This experience was his first in a predominantly male queer setting. These encounters prompted many questions: How do these men negotiate their commitment to a heteronormative understanding of self, while participating in homonormative social and sexual activities? What is it about DL subjectivity that allows for such possibilities?

What is it about the structures and textures of the club space that invites these performers of discreet sexual identity?

Black Queer World-Making: Going Inside The Gate

Growing up in the 1980s and 90s, during a time when white queer politics held sway and white queer images were dominant, the possibility of a black gay presence in popular culture seemed impossible, or at least invisible. Consequently, during my childhood and some of my adolescence, I believed that black gay men silenced themselves, or made little noise, and never experienced any form of sexual freedom.[109] Therefore, my black queer world consisted of a ravaged imagination with no playground to explore and/or with to experiment. This understanding of black gay men as invisible or "quiet" continued into my collegiate experiences, as the predominant gay presence once again was white gay men. The potentiality of a black gay setting where men actually engaged homoerotic desire seemed at best foreign, at worst a fantasy never to be realized. It was not until my senior year in college that I learned that there were many people who had transformed my fantasy into a reality. Indeed, across the country and throughout the world, there existed spectacular spaces of black queer expression. In order to understand, experience, and enjoy my black queer self as a part of a living (rather than dormant) tradition, I would have to acknowledge what the critical performance scholar Dwight Conquergood knew well, "that sometimes—you do have to go there to know there."[110]

I first went to The Gate with my best friend Aaron, after we came home for Christmas break in December 2000. As an undergraduate, I ventured into the white gay club scene under the racist "all black people look alike" mentality that marked the culture of so many white gay establishments, by using the ID of an upperclassman who was two shades darker than I. When I

turned 21, however, I was afforded open-door privileges to participate in whatever "adult" activity I desired. My visit to The Gate was my first official "black gay function." I remember asking folks in line, "Is it hot in there?" to which many applied in the affirmative. Many of the club goers were also lamenting the

closing of The Incinerator, a black gay club that evidently had been the place to be "black and gay, and fabulous," prior to The Gate's arrival, according to one patron.

Interestingly, The Incinerator was a house-club, which many argue lost its business to the "rise of hip-hop."[111] What was most significant about The Incinerator was its history as the only black gay club, seven days a week. The Gate, on the other hand, is gay once a week--becoming the Friday night queer outlet for a large hip-hop queer mass. While those who attend The Gate have an option of listening to house or hip-hop, all of the club's advertisements and publicity seems to highlight its hip-hop appeal. Together, those who "kicked it" at The Gate partook in what Fiona Buckland describes as *queer world-making*—"a conscious, active way of fashioning the self and the environment, cognitively and physically, through embodied social practices moving through and clustered in the city" (19). While Buckland does not deny the possibility for a racialized subject to engage this practice, her research does not advance a theoretical application that accounts for racial subjectivity. During that Friday night party, The Gate's patrons were definitely participating in an act of black queer-world making through their appropriation of a traditionally black heterosexual space and transforming it into a space of and for queer desire.

Excited, to be a part of this black queer world, Aaron and I entered the gates of The Gate. As we approached the cashier, we read a sign announcing, "ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLE

NIGHT," which also explained why there was a ten dollar cover charge.. We both looked at each other, astonished at the use of the terms "alternative" and "lifestyle," which clearly marked the space as not only queer, but temporarily non-heterosexual. This framing of our evening of fun suddenly became queer, in the sense of odd, as we had configured this opportunity as not an alternative, but an only option. Secondly, we were also appalled at what seemed to be an inflated price for clubbing. Both of us, having ventured to predominantly white clubs, had become accustomed to three to five dollars covers for entry. In response to this escalation in price, Aaron referred to the cover as a "rip-off" and I, at that time called it a scandal. Later, I learned otherwise. Todd, a manager at The Gate, told me that, "for black club owners there is a greater price to pay—for the possibilities of misbehaving and also to make up for the lack of money made through the consumption of alcohol and other club activities." Clearly, the prices for this queer party were the product of something that went beyond scandal and rip-off. It was an example of the way Chicago's system of racism shows its face in every part of black life. However, our sentiments, and those of many others I have talked to, reveal the ways that this customary practice toward black parties informs a (mis)understanding of the economics of queer world-making. As a result, the escalated costs of clubbing at The Gate, when compared to "white" establishments," almost always suggested an unethical and outrageous "lack of appreciation" for black patronage. Due to such high costs, in what seems to be always hard economic times for black people, many choose to stay at home or truly find "alternative" things to do. This, I know, has not only led to disgruntled patrons, but has also contributed to the historical demise of many black gay events, in general. Despite the ten dollar cover, we entered

this space of queerdom hoping that what was inside was better than what we had witnessed thus far.

As we entered The Gate, we heard the thump of house music and observed many bodies, mostly men, moving across the dance floor, feeling the groove, standing along the wall, and charged with homoerotic energy and rhythmic impulses. Initially, we didn't acknowledge the dynamics of space, as much as we were attentive to the music and the "type" of folk in each space. It was not until we entered the second room, that we made any real assessment of the differences in clientele on this night. When we entered the hip-hop room, we noticed that it was crowded and filled with a sort of "brute masculinity," as Aaron put it. Immediately, I thought of cave-men when he used this analogy, but I understand the gist of his commentary. Indeed, there was something rough and rugged about the way people moved in this space. In this first episode at The Gate, I only remember us exiting the room quickly, as we began to sweat profusely in the midst of those dancing and moving to DMX's infamous "y'all gon' make me lose my mind up in here."

Feeling that we were literally going to "lose our minds," we returned to the house room where we felt more comfortable and more at home. In retrospect, I am sure that Aaron may have felt out of place in his Kenneth Cole black slacks and fitted white shirt because most of the men in the hip-hop room were not dressed in similar attire. Instead, they were adorned in what had become known as hip-hop gear: loose low-riding jeans, big shirts, and baggy wear. I was wearing a similar ensemble to Aaron, a black shirt (somewhat fitted) and a pair of regular fitting jeans. I felt a tinge out of place, as well. Nonetheless, our return to the house room made us aware of the great contrast between the two spaces. The houseroom welcomed us. This was most

clear when the vocalist on the DJ's track began to sing, "Divas to the Dance Floor." Quickly, we took to the dance floor as if that was a cattle call to our middle-class, college-going, Kenneth Cole and DKNY-wearing selves. We thought we were divas—the cream of the crop. But more than this, we felt that we were "free" to express that part of ourselves that we had repressed for so long. This song initiated our move into black gay culture, showing us what we loved most about it: the fabulous music, the fabulous people, the fabulous DRAMA!

Fiona Buckland marks this act of being "fabulous," as a quintessential gay cultural performance sensation. Indeed, it is an essential component of black gay life, as it is in white gay cultural productions. The Gate, however, as a space which contained both house and hip-hop music seemed to occupy two distinct modes of expression. While the house room and music was "fabulous," it was clear that the hip-hop room and music was deemed "cool." If one simply observed the house room, where one witnesses voguers in high fashion from DKNY to Prada, traditional Kenneth Cole-wearing dancers, and the classic tight shirt-tight jeans models, he or she would recognize it as a place where "I'm fabulous and I don't care what you think" is the general sentiment. Whereas, the predominant look in the hip-hop room was more uniform—demonstrating people's desire or consciousness of specific fashion trends traditionally associated with hip-hop music and its consumers. This is not to suggest that fabulousness and coolness are determined by fashion. However, clothes are one way that individuals in space can display both their individuality and conformity. Although this binary description may imply otherwise, it is important to note that I am not claiming that hip-hoppers and house-heads, as they are often called, don't share space or blur the lines. Yet, for this project, the distinctions between the two spaces are important as they reflect a larger, dominant shift/divide in the black gay cultural

experience at this historical moment. Therefore, the dynamics of the hip-hop room as space that lends access to down low positionality is of utmost interest. Indeed, this space circulates contradictory messages that supercede traditional boundaries of gender and sexuality, where men negotiate their relationship to and between masculine bravado and black queer culture.

This odd congruence, between hip-hop and queer desire, has "coolness" at its nexus. Here, I wish to discuss coolness as a more general expression, which Marlene Kim Connor in What is Cool?: Understanding Black Manhood in America understands as a guiding ethic on how to dress, behave, and interact with approval from a largely black and male spectatorship. Coolness is a theory in practice—an embodied rubric that regulates and monitors what is and is not acceptable amongst black men under and outside of white surveillance. While I argue that coolness is not a uniquely black expression, it is a modern descriptor for a historical tactic. Most importantly, coolness acts as a way of survival, a coping stance/pose that black men engage, in order to make do with what they do or do not have (Majors and Billson 4-5). Coolness is a performative utterance and action, whereby men define themselves within and against traditional standards. Indeed, like all performances, it changes depending on those involved, dimensions of space/place, and who is reading and interpreting the scene of action.

The Gate's hip-hop room seemed to spill over with coolness. Our quick entrance and exit, a sign of discomfort, was probably a resistance to such odd congruency. Queerness and coolness rarely are coupled in traditional black rhetoric. More pointedly, hip-hop as the impetus or interlocutor for queer desire is foreign to circulating mythologies of sexuality. Indeed, everything we had learned in our experiences about hip-hop and gayness said that "ne'er the twain shall meet." In addition, our tradition of queer experience included white men, techno

music, and "fabulous" apparel. Naturally, The Gate's ability to forge a relationship between hip-hop and queerness was fascinating, but also triggered feelings of discomfort. We were queer indeed, but we were not hip-hoppers; we preferred house (more honestly read: techno) and we wanted to be fabulous rather than cool.

Indeed, the dynamic duo, hip-hop and queer space (or coolness and queerness), are incongruous at surface-level, but a deeper examination can explain this coupling. Historically, hip-hop culture and music, has gone against the grain of traditional American music and style—often critiquing dominant structures and modifying other musical forms. Likewise, queerness has also disrupted normative tales of sexuality, re-structuring the perceived composition of our society and generally challenging normative socio-sexual rules and regulations. Together, they seem to make a "fabulous" pair. These two world-making apparatuses disrupt norms, interrogate new ground, and encourage exploration outside the domains of normativity. Ultimately, the relationship between hip-hop and black queer expression, is a sort of meeting of two queers. Thus, hip-hop music's use as a medium for homoerotic engagements is not odd, but almost anticipatory. Furthermore, The Gate as a predominantly black establishment would naturally welcome black forms of musical and cultural expression—its patrons are young black men and women who often are consumers of hip-hop in other contexts. Furthermore, young postmodern black queer subjects are often most inclined to situate sexual identity as only one part of the self, rather than the most privileged point of identification.[112] Whereas, white queer subjects may often construct a more peculiar culture, black queer subjects often appropriate traditional black (often hetero-sexual/sexist) mediums of entertainment for queer use. While this appropriation does, in fact, mark the black queer subject unique from dominant structures, on these terms,

black gays can recognize both parts of the self, concomitantly. To follow this line of thought is to understand that black queer participation and enjoyment in hip-hop is congruent with black life—where hip-hop often operates as the nexus between the black and the queer. This reality corroborates the theoretical shift in the academy that understands the black subject as multiple, rather than monolithic. In a world that compartmentalizes different parts of the self (i.e., sexuality from black forms of expression), the black queer male/female subject understands that his/her being in the world is informed by all parts. Therefore, hip-hop is as much a part of queer-world making, as queer-world making is a part of the history of hip-hop.

Indeed, black queer-world making is a way of making history in a society where black experiences of same-sex desire and interaction are too often under-represented and under-appreciated. Hip-hop, at The Gate, provides a unique experience for black queer subjects to embrace such desires while maintaining an allegiance to macro-cultural forms of expressions. The (un)conscious moving and making of a black queer world constructs a black queer history that is dynamic, though often "down low." The Gate is one place that participates in a black queer-world making in Chicago, where it uniquely creates a conversation between seemingly distant, but clearly familiar, cultural expressions. Black men like Robert, a DL man who I met during my earlier ethnographic observations, illustrates the value as he says he can "feel the body of another man's without feeling ashamed."[113] Nonetheless, he acknowledges the peculiarity of this space while also recognizing the inability for this exchange in other circumstances. Robert marks the key cultural difference between this queer world and the "other" when he tells me that in The Gate, "there is no need for hiding and hushing." Indeed, The Gate provides such a space where black gay/queer men can express same-sex desire with little, or no disgrace. In this sense,

black queer world-making is as much about constructing a history as it is building a "home." As Chandan Reddy informs us, home is always a "contradictory location that is open and hybrid" (367), much like the hip-hop space at The Gate— which blends hip-hop and queer roots on the route to non-normative desire and pleasure.

The Gate, in its re-routing of queer desire and pleasure into social space, constructs a home where a subject can "have his/her cake and eat it too," so to speak. The black queer subject can live in the space of hip-hop, engaging traditional black (read: black heterosexual) musical forms and cultural styles, while also engaging queer desire. This space, home, "is open and hybrid." As the domestic home has often afforded very little opportunity for black queers to enjoy and celebrate their desire, The Gate offers an opportunity for them to challenge such limited understanding of home, constructing a temporal "pleasure zone." While the relationship between hip-hop and queerdom presents an enthralling question, of most interest here is how black queer subjects utilize hip-hop in queer space. Particularly, how does hip-hop serve as an interlocutor between discreet performances of sexual identity and explicit engagements of queer desire? How specifically, do DL men utilize queer space, navigating their desire for discretion and the pleasure of homoerotic engagement? How do these men literally dance down low, while simultaneously re-mixing the closet? To gain any critical understanding of this process, we must go "in da club."

"In Da Club": Homoerotic Activity in a Heteronormative Playground

It is about 12:45 a.m. on a cold, below zero February morning on Chicago's northwest side. I stand in front of what once was a site of industrialization—a dark brick building with a

one-story front and its raised back— now a structure that contains often contradictory architectures of homo and heteronormative performances. The Gate is a parade of contrast. The physical appearances and fashion "looks" are definitely diverse and dynamic. As I stand in a line of approximately seventy-five people outside of the club, the "straight" bouncer yells, "Have your IDs ready." I scope the never-ending processional, where there are Black men and women of all ages, a few Whites and Latinos, a couple of drag queens in pumps, and some folks who appear "to have gotten the night mixed up." After twenty minutes of us taking in the scene, the line begins to move. I am elated because my arms are getting goose bumps, as I am dressed in a blue polo shirt and loose-fitting blue jeans. Seeing that I don't have much meat on my bones, this "cool" attire was probably a bad choice for this processional in the middle of this Chicago winter. Troubled by the tingling sensation in my fingers, and concerned that my elbows will begin to ash, I proceed forward in the line, as a young woman who is adorned in FUBU fashions (that's For Us By Us), passes me and hands the big six-foot four bouncer her VIP pass. This, to my dismay, allows her to bypass the parade. I hear disgruntled patrons in line expressing their frustration, while my shivering body tells me that I should've been with Miss VIP. Before long, enter the corridor that leads to the actual club. Plastered on the wall still hangs a sign that announces, "Alternative Lifestyle Night." Near this sign is another that reads "After 1:00 AM, the cover is $12.00." Hell no!" scream some of the folk standing in line as they read the sign. I, of course, pay the cover, unsure about what is so special about the 1:00 AM hour, but knowing that there is a rich queer world waiting inside.

Bodies of all ages, sizes, shapes, colors, and fragrances fill the "house" space. I walk past a bar to witness bodies divided across the dance floor by wooden beams in a twenty by forty

feet space of sensuality and sexuality. Indeed, this house was divided, clearly quartering off one "type" from the "others." There is a section of men over thirty in one quarter, voguers in another, and two quarters of the men and a few women who are under thirty and uninhibited in how they move and groove—who may often be conceived as the liberal or "queeny" types.[114] Both DL men and traditionally "masculine" gay men often read themselves against the latter category. Effeminate men—or the "queens"—

are the male characters in this dance space who are most often positioned as artificial, fake, or not "real men." Here, the "sissy," "fag," or "punk" is understood as being a pretender or impersonator. These assessments assume that for biological men, masculinity trumps femininity, denying the possibility for both gendered norms to exist in one body, or more importantly for their development, or appearance, to be disordered. Not only do such claims allow "masculine" men to deem their performance as natural, but also reaffirms that gender is a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 270). Interestingly, such claims of inauthenticity could be made for any masculine performance—noting that all gender performances are impersonations. [115] If one accepts RuPaul's oft-cited claim that "we are born and the rest is drag," then all men in queer space are practicing the art of impersonation. Yet, this does not situate any one gender as more real, or authentic, than any other. Still, the prevalence of men in the hip-hop room illustrates which performances are valorized as being most authentic. While the macho bravado, or most "thugged out," images are often deemed as most "real" or "authentic, there are clearly competing versions of what is, or ought to be, the black masculine. However, in The Gate it seems that one particular narrative has won out, but has not completely taken over.

While their may be debate over who belongs at The Gate or within which space, the convening of black queer men for socio-sexual engagement is an electric gathering. In The Gate's house room, black men perform gayness and blackness simultaneously. And while there may be shame in the shadows, the rhythms control the character of this space—filling it with pride and celebration. I, typically, join the crowd of men under thirty, where we dance to the sound of the urban drumbeat, industrial scratches, gospel riffs, and the rare remixes of rhythm and blues songs together. We dance to house music, which seems to release the body from some of its constrictive impulses, exploring its multiple meanings and possibilities. Those who wish not to dance, stand against the wall smiling, frowning, talking, drinking, and sometimes even singing. These bodies often exchange space, switching between the dancer and the wallflower. However, many who feel the "groove," remain in their sweat and swing, living on the dance floor. Unfortunately, this house would not be my home today. As I walk past another bar, I follow a crowd into another space, located in the back of this warehouse, the "hip-hop" room.

The "hip-hop" space is a strong contrast to the "house" room. As I push my way through the crowd, I gently brush up against hard muscle, soft and sometimes sweaty flesh, noticing the many costumes of those who inhabit this humid and frenetic space. As I navigate through the crowd, I hear a familiar rhythm and walk up a short flight of stairs onto a passway above the dance floor, a location where many seem to settle. The new hit by Eminem's protégé Fifty Cent—"In Da Club"—is blaring from the speakers:

You can find me in da club,

With a bottle full of Bud

But, mama, I got the X (ecstasy)

If you into taking drugs.

I'm into having sex,

I ain't into making love.

So come give me a hug—if you into getting rubbed.

I become entangled in these lyrics and wonder about their function in this space of desire and dancing. Surveying the action, from what de Certeau has called the "God View,"[116] my critical ethnographic instincts are overactive. Everything is present, alive, right in front of me, above me, and even behind me. I am over stimulated. And I wonder, "Why is it here, on this scape, that I typically encounter men on the DL?" Many men I have spoken with have described this point of view as "safe," or the place where they just "chill." This is a unique vantage point as it sets you apart (creating vulnerability), while giving you the scopographic power (providing control). The vulnerability I experienced was the result of over-stimulation—where the heightened action within the space left me available for unwarranted touching, pushing, and shoving. My body, as it absorbed so much of the vibrant action in the club space, was the receptor of much uninvited, and often unwelcomed, energy. I could only imagine the experience of DL men –who did not have the couple years of experience (over 50 visits)—as they attempted to participate in new queer ventures. Surprisingly, many DL men favored this passway, as a place of residence in the hip-hop room. As one DL man told me, "I can see all the pickings from here." I would contend that while the God view is a point "which transforms the city's complexity into readability" (de Certeau, 1985, 124), it is also a location of power and control. This passway, or balcony, allows the viewer to observe action from afar and potentially locate those whose gestural schemas,

and/or "sex appeal," are in line with the their ideals. Here, the traveler in this queer world can be a bit more selective about who piques his queer desires. From this spectatoral location, the voyeur has control and is almost unavailable for direct physical interaction. Often when I approach random "strangers" to inquire as to their reason for choosing the hip-hop room or The Gate club, they often cut the conversation short, or disregard my attempt to converse.[117] These moments have heightened my awareness as to the navigating powers of the ethnographer—as a trickster-traveler, who has to work for access into whatever community with which he/she works.

As I stand at "God's view," I am so aware of what is happening in this queer world. This consciousness can be partially attributed to my vantage point, but also to the words of the rap song—the way that the lyrics seem to match the action on and off the dance floor. We were in the club, there were some Budweiser drinkers, and there was body language that suggested, "I wanna have sex" and not "I wanna make love." Meanwhile, I am doing what I call the sway dance—moving from side to side to the rhythms but not really exerting much energy. I look up and around as the crowd shakes, jiggles, and gets down. This space, though filled with many different bodies and forms of bodily expressions, has a somewhat homogeneous character stamped with a certain "look" or "pose." This aesthetic is discussed in Thomas DeFrantz's, "The Black Beat Made Visible," where he suggests that "it is the tightness of the body that speaks most to a hip hop dance…These dances are fundamentally concerned with controlling the body, holding it taut, and making it work in a fragmented manner…" (75). While DeFrantz was discussing early hip-hop dance history, the age of break-dancing and pop-locking, similar trends remain in clubs like The Gate. In these dance spaces, the performers limit their movement rather

than find multiple ways to flex the muscles and navigate through space. The dancing seems more contained to a specific location, with little mobility, yet much diversity. Though informed by some of the ritualistic expressions of hip-hop in popular culture, each body tells its own story.

As I look above me, below me, and beside me, I observe physical and facial expressions that re-call childhood experiences of "mackin'" and "hollerin'." These type of poses and approaches were popular as a young boy growing up on Chicago's South Side. Men would often stand, in a neutral position, allowing their eyes do much of the talking. Then, as they approached the person with whom they had interest, they would quickly perform this "tight" and often "tough" guy posturing. This performance was often accented by a hand on the groin, an expressionless face almost always absent of any hint of a smile, a cool slouch in the shoulders, and the classic concaveness in the chest. A similar aesthetic appreciation is present in The Gate. Interestingly, however, the presence of women in this space is hardly felt. Yet, the "mackin'" and "hollerin'" styles of performance are projected onto bodies of the same sex. There is the dancing male butch-femme binary and its ideological counterpart, heterosexual male-female pairing. Still, it is striking how the dressing styles and dance characteristic are consistent, as to suggest that everyone had received a similar cultural memo for the evening. In this space, the dress code is in—and it's called hip-hop fashions (anything produced by the fashion gurus like Nelly, P-Diddy, and Russell Simmons). Bodies move slowly and stiffly, with little exaggeration. These are men who through the image of the "thug," or "homey," make the masculine man (or woman) come alive.

My flow, my show brought me the doe

That bought me all my fancy things

My crib, my cars, my pools, my jewels

Look nigga, I done came up and I ain't changed.

As this bridge plays, I become more excited and decide to come out of my standstill and catch the groove. As I step down from the passway onto the dance floor, to my surprise, I see Shawn. This twenty-two-year-old college student classifies himself as being on the "DL," and previously vowed that he would never "be caught dead in one of those sissy clubs." It was with even greater surprise that Shawn acknowledged me and proceeded to take my hand and place it on his groin. This was the first time he had ever made such move, but the time and space encouraged him to lose many of his inhibitions and insecurities. When I ask Shawn about the incident, particularly the level of comfort he displayed, he insists that it was due to the alcohol and apologetically says, "I guess I'm becomin' a little bit too comfortable." This statement prompted a longer historical explanation:

> I wasn't always that comfortable. For real. I mean, me and my guy—my best friend—the first time we went to the club in D.C., we practically hid. We wore our hats so far down over our faces; the most you probably could see was my smile and his goatee. We wore real big clothes to conceal our identities… Now I don't know who would have known me in D.C., being that I was from the west suburbs of Chicago.

This admission, clearly marking Shawn's evolution from being very discreet to less discreet in his participation in club life, is informative. While it illuminates a certain level of "comfort," it could potentially suggest that Shawn has "come into himself." However, this comfort within the space of the club does not speak to his behavior in company outside of the club. In fact, I

observed that Shawn's anxiety over how his fraternity, friends at school, and family would respond to his presence became an almost overwhelming concern. Specifically, he articulated a concern for his reputation amongst his "brotherhood" as the "pretty boy, ladies man"—a title that clearly informed Shawn's general performance of masculinity. The most striking image in this narrative is the costume for concealment, the utilization of presumable hip-hop gear to mask identity. Shawn is astutely aware of the value of clothes in the regulation and monitoring of what is properly masculine. In a sense, Shawn and his friend's clothing is the material mask for their queer desire. On one hand his cap is a signifier of hip-hop, while it is also a sign of Shawn's desire to both not see, as well as be seen. All at once, hip-hop is the corroborator and the concealer of queer desire.

The more one understands the cultural work of hip-hop, within and outside black queer environments, the less surprising it becomes that DL men patronize The Gate. A couple of weeks prior to the incident with Shawn, a guy standing at the bar had approached me by saying, "I'm here with my girl and her gay friend, but I get down too."[118] After this admission, and my mild response, he proceeded to rub my leg. I suppose the wordless realm of physicality was being used to clarify the meaning of potentially ambiguous language.[119] I slowly smiled, grabbed my drink, and continued back to the dance floor. He attempted to follow. After talking with other gay men who frequented The Gate, I discovered this is not abnormal. Often, these spaces allowed for DL men to engage desire that would otherwise be neglected and kept dormant. However, as queer space somewhat de-stigmatizes queer sexuality, men could feel less convicted in their participation in homo-erotic/sexual behavior.

Likewise, Shawn was able to not only be present at The Gate, but also activate his sexual desires without the fear of losing his "masculine" card. My astonishment over Shawn's presence at The Gate, and his behavior therein, was related to his adamant insistence that his identity was "private," a term that connoted a keen sense of discretion. Typically, the men I had encountered previously would not be seen in an announced "gay" or "alternative" night at any club. Since this encounter, I have seen Shawn at one other "gay" club that offered a hip-hop fix. Later, he told me that "I can't stand house music— hip-hop is where it's at!"[120] It became clear that his ability to perform a hip-hop masculinity was part of the impetus for his participation in this particular "alternative" Friday at The Gate.

Fifty cent continues:

I'm that cat by the bar toasting to the good life

You that faggot ass nigga trying to pull me back right?

The last line invokes audience participation. As I deepen the groove of my sway dance, gay men and women shout "faggot ass nigga." Actually, they shout the whole line, but it is this part of the phrase that throws me. It seems contradictory for these queers of color to engage in such a chant. I turn to a friend, giving him a look of shock and disheartenment, and he says "It's just like the way we use nigga by itself." But, why would those who, like myself, have endured being called "faggot, sissy, punk" re-articulate such problematic rhetoric? Why would Shawn, or DL men in general, seemingly draw pleasure from this chant of hate and homophobia? As people threw their hands in the air, almost marching to construct a chorus-like concentric circle of "faggot ass nigga," something told me this was "cool."

This performance of heterosexism seemed to work in collaboration with a larger desire to be "cool." The queer subjects who yelled "faggot ass nigga" could feel apart of a larger black masculine sphere—one that usually excluded them. In this masculine imaginary, the way to often affirm one's normality is through the participation in homophobic, or sexist acts. When one takes possession of the "faggot," or the "nigga," it reduces the legitimacy of such ascriptions being made upon the speaker's body. In this way, the utterance of the profane empowers the speaker/chanter, affirming his status as appropriately masculine. This chanting moment was emblematic of the "cooling" of the hip-hop room, while also illuminating the ways in which one type of masculinity seems to pose itself as THE cool. In this way, the hip-hop room and its patrons, through so-called performances of heterogender (read heterosexism) positions the hip-hop space as the greater of the two rooms. It is within the hip-hop room that the "real men" reside. Traditional hetero-masculine behavior and codes deemed this space as "hot." This behavior, though highly problematic, suggests as Robert Farris Thompson does in his aptly titled essay "Aesthetics of the Cool," that hot is always balanced by cool (85-102). Whereas Thompson is speaking to the literal hotness of bodies, I employ "hot" to refer to contemporary black vernacular where this adjective signifies the best place to be, the spot, and the atmosphere that is most enlivened. Indeed, the men in the hip-hop room understand this room as such, while often the "room of sissies," as one patron referred to it, as a place less desired—"really gay," so to speak.

I also read this instance of hip-hop heterosexual rage in queer face to be a moment where gay men can temporarily "de-queer" themselves. I argue that such a chant may work as a way to set these men apart from the "others" in the space. It is a strategy to disavow

one brand of masculinity, while embracing another. In this conceptualization, the "others" who are outside of the traditionally masculine—those ascribed titles such as "femmes," "bottoms," "punks"—are marked as inferior, less than those who carry traditional masculine codes and behaviors. Shawn explains the every Friday chorus by stating that, "A faggot is a punk—it's not about what he does in the bedroom, it's what he doesn't do." His perspective suggests that the ability to spout this sexual epithet is about condemning the feminine male. In addition, Shawn's comment also ridicules those who perform the non-dominant role during sex.[121] Hence, his comment "what he does not do," signifies a discomfort not with being the non-dominant sex partner, but those who perform a style of masculinity that signals this sexual preference. Of course, Shawn doesn't consider this style masculine, which begs the question, "Is there a way to masculinize bottoms in this world of queer world-making?"

For Shawn, I guess not. Shawn's perspective further accentuates the ways in which "femininity is always already devalued in patriarchal societies, those associated with the feminine are also viewed as inferior." [122] There is no room for femininity in the domain of the masculine. A man is considered either masculine/feminine; the different styles of masculinity often remain unaccounted for, or unrecognized. Of course, femininity is the less ideal performance of gender, making the distinction between who is properly masculine and who is not. Much of these understandings of gender are residual hegemonic perspectives that almost always uses the effete, or feminine to describe the "gay," setting straight men apart from those who are identified as "gay." This act of devaluation of some gay male bodies is modified in The Gate, as some "masculine" gay men can at once feel "straight," while DL men can affirm their allegiance to heterosexuality (read: heteronormativity) through a harsh critique of those who

perform queerness, and manliness, differently. Furthermore, it allows some men to carve a space for the cool, creating a necessary hierarchy of masculine performances within The Gate.

It would be dishonest to ignore the ways in which "faggot ass nigga" is somewhat of an inside joke. All of those who participate in the "alternative" night at The Gate are aware of their appetite for those of the same sex. Thus, the utterance of the chant also brings with it a reminder that the space is a queer, or "faggot," terrain. In some ways, the mass chant announces "we are black faggots, but look who's in possession of these words now." In this sense, my friend's comparative analysis between the chanted phrase and the vernacular use of "nigga" is an apt one. Black queer men re-appropriate these terms, turn them on their head, and thereby reduce the power of the term in constructing their identities. However, I would suggest this analysis is less applicable for men on the DL, as they often dis-identify with traditional identifications of sexuality in everyday life.

I spend critical time in this chapter on this moment of hip-hop heterosexist and homophobic chanting because it exposes what I believe is the true pleasure of this queer zone, for black gay men and DL men alike. In this space, performances of gender and sexuality are in flux—men are able to be queer, while also acting straight, or even straight while acting queer. Patrons of The Gate are able to realize the treasure of performance that many of us scholars take as given: "…performance is a means by which people reflect on their current conditions, define and/or re-invent themselves and their social world, and either re-enforce, resist, or subvert prevailing social orders" (Drewal 9). The Gate offers an occasion where black queer men can attain pleasure through the stimulation created by the multiple valences within the hip-hop space. In this unique space of queer world-making, these men can "re-enforce, resist, [accept] and subvert" dominant

modes of gender and sexuality. While black men can identify and perform their queer desire (resist/subvert), they can still participate in the rituals of patriarchy (re-enforce/accept). At the Gate, or any queer world-making space for that matter, bodies "produce paradoxical effects which cannot be understood if one tries to force them into a dichotomy of resistance or submission" (Bourdieu 94). At The Gate, a belief in a functional system of either resist/re-enforce/subvert would definitely be inappropriate—ignoring the powerful and provocative presence of the both/and operation, an element of constancy within the Hip-Hop room. This may be the queerest characteristic of this space—where hetero-gender, hip-hop, and homoeroticism are married through music and dance.

This queer possibility is what Katrina Hazard-Donald misses when she addresses hip-hop's dance as a form that "encourages a public (and private) male bonding" through the disbursement of male bodies, moving and communicating through space (229). Her discussion is not only heterocentric, but it also denies the possibility for queer potential in the spaces where black men gather in the name of hip-hop. Instead, she attempts to frame these "male bonding" episodes as purely plutonic and historically traditional, only significant because of the ability for black men to proclaim a sense of brotherhood. She ignores what Eve Sedgwick has informed us as the homoerotic potential of all male-bonding circumstances. Sedgwick, when examining what she calls "homosociality," re-evaluates the often assumed impossibility for the homosocial to become homoerotic. In Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire, Sedgwick attempts to demonstrate the "unbrokedness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1)—bringing forth a significant discussion of desire's presence in what could be called "male spaces." A discussion about such possibilities has been almost absent in the

commentary of those who write about the homosocial domain of hip-hop. My discussion here attempts to expand beyond acknowledging the potential of space in constructing and producing desire, but rather how The Gate, as a unique space, opens doors for a specific desire by a particular group of men. Moreover, this chapter illuminates the many ways that hip-hop is employed for queer use. In the hip-hop space, all black queer men can participate and feel "normal," almost un-queer, as the culture of the space encourages homoerotic desires for each subject, as he dances in the largely heteronormative playground.

In Da "House": Bringing the Hip-Hop Home

Though my fascination is with the hip-hop space at The Gate, specific performances in the house room are germane to the understanding of masculinity in space. In this section, I map and examine the ways in which hip-hop masculinity travels. Particularly, I look closely at a peculiar moment where a DL man engages desire in the house space, though operating under the rubric and rhythm of hip-hop. In short, I am interested in how some men perform "cool" in a space that is often understood as being "fabulous" and filled with "faggotry." Throughout my research for instance, I have found that some men embrace, appreciate, and even express attraction for, the "feminine," while simultaneously subscribing to a hegemonic masculinity themselves.

Indeed, I was surprised when Tavares, my childhood friend of almost 16 years who was always known as "THE ladies man," volunteered to join me on a Friday night venture to The Gate. Tavares is a twenty-two year old young man, often in and out of his mother's home in the south suburbs of Chicago. Since the mid-1990's I observed many black families moved for gentrification— from the ghettoes of the city into the south suburbs of Chicago—a migration that

often had damaging and debilitating effects on minority children, for the sake of middle-upper middle-class progress. While this transition was often understood as a mobilizing act by the city for black people, it often facilitated in greater segregation in the city and schools, while also displacing many poor blacks from their inner-city relatives.[123] I often attributed Tavares's discomfort in his suburban home to his nostalgia for the south side of Chicago, where most of his friends and family dwell. Unfortunately, on one of his many hiatuses from his mother's home, Tavares began a new hobby of living with "big girls who love me" and "serving" marijuana in the neighborhood. Unfortunately, the latter occupation landed Tavares in the Cook County Correctional facility, where I would spend much time visiting him and ensuring that he had the support and resources necessary for physical and mental survival. A month after "serving time," he came to stay with me for almost two weeks. This week offered me a fruitful opportunity to not only get reacquainted with my "brother in spirit," but also to listen deeply to his many, many experiences. Sleeping in my bed, chatting on my computer, rummaging through my videos, and surveying my books, Tavares learned things about me that I had never disclosed to him during our childhood. The first thing he learned was that I love Whitney Houston; the second, that I am gay. The latter bonded us in ways indescribable, while the former simply welcomed weird looks.

Tavares's presence in my intimate, so-called private space opened a door to vulnerable, valuable, and very enlightening dialogue. Tavares's entrance into my personal space opened my eyes to what it feels like to be "exposed." Though I was very open with my sexuality, my politics, and my home, it was still awkward to see and experience Tavares making certain evaluations and judgments on my "private" materials—I often felt under investigation. I realize quickly that my anxieties, though similar, were incomparable to the type of scrutiny he might

experience while attempting to maintain discrete, or to stay "down low." It was these intimate moments that always reminded me that the ethnographic walk is a privileged one—a journey that requires attention to *how* we gather information before being concerned with *what* we gather. On the fragile plain of conversation with Tavares and other men, it has often been difficult to generate more intimate, deeper discussions. Though we were friends of many years, my new role as an ethnographer seemed to create some distance between us. However, our already established closeness seemed to turn potential feelings of exposure into moments where the subject can exhale and release many inhibitions.

The potential rewards of such an approach was made most obvious when, on the second night he stayed at my home, Tavares witnessed my "going out ritual." This included talking on the phone to find out every friend that would be out at The Gate, while simultaneously finding something "hot" to wear. I am sure that this element of preparation made it clear that I was not going to a "straight" club. When I finished on the phone, ironing my clothes, and got out the shower, I announced that I was leaving. Before I could even ask if he needed anything, Tavares said that he wanted to go with me. I asked him, "Why?" He responded, "What am I going to do, sit here at the computer and listen to Whitney?" I said, "You know where I'm going, right? I'm going to a gay club." He said, unaffected and unflinchingly, "I know."

Tavares's willingness to go to The Gate registered as a queer idea, but not queer in the sexual sense. It was queer because it became an instance when a 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 to not be preoccupied with my sexuality, or overdetermine what his participation would

signify. His ability to accept my queerness continued when I had to pick up Dedrick, my partner at the time. Together, they shared jokes and bonded in peculiar ways—usually through various forms of making fun of me and my idiosyncratic ways. Interestingly, their greatest point of connection was around musical taste—from Eminem to Do or Die. At the time, I sat silently and engaged this moment with great interest. This act of male bonding reaffirmed what I have articulated earlier about the many transgressive possibilities for hip-hop, on and beyond the dance floor. I was most excited to see Tavares and Dedrick engage the hip-hop room at The Gate. Admittedly, there was a theory being tested—a theory that was proven to be incorrect. In my early trials in the field, I learned quickly not to anticipate outcomes because they almost always turned out differently from what I expected.

When we arrived at The Gate, I paid the whopping $36 for all of our admission. It was after 1:00 a.m.! Moving through the customary procedures, we enter The Gate and I ask Tavares if he wanted to take his hoody to coat-check, as it would probably be too hot in the club. He refused. We continued into The Gate, whose energy and tone was pretty standard. It was much more crowded than moments mentioned earlier. This night, the dance floor had no empty spaces, the walls were crowded, and there were even lines for the washroom. It was a perfect night to feed the potential anxieties felt by my straight buddy from childhood. In such a crowd, one's body was always touching other bodies; one was constantly being looked up and down. Everything from drag queens to drunks was attempting to make contact with Tavares. Appropriately, I quickly dashed toward the hip-hop room—an area where I was sure that Tavares would feel most comfortable. Immediately, Dedrick and I hit the dance floor. Tavares stood back against the wall observing the scene, while reggae beats played loud and strong. Quickly, the

reggae turned to rap and Tavares briefly joined us, doing a dance similar to my sway dance—a default move for music with a steady beat and for people who don't want to get too carried away. After a couple of hit songs, Dedrick and I continue dancing, but Tavares goes off to the sidelines of the dance floor, and simply stands in front of the speaker.

After being engrossed in a moment of dancing with Dedrick, I look over and realize that in the midst of the large crowd, Tavares had disappeared. I panic. I assume that he is looking for me, as Dedrick and I had slightly shifted on the dance floor. I walk to "God's view," looking out onto the dance floor and he is not there. I move to the balcony level, thinking that he may have given himself a personal tour of the hip-hop room. He was nowhere to be found. Maybe he went to the restroom. I walk through the crowd and surpass the line, strangely gazing into the restroom for Tavares. Just as I was going to return to the hip-hop room, Dedrick came and informed me that Tavares was watching the voguers. What? This was the last place I would have expected to find this "ladies man." Nonetheless, I found Tavares standing, almost entranced, as the voguers wave, flip, and drop to the infamous, "Ha!,"—a musical piece that has historical reverence in the ball culture of black queer life.[124] I ask him, "You like that?" He replies, "It's funny—they crazy—but it's entertaining as hell." His fascination shocked me. Looking at his hooded face, I knew that Tavares' interests had shifted from entertainment to erotic pleasure. He watched the voguers with the same visual pleasure that he had watched all of the "tight females" who got off the 3rd and King Drive bus during our childhood. It was this look of desire that Tavares possessed as he gazed upon the "femme-queens" and the "girls up in pumps." He watched them for the remainder of the evening.

It was not until a later conversation at my home that I understood this erotic impulse that seemed to guide Tavares's desire for femme-bodies. Tavares was in my room, at my computer—while I lay in my bed—and he told me that he had "a thing for femme cats." At first, I was preoccupied by the inversion of typical animalistic description of men as "dogs," flipped in this context to "cats." More interesting and informative, however, was how such an appreciation for the feminine disrupted and discounted the assumption that DL men only have interest in the masculine. Here, Tavares gives value and recognition to a desire for something outside of the masculine, showing a moment where his masculinity and heterosexuality is not contingent upon his object choice being a masculine subject. It is for this reason that Tavares's experiences in the house room become most appropriate in this discussion of hip-hop.

I argue that though Tavares prefers a feminine subject of desire, his interests are still in line with a certain heterosexual privileging system. Tavares, as a DL man, maintains his heterosexuality through his pursuit of a surrogate female figure. His relationships with "femme cats," who are often understood as sometimes an androgenous/transgendered male, allows him to still imagine himself inside the dominant matrix of sexuality, as these figures are often referred to and often refer to themselves as, women.[125] Like those in the hip-hop space mentioned earlier, Tavares attempts to undo his queerness through his participation in what can be understood as un-queer acts. It is no coincidence then, that when Tavares describes the femme cats he had seen and "hollered at" elsewhere, he emphasizes the female characteristics as being "so real…I mean just like a woman's." This thinking reveals the ways in which the feminine/female body, though possibly anatomically male, acts as a fill-in for the biological female with which Tavares is most familiar. Still, he can not deny that he is engaging in queer acts with those who identify

themselves in queer ways. This is most apparent when he articulates his same-sex desire in the somewhat ambiguous phrase [I was], "feelin' that way toward another dude." Though he may relish in the femininity of his sexual object-choice, he is always aware that it is a "dude." It seems, however, that he feels less threatened by his own desires when he imagines and acknowledges those with whom he shares interests as females or femme cats. In this sense, Don Kulick's ethnographic analysis of Brazilian travestis' desire for "straight men" is relevant and instructive for this case study: "Not only is desire meaningful only in relation to difference, it is also what *produces* difference—a male is a man *because* he desires a woman; a travesti can feel like a woman *to the extent that* she desires a man and is desired by him in return" (126).

The "production of difference" is what triggers Tavares's attraction toward "dudes" as being "all good." The difference, rather than sameness, attracts him to feminine subjects; whereas, the queer world around him seems to endorse a more homonormative relationship.[126] Consequently, Tavares stands as somewhat of a queer-queer, who re-configures queer desire as heterosexual. As long as the subject of his desire speaks "woman" through performance and pose, he is comfortable and content. This female performance legitimates his desire, marking it as authentically "straight" and "more normal," as he puts it. Such desire for normality, normalcy, and normativity seems to be the anchor for expressions of desire in these spaces, where masculinity seems so fragile, contingent, and contained to hetero-patriarchal ideals.

In addition to his ability to establish his heteronormativity through desire-choice, he also continues to position himself within hip-hop masculinity. Tavares carries with him a gendered performance that has its roots in hip-hop culture. He stands rigid, with his hoody covering and concealing his face, periodically moving to the beat. As he talks with those who pass by, who fit

his preferred image, he carries himself in a manner that bespeaks "coolness," and positions himself as in charge and in control. I even notice that his voice deepens and hardens in manner similar to that of young boys courting young girls over the telephone. As he engages feminine objects of desire, through his performance of heterogender, he is able to mark his place in this space of queer desire. Tavares, like many men on the DL, can only come to embrace homoerotic desire through the performance of heterosexuality, or heteronormativity. Together, Tavares and Shawn tell us two different stories about DL desire, disrupting any mainstream, monolithic notion of the performances of discreet sexuality. They serve as examples of the ways in which space "unleashes desire"—forcing them to find ways to compensate for the force-fitting pressure to submit to hegemonic masculinity. Their experiences in the club space accentuate and re-iterate the ways in which sexuality is greatly informed by the constant constructs and constraints of a black masculine architecture.

Something in the Architexture: Heterotopia, Masculinity, and Homo-Eroticism

For this construction of black male identity, we can thank many cultural architects who include: Eldridge Cleaver, Amiri Baraka, Louis Farrakhan, Dr. Dre, and Fifty Cent.[127] In these constructions of black masculinity, queer desire and performance is suspect, stigmatized, and incompatible with certain notions of blackness. Additionally, we can be grateful to white supremacist capitalist patriarchy which demands and rewards a certain performance of masculinity for black men in America to gain certain access to agency and power.[128] On one hand The Gate, in its homage to hip-hop, destabilizes the "queerness" of this space and shapes a heteronormative imaginary with a queer subtext. On another, The Gate uses hip-hop to facilitate, encourage, and even legitimate queer desire. Indeed, something strange occurs in the invocation

of hip-hop in queer spaces. This presence of the "strange," calls back to how my mother would respond to abnormal occurrences within our house screaming, "I swear there is something in the water!" Likewise, in this essay, I am professing that there is something in the architexture.

Clearly, I am not the first to connect architecture, as a material form, to ideology within a given culture. In fact, this relationship was discussed as early as 1850 in author-architect's George Wightwick's writings on the body and architecture:

> A building is a body or a "carcass," lettered over with beauty of diction, with poetic illustration, and with the charms of rhetoric….what the skin is to the body, the hair to the head, the eye-brows and lashes to the eyes, and the lips to the mouth—such is the marble casing to the walls, the cornice to the facade, the pediment and the architecture to the windows, and the porch to the door. (37)

What is most important in Wightwick's discussion of architecture is his focus on the body and space as interdependent. The body is as important as space; each part of the body and space requires the other. In Wightwick's construction, body and space form a dialectic rather than a dichotomy. While Wightwick's discussions seem to get at the dialectic between space and human behavior, I argue that architecture as a term does not get us there, or sufficiently explain what is happening. In this project, I am as much interested in how certain spaces invite DL men's participation, as I am interested in the interior issues that allow DL men to find liberation, tension, or satisfaction in The Gate. While many would refer to both as architecture, I want to employ a more appropriate term: *architexture*. While architecture alone accounts for physical space, the addition of texture tells us more about the "feeling" of space—the expansive cultural fabric that dwells in specific sites of queer production. Architexture is a term which describes the

dialectic between the interior and exterior manifestations of masculinity. In Maurice Wallace's book, Constructing the Black Masculine, he argues that in order to understand the construction of the black masculine, we must consider the architectural structures in which it resides and also those structural foundations around which it is built. To this end, I utilize the term *architexture,* as a term which describes the contours of black masculinity with regards to spatial characteristics and cultural dimensions.

Architexture, as a material structure and a meaning-making apparatus, is a productive point of entry for my discussion of DL men in the hip-hop room of The Gate. At The Gate, there seems to be a constant thread of masculinity that impacts the music and the men. As a performer-witness at The Gate, I have experienced the impact of certain commitments to masculinity, while also participating in its construction and re-enforcement. Between my first visit to The Gate and my subsequent journeys, I have learned that there are many codes, characteristics, and necessities to gain greater access into men's lives. The Gate's physical space assists in the masculine characteristic of the space. The industrial and working-class motif, in addition to the separation of house and hip-hop, signify the value and visible difference between two worlds. The industrial features are in alignment with the black masculine subjects in the space and their character concurs with the cultural fabric of The Gate's patrons. *Architexture* seems most applicable, then, as a term that best accounts for this strong relationship between the physical space that helps shape what is possible, and the internal presence that helps dancing subjects to make sense of what is possible.

It was only through a concerted effort to understand *how* men *do* the DL—a rehearsal of sorts—that I was able to refine and often reproduce the style of masculinity being produced in

and outside the club space. At The Gate, either you follow the rules of hip-hop, or you were deemed outside the realm of normality. The Gate houses a brand of masculinity that reifies, reproduces, and rewards Shawn's and Tavares's heteronormative ideals, making it a space more open for DL presence and participation. Todd Boyd has called this gendered performance "the desire to be hard," which is much like cool in its somewhat visual posturing often associated with gangsta culture that is most often conveyed through style and image (70). The Gate, through its patrons dress and gestural style—its architectural design's sterility and staleness—promotes and projects a sense of the "hard." As the music fills the space with a hard sound in order to narrate a hard ideal, it prompts "hard, tight dancing," to which those who find queer performance difficult can engage with less anxieties.

It is DL men's physical presence in the queer club, as seen in the previous chapter, that much of media has latched on to, as they stake claim to an "out" DL subject. In actuality, most men at The Gate are not "coming out," but participating in a sort of "comin' in." They have arrived in a queer space that welcomes them, but does not require them to become an official membership. The Gate is a black home they can come into, where the relatives understand the fullness of diversity, liberalness, transgressiveness, and is most honest about different forms of desire. The discursive demand that one must be "out" to participate in gay activities ignores that all gay activity does not take place in public, and that participation does not always guarantee membership.

Indeed, DL men are out in the club in the sense that they are a part of a queer world-making moment. However, outside of this club space they live very discreet lives, void of public displays of pleasure and desire for those of the same sex. Shawn refers to this as "being out in the

real world." Is the club space not the "real world?" During our conversations, I am often aware of how he dichotomizes the queer world and his everyday, heteronormative performance of identity. These admissions clearly gesture toward the ways in which The Gate affords DL men to imagine themselves in a sort of utopia (but not quite). This pleasure, attained through a queer world-making experience, may be the answer to the problematic question, "Why are they in a gay club if they are not gay?"

This "utopia, but not quite" pleasure is what Foucault has referred to as a state of *heterotopia*. Heterotopias, unlike utopias, are real places. In his public lecture "Of Other Spaces," Foucault uses the mirror as an example:

> The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there. (24)

Here, I find the difference between the real and the unreal, heterotopia and utopia, to be contingent upon time. As Foucault makes clear, "the heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (26). While the subject appears to be in the mirror, everything that he experiences is real, but once he exits the mirrors he is no longer in the mirror and his image and its surroundings has a different meaning. The image that he acquired in the mirror is gone and he is left with the everyday imagining of himself rather than the situational, specific look of the mirror.

For Foucault, then, heterotopias are spaces where people temporally reside. These spaces allow individuals to lose sense of time and to picture themselves and their world in ways that

mark time as inconsequential. For DL men, the club is one of many potential heterotopias. Queer spaces that allow DL men to live queerly—though constrained by time—allows them to explore often unavailable, or inconvenient, possibilities. Unlike a heterotopia, a utopia is without material grounding, potentially timeless, and available only to the imagination. While Foucault's uses an abstract space to speak to the possibilities of heterotopias, his material examples provide clearer understanding: "theatre, cinema, garden, cemetery, prison." Each of these spaces serves a specific purpose, allowing its residents to go to a different world for a specific period of time. The Gate's hip-hop room is a heterotopic space. Though Foucault omitted the club, in his original theorization, its characteristics definitely fit within his paradigm. As DL men travel to spaces, like the black queer club, they enact desires that are often foreign to heteronormative understandings of manhood. As they participate in queer world-making, they are engaging heterotopic sites. The Gate's hip-hop room is a heterotopic space.

As heterotopias break with the ordinary, everyday life, they serve as monitors of our social conditions. For example, the necessity for the creation of queer dance spaces, in general, alarm us to the lack of social sites, circumstances where queer men and women can act erotically without scrutiny. Because most clubs embrace a heteronormative understanding of what is acceptable, queer men and women must develop their own spaces. In essence, queer-world making is a way of creating heterotopia. The Gate's hip-hop room offers those who are sexually marginalized, but who have specific cultural roots, to "have their cake and eat it too." Particularly, it offers black queer men an opportunity to take traces of the everyday and mix them with the extra-ordinary to create a scene where they can make their erotic imaginings real. The Gate, in its use of hip-hop and preference for a certain texture of masculinity is a unique

place—where contradiction seems to fuel its energy and erotic possibility. Here, black men can imagine themselves within and outside of societal ideals—mapping their own reality, making real what only seemed imaginable.

Heterotopias are sites structured in privilege. The Gate allows men the privilege to engage, enjoy, or perform same-sex desire. Hence, they are similar to "safes spaces." Like heterotopias, The Gate "always presuppose[s] a system of opening and closing that both isolates and makes them penetrable" (Foucault 26). Thus, for DL men, The Gate has as many real risks, as rewards. However, because of its "curious exclusions" (26), the risks are limited and its rewards multiple.[129] Indeed, Judith Butler's rhetorical questions at the outset of this chapter are apropos as racialized queers often cannot afford or desire to be "out." Thus, the closet as a threshold apparatus does not fully illustrate the ways in which the patrons of The Gate work through their sexuality. Black queer people have always done queer differently. Symbolically, The Gate unlike the closet is not a place of residence, but a place for possibilities to be explored. The Gate is a heterotopic playground whose architexture allows its patrons to explore and enjoy temporal pleasure—through its conjoining of oft-thought disparate traditions.

In this chapter, I have attempted to highlight one complicated space that exhibits black queers "making do" within a heteronormative society and cultural tradition. As media and other intellectual endeavors pursue this topic, it is important that they listen deeply and "down low," and be attentive to socio-historical circumstances of black men and the histories connected to the spaces in which these men put their bodies on the line. As Aaron Betsky informs us, "Queer space is not one place: it is an act of appropriating the modern world for the continual act of self-construction…Queer space queers reality to produce a space to live" (193). Whether it is on the

phone-chat line or on the internet, as in the next chapter, or in the hip-hop section of a black gay club, DL men and many black gay men search for spaces where they can imagine a world that allows them to "just be." Here, "to be" is engaged in a politics of "becoming"— a black queer world-making—where one's positionality can shift without scrutiny, but understanding.

As I sit at my desk, imagining the space of The Gate and the many possibilities within, I am drawn back to Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston*. I return to a masterful moment when he flashes back to a historic scene in which black men are gathered in a discreet space to party and partake in homoerotic desires. Some stand with drinks, some chat, and some dance with each other—all feeling the pulse of the erotic and the pleasure of this rare opportunity. Dressed in period suits and cloths, drinking and tasting the finest things, these men engage desire on their own terms, in their own way, somewhere "down low" and outside the radar of heteronormative gazes. This moment in film mirrors so much of what I see at The Gate. Black men and black queer men engage desire and use space, style, and music to guide their performances of desire. The Gate is no contemporary coincidence; it is a space that resurrects an older, rich tradition. It is a re-telling of black queer men, cautiously and creatively, dancing desire. It is an illustration of black queer performance happening outside the closet, but inside The Gate.

Chapter 5:

Going *Down Low*: Virtual Space and the Performance of Masculine Sincerity

Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.—Benedict Anderson[130]

The 'grain' of the voice is not—or is not merely—its timbre; the significance it opens cannot be better defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else, which something else is the particular language...—Roland Barthes[131]

When you on the [phone-chat] line you can tell who real masculine or who a real sissy…Same thing on the internet, if you listen between the lines you can tell who out there and who ain't…—Anonymous Caller[132]

In the previous chapter, I explored the space of the black gay club and its ability to "unleash [queer] desire." This chapter, in the same Lefebvrian way, follows DL men into spaces where their anonymity is most valued and where the architexture of black masculinity permits certain articulations of homoerotic desire. In the pages that follow, I examine the performance of the black masculine by men within virtual spaces—a public phone-chat line and a popular website designed for queer male use. This chapter shifts focus from how masculinity is read examining bodily signifiers to the strict interpretations of the aural and visual. By employing Roland Barthes's metaphorical reference to the "grain of voice," while also giving it literal significance in how we understand communicative acts, I uncover how the voice is read, constructed, manipulated, and reproduced in two distinct spaces frequented by DL men.

In essence, this chapter is interested in how DL men represent themselves in spaces where their voice is the primary mode of communication (phone-chat line), while also being attentive to how they render their voice and others as "masculine" in cyberspace (the website for male-male interests called Steve4Steve). In some ways, the internet as a site of anonymity for

DL men is not surprising. Many studies of queer internet use have cited this space as one of anonymity and discretion (site the sources). However, if telephone historian John Brooks' claim is true that the "telephone is our nerve end to society," (9) then the unwritten values of this space in queer cultural production is worth investigation.

Historically, ethnography has been understood as an act of entering a certain physical space while collecting data, conducting interviews, and rendering the scene though a "writing of culture." This tradition has limited the scope of ethnography's possibilities to reach beyond physical space and move into virtual spaces. Specifically, one of the most under-researched terrains is the telephone lines. This mechanism of verbal communication has often been pitted outside the imaginable realms of ethnographic research:

> When one speaks of working *in* the field, or *going* in the field, one draws on mental images of a distinct place with an inside and outside, reached by practices of physical movement. These mental images focus and constrain definitions. For example, they make it strange to say that an anthropologist in his or her office
> talking on the phone is doing fieldwork—even if what is actually happening is the disciplined, interactive collection of ethnographic data. (James Clifford 54-55)

Consequently, this chapter offers a critique of studies which both focus on actual physical space, as well as see internet exchange as the sole virtual site of male-male discrete encounters. While this chapter is interested in the operations of traditional virtual spaces populated by DL men in Chicago, the most innovative contribution is its examination of how the phone-chat line acts as a more economical alternative for many to find erotic predilections and legitimate their own commitments to black masculinity. The phone-chat line's existence and excitement, evident

through its large use, speaks volumes about the economic disparities of many black men specifically, and working-class people more generally. In the select spaces explored in this chapter, many decisions are made exclusively upon the texture and "grain" of the voice, be it the actual speech of the subject or the language used to describe himself or his sexual-personal desires within a brief profile. I argue that these judgments are made based upon what Barthes refers to as the "something else"—here, a somewhat enigmatic equation that draws upon subjective experience and knowledge of the machinations of specific spaces.

As I travel through the Bi-Blade—the "public" phone-chat line—and Steve4Steve—an internet site, the determinant of the authentically masculine and therefore desirable is often what I refer to as a *masculine sincerity*. While *sincerity* has been used recently by John L. Jackson in his book Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity to discuss alternatives to authenticity, I utilize this concept to describe how men decipher between the making and the faking of gender performance. This distinction was highlighted in Victor Turner's examination of identity performances, where he attempts to move beyond the limited idea of performance as fakery, but rather a process of "makery" (From Ritual to Theatre 93). While Turner's perspective has great merit within interrogations of performance, certain engagements within virtual space challenge Turner's move for a more generous understanding of human behavior. The virtual spaces I investigate allow for the possibility for what is made in these spaces to be seen as real, as much as they can be understood as fake. Nonetheless, I am most interested in how individuals utilize certain codes to at least appear sincere or to present themselves as properly masculine. Here, in these spaces performance can be understood as both makery and fakery. Nonetheless, even the contrived performances are creating meanings as they construct an understanding of what it

means to "do the down low" in virtual space—a "making do" with black masculine ideals and queer desire.

This ability for language to be understood as distinctively "masculine" or "DL" in virtual space and its reproduction by those who travel in the virtual spaces is key to this chapter. As a result, this chapter travels new terrain by being attentive to the by-products of racialized language and racial epistemology in constructing the meaning and purpose of space**.** Through an examination of discourse created by those who dis-identify with gay, bisexual, or any other traditional categories, it makes real the notion of "queer linguistics." Whereas other scholars have investigated "gay English" or gay spaces of cultural production (Baker 2005; Leap 1999; Leap 1996; Ringer 1994), this chapter uses the DL as an exemplar of *queer* linguistic and cultural production.[133] Don Kulick and others have argued that queer linguistics have little to no utility, by citing such categorization as a misnaming because "the only language ever investigated…is language used by those the researcher identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered"(66). While I agree this has been a dangerous move on the part of such scholars, I wish not to throw out the baby with the bath water. Though the academic tradition may have relegated *queer linguistics* to gay and lesbian linguistics, this research attempts to depart from this ritual. This project affirms and challenges the claims of Kulick and others by suggesting that there is a real significance and importance to employing queer in the academic discussion of language. In the spaces explored in this chapter, I locate a black queer-world making, which expands the historical category of queer to not only include racialized subjects, but also speak to multiple sexualities outside of what previous studies have often included and what Kulick's polemic seems to suggest *queer* contains.

Black Queer-World Making: Part II

As an undergraduate at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa, I struggled to locate black queer experiences. It was in this quest for blackness that I began to utilize the "party line," as it has historically been called—a free phone-chatting system that allowed black gay men to hold private and public conversations. I discovered this network of black men while in Chicago when friends of mine would call in to taunt others who frequented the line. For example, my friend "Rob" would call in and play the fire and brimstone minister who thought "all fags are goin' to hell!" When he would hang up, after me and other friends witnessed his charade, he would say, "Chile, I upset the building today!" Or my friend "Milan" would call in and act as the "big queeny bottom who was looking for a big dick to top" her. He was probably the most extreme. However, most times, the line was a way that these "kids"—and we were young—would find ways to commune with others like them when their parents were sleep or had gone to work. Unlike what is usually thought of as phone-chat lines, individuals could actually maintain conversations as if in virtual "family" rooms, sharing their everyday experiences, expressing their desired interests in other callers, or simply taunting others who inhabited the space.

It was not by any coincidence that while frustrated with the cacophony of whiteness in Iowa— which I constantly consumed, engaged, participated in, and contested—I went back to this pasttime. In the rural white plains, I often yearned for traces of blackness either on television, amongst the few other black folks on campus, on trips to Iowa City, or in my ventures to Chicago's black gay club scene. However, when those experiences were not available, the phone-chat line officially called the BeeHive was my haven.[134] Here, using my student access code, I would dial in and "gag" with several other young, black gay men.[135] Whereas in Chicago

this call was free, in Iowa it was long distance and quite costly. Thus, seemingly many other "home-sick" college students and I were paying for our taste of black gayness. Indeed, it often proved to be worth it. The BeeHive had three distinct features: 1) a caller could obtain a mailbox, where he could attach a greeting which would indicate his intentions and other callers could leave messages; 2) a caller could enter one of nine "private" rooms— where a maximum of twelve callers could reside—and decide which conversations he wanted to engage; and 3) a caller, after entering the room, could announce his interest in another caller and prompt the interesting conversationalist to press the same numeric digit to create their own private room (often, in jest, many would follow). Indeed, the boundary of public-private was blurred in the BeeHive.

Typically, I would enter the room quietly to find out updates about Chicago's black gay life. Of course, this "information-system" was limited in its ability to tell all, but the size of the "known" young black gay community always seemed relatively small. Interestingly, these private rooms were crowded with those who loved to gossip and tell their "business." From time to time, there would be highly political conversations—such as "coming out," the black church and gay persecution, and my favorite, "how can you tell a bottom from a top." The latter was an on-going weekly conversation. I often found myself annoyed by the essentialist underpinnings of the discourse and would move to another room where the conversation was more to my liking. Truthfully, I was satisfied to hear the voice of black urban gay Chicagoans, in their various textures and tones; particularly, the cultural vernacular from which I was estranged in Mount Vernon, IA.

The voices of these men were refreshing and often, for my pleasure, erotic. This would explain why the BeeHive, for my few years at Cornell College, became a channel through which I expressed sexual desire for black men—through phonesex. Here, I could express my homo-erotic longings for black men without actually *being* there. I could imagine by body engaging another brown body, being aroused by the verbal nuances that I found most desirable during sex. Most importantly, here I could make active what was dormant—the sexual part of my sexuality. The BeeHive released me from the white community of Iowa, as well as the perspective of queerness as almost always white men performing sex/sexuality. In this space, I was allowed to partake in a black queer world-making parlance, as black men gathered in hopes of co-articulating sexuality on their terms through "gagging," dialogue, and erotic demonstrations through phone sex.

Years later, I would find this site as central to my research on DL men. While I am sure there were DL men on the "line" in previous years, though they did not refer to themselves under this nomenclature, something told me that this space was still sweltering with discretion. After all, my friends and I were somewhat DL as we would convene on the "line," as a substitute for an outlet to actually commune in any particular physical space. My return to this virtual space, however, was the result of a conversation with Charles, a 35 year-old man I had met at *The Gate* club. In our conversations he indicated that his first sexual experiences were simply "sexual fantasy" through phone-sex on the "PL," a new name for the party line.[136] The striking resemblance between "PL" and "DL" withstanding, the phone-chat line was still an active agent in the construction of black homo-erotic/sexual experiences. Though Charles refused to engage in on-going conversations, his narrated experience revealed that the party line had retained its

popularity. In addition, his narrative suggested that the phone chat line may have been a more "private" and pragmatic forum for DL men than the club space, as meeting grounds for those men who desired relations with men. The phone number of the "PL" was passed on by word of mouth, much like the snowballing process I used to locate DL men, while its specific codes, navigations, and other tactics were learned through practice and trial and/or error**.** As I returned to the line after a long hiatus I would be inclined to learn the party line's nuances, as with most modern modes of communication there were some technological advancements.

The most obvious and significant change was the creation of an actual private, one-on-one chatting area called "CB." Evidently, this is a riff on CB-radio, which is a mode of short-distance radio communication often utilized by truck-drivers or constant travelers, whereby they can have one-on-one conversations with other travelers, or local emergency facilities. The phone chat's line's CB space allows local callers to communicate and participate in interactive and interpersonal communication. In this space, callers create personal profiles where they describe themselves, articulate their interests, and include whatever information they feel necessary for listeners to hear. In addition, they can screen the profiles of other callers and leave messages demonstrating interest. If so inclined, participants can leave messages for each other, request one-on-one private chat, or block/skip callers who have shown interest in their profile. According to Charles, this was the space where he would dwell in search of perspective partners for his "phone-bone" experiences. Accordingly, as I adventured to perform my ethnographic research, the dynamics of this space seemed most appropriate for serious consideration in gaining access to the backstage performances of those men who preferred a "discreet way of being in the world." As anticipated, this space provided fertile ground for my critical inquiry,

bursting with contradictions, admissions contrary to my expectations, as well as identified another space where black and queer could reside not in tension, but tandem.

Everybody's On Top: The Construction of a "Masculine" Community

One of my first observations about the CB space was that being sexually dominant—a "top"—was a metonym for "masculine" and its use instigated a distinct cultural climate amongst callers. In August 2002, when I first called the party line for research, there was a popular addendum used in the profiles of those who professed to be "on the down low": "Top brotha right here." It appeared that everyone was on top, a top, or liked to "fuck." While, indeed, there were several callers who performed the non-dominant role in sex, those who identified themselves as a "bottom," "submissive," or "versatile," the predominant DL caller identified as a "DL Top" or a "Top Brotha."[137] This affirmation attested to what Roger Lancaster learned in his ethnographic explorations in Nicaragua, as the unequal distributions of stigma which is contingent upon the role played in sex (241). In the CB space, the prevalence of "top" men changed the texture and tone of masculinity on the line. For example, the preoccupation of callers with certain masculine tropes created a space where gay men and DL men desired to appear as masculine and "normal" as possible. When reviewing a profile of young man named Maalik, this became most apparent:

> (deep voice, dark guttural tone, often hard to understand) Yeah…you got dis DL, bi-sexual nigga right here on the souf...I know yall prolly tired of hearin dat shit—shit—cause I am too...I'm saying (voice gets deeper) but that's the truth with me… man…I don't like femin niggas at all..not attracted to feminin niggas. (voice gets higher) I only hang with straight niggas…(more emphatic, slightly higher) And if I can't bring you

> around my homies… (more fluid in tone, back to the beginning tone) Looking to hang out with a nigga. I work, go to school, shit like that, looking to hang with a nigga, see what you look like. If somethin happen, it happens. Only into tight guys—people be confused (slows down and mumbles) bout what is fine. That's what I'm looking for…[138]

Maalik is clearly both aware and unaware of his performance of the properly masculine. On one hand, he is conscious of the desired vocal and verbal rules necessary to establish himself as DL, while also unconsciously shifting vocal tones, inflections, and fluidity. Like most gender performances, there is always slippage. In this case, the slippage in and out of the deep "Barry White" voice was much more apparent than was common— either he was not well-rehearsed or had limited experience on the chat line. Considering his assessment that callers were "tired" of hearing self-proclamations of DLness, the former is probably more accurate. His assessment of callers' attitudes toward the DL title demonstrates a familiarity with the space, as well as the popularity of evocations of being "on the DL." Generally, the mastery of deep tonality, with consistent and convincing character, is the standard for those announcing themselves as a "DL brotha" or a "brotha on the down low." Though Maalik does not serve as example of this "passing" talent, he does exhibit his knowledge of the value of a certain type of masculine performance. In essence, to Maalik, his cool performance on the "PL" was an indicator of his sexual position. Maalik, in his commitment to the masculine texture/tone and the (non) reliability of his voice to sit in for his body, is emblematic of an investment that many men have in the black masculine schema.

When Fanon exclaimed "I am fixed" (116), as he theorized the function of the "epidermal schema," I believe that he was not only seeing the white gaze inscribing images upon the black

male body, but also the black male inscribing those images upon himself. He was imagining a historical moment like the present, wherein there was a dangerous sedimentation of the "black masculine" schema—when certain stereotypes are seemingly embraced, internalized, and rarely re-written or complicated. Unlike Fanon's narrative, the men in CB attest to the fixedness of not only a racial identity, but also sexuality and class. In this space, there is a consistent strain within the performances of not only an idealized masculine bravado and voice, but also a commitment to gender normativity, or normalcy. Here, voice and verbal cues work together to inscribe these men with masculine meanings, allowing those who converse or listen to these men's profiles to imagine a body that exudes proper masculinity and the desired sexual role. This is the "particular language" that Roland Barthes signals in the epigraph—the "something else" that produces a meaning beyond the content of the message. Most importantly, after callers are acclimated to the space, they learn the language necessary to produce their desired outcomes.

This was a top-privileged space with little room for so-called "sissies" or "femme bottoms." The disavowal of all that was effeminate positioned DL men, and some gay men, as possessing "normal" gender characteristics. Those who performed the active role in sexual intercourse, or at least verbally claimed they did, were less stigmatized than the presumable feminine "bottom." Ironically, to label oneself "top" had a certain aural acceptance not given to the passive participant in sexual intercourse. The hearing of "top" affirmed a masculinity that could pass in the more pedestrian crossings of black life—down the street, in the supermarket, and in the company of family and friends. As a result, the proclamation of being a top, or DL top, seemingly became the pass into being embraced as authentically masculine. The predominance of callers who proclaimed the dominant role in sex demonstrated its use-value.

Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of so-called "tops" perplexed my ethnographic ears as there had to be "bottoms" for them to engage in sexual intercourse. If most of these men supposedly preferred other DL men, there must exist a contingency of men who are "bottoms" during sexual intercourse. The absence of these bodies from the CB space spoke to not only a commitment to a certain type of masculinity, but also how the management of sexual roles gained appeal and provided callers with authenticity and authority. Undoubtedly, there was some dishonesty in what sexual roles callers played. Yet, as a caller told me, "you would never know until you get them in the sack." In other words, the proclamation that one is a "top" does not necessarily match the actual role performed during sexual intercourse. Nonetheless, in this marketplace of queer desire, tops were literally on top and bottoms were, indeed, subordinate. Everybody wanted to be understood as being on top and no one desired to be on the bottom.

I quickly realized that much of what I would learn about the down low would be gathered from being attentive to how callers described themselves and the type of codes that were inscribed in their chat-line profiles. Unlike my experiences in the black gay club, the collection of ethnographic material would be generated from a type of participant-observation which did not necessitate much formal interviewing. Like Melissa Harris-Lacewell, I had to recognize the great value in examining what is "embedded within conversations that are not always overtly political" (4). In addition, I realized that the overt interviewing process, in the case of populations which refuse attention or prefer discretion, is limited in its utility in telling "what's really going on." This was most clear as I realized that CB is what I called an "agenda-driven" space, where callers had clear goals and specific modes of acquiring their desired outcomes. For this reason, I knew it would be a challenge to set up personal conversations. Callers were

primarily in CB for erotic "hook-ups"—be it phone sex or what was often understood as a "meet and greet." Seeing that I was ethically unable to do either and was utilizing CB for research purposes, my interests in the everyday lives of DL men could only be satisfied through close attention to what was being said and not being said in personal profiles, as well as responses by those who showed interest in me as a potential object of desire. Unlike the club, the patron who is standing alone and open to conversation, or at least flirtation, was hard to find. However, it was definitely productive to do some "deep listening"—as Dwight Conquergood had taught me to do, which for him meant being as concerned with presence as with absence.[139] Thus, this chapter attempts to not only unveil the relationship between space, discretion, and constructions of masculinity, but also illustrate the centrality of rules and regulatory agents in what is often thought of as "private space."[140] The marking of this space as private is central to participant's ability to establish certain styles of "masculinity" as acceptable, as well as demarcate who is authentically DL and who is not. Such boundaries construct a space where DL men can feel more comfortable and where black gay men can find innovative ways to write themselves into heteronormative gendered ideals.[141]

This cultural congruency between DL men and black gay men somewhat explains why the negation of the "other" (in this case the femme and "out" gay man) was a common practice. Whether black and gay, or DL, the more masculine caller was elevated to a position of power and desire. For example, one caller's profile described himself as a "cool, DL nigga on the line, looking for another DL nigga," while also stating clearly that "no queens, no sissies, only DL brothas" were of interest. Here, it appears that his mode of validating his own masculine persona could only happen through the denigration of more effeminate men. While it appears that for him

DL means everything non-feminine and non-identifiably queer, when asked what was meant by DL in his profile he responded, "I can't believe you hit me up with that shit, but DL is whatever it mean to you. What you think it is, that's what it is...it's whatever it means to you." For this caller, "it" is a fixed sexual identity that should be common sense for those who are, indeed, DL. It was clear through the caller's tone that he was annoyed at my inquiry, as if I was insulting him by asking such questions. As he repeated "it's whatever it means to you," it became clear that I was deemed a trespasser who was outside of his "community." My lack of knowledge situated me as a "sissy" or "queen"— as my inquiry seemed uninformed.

Though I understood what definition of DL was circulating in the CB space, my ethnographic naiveté was deemed not only ridiculous, but inappropriately feminine. In addition, I was quickly dismissed as a potential candidate of interest for the caller's conversation or as a potential "meet and greet." My perceived lack of knowledge resulted in the caller pressing the digit four, which would skip to the "next guy." Evidently, I did not possess the standard knowledge or the masculine ideal that permeated the CB space. Shawn, the DL guy who grabbed my groin in *The Gate* club, relayed a story where he experiences rejection in the CB space of the party line. He described an instance where he felt as if his "DL card" was snatched when he did not fulfill the vocal, or performative, expectations of other DL callers. Shawn, a college student from middle-class background, refused to disguise his voice to ensure his passing into "straightness," or what was commonly understood as masculine. Thus, he was often dismissed as being "gay," or a "punk." It is this reaction to any fluidity of black masculinity, or breaking of accepted gender rules, which I believe fueled much of the Shawn's antagonisms with many men who were openly and unapologetically queer.

While the repudiation of the so-called "out brotha" was common, it more importantly elucidates the arbitrary judgments made within this space. Shawn's hyper-critical opinions of the effeminate men, like many men who choose more discrete ways of being, exhibits his own discomfort with being emasculated and his unease with those who articulated a conscious gay identity. The further distance that DL men position themselves from everyday queers, the closer they move toward normalcy. On this chat line, a masculine memo is distributed with specific instructions; yet various individuals often lose or have their "cards" taken away. DLness is often used to measure masculinity and masks the plurality within this particular community. In addition, those who describe themselves to be DL and those who prefer a discreet way of being in the world seek men who claim to possess those visible markers of masculinity often located within heterogendered bodies. [142]

As a result of the overwhelming number of callers who make such demands for masculinity, the space is homogenized in ways that resemble historical treatments of race as a category. Many have tried to fix, or bracket off, the category of blackness in order to signify sameness amongst a community of people. Yet, this artificial production of sameness neglects the diversity amongst black people. Still, many try to fit into this limit filled box. The same is true in the case of the DL—many regulate to affirm there own truth, while ignoring the "other" voices within their communities. Consequently, many men fix themselves to fit certain masculine ideals. While these regulatory practices create imaginative cohesion, Judith Butler reminds us that they more accurately "invoke the heterosexual norm through the exclusion of contestatory possibilities" (109). In this case, those who understand black sexuality as private, and to only be performed in properly masculine ways, exclude others who feel otherwise.

Therefore, less masculine men are relegated to the quiet of the bedroom, while quieted in the waves of the party line. This creates the illusion of homogeneity within the CB space, wherein DL becomes synonymous with "top" and acts as an index for accepted and proper masculinity. Regardless, the absence of aural bottoms, or queeny tops, does not mean they do not exist. Rather, it demonstrates the powerful economy of the top within this black queer world.

While sexual labels and positions are central to how DL men framed themselves as masculine, other attributes were offered as validation of gender-sexual authenticity in the CB space. Often callers made references to not only the structural build of their body, such as "muscular" or "thick," but also drew explicit attention to their physical endowment. Such statements like "Big Dick Top," "8 inches thick and round," and "hard dick looking for a bubble butt," were like keywords in caller's profiles. While this was not the language employed by all callers, the commonality of these phrases were indicators of the ways in which a sense of community was created through what Rusty Barrett refers to as a "homo-genius" language. Using the work of Saussure, Barrett discusses how communities build a language where ideal speakers reflect the language and language structure of his/her society (Queerly Phrased 182). In "CB Land," as one caller refers to it, a predominance of a certain type of language has constructed a cultural situation where voice and self-description verifies the status/role of individuals within the community. In addition, it equips callers with the ability to locate themselves within the DL community and to dismiss those who are impostors, or "fags." Along these lines, there was a concerted effort amongst men to eliminate interest from caller's who were understood as undesirable. The catch phrase, "No Fats, No Femmes," could be found in many profiles. In line with dominant historical privileging of certain bodies, this tendency

illustrates a need to see oneself as what one is not. While initially the coupling of "femme" and "fat" seemed highly arbitrary, its logic becomes apparent when recognizing the construction of overweight and feminine bodies as non-normative ideals. This move by DL men to pit themselves against the "fat and femme" allows themselves to write themselves into what R.W. Connell calls "hegemonic masculinity" (64).

In 2004, the extreme nature to which these masculine ideals were privileged was made most evident when my childhood friend Tavares revealed that there was a strong economy in "meetin and greetin." He referred to this act as "paper-chasin." In other words, he had been paid to meet up with someone and engage in some type of sexual act. While I am certain that there were many who profited from their participation on the line, DL men seemed to have an overwhelming appeal to patrons hiring for sexual acts. Tavares, like many men I spoke with, made it very clear that this sexual-capital exchange was not about pleasure when he shared that, "getting my dick sucked is getting my dick sucked. And if somebody gonna pay me to suck my dick...shit…" He later indicated that it was enjoyable, but mostly because he needed the money. On the one hand, Tavares attempts to attribute his same-sex experiences on the line to a matter of profit; while, on the other hand, he admits genuine sexual excitement from his various patrons. The tension illustrated by these two statements is clearly a product of stigma. As mentioned in previous chapters, DL men are sexual passing subjects who navigate between the stigma of (queer) sexuality and their actual desire for same-sex relations.

Nonetheless, the profiteering component of this stigma for working-class men like Tavares, offers another way to survive economic hardships and unfortunate circumstances.[143] Unlike many DL men on the chat line, Tavares had a very broad "hook-ups" list. From single DL

men, married men, transvestites, openly gay men, and various physical types, he engaged in sexual activities in exchange for money and/or housing and food.[144] In a recent conversation with a group of gay men, they admitted to "putting up and feeding so-called straight men" in exchange for some "good sex or just for good charity." While the sex-exchange was consistent with my previous findings, the charity factor was confounding. After several conversations, as well as further one-on-one talks with Tavares, I realized that they were buying masculinity. Many gay men had such strong desire for the "masculine" that they would not only allow many DL ("straight" or "trade boys") free reign in their homes, but also pay these discreet men to receive oral sex from them.[145] In a gathering of black gay men at my home, one man stated "fags love a thug—they want *a* man not any man!" This sentiment highlights the surplus-value of the DL brand of masculinity, exemplifying how hegemonic masculinity is not only privileged amongst DL men, but black gay men as well.

While black gay and DL men seem to be highly invested in certain versions of masculinity, after public discourse arose on the subject there appeared a tension within the virtual space. As the demonizing inscription upon the black male body were being consumed, criticism and concern was as pervasive amongst black gay men as amongst black women and the larger black community. For example, one gay caller who called himself BD told me, "These men are dishonest…They use us, go back to their wives, and potentially spread disease with and without knowledge." While this remark seems to gesture toward envy for the priority given to the female partner, it more importantly identifies a defense for black women. Nonetheless, his biggest contentions were that "*these* men were not comfortable in their skin" and "confused." These "internal issues," as BD called them, were unacceptable. Like the media and its thirsty

consumers in Chapter 3, BD ignores the many pressures and presences within black men's lives. In fact, he later admitted that "it took me about eight years to tell anyone what I was doin', but I did it." As he attempts to commend himself, he unconsciously empathizes with many DL men's socio-cultural positions as fathers, brothers, sons, friends, and workers. Unfortunately, his sentiment like many others, corroborated with popular opinions noted in previous chapters where the DL was made synonymous with immorality and disease.

My knowledge that gay men had a different relationship to marginalization created expectations that their opinions would differ from popular discourse. However, I found that many black gay men had also found their "criminal" in the DL body. While I don't mean to suggest an intentionality in the criminalizing tendencies of gay men, I do wish to denote the amount of pleasure exhibited in gay men's ability to deflect negative attention from themselves. In addition, their focus on the duping and disease aspects of the so-called "DL lifestyle" evokes an "us versus them" construction. This framework allows gay men to remove themselves from being the queer threat—posturing as a figure who is the queer friend who not only defends morality, but black (heterosexual) health. In essence, it seems that openly gay men—who have historically been constructed as "bottoms" within this spatial context—are now inverting that legacy. In other words, they are positioning themselves in a privileged location of hierarchy through a moral queer v. immoral queer dichotomy, as they criticize DL men on the basis of issues of dishonesty and disease. In this sense, they re-position themselves on the top of black sexual discourses around queer sexuality—becoming the proper example of male-male desire.

Consequently, the reputation of DL men within the CB space was often challenged by gay men. Callers would either announce their desire not to be contacted by "confused brothas" or

"DL men," or they would simply enact BD's strategy of "skip to the next caller." Yet, the frustration expressed in CB was not just a product of arbitrary power play. There had been several news reports that cautioned callers to the use of the line—"straight" men who used the line as a vehicle to attack "queers." While I was engaging in research, an ex-lover of someone I was dating was robbed and brutally murdered during a "meet and greet" with two discreet men. This series of events not only created a "disgust" for DL men, but also a fear of "homosexual panic" being enacted against openly black gay men by those who were then called "closeted fags." Intuitively, many men who typically identified as DL callers not only qualified their understanding of themselves of DL, but also created profiles that implied that the term was an abused term. While many refuse to change their way of being, in terms of discretion, they tailor their profiles to only attract callers who can tolerate or understand their positionality. For example, one caller publicized this profile:

> You got a brotha that's frustrated as hell (pause)…me and this nigga supposed to have an understanding and shit—I'm married, and this the first time I decided to hang with him…him and his guys..but he wanna front me off and he tells these mf's I'm confused, that I'm tryin to live two lives. I love my girl, love being with her, but like dippin with a nigga too. Then…this nigga friends start comin at me…this motherfucker wasn't even sayin shit…I ain't with that whole scene. (deep sigh) So….I'm looking for another nigga…once we have an understanding, we have an understanding…AINT NO BREAKING THE LAW.

This profile narrative illustrates one of the ways that many men situated themselves as DL, while responding to the popular critiques of the way they moved within the world. Here, the caller

clearly marks himself as traveling between men and women—marking his heterosexual relationships as most significant, while his queer relations were about something simply sexual.[146] Unapologetically, the caller signals surveyors of his profile that he has a clear frustration with the public sexual visibility that he witnessed in a recent encounter. This act of story-telling made other callers aware of his unwillingness to submit to popular calls to visibility or for the quick shift from discretion to disclosure. Indeed, he outlines the "drama" of the situation—he articulates a desire to reduce the possibilities of both visibility and criticism. Important for this discussion, he illustrates the tension that I pinpoint between some black gay men and DL men, in terms of the different expectations for sexual comfort or outness. The man who took him amongst his friends had a different comfort level with his queer sexuality and denied the caller his own choice in making his sexuality a public conversation. Finally, the caller's final move to incite issues of "breaking the law," illuminates how a desired discreet position can be a binding agreement between men. The calling out of his sexuality by the openly gay man, ridiculing his "confusion" and participation in a double life, denied the DL caller to narrate, or not narrate, his own sexual pleasures.

While this example serves to elucidate the tensions between men in CB space, it also speaks to its various risks. Particularly, it highlights how DL men's commitment to discretion can be challenged and questioned. The CB Space, which was often referred to as "cool" space connoting a sense of safety, now becomes a place of "drama" and potential danger. Rather than the laudatory remarks I would receive from DL men in the beginning of the research, I now hear "the line has too many fags." This declaration is not as homophobic, as it is a recognition of the difference in approaches to sexual (in)visibility by DL and gay men. It may be for this reason

that many men with whom I spoke, moved to the internet for their homoerotic experiences. Indeed, this is not the sole reason. Yet, the internet does supply more ways that an individual can engage in fantasy and also monitor and maintain their discreet sexuality.

DL Virtuality: Anonymity, Semi-Visibility, and Steve4Steve

While there has been substantial work on gay men on the internet (Nakamara 1995; Shaw 1997; Campbell 2004; Baker 2005), little work has explored how black gay men navigate their identity within the virtual world. Moreover, the discussion of DL men in internet chat rooms is often thought to be a paradox. For example, the infamous New York Times article, "Double Lives on the Down Low," frames black cyberspaces as an anomaly—rare places where dangerous things happen. Similar to perceptions of DL men in the Club, the presence of their actual face, body, or image in cyberspace seems to be contradictory to their assumed tenets of "discretion." This narrow construction of what DL can include is popular within and outside the community of men themselves. However, these findings negate the faith and trust that some men have in internet spaces that are largely exclusive. In addition, many take for granted the possibilities for virtual interactants to hide their identity, as well as information that may endanger their anonymity. This section of the chapter charts new territory as it travels within a space called Steve4Steve, a national internet site, often frequented by men with whom I speak. While nationally this site is predominantly white, Black and Latino men uniquely pervade this space in Chicago. This rarity possibly speaks to the limited networks for men of color in engaging homoerotic pursuits, as much as to the fact that queer spaces exclude men of color (Nero 2005). Whereas, in a city like New York, where there is a history of Black and Latino queer social networks, the need for such virtual spaces is less.[147]

While anonymity has often been concluded as the central feature for travel into virtual space by men who desire men (Reid, 1996; Bruckman, 1996, Danet, 1998), this finding is somewhat incomplete. I argue, like John Edwards Campbell in his text, Getting it On Online: Cyberspace, Gay Male Sexuality, and Embodied Identity, that several components are at work:

> I contend that such anonymity alone is not sufficient to foster feelings of safety in the case of queer erotic exploration. Rather, I would suggest that it is the more complex convergence of online anonymity, shared presumptions of both a particular gender and sexual identity, the policing of these presumptions, as well as communal efforts to exclude hostile discourses, that has, for queer interactants, made these channels hospitable spaces for queer exploration. (55)

While anonymity may be a key component of the pleasure gained in cyberspace, these other factors seem complimentary. In addition to Campbell's assertions for what makes queer virtual space desirable, it is impossible to exclude racial identification from the formula of "hospitality." Particularly, in the spaces where DL men reside it is imperative to understand the interworkings of race, gender, class, and sexuality—in all of its many prioritizations. This became clearest for me when an interactant in Steve4Steve said that he preferred this site because he saw "real black men" on here. This comment has all the inflections of racial and gender authenticity. The marking of "real black men," demonstrates the ways in which the a*rchitexture* of black masculinity always already conjoins blackness with gendered identity. Thus, it is virtually impossible to understand what black men do within virtual spaces without paying attention to the intersections of their multiple identities.

Steve4Steve is a traditional cyberspace site which highlights the significance of intersecting identities, where individuals communicate via internal messages, while opting to have external face-to-face interaction at a later point. As is common with most sites for interpersonal communication, each interactant can create a profile to inform other individuals of their physical, mental, and sexual characteristics. However, the site is peculiar in the required information: "You **must** include in your profile: age, height, weight, waist size, body type, hair color, body hair, ethnicity, and what your sexual desires are (i.e. 1-on-1 sex, relationship, friendships, misc. fetishes, etc)." The fact that these "fields" are required forces interactants to appeal to the physical-erotic eye. In addition to these required fields, there are also "optional" components such as self-written personal profile, professional information, substance consumption habits (smoking/drinking), as well as what sexual features (role, "dick size," HIV-status, etc.). Finally, the final "optional" field is the personal/private photo. For many DL men the latter component being optional is ideal. However, most men with whom I speak do post some type of image. Either an actual picture of themselves, a nude photo which shows their genitalia, or an image that would speak to their masculine schema (i.e., Tupac Shakur, a jeep, or scene from an urban neighborhood). Regardless, the option to select an image of choice allows for what I am referring to as a quasi-visibility—to be seen and unseen—a feature that accommodates the predominant desire to only present part of the self.[148] This choice not only represents a move toward anonymity, but also a strategy to avoid folks from "getting it twisted," as one man stated. In other words, no one can be confused about the aims of the interactant, attaching themselves in ways beyond the sexual-physical. Here, the medium is indeed the message.

When I first arrived in the Chicagoland area for graduate school in the Fall 2001, after being gone for almost seven years, I was hard-pressed to identify a "community" where I fit. In Evanston, where Northwestern is located, there was hardly an apparent black queer community. Thus, I found myself looking in virtual space for individuals who shared similar experiences and attitudes. During this venture, I found numerous individuals who were black, professional, and within the local area. Some were simply "looking for friendship" and attempting to make the same connections I desired, while several others were interested in more physical relations. Indeed, there were many who told me straight-away that they were not interested in any conventional gay relationship or friendship, but discrete (and discreet) sexual experiences with other men. The multiplicity within the place was obvious; while the homogeneous aspects were ever-present as well. My personal experiences in this space led me to an instinctual choice to return here when I began to explore virtuality within DL men's lives. As expected, the virtual world would have different features than the actual physical spaces I had met many men, but there would be similar attitudes amongst many who traveled within the site.

I began my research on Steve4Steve by reading through thousands of profiles, locating trends and tropes within the descriptions, desires, and other disclosed details. Particularly, I was interested in profiles that explicitly used DL in their profiles, as this suggested a certain consciousness about what one may include in their personal narrative. I found that men from all racial, cultural, and class backgrounds employed DL to signify a certain level of discretion and masculinity.[149] While this was not a corpus study, where I was examining the quantitative frequency of certain linguistic terms within profiles and what they may mean, I was interested in the consistent narratives that were being publicized by DL men on this site. Indeed, there were

certain trends in how men would situate themselves and their sexual desires. For the men who had literally expressed a DL positionality in their profile, there was limited information offered about their personal lives. One individual, whose screen name was **DLChicago76,** included all physical components of himself but omitted any information that would potentially allude to his professional background. In other words, though his profile stated "5'9, 145, 32w, swimmer's build" as his physical description, the other optional components were excluded. Here, the interactant could draw attention to not only his physical description, but also the provocative picture of his penis. This profile was intended to appeal to a certain viewer, one who was interested in a sexual experience. Likewise, many profiles include nude pictures of the interactant, which serve as a stand-in for the conventional headshots. Such illustrations would include everything from upper torso shots to actual images of the genitalia, as well as photographs of men engaging in particular sex acts. This choice, for the nude photograph to stand-in for the actual face, reduces the interactant to his sexual function and constructs the DL positionality as one solely concerned with sex. Indeed, the common practice of this stand-in effect can create a misunderstanding of DL culture and the full-scale objectives within cyberspace. While there are several men for whom sex is a priority, the absence of these men's faces in the space is more of a conscious choice to avoid recognition.[150] As DL men attempt to regulate and monitor their visibility, like **DLChicago76** they recognize "my body is enough."

This investment in discretion and acting as a somewhat disembodied subject, through the absence of actual identifiable images of the self in Steve4Steve profiles, is often challenged. Many men who travel within the site choose to publicize photos of their face and/or their body for others to review. When I first saw the profile of an interactant called **DL_Blackboi** with an

identifiable headshot— but limited descriptive information—I was surprised. Up until this point, I assumed that this would be outside the DL protocol, especially since I understood discretion to be at the core of DL men's everyday praxis. Thus, to see a clear shot of this man's face on this queer site was, at best, shocking. After several discoveries of similar profiles, I realized something significant. Many men did not feel inclined to hide their images because the likelihood of exposure was rare. Indeed, the other men who resided in this space shared the common desire for male-male experiences. Furthermore, men like **DL_Blackboi** reduced the opportunity of discovery by including limited information for other interactants, or possible viewers, to identify who they are, where they work, and other potentially threatening information. Lastly, such choices of visibility speak to the diversity within the enclave of DL men who travel within the space, as some are more discrete than others.[151] As in all "communities," there are a range of investments—some more extremely discrete about their sexual desires than others. The few men who do expose their faces attest to how the DL is often invoked to simply signify the presence of the masculine, indicate their navigation of sexuality outside specifically queer-oriented spaces, or as a description of how they move within the world in terms of privileging a private livelihood. These men, in line with David Ziller's book Photographing the Self understand "auto-photography" as a "method of nonverbal communication which provides a frozen image with a message" (70). Likewise, in Steve4Steve the self-photograph and the attached written text acts as a sort of advertisement—the selling of the masculine, or ideal sexual subjectivity.

Rather or not DL men select to make public their face or body, many men like **DLChicago76** will often omit certain information and write their profile narratives to regulate

who will pursue their interest. For example, **DLsmooth1977** indicated that he was a "discreet brother interested in only the same." This statement attempts to bracket off who is, and who is not, eligible for the interactant's interest. In essence, the publicly visible black gay man is an undesirable candidate for many men's sexual pursuits—what Murray Healy has called the "I am what I want" theory at work (63). In order to ensure interest for other interactants with similar interests, men in Steve4Steve often identify the characteristics that potential mates must possess. However, I argue that this desire for men who are like the interactant is not only about a desire for more masculine men, but also a way to feel more "straight." Tyrone, an avid Steve4Steve user, told me the following:

> I want somebody I can go out to the bar with, play pool, and no one ever know we are more than buddies. When I talk to these guys on here [Steve4Steve], I am always cautious about meeting. We are not going to meet without talking on the phone. (pause) I need to know they are cool like me…that they can be out and about and they don't wear their business on their outside.

Tyrone's sentiments are common, as they reflect a concern for appearances and external affirmation outside of cyberspace. Though many men meet without prerequisite phone-calls, Tyrone insists that he has these conversations with all of his "hook-ups." This need for aural affirmation of masculinity not only reveals the dependency on vocal qualities, but also how Tyrone and others use the telephone as a second-opinion. Tyrone admits that once he has telephone conversations with men, there is much he can tell from other "S4Ser's." Among the many characteristics that he lists as being potentially unveiled in the internet plus telephone conversation combo are "whether a brotha is really masculine," "if he uses gay language," "if he

a top or bottom," "if he is a liar," and "if he is a send off."[152] Of course, all of these guarantees are not guarantees at all. However, Tyrone's faith in his deciphering abilities not only speaks to his experience at doing the "hook-up"—for almost 2 years—but also his investment in certain masculine codes and conduct as an index for heteronormative gender performance and sincerity. As Tim Edwards has eloquently articulated in Men in the Mirror, "for some, this intense masculinization of gay culture represent[s] a triumph of sexual expression and political opposition to heterosexual ideology, whilst for others it mean[s] attempted conformity to oppressive stereotypes of sexual attractiveness and practice" (108). For Tyrone, and men who have similar standards, the internet image and profile is never enough—further investigation is almost always necessary and a better guarantor of their gender-sexual ideals.

In order to more fully understand DL men's interactions within the Steve4Steve site, I created a personal profile for **DownLow_25** that announced myself as a researcher who was interested in speaking confidentially with DL men:

> Brotha here wanna talk to DL men only. Trying to get the real deal on the Down Low. Media's not doing a good job and these so-called experts ain't tellin the story right. I am not interested in your name, or anything that you are not comfortable sharing. But, I am writing a book--I need to gather life stories of DL men who use the internet and phone chat lines. If you wouldn't mind filling out a short questionnaire, Email me at: downlow1_2006@yahoo.com.

My construction of the profile was fueled by what I had already ethnographically gathered as explanations for why many men resist dialogue with researchers. Largely, many men expressed concerns about the confidentiality of their lives, as well as illustrating discomfort with answering

too many questions. Therefore, I created a questionnaire that allowed them to determine the quantity and content of their sharing. In addition, I also assured their confidentiality by asking them not to tell me any information that they felt was potentially too specific to who they were (such as name and place of employment). Though I was able to follow up with some men via instant messenger (chatting in real time) and via the telephone, I used the questionnaire as a text that would provide further explication for their doings in and outside of this space.

When I first posted my profile, I received several messages from openly gay men which expressed concern for my research outcomes. They often stated that they doubted my ability to get DL men to speak to me—not only because I was a researcher, but because, as one interactant said, "there ain't no real DL men online—they in the streets." While much of the DL population is inaccessible, as they perform sexuality behind the doors of surveillance, many do travel in cyberspace. As illustrated earlier there are different levels of trust of the machine, various interpretations of "risks," and multiple commitments to different degrees of discretion. Therefore, I would retort (or not respond and just think), "I think you are wrong." This was definitely a statement of faith, as the first few times I left my profile online I only received one response. As I spoke with another friend who does similar research, I was advised to change my profile image. Initially, it was a blank profile box with "No Photo" inscribed in it. I believed that my screen name **Downlow_26** would attract enough of attention and interactants would be compelled to read my profile. After I realized, by the lack of responses, that this initial image was not enticing—particularly, for a site that was constructed for its users to scroll and screen images—I quickly updated my Steve4Steve profile. I changed my profile image by cutting and pasting the front cover of Scott Poulson-Bryant's book Hung: A Meditation on the Measure of

Black Men in America. Poulson-Bryant's cover shows a black man's upper torso with the word HUNG in bold print and vertically centered, while a measuring tape is diagonally stretched across his chest. The picture, I knew, was not only sexually suggestive, but a prototypical image for those who often understand themselves to be DL, as well as those who desire DL men. This experience of online rejection, or "no hits," gave me great insight as to why it is often necessary for DL men to utilize an actual photograph. It was probably less about a willingness to expose images of the self, or parts of the self, and more about eliciting cyber-appeal. After I changed my image, my responses began to swarm instantaneously.

While several men commented on how "tight" or "hot" I was, not realizing my virtual image was a cover of a book, about fifty men showed interest in answering the questionnaire. After e-mailing the survey to their perspective accounts, all seemingly fictional, about twenty-five men returned the questionnaire.[153] The range of participants ranged in age from 23-40 years of age. They were all black men, who came from various class and social backgrounds, and indicated similar but distinct reasons for their Steve4Steve pursuits. Many men indicated that the internet provided a private space to express desire for other men, while also providing a venue where they could explore fantasies that were unavailable in everyday life. There were three primary findings within the questionnaires generally: how DL men navigate within Steve4Steve, how the cyberspace experience relates to everyday life, and how they interpret their own performances of DLness and those of other interactants.

As DL men travel within Steve4Steve, they construct their own interpretation of the space. Consequently, they construct strategies to navigate within various sites. When narrating how he moves within Steve4Steve, **Get_Down25** had this to say:

> Honestly I don't approach guys, if I see some attractive online I will speak and if they want to hold a conversation that's cool..but most of them niggas online be trying too hard to be hard. You can tell a lot from a picture….but how the fuck you "DL" and you got your picture posted on a fag website? How the hell you can be a "THUG" but your eyebrows thin and got a bunch of Vaseline on your lips…some bullshit.

This statement is quite loaded with contradiction. For example, he predicates his move to converse with other interactants on being "attractive," but yet criticizes so-called DL men whose pictures appear on a "fag website." Later in the questionnaire, he states that one of his greatest fears is other interactants "being someone else than the person on the pic." This withstanding, the pejorative description of Steve4Steve as a "fag website" is ironic, as he travels daily within this space. Is he also a "fag" because of his virtual explorations and sexual desire for men? Furthermore, other than visual representation, how would he know if they have thin eyebrows and Vaseline on their lips? It seems that he is committed to discounting the visual as a medium of representation, while using it for his own production of knowledge. However, chat rooms are historically sites where the textual and visual meet to constitute meaning. **Get_Down25** attempts to disconnect the two, in hope of authenticating his DLness. Like many other DL men I have encountered he creates a virtual impossibility—reducing the opportunity for interactants to make some visual assessments before actual face-to-face interaction. In terms of his own individual practice online, this extraction of photographic images is unrealistic and non-ideal. Thus, his move to discount the visual is more of a rhetorical move rather than an actual expression of his perspective. This desire to express an authentic DL persona through what one says publicly is common amongst men online. It benefits **Get_Down25,** and DL men more generally, to appear

uncomfortable with the queer visibility and the "fag," even when this may be one of the appealing features of online. Here he attempts to use a rhetorical strategy of dis-identification as a way of "proving" his DLness in conversation with others (including me, the researcher) through the construction of a certain narrative. While there may be some reservations to making one's photographic image public, it is still an attractive feature on the Steve4Steve site. In many cases, it appears that the danger, or risk of exposure, is reduced by the fact that this is a space exclusively for "fags," or a predominantly queer site.[154]

The role of cyberspace as a reduction of risk factors was never more apparent than in the responses given by **DL_MarriedBiGuy**. This married thirty-six year old professional in the entertainment industry and father of three children, though succinct in his responses to my inquiry, provided great insight. One of the most intuitive statements that **DL_MarriedBiGuy** made was that "the internet allows me first and foremost anonymity. I can screen others who are in my situation and therefore I feel." **DL_MarriedBiGuy** highlights two features that many men share as essential to Steve4Steve: the feeling of anonymity and an ability to "screen" potential interactants of interest. For interactants like **DL_MarriedBiGuy**, who do not make their images public, they often understand their role in cyberspace as privileged. As objectifying agents, rather than objects being desired, they have the option of selecting with whom they will interact rather than interactants being drawn to their profile by their publicized image. Of course, this limits the options for those who announce "no pic, no chat," but increases their authority within Steve4Steve as dictators of their own virtual experiences. Another reason for DL men's comfort may be analogous to many gay clubs, where it can be assumed that the interactants in this space practice male-male desire. Like David Shaw, it seems that "the reason one goes to a gay bar [is

for] common solace and excitement in the fact that it is one of the few places in society where by their mere presence all patrons can be assumed to be gay" (137). Though this may not be the case in a time where there is more gay-straight interaction in queer clubs, as seen in the previous chapter, there seems to be greater assurance in queer cyberspace sites. By this, I mean that sites like Steve4Steve require many intricate preliminary tasks such as creating personal profiles and constructing a coherent and attractive virtual identity—which will often discourage an "outsider" from becoming an interactant.[155] Indeed, constructing everyday or virtual identities it is hard work. Indeed, rather for the sake of investigation or engaging secret male-male desire, the construction and/or maintenance of identity is an arduous process.

DL_MarriedBiGuy is a testament to this labor. Of all the men who responded to the survey, he seemed to really use the "additional comments" section for a space for catharsis:

> I am a married man who at the age of 10 had my first sexual experience. It was with a relative 10 years older than I who was of the same sex. It was rape. I did not know that at the time…because I thought it felt good. I have tried to deny my true self by marrying and having children. What I didn't understand is that I would have been gay had I not been raped at an early age or not. I think I tried for years to blame it on that occurrence, but now I know I am a Gay man, who has chosen to hide behind a wife and children, as I was expected to do. I am miserable most everyday and the only thing that keeps me going is the love I feel for my children and the love they feel for me. I will continue to have encounters with other men, probably for the rest of life. Why? Because the children I have helped bring into this world are much more important than my own needs.

Throughout his questionnaire response, he identified his married status eight times. Yet, it was not until the closing "additional comments" question that he expounded upon the value of his marital relationship in his sexual experiences with men. Interestingly, his expansion on the pressures of marriage excavated not only the significance of his children, but also horrific memories of his childhood. Like three other men who answered the survey, he marked the genesis of his male-male sexual experiences at molestation. The most profound element of **DL_MarriedBiGuy**'s response was how he admits how his self-reflexivity allowed him to identify a different origin for his homoerotic pleasure within socio-cultural factors, rather than his moment of sexual tragedy. Furthermore, he suggests that his marriage was initially about "covering" what he understood as the result of rape, but later evolved into his escape from identifying as a "gay man." In other words, he refuses a gay identity because it seems impossible to be an avowedly "straight" man and embrace a queer identity label. However, the tension he locates between identifying as "gay" and being a "married man" highlights an interesting conundrum. Can there be a conversation of male-male desire without an invocation of accepting a gay identity-claim? What forces **DL_MarriedBiGuy** to make a rhetorical leap to an embraced gay identity rather than understanding himself as a man who desires men, but also a strong commitment to his family and certain patriarchal ideals? It seems that this rhetorical move is an indicator of the ways that the centrality of choosing an identity, or the rhetoric of outness, has penetrated public constructions of proper sexual identity. In the dominant narrative of family there is no room for gay men who are married, or married men who prefer male-male desire.[156] With this in mind, **DL_MarriedBiGuy** continuously recognizes his marital relationships and emphasizes that "I always practice safe sex! I have wife and children to care about…make sure

they are protected against my improprieties." Like many DL men, no matter how comfortable or content **DL_MarriedBiGuy** appears with his sexual desires, he is stricken with a sort of moral anxiety—which always encourages a degree of self-punishment within his rhetoric. Indeed, "being DL is like a hard job."

While some men do demonstrate remorse, when they are traveling between two different partners, many men are more concerned about the "risks." Indeed, the issues raised throughout this chapter are concerns at various points for different men. However, men like **Mad_DLBody21** seem hyper-aware of their risk of exposure or "being found out." He shares one narrative which reveals his somewhat hyper-consciousness about exposure possibilities:

> My first experience was at the gym and to this day I'm not big on going to the gym. Why? Because my girl came to me and said her friend boyfriend was being hit on by men at the gym so I stop so she was not thinking the same about me.

Prior to this admission, **Mad_DLBody21** admits that he received oral sex in the bathroom of the gym and it was exciting to be "watched by another guy." Yet, his guilt was not about these homoerotic pleasures, but the potential of his "girl" being suspicious of him and scrutinizing his masculinity. As **Mad_DLBody21's** is clearly aware of the most dominant definition of the DL—men who travel between men and women secretly—while embracing this term, he tries to avoid being implicated in the common definition used to connote his discreet positionality. Rather, **Mad_DLBody21** attempts to avoid the possibility of personal and public humiliation, by opting for more intimate environments. Indeed, the internet is a much "safer" site of homoerotic exploration. For **Mad_DLBody21** the benefit to Steve4Steve is "if you hook up over the internet I never have to see you again." Unlike the gym, where men frequently return, his involvement

with other interactants in cyberspace is contingent upon his own choice. Here, once again **Mad_DLBody21** exhibits a concern for visibility, as he assumes that this endangers his primary relationship with his girlfriend. For many men, this site allows for selective choices, as well as eliminates the possibility of discovery, as the community of interactants is comprised of individuals whose public persona is different than their personal profiles and/or personality.

Authenticating the Impossible: Changing Times and the Impact of HIV/AIDS

As I concluded my explorations on the BeeHive and Steve4Steve, this disconnect between the everyday persona and the personal profiles was becoming most apparent. New descriptions and new details became common within personal profiles—information that conjoined the personal/everyday and the private/public virtual images. The most noticeable presence was that of the discourse around HIV/AIDS that became central to both sites of virtuality. On the phone-chat line, comments like, "A nigga is looking for healthy brothas—no sick brothas—clean brothas wanted" or "why dudes on here be lyin about their shit…if you got AIDS or whatever, just say something, so I can be on my way," were commonplace in my travels through the aural channels of the BeeHive. Similarly, such calls were visible in Steve4Steve. Virtual interactants began to post, as a part of their profiles, such addenda as "HIV Negative as of 3/4/06" or "I'm Clean"—as indicators of evidence and knowledge of their sexual health. While initially such admissions can appear transgressive and potentially ground-breaking in terms of safe-sex and testing awareness, the truth is that these acts are discriminatory measures within both spaces. Indeed, they indicate a fear and awareness of sexually transmitted diseases. Nonetheless, the presence of these as "taglines" within individual profiles, acts as a practice of boundary-making. Through the self-marking of the self as being "clean and disease-free,"

individuals not only announce their own health status but indicate that these are expected desires for potential sexual partners. Such indications draw a discursive line around individual profiles—portending to be accurate statements of fact, which are actually admissions which deserve scrutiny. Since this is the beginning of a trend within both spaces, it is difficult to predict what effect this will have on the communicative exchange between individual callers and interactants.

Nonetheless, these profile inserts of HIV-negativity situate certain callers and interactants as possessing a purity, or cleanliness, which seems impossible for the openly gay individual. In these spaces, as DL men enact this rhetoric of "cleanliness," they assign impurity to others outside of their discrete community. As Mary Douglas notes, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity of experience" (2). Thus, as DL men separate themselves from their HIV-positive same-sex desiring callers and interactants, they inadvertently construct a unified identity not only around DLness, but HIV-status. However, HIV-status here has more significance than health. This regulatory announcement—claims to purity—rewards the performance of a certain style of gendered sexuality with a somewhat arbitrary outcome. The attempt to equate DLness with HIV-negativeness is not only a tactic to divorce it from popular discourse, but also to divorce DL men from the affected/infected gay community. Here, in some ways, DLness prevents the infection of HIV. Indeed, this is never more apparent than when my black gay friends share instances in which they have met and engaged DL men. Many have shared that when they inquired about the status of a potential sexual partner, the response was something akin to "Look at me—do I look like I am sick man…?"[157] This belief in a certain style of masculinity preventing disease transmission is quite hazardous in a time when we know that sexual behavior, not orientation, is at the core of sexual health. Indeed, this may have some

impact on the perpetuation of disease, as individuals engage in hazardous acts under the "all DL men are safe" rule. While this idea of safety is not always present, it does have rhetorical value in spaces where "risks" are at the epicenter of cultural communication. The evocation of HIV-negativity as a trait specific to DL men enacts Goffman's apt theory that "before a difference can matter much it must be conceptualized collectively by the society as a whole" (123). Safety, in this case, is contingent upon a gendered sexuality that promotes a sense of normalcy—that which can only be possessed through the de-stigmatization provided by the properly masculine. In other words, DL men can affirm their own presence within virtual space as safe as an act of increasing their collective attraction value, as well as their ability to affect cultural shifts. The always already HIV-negative DL body can separate himself and his understanding of the self from the impure gay male body.

This new trend in profiles within the BeeHive and Steve4Steve accented how DL men responded to the cultural attacks mentioned in earlier chapters, especially in light of being named as the HIV/AIDS culprits in the black community. In essence, DL men reify their position as ideal through re-enforcing the mythology that with masculinity comes safety (in terms of sexual health and personal identity). They invert the logic of same-sex relations as "dangerous," as they remove the gaze through highlighting an accomplishment in masculinity. Though such attempts to take the virtual focus from the DL elsewehere are pervasive, the stigma of same-sex desire flows within and outside this terrain with even greater momentum. Though DL men may reconfigure certain narratives, they are always pitted against public discourse. As they find strategic ways to displace myths, or suspend them, their taboo desire is writ large with questions and scrutiny.

This chapter has illustrated the negotiations of black masculinity and sexuality in virtual spaces, it is clear that it may be virtually impossible for DL men to prove themselves authentic. For many it seems that authenticity is a way of articulating that they are sincere in their masculine performances, they have mastered the gendered expectations, and have set themselves apart from those who identify queerly. Indeed, there moves to de-queer themselves are as much about gender, as they are about moving away from the realms of cultural suspicion. The next chapter will discuss the meaning of the "suspect," while illustrating how this term is employed to describe DL men.

Chapter 6:

The Suspect: Implications for a DL Future

[W]e demand that sex speak the truth…and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness.—Michel Foucault[158]

I often sit at Starbucks—with my books, my laptop, my dissertation notes, and my pomegranate green tea—constructing chapters for this dissertation. At the close of the dissertation I sit, once again, at Starbucks. The coffee shop environment, in a Habermasian way, seems to be a generator of conversation, intellectual stimulation and exchange. Often, individuals inquire as to what I am doing "with ALL those books." I respond, "working on my dissertation." Then, they retort, "dissertation about what?" And it is history after that. After I distill my dissertation in the two-minute spill I have mastered since finishing the strenuous qualifying examination process, they always have an experience they wish to share. Two shared experiences continue to illustrate what I have deemed as the queer future of the DL.

The first conversation was with a young black woman who had initially engaged me in conversation about my research when she recognized J.L. King's now infamous book On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Other Men on my table. She was primarily shocked to witness a "brotha" reading this book. I quickly explained that I was critiquing and reviewing this text, far more than I was enjoying. This began a lengthy conversation. After an elongated discussion, within which she also verified my sexuality, she commenced to surveying the men in the Starbucks. As she sat, she pointed to about five or six men who she considered "suspect." By this, she meant that these "brothas was acting one way

when they were really another." These were the type of brothers she said she would have to either keep a close eye on, or "cut them off!"

My conversations with a black man in his mid-forties verified what I feared as the effects, or future of the DL within black discourse: A string of suspects and a heightened self-consciousnes or greater paranoia amongst black men in general. As I sat at my small round table, sipping a pomegranate green tea, he inquired as to the type of work I was doing. Quickly, seeing this as an opportunity to hear a presumably "straight" black man's reaction to my dissertation topic, I eagerly obliged his request. After I explained the gist of my project, I added to my "spiel" that I was concerned about the impact that dominant discourses surrounding the DL would have on the black male population. He immediately responded, "Now that's what I'm talking about—cause a brother can't even try to nurture, or be nice to a black woman, without being 'suspect'." He then continued to share how he tries to "wine and dine," as well as retain his own hygiene, to ensure the comfort of women he dates.[159] In addition, he also indicated that his interests in "opera, shopping, and less 'get your hands dirty' activities" deemed him even more questionable. After all this, he lamented, "Can a brotha ever win?"

Indeed, he can win—but only if he adheres to certain stereotypes—which, of course, will position him as a potential "DL Brotha" nonetheless. Here, the DL is invoked exclusively to signify those men who deceive female counterparts, while having relations, or relationships, with other men. As "suspects" in these ideologically incriminating times, the possibility for positive outcomes is rare for black men. Ironically, black men who elicit certain characteristics that would deem them sexually suspect are framed as dangerous agents unfit for trial (for trial? I don't get this) or fair treatment. As a result, black men who perform discreet practices of homo

and/or bi-sexual acts are not afforded the privilege of defining themselves, or keeping their sexual acts contained to the privacy of space. Instead, they are subject to public scrutiny and criminal-framing—leaving them little room for redemption, or more importantly, valid reasoning for opting for discretion rather than visibility. As this dissertation attempts to articulate, the discursive situation of black men enacts more of a necessity for sexual passing, rather than uncovering real, actualized acts of deceit or endangerment. Like Foucault's epigraph above makes clear, when it comes to sex in our society, it is deemed as truth-telling in the moment of making the sexual visible rather than allowing each individual to construct their own versions of truth. In the case of the DL, black men are always already "suspect" and subject to potential scrutiny rooted in a host of discursive mythologies perpetuated in and outside of media. Outside the realms of sex, however, black men are major figures of "suspicion," often framed as criminal and violent within the news, television shows, and pop cultural film and video. Consequently, the narrative of the DL as "deviant" and dangerous" is more sellable, appealing not only to the racist mythologies of our society, but the optic biases that are products of the mass circulation of the deviant black male body.[160]

The fact that DL men are now commonly referred to as being "suspect," is not surprising when considering the etymology and cultural baggage of the word itself. The word suspect derives from the Latin word *suspicere*, which means "to look at." In essence, at the core of marking the suspect is the gaze—which is always already instructed by cultural bias and expectations. Consequently, within the history of racism and black doubt, black men are often looked at in ways that are almost always suspicious. Likewise, the cultural usage of the "suspect" within contemporary usages inflects a scopophilic tendency to inscribe criminality upon the

black male body. As we learn of suspects in the context of contemporary media, the proliferation of images of "black men" within the frame of criminality deems this as a natural image. DL men, as sexual suspects of deviance, extend the ascription of criminality from judicial law to socio-sexual law. Indeed, this explains why the greater concern surrounding the DL centers on "black men who have sex with female partners, while participating in male-male sexual acts." The central criminal act, for the general public, is not only that DL men act outside of what has been deemed naturally masculine, but also that DL men act as heterosexual impostors. In this light, the labeling of men as "suspect" is not a move of suspicion, but a sign that the spectator has acquired enough "truth" within the given performance by the male figure under scrutiny. Consequently, the black male is subject to being a suspect of "deviance" not because of something that he has done or actual evidence of misconduct, but largely because of his relation to deviance by the nature of "acting out." In this sense, I use "acting out" to signify the notion of "acting out of character, which assumes that there is an essential way for black men to behave. When black men do not prescribe to certain modes of performance, they are deemed "other," a code word for "suspect," or a signal of their masculinity being in question, or being understood as potentially "queer."

As individuals attempt to decipher the "truth" of the DL within the public sphere, black men are discursively reduced to mere abstractions, a collection of distorted fragments. However, this dissertation has demonstrated how men (re)embody themselves through performance, language, and queer-world making, countering the active discourse by allowing them agency and humanity. As DL men perform within spaces—queer clubs, phone-chat lines, internet sites, and within literary discourse—their "doings" disrupt simplistic narratives of sexuality. In this sense,

the DL becomes a kind of counterpublic. Contesting Michael Warner's claim that "counterpublics" are queers who denounce the language of heteronormativity (86-87), DL men dismiss the notion that queerness must be predicated upon a politics of visibility and repudiation of discretion. Seeing the neo-liberal shift amongst black queers as of late, the DL population might be better understood as a counter-counter public to the black queer public sphere. While on one hand the black queer population is a counterpublic by the very nature of its existence, DL men penetrate spaces with a discourse of discretion that marks their racialized sexual experience as distinctively different from white and privileged black queer communities. Thus, it counters the counterpublic where black queerness is articulated as something to be "seen,"—the sense of sexuality that is aligned with the dominant mode of expressing sexual identity within America.

This countering force is akin to Jose Muñoz's explanation of "dis-identification [as] meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). While DL men enact a dis-identificatory politic, they are continuously framed as queer "strangers"—situated outside of the dominant black queer paradigm, perpetrating an un-truth rather than evidence of the opposite. If anything is apparent in this dissertation, it is the fact that the DL is an attitude and positionality that has a central role in the lives of not only queers of color, but also within black communities more generally.

Indeed, chapter one of this dissertation addressed this move toward discretion, as it lays out the theoretical and methodological moves of this project. Chapter one demonstrated the insufficiency of the traditional closet as a paradigm used to describe the discrete space where

black queers make sense of their sexuality. Particularly, as black people attempt to move within and outside the historical gaze of surveillance which attempts to regulate their everyday performances, the use of the closet is unstable and shifting. This relationship with the gaze becomes more complicated as we factor the relationship between black sexuality and masculinity—when thinking about DL men specifically—as it constructs a narrative which privileges discretion, without the desire to be "out" or "visible." It is because of this complex "re-mixing of the closet" that this project engaged an interdisciplinary approach—literary, discursive, and ethnographic analyses—to generate a more sophisticated and nuanced conversation around black male sexuality.

In order to advance a more sophisticated discussion of black male sexuality, following Patricia Hill-Collins, I identified the "past in the present" through recalling the historical narrative of *sexual passing*. Chapter two constructed a genealogy of DL performance by excavating the link between historic race-based passing novels and the contemporary literary work of E. Lynn Harris. As one of the first black novelists to call attention to the DL, Harris creates sexual passing narratives through his novels, unconsciously (or consciously) harkening back to acts of passing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century racial passing novels. While Harris explicitly addresses issues of sexual passing, he simultaneously engages issues of bisexuality. The theme of bisexuality, as a highly underdeveloped critical engagement, is an important lynchpin in understanding the dynamics of the discourse around the DL. While Harris is not always successful in complicating popular understandings of (bi) sexuality, or even the DL specifically, he has crafted a popularity which acts as pedagogy for those who are attempting to understand black men and their sexuality. Therefore, chapter two's unveiling of the various

teachings by E. Lynn Harris through his novels functions to not only re-read his work, but also uncover what Harris's novels teach his consumers about black male sexuality and the DL.

In addition to E. Lynn Harris's literary pedagogy through his sexual passing novels, much so-called "knowledge" is acquired through encounters with various discourses. In chapter three, I examined how the proliferation of information about the DL is circulated through news media, television, and public exchange of ideas. While Harris's text may have been the predecessor to media discourses introducing the DL as an "official" topic, these two mediums together collaborate and construct a dangerous narrative about DL positionality. This chapter, in its attention to the discursive shape and moral inventions of popular media, identified trends and tropes that re-inscribe dangerous mythologies about black men within the public sphere. Specifically, this chapter recognized the critical role that media plays in not only (mis)shaping black men, but also the scripts that encourage a regulatory practice amongst the men themselves. As DL men are always already linked to deviance and disease within media, in their everyday lives they often steer away from associations with queerness; this aversion to surveillance creates a greater inclination to mask and masculinize the self. While on one hand such media discourse around the topic reinforces many stereotypes about black men and black sexuality, it also encourages DL men to become more aware of not only their sexual behavior, but performances of "proper" gender.

The role of gender, particularly masculinity, in the lives of DL men was central to chapter four. In this ethnographic exploration, I entered the black queer club space to witness multiple contradictions, continuities, and complicated understandings of sexuality. This chapter explored the seemingly ironic presence of DL men in the openly gay club space—locating men's

reconciliation through the privileges often given to "heterogendered" performances. Furthermore, this chapter illustrated how the DL factor is largely a part of black queer life more generally, which works to better serve men who prefer discrete performances of sexuality. The black queer club space—in its ode to hip-hop and normative black masculine codes—encourages the participation of those who not only prefer the sexual politics of discretion, but who also embrace dominant black cultural expressions. The body and its performance are at the center of interpretation in this space. In this chapter, I examined how the body within the club space is used, read, and transformed—activating a certain recognition that allows for discreet men to engage queer activity.

Conversely, chapter five examined how DL men communicate and represent themselves in virtual spaces. In these sites where the body is materially absent, I explored how the body is constructed, narrated, and materialized through language and visual imagery within "virtuality." Specifically, the phone-chat line and the internet are sites where men construct "voices" and images which authenticate their DLness, as well as their black masculinity. This chapter observed the trends and tropes in two spaces, while assessing how men construct and imagine their virtual selves. In addition, I also examined how the sites changes with the shifting cultural dynamic of DL men, as well as the entry of HIV/AIDS discourse. While this chapter is much about the modes through which DL men mark their "masculine sincerity," it is also about how they influence how "others" are seen and see themselves. This chapter, unlike others, illustrates how the presence and representations of DL men affect shifts in the cultural climate of virtual spaces.

Indeed, this dissertation covers a lot of preliminary ground. As the first project to really examine the DL—as more than a "phenomenon"—it attempts to shed more light on a population with historical and contemporary significance. This project has attempted to move the DL from a discourse of "suspect" to subject—recognizing the potential for these men to inform a more sophisticated understanding of race, gender, and sexuality. Through an interdisciplinary approach, taking performance as a central paradigm for inquiry, this dissertation is able to better facilitate a discussion of the fluidity and complexity of sexuality. Through the critical aims of this dissertation, DL men move from the distorting gaze of suspicion; rather, here they are situated within an intellectual discourse that understands the "doing" of gender and sexuality as always already shifting apparatus. DL men, in the precarious position of being subject to public scrutiny and pitted against the confines of the ideals of black masculinity, are too often framed in an illusory coherent, cohesive sexual narrative. Indeed, the punitive public gaze and self-regulating tenets of black masculinity encourage the creation and maintenance of DLism.[161] Nonetheless, the manifestations of this positionality have multiple dimensions. This dissertation project has only begun to unveil the nuances of DL positionality and all of its complexities—disallowing for reductive, moral-driven assessments of discrete performances of queer sexuality.

The future of research that engages sexual performances, which reject what may be referred to as normative approaches to sexuality, is necessary. This project has revealed for me its greatest importance: to identify the ways in which intersecting identities shifts the role of sexual politics. In recent months, I have discovered various manifestations of this shift through the incorporation of the DL within various cultural groups. For example, in San Francisco I located a group of Asian men who have appropriated the DL under the nomenclature *Downe*, to

not only express their affinity for discretion, but also hip-hop culture. Several conversations have pushed me to incorporate a discussion of DL women, of all races—many of whom I have met during research for this project. Outside of those who explicitly embrace DL in modified versions, there are several communities of men and women who "re-mix the closet" and create other ways of being in the world without ever coining a term, or a term being ascribed upon them. All of these communities deserve critical attention within academic research, as they illustrate the ways in which marginalized communities "make do," or make their own.

Indeed, David Eng, Judith Halberstam, and José Muñoz's inquiry, "What is the social costs of this new visibility?" (2) is an apt one. While the growth of queer visibility for those who desire it is praise-worthy, it is as important to recognize the error in its establishment as the privileged, or desired state. Such revelry over queer visibility often excludes the racial specificity of sexual development and experience, excluding those who operate outside the visibility paradigm. This tendency to exclude those experiences outside the dominant paradigm also deems many men suspect. In this case, as visibility is deemed the norm, (in)visibility or discretion is deemed as signs of abnormality, or underdevelopment. Consequently, as queers of color embrace other ways of doing sexuality, they are marked as outsiders, while the dominant mode of doing is deemed as normative and most rewarding. However, as this dissertation has illustrated, there are several remunerations for engaging sexuality in discreet ways. Most specifically, the discrete way of doing sexuality allows black men to retain the ideals of masculinity while engaging queer desire. Whether DL men discreetly engage in relations with only men, or between both sexes, the location of themselves within the DL continuum acknowledges their desire to practice desire in "low-key" ways that avoid public scrutiny. Indeed, the DL as a community may be under

discursive fire. Nonetheless, public discussion on DL men aims at abstract figures, rather than individuals. Consequently, the damage that is done through discourse is that of demonization of black men and black people, more generally. The men with whom I spoke have illustrated the minimal influence of discourse on their DL journey. As one man told me, "it gives the DL a bad rep, but it don't really affect me…cause it's not me."

Still, the discourse of "suspicion" continues to fuel national momentum. While there is some logic to women's search for DL men, too little time is spent deconstructing the systems that perpetuate dangerous sexual practices and discrete sexual behavior. The former is of most concern for me. As the larger public concerns itself with those who commit the "crimes of identity," (103) as D. Marvin Jones has put it,[162] I am concerned about the crimes against humanity that prevent individuals from making the best choices for themselves and others. For example, what makes an individual believe "I'm clean—look at me, can I be sick?!" Such assurance, based in such artificial parameters, perpetuates a belief that one's masculinity protects one from the perils of disease. These myths create some dangerous behaviors, which are known to bring about unfortunate results. As scholars, healthcare providers, and those concerned about the welfare of society, we must begin to explore what is at the core of such poor choice-making. Specifically, when an individual decides to engage in sexual acts with another individual, what socio-cultural circumstances play a crucial role in decision-making? How do race, gender, class, and sexuality work together before, during, and after poor sexual choice making?

Medical scholars like David Malebranche and Gregory Millett are beginning to ask these questions on the medical front. However, in order to affect change, how do we get these concerns to be a larger part of academic and popular discourses on sexuality? As we move to

concern ourselves with the workings of the DL, let's unveil the "discreet" sexual choices that are costing people their quality of life. It seems too easy to resort to the old scripts of black male disease and demonization, rather than addressing the more complicated conundrums of sexuality. Those types of questions are central to solving the issues of sexual unhealthiness within all communities. Rather than invoking discussions of "suspect" sexuality, we may be better served by engaging a conversation about sexual health, in addition to sexual performances.

At the close of this dissertation, I have attended two funerals in the last two months. Both of these funerals were for men who had sex with men, but whose families were unaware of their sexual desires or behaviors. As I type, I recognize the important contribution that this angle of research could have on my project. As I move to transition this text from a dissertation to a manuscript, I realize the necessity for me to address how DL men 1) address HIV/AIDS within their relationships, 2) negotiate their own HIV/AIDS status, and 3) approach HIV/AIDS with respect to race, gender, and class. While I will continue to avoid linking HIV/AIDS to one collective group or particular practice, I do recognize the importance of addressing how some men, who are DL, manage the reality of disease. While this will move the project further in humanizing those who have been constructed as mere abstractions, it will also provide a better understanding of the complex "doing" of the down low.

Notes

[1] See Blasius, "An Ethos of Lesbian and Gay Experience," 647.

[2] See Phelan, 96-97.

[3] In the Alex Hinton's film, "Pick Up the Mic," he interviews poet and activist Tim'm West about the inability of black people to "come out of the closet," or elect to engage in visible queer identity politics.

[4] Due to the length of this introduction, and the aims of this example, I will not narrate every episode in the video series. However, a more detailed narration of each chapter can be found at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trapped_In_The_Closet#Synopsis.

[5] See Venable, 2001; Edwards, 2001. As these articles focus on the inability to decipher the sexuality of DL men, it illustrates a frustration and anxiety over these "passing" performances.

[6] Center for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 2001, Vol. 13, No. 2.

[7] Rather than employ the construct of "identity"—which houses all the implications of stability and fixedness—positionality connotes the "moving within and between" that is traditional as individuals attempt to find their way out of the gaze of surveillance. This seems better suited for my discussion of the down low, especially as constructs such as race, gender, and class trump sexual affiliations. In addition, DL positionality inflects the role that the intersection of various constructs plays in black men's understanding of their sexuality.

[8] When looking at the hyper-surveillance of black people in media, within institutions, and in everyday life it is not surprising that conventional understanding of "liberation" are inapplicable. Instead, black people—as bodies always on the auction block of sorts—often seek privacy.

[9] Historically, the "underground rail road" and the mission to teach fellow slaves to read are probably two of the most explicit examples of DLisms in black life.

[10] See Madhabuti, 1990; Wallace, 1990; Duneier, 1992; Connor, 1995; Blount and Cunningham, 1996; Ross, 1998; Hine and Jenkins, 1999; Booker, 2000; Clark, 2001; Wallace, 2002)

[11] See Eve Sedgwick, 1.

[12] Yoshino offers three investments that both self-identified straights and gays have in bisexual erasure: (1.) an interest in stabilizing sexual orientation; (2.) an interest in retaining sex as a dominant metric of differentiation; and (3) an interest in defending norms of monogamy. See Yoshino, 362.

[13] Due to its investment in non-normativity, queer theory has the critical potential to be instructive for discussions of marginalized sexual identity and the ways in which its performance often falls outside of normative brackets. However, the use of queer is often too linear and limiting, as it is consistently used to describe and explore non-discreet sexual performances. Indeed, in theory "queer" is inclusive of these categories (See Doty, 1993; Warner, 1993; Jagose, 1996), but in practice privileges the "out" subject whose identity is invested in specific personal-political agenda. There is a clear disconnect between queer praxis and theory. This project attempts to mend this gap, through its recognition that coming "out" is neither an option for every one, nor is it everyone's desire.

[14] See Harper, 1996; Nero, 1999; Carbado 1999, Reid-Pharr, 2001.

[15] See Scott, 1999; Clifton, 2000; and Phellas, 2002.

[16] See Mankekar, 1999; Robertson, 1998; Kulick, 1998 for excellent examples of how ethnography illuminates the value of subjugated knowledges.

[17] Thanks to Dwight Conquergood for this insight.

[18] For more on the "politics of respectability," see Higginbotham, 1993; Griffin, 2000; Cohen, 2003.

[19] See Cathy Cohen, 2003.

[20] See hooks, 1992; Majors and Billson, 1992, Kelley, 1997; Carby, 1998; Wallace, 2002.

[21] See Johnson, The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man, 1.

[22] See Foucault, Discipline and Punish, 200.

[23] Here, I use the term "spirits" to speak to what many people consider the core of themselves. However, I am not trying to make a move toward an essence of blackness, but rather a communal feeling that is often the result of injustice.

[24] De Certeau refers to this in The Practice of Everyday Life as "makeshift creativity." In his conceptualization of this strategy, those who are without make do with what they have. This has been a historic presence within African-American communities.

[25] Here, I allude to Werner Sollors discussion of the primary role that "social and geographic mobility" plays in the lives of passing subjects. He argues that while certain social, geographic, and political arrangements sustain the color line, passing allows for performances of resistance, that move those who may be traditionally exiled are welcomed. See Sollors, 247-248.

[26] For critical perspectives on the role of intersectionality in queer lives, see their respective essays in the anthology Black Queer Studies.

[27] By 2000, Harris had sold one million copies of his six novels, all of which explored the lives of black queer men. Specifically, novels which took as their central character what is now understood as "DL Brothas." See the Q& A section of Ebony Magazine's October 2000 issue.

[28] The writing of these novels during these specific era were significant, according to scholars Gayle Wald and Hazel Carby, as these writings acted as devices of agency during the racially and gendered turbulence of the times. The resurgence of such novels and narratives at the close of the 20th century should not go unnoticed. Recent examples include James McBride's Color of Water, Danzy Senna's Caucasia, Gregory Williams's Life on the Color Line, Colson Whitehead's The Intuitionist, and Patricia Jones's Passing. As Tracey Vaughn has in her work, I argue that the return of passing novels is an indicator of crisis and a heightened visibility of the instability of identities thought to be stayed or stable.

[29] Such response is not foreign to the genre of passing novels. Charles Chestnutt's The House Behind the Cedars also confronts the material-internal struggles of the spectator of the "pass." Through his telling of the white aristocrat George Tryon's falling for Rena, a female passer, he demonstrates the extremes of the American racist imaginary—not only its effects on those of mixed-race, but also on those who are white. Such recognition of the emphasis on the "signs of race" signal the great dependency of the interpreter on the visual, as well as acknowledges the sheer value of interpretation in the passer's achievement in attaining an authentic, or legitimate, place in society more generally.

[30] Both Siobhan Somerville and Philip Brian Harper argue that the interracial romance is both fleeting and peripherally-placed in Autobiography. While this is a possible reading, I read it as central, while still finding their points about homoeroticism and gender performances instructive.

[31] Here, Michael Warner's critical discussion of normal and queer is instructive. Although he focuses primarily on sexuality, I appropriate his use of normal in regards to that which is hegemonic with regards to race, gender, class, or sexuality.

[32] E. Lynn Harris's official website describes Basil as a "terminal bisexual"—a label very much akin to the historical "tragic mulatta." Here, the modifier "terminal" is used to indicate the everlasting, yet painful quality most obvious in Harris's construction of Basil's desires for men and women. The difference in historic portrayals of the mulatta is that her life usually ends in death and anguish; whereas, Basil's life may be complicated but is always allotted outcomes which benefit his own secrecy and sanity.

[33] It is important to note that in this novel that Basil is described as "being on the down low," but not a positionality claimed by him specifically. However, Basil's gender performance and discreet sexuality—his subscription to a legible "heterogender"— prompts others, including the author, to give him such a label.

[34] See Venable; Ballard; Edwards; for examples of the popular media representations of the down low in 2001.

[35] On one hand, I mean the possibilities for DL men within certain black contexts. While on the other hand, I mean his acknowledgement of what interest his reading public would have in the DL subject.

[36] It must be noted that the final two novels in Harris's trilogy cycle, with Basil as the central character, debuted second on the New York Times Bestseller list. This speaks to both the thirst for and the popularity of this passing character in the public imagination.

[37] This was a common response on his website and among women who I have spoken with about his novels. In addition, when visiting www.amazon.com, I found several reviews which found much pleasure in the scandalous nature of the writing. One reviewer even stated that she felt that these novels would be good educational material for teens.

[38] In The Boundaries of Blackness: AIDS and the Breakdown of Black Politics, Cathy Cohen discusses the trope of the "dreadful (male) bisexual" within the context of HIV/AIDS, as almost always the configuration of the main vector of contagion. Such a historical trope plays out in the DL narrative as well. In many senses, the DL in discourse is a re-articulation of the dreadful bisexual figure.

[39] This is not to suggest public alarm and warning can not be useful. However, his literary voice lends itself to an incomplete and empty interpretation and representation of the circumstances of DL men and black people, in general. Due to Harris offering exaggerated and sensationalized characters and their contexts, readers are left with literary work that rarely appeals to intellect, but to homophobia. His passing characters, particularly in Any Way the Wind Blows, are reductive and simplistic. Nonetheless, his constructions of the DL have been the most influential and effective in terms of the years that he has dedicated his writing to this topic, both directly and indirectly.

[40] I frame this character in this way because it accents the uni-dimensionality Harris often ascribes his female characters. Often, the female characters serve to give greater volume to the central male figure, which also sees her value as minimal or insignificant.

[41] In addition, often the in-group representatives are the readers who are "in the know"—as we are the only witnesses to the many honest asides that each character provides for its readers. In these moment, characters confess there most honest secrets, feelings, and concerns.

[42] Thank you Jennifer Devere Brody for her insight here.

[43] While this discussion does not take issue with Harris's portrayal, I must note that Harris's focus on the "dupe" interferes with his ability to convey the greater complexities of DL life. My discussion attempts to critically engage "passing" discourse to illuminate the complexity of DL sexuality.

[44] In one reviews on www.amazon.com, a woman comments that "Basil is not a good representative for "gay, bi, or any people." This sentiment was shared by several other reviewers—as they expressed their "disgust" with his actions.

[45] I specify heterosexuality as being the assumed stable category because in western constructions of sexuality, homosexuality is often thought to be a temporal state or simply a detour from its heterosexual other.

[46] This quote is taken from personal communication, but can also be found in Tracy Vaughn's dissertation, which takes as its central focus racial passing and the role of externals in constructing and maintaining identity.

[47] The other, of course, is J.L. King—the author of On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men who Sleep with Men—who has been deemed the man who "blew the lid off the DL." His significance in the discourse will be discussed extensively in the following chapter.

[48] By calling the impact "mythologized" I am not marking concerns about HIV insignificant, but incomplete and inaccurate. Indeed, the discussion of the DL and its potential relationship to the rise of HIV is important. However, such conversations must come equipped with recognition of the multiple contributing factors to the present circumstance of health. The significance of HIV in DL discourse will be discussed more fully in a later chapter of this dissertation.

[49] It is important to note how "history" is called upon to exaggerate the importance of the DL in the Essence's report. Such hyperbolic connections to history impose a specific centrality to the DL that unfortunately marks sexual passing as a racially-specific move. Furthermore, "these confusing times" suggests that there has been a critical change in the clarity of African-American history. Such ponderings deny that African-American history has always been a confounding and conspicuous construction of narratives.

[50] The modernist tendency often assigns bodies characteristics and behaviors based on the finding of certain practices amongst specific groups. Here, I critique this tendency by making a brief remark about the tendency to see not only the DL as unilateral "fakery," but also black. Indeed, sexual passing like racial passing is beyond the "fake and real," as well as the white and the black."

[51] In terms of facilitating a more healthy discussion about women, HIV, and the DL, Taigi Smith does well. In her article, she uniquely gives women helpful facts that will assist them in remaining healthy and safe. This health component in the context of the DL conversation is one of the most productive. However, her aim to discuss the DL specifically is short-sighted and highly agenda driven.

[52] This is not to simplify the role of gender roles in the sexual relationships between individuals. However, I am attempting to move away from the act of passing as culprit to the act of "unprotected sex" as criminal.

[53] See Browning, 17.

[54] See Douglas, 16.

[55] Here, I employ Eric Watts and Mark Orbe's term "spectacular consumption" to signify what they refer to as "the process through which the relations among cultural forms, the cultural industry, and the lived experiences of persons are shaped by public consumption" (225).

[56] Center for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV/AIDS Surveillance Report, 2001, Vol. 13, No. 2.

[57] The idea of the black family as threatened by external forces has been an on-going dialogue, which is maintained as new discursive formations arise to create fear amongst blacks, as well as facilitate further homophobia within black communities. In the previous chapter, racial mixing was the threat that was seen as a potential pollutant, or contaminant, of white and black family purity. Similarly, present discursive renderings of DL men suggest that they endanger the stability of the black family, particularly through the passing of disease to black women.

[58] Here, I am suggesting that black women are rewarded by this reconfiguration in two ways. First, it relinquishes them of being the unfit figure in heterosexual relationships—as deemed in welfare reform and historical treatment of their role in black family—by placing focus on the disruptions of DL men. Second, it extends narratives of the "dead beat dad, boyfriend, father" to include actions that challenge not only black men's loyalty to their family, but also heterosexuality. For those black women invested in such narratives, it further constituted their sentiments of frustration and anger.

[59] By mission work, I mean the labor that people do "for the people's advancement" and the work that exoticizes the "other" for pleasure or profit.

[60] Alexander claims that black people are not honest about their own preconceived notions and prejudices about other black people—the buying into linear, racist constructions of black people. Though this may be the case, this chapter demonstrates that there is still a certain power and authority given to the dominant media, which allows it to offer an "official" voice on these issues. Thus, when black media agrees with dominant media, there is an appearance of dangerous consensus.

[61] Here, I reference the oft-cited Moynihan Report and certain (mis) appropriations of E. Franklin Frazier's The Negro Family.

[62] This is borrowed from Ed Guerrero, as he discusses how the monster is called upon in times that uncomfortable "energies, memories, and issues" surface (43).

[63] See Fanon, 137.

[64] See Baldwin, 290.

[65] In an unpublished essay and a public lecture at the Black Gay Research Summit on August 3, 2005, David Malebranche described DL men as being a discursive product of the same type of mythology afforded Bush's justification for the War in Iraq, the search and apprehension of the "weapons of mass destruction." Likewise, the black community searches for DL men, walking phallic symbols, who are understood, but not proven to be contaminants and dangers to the black community.

[66] *Thug*, according to the Wikipedia encyclopedia at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page, is a term that is loaded with a lot of historical baggage. But, what is most useful in my employment here is how this public encyclopedia (where everyday folks can add and extract details) limits the boundaries of "thug," to only include the "ruthless," "violent," and non-committal. Such an understanding likens the construction of the *thug* within hip-hop media; particularly, how Vibe attempts to deal with the juxtaposition of homo and thug. Likewise, homo is always already understood as a being that which is most disparate from the thug, rather than potentially apart of its public circulation.

[67] This is a quote from someone I was speaking with about the state of hip-hop. These remarks are akin to the oft-cited quote from Ice Cube, that "Real Niggas ain't faggots."

[68] Most recently, discussions of middle-class men who are not "thugs," have arisen in response to the mass hysteria amongst middle-class black females in America contracting HIV/AIDS. The class implications here are quite interesting, when we think about the historical black agenda which often has taken flight as a result of middle-class concern and anxieties. For this reason, the recent proliferation of popular press articles on the subject of the "down low brotha," rather than the "thug" or the "bisexual," is quite suspect—a cyclone induced by the presence of the DL topic in middle-upper class suburbia via New York Times, as well as middle-upper class black media sources. Nonetheless, the predominant picture of the "dreadful bisexual" remains to be that of the thug-like black male sexual deviant. Though I argue the momentum of DL discourse was a result of middle-class black men's discreet practices, it is the working-class "deviant" who infects middle-class purity and represents the greatest threat to the "black community."

[69] As indicated in the Introduction to this dissertation.

[70] This point is taken up in more detail, in the ethnographic component of this dissertation.

[71] While the DL discourse has significant affects on black female representation, this issue is taken up in a later section of this chapter.

[72] Indeed, this notion of the uninformed and uninterested black public is troubling. Rather than maybe positioning black people as being uninterested and in need of a simple fix, I may be better to propose that the culture of sexually transmitted infection prevention has produced an attitude within the public of disinterest and need for simplicity. Boykin's reading suggests that this is something culturally-specific to black people. This is simply not the case.

[73] It is worth noting how the notion of "Living (and Dying) on the Down Low, divorces these men from HIV/AIDS and appears to blame the "down low" for their potential death. In addition, it assumes that the DL body is always already infected, or at risk.

[74] Few articles provide a substantive inclusion of black female narratives and experience, during their discussion of the DL. See Vargas, 2003; Glanton, 2004. Both of these articles give women central voices in discussing issue of HIV/AIDS.

[75] During a conversation, discussed later in this chapter, J.L. King credited this article for the interest of Broadway Books in his story.

[76] I would argue that actual physical images of DL men creates allows people to do more than piece together fragments of an idea, but to believe that they have all the evidence they need to not only recognize, but reprimand, particular "types" of black men.

[77] Indeed, my choice of the term Messiah is loaded. However, my use is not to invoke all the historical cultural baggage, but to more accurately describe *how* J.L. King is situated within DL discourse, as *the* voice of authenticity; therefore, providing the most "official knowledge" from within the inside.

[78] This rendering of analysis of the heightened DL scene in Chicago read as more of a way to bring relevance to his discourse in this particular venue. This pinpointing of Chicago as a central hub of DL culture incited not only interest, but panic within the eyes, faces, and body language of the audience.

[79] In this dialogue, he claims that DL men have threatened him, as well as he has received several criticisms form the black gay community for "demonization" In the August 1, 2004 Houston Chronicle, he makes similar claims—asserting that because of such hostility, he has bodyguards. Interestingly, in all of my encounters with J.L. King, there have been no bodyguards. In fact, there have been typically a group of gay men.

[80] This is extracted from previous fieldnotes at the spoken word café's relationship chat.

[81] The transcript of this special segment can be found at http://abclocal.go.com/wls/news/specialsegments/021704_ss_hissecertlife.html. I was given the honor of being one of the academic consultants for this project.

[82] This has been validated by several attendees, who in confidence, contend that King's investment in the DL is largely a financial one. Yet, an investment that comes with great costs.

[83] This is in conversation with a point, made in the introduction to the dissertation, where Marlon Ross challenges the critique of black male constructions of sexuality that lie outside of dominant norms.

[84] See Kant, The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals, where he explains this imperative as an unconditional obligation to perform a certain action—here, identify one's "self"—which is required and justified by the law. Here, the social law of categorization is imposed on King and DL men by Oprah.

[85] It is important to note that the *Oprah Winfrey Show* is broadcast nationally and globally, while the after-show is apart of a more limited cable television station, *Oxygen*. Thus, more people have access to the problematic rhetoric within the Op*rah Winfrey Show* than they would to the after-show.

[86] Wilson recall for me the last line of Dwight McBride's provocative essay "Straight Black Studies" where he states "whenever we are speaking of race, we are always already speaking about gender sexuality, and class" (87). For a specific discussion of "intersectionality," see Crenshaw, 1989.

[87]In the post-show talk of the *Oprah Winfrey Show,* King posits that he wrote this book for the accessibility of both of these audiences.

[88] In a personal interview with J.L. King, in 2002, he told me that E. Lynn Harris is not a close friend of his, but also a writer who he often reads.

[89] This episode had the highest rating on network television during its airing, see www.tv.com/law-&-order-special-victims-unit/lowdown/episode/310631/summary.html . In addition, this episode was awarded the SHINE Award—a "honor for those in the entertainment industry who do an exemplary job incorporating accurate and honest portrayals of sexuality into their programming." See http://www.themediaproject.com/shine/

[90] This transcript can be found at http://www.pbs.org/kcet/tavissmiley/archive/200405/20040513.html.

[91] This is the taken from the Center for Disease Control's webpage, where they outline their stated objectives and goals. See http://www.cdc.gov/about/default.htm

[92] After substantial success with two New York Times best selling books, he shifted his focus from a website centering on the "down low" to the appropriate http://www.jlking.net. He became the focus of his campaign. After all, he is now the "messenger."

[93] This mission statement can be found at http://www.cdc.gov/about/mission.htm

[94] This image was originally found at http://www.livingdownlow.com/html/prevention.html, but can now be ordered from the Center for Disease Control directly.

[95] See White, 2001; Ferguson, 2002; and Higginbotham, 1993.

[96] I recognize the possibility to read her statement as contradictory. Yet, her voice told me that she understood the complexity of her statements. She was rendering her own honest truth about what happening.

[97] Unfortunately, I have been unsuccessful in locating this poster. It was a local ad campaign. Nonetheless, I believe its significance is worth citing here.

[98] See Butler, *Critically Queer*, 227.

[99] See King.

[100] Throughout the dissertation, I have argued that the closet is a traditionally white paradigm, which has little/limited utility for black men who face issues of sexuality under racialized oppression. America's history of racism, and consequent surveillance of black male bodies, makes the closet an inept signifier/descriptor of black masculine performances of discreet sexuality. Rather, I argue that black men, and others within the black community, have found alternative ways of naming and identifying their discreet desire and practice.

[101] The late Charles Clifton, as he explores historical presences of homoeroticism, illuminates the importance of recognizing the role and service that discreet sexual identity has played in the lives of black men. See Clifton, 342.

[102] The name of this club has been modified, to secure confidentiality for the men with whom I speak, as well as the club and its other patrons.

[103] Although this is not the topic of this chapter, it is important to note that the direction in which DL discourses are moving suggests a new black male archetype on its way. In a sense, DL men were discursive subjects, members of a community's social imagination—the new face that would help sustain a black consciousness about the effects of HIV/AIDS in black communities. On the other hand, the DL has become a convenient distraction from real issues of economic, political, and social injustices that have greatly contributed to the disproportionate rates of black people living and dying with HIV/AIDS. This latter point sits with me, as I reflect on my journey, as I have recently moved from solely discussing black masculine *architexture* (?) to a desire to make radical interventions that critique and combat the media's attempt to create another dangerous black archetype.

[104] For example, many DL men will say, "I'm not a faggot bitch!" rather than saying I am a "discreet brotha—keepin' it on the down low."

[105] This is borrowed from Jason King's "Remixing the Closet" article in Village Voice, where he finds fliers for a party that read, "Pride on the DL."

[106] For examples of DL in print media, see Denizet-Lewis and Venable. For examples of the politics of the closet in academic discourse, see Sedgwick; Halperin, and Warner.

[107] It seems that a new wave of doing media work involves "talking to the people" to understand "them." In so doing, we often find these quasi-ethnographers whose main objective is to feed popular discourse with sexy stories, using methods that are usually undisclosed or ill-practiced.

[108] For a prime example of pop ethnography, see Benoit Denizet-Lewis attempt to map the DL for his readership through various exploitative and ill-treated circumstances. See Denizet-Lewis.

[109] Here, sexual freedom is being used to describe the sentiment of my youth, when I saw "outness" as a sign of freedom.

[110] This citation is taken from notes from a graduate seminar in performance ethnography.

[111] For more information on the transition from house to hip-hop and its effects on the club space and its business see Kai Fikentcher's You Better Work: Underground Dance Music and Culture.

[112] Here, I contests William Hawkeswood's discussion in One of the Children: Gay Black Men in Harlem, where he mis-labels the population of men with whom he speaks as "gay black men," when they clearly prioritized blackness before gayness (11-12). Black gay men, seems to better articulate the way in which many understand themselves and often (even in Hawkeswood's study) show strongest allegiance. Such recognition further explains the black gay affinity for hip-hop, as it assists in an authenticated blackness.

[113] Though Robert speaks generally about The Gate as a club, I would suspect that his sentiments are his interpretation of his experiences in the hip-hop section of the space.

[114] Note how the uninhibited, self-expressive, and energetic gets read as being feminine or over the top.

[115] See Mark Simpson's Male Impersonators for a broader discussion on the art of gender impersonation.

[116] In de Certeau's "Practices of Space," he refers to this viewpoint as a (dis) advantage point above the city, away from the masses. While this perspective provides a place to feel the energy and activity in the space, it also positions me outside the participatory realm, in a place of power and privilege that I often find too titillating, or at times, troubling.

[117] Often, those who elicit initial eye contact or conversation, are not interested in my research questions. Most often, they are interested in me as an object of attraction. For this reason, there are many more dead-ends than there are live wires. However, I can sometimes turn their attraction into a fruitful conversation with minimized flirtation.

[118] This term is an indirect admission that one has sexual relations with men. Typically, "to get down," suggests a temporal queer experience; whereas, the person who "gets down" only does this periodically, or when it is convenient for them.

[119] Often, when faced with issues of sexuality, nonverbal expression can provide greater clarity; while language often creates greater tensions and even over-articulates what the subject desires. In this case, erotic physical performance clarifies homoerotic desire.

[120] Here, Houston Baker's discussion of disco music has great resonance where he states, "there are gender coded reasons for the refusal of disco. Disco's club DJ's were often gay, and the culture of eurodisco was populously gay."

This may also explain the consistent disdain for "house" music as it often queers spaces and carries a queer aesthetic. See Baker, 198.

[121] Interestingly, Shawn has admitted to me several times that he often performs both roles, as active and passive participant in sex. This contradiction is consistent within all initial conversations with men on the DL, but often operates the same way in traditional black gay discourses.

[122] See Johnson, 69.

[123] For more on gentrification and its effects on black people, see Mary Patillo, 2000; 2007.

[124] For more information on this dance form and the musical significance of the "ha!" see the work of Jonathan David Jackson and Marlon Bailey.

[125] It is important to note that this relationship with "femmes" or transgendered individuals is not peculiar to DL men. For example, many gay men prefer relationships with "femme" men or transgendered women. However, since I have been doing this research, the investment in these relationships are predicated on something often very different from that of many gay men. Often, it seems that many DL men engage in a gender-attraction, whereas they are captivated by certain ideals that are grounded in hetero-patriarchal ideals. It is also important to note that my use of relationship is by no means to suggest that Tavares has ever sustained relationships with those with whom he shares interests. "Relationship" is used to describe the connection or association between Tavares and those he desires.

[126] While one could argue that male-transgender relationships are apart of homonormativity—the lack of acceptance of this relationship within black queer "communities" counters this supposition. More specifically, for Tavares the only way he can even fathom a relationship with a "man" is if he appears to be a "woman" or "womanly."

[127] Philip Brian Harper highlights the ways in which certain leaders within the black community have continued to create heterosexual anxiety over queer presences. See Harper.

[128] bell hooks illustrates the detrimental effects of this structure on black male understanding of self and also locates white supremacist patriarchal culture as the hidden culprit in perpetuating and legitimating both sexism and homophobia. It is important to recognize how these forms of domination reward black men for acting out in sexist and homophobic ways, re-iterating its use-value and almost necessity within black male life.

[129] One of the sited reasons for attendance by many DL men, in spite of the possibilities of being "found out," is that The Gate typically attracts the same "type" of people. In other words, the likelihood of incidentally encountering a spouse, family member, or friend is unlikely. In addition, many have cited that the anxiety is lessened as those who would attend the Gate are probably more likely to "be cool" with what men do at The Gate.

[130] See Anderson, 15.

[131] See Barthes, Image, Music, Text, 185.

[132] This was taken from a conversation with a 22-year old young man who was an avid user of the internet, as well as phone-chat lines for male-male erotic encounters and conversation.

[133] While these texts employed the term "queer" to describe the language and culture of men, they often reduced the queer experience to that of gay and lesbians. More specifically, the subjects and their acts were called queer because they involved admittedly gay subjects. This project challenges this move, as it attempts to make queer inclusive of not only minoritized subjects but also those experiences that are described outside the context and container of traditional sexual categories. In this sense, this chapter moves to make queer a bit queerer, rather than employ simplistic and linear understandings of the term.

[134] This space would later be called the BI-Blade.

[135] "Gag" is a black gay vernacular term that expresses a sense of comedy and jest in dialogue for entertainment purposes.

[136] While my conversations with "Rick" were in 2002, the DL had begun to be used as a descriptor of positionality quite frequently. Interestingly, the name of the party line was shortened and abbreviated, as is common in black vernacular. However, most striking are similarities between "DL" and "PL."

[137] While openly gay men traveled the space, my attention here is on how DL men bracket themselves as sexual subjects within the CB space.

[138] This is extracted from an interview conducted on April 29, 2003.

[139] In a graduate ethnographic field methods seminar, Dwight Conquergood encouraged deep listening as a way of interacting within space, especially when the activity in sites were moreso covert and inexplicit.

[140] Many of the men with whom I spoke referred to CB as more private than any other part of the "line." In addition, they highlighted that they had control cover how they moved within these spaces. In other spaces, there were not only other callers, but also technical issues such as disconnection or "bumping," that eliminated callers' opportunities to communicate.

[141] This will be discussed more later in the chapter. However, I mention it here to draw a parallel between the operation of certain styles of masculinity for DL men and black gay men.

[142] Throughout the dissertation, I have made a distinction between the various manifestations of the DL. Here, I separate the DL from those who prefer discretion because they indicate two different identifications, but similar desires. Though DL men use a specific label to gain masculine authenticity, those who are discreet in sexual practices are also deemed masculine. For most men I have encountered in either category there is a preference for a certain style of masculine performance that aligns itself within a heteronormative trajectory.

[143] Due to his unstable housing situation, Tavares would often compensate his payment for sexual favors for temporary food and shelter.

[144] This is much like "trade" of the 1990's, as Edwin Greene describes in "Thoughts on Trade/Ending an Obsession," where it is about money/food in exchange for sex. While DL men may not identify themselves as "trade," many gay men who are familiar with the history of the term ascribe them this title. Indeed, some DL men do "trade" for sex—an indicator of the value given to heterogendered performances.

[145] Though I have not spoken with anyone who received money to actually perform the non-dominant role in intercourse, many I have spoken with have noted this to be a part of the tradition. The presence of this role-reversal, so to speak, amongst gay and DL men's relations, would only seem fitting as there is an erotic-power in penetrating those who have been deemed to possess the most masculine positions within a community. In fact, there is often a sort of boastful presence amongst gay men, who typically perform the non-dominant role, when they top the "top."

[146] This caller identifies his DLness by his affiliation with women (his heterosexuality). While this is common within the CB space, this is not the only, or predominant, construction of the DL. In fact, most definitions are centered in a commitment to discretion and privacy.

[147] In Chicago, there seems to be limited spaces for demonstration of everyday queer desire (e.g. street, bus, clubs, parks, etc). In such cases as New York City, the openness of sexuality seems to be more visible and available in public spaces. For example, in cities such as New York City and Atlanta, there have been many instances where I have been propositioned in subtle and explicit ways in public places. In a sense, sexual tourism, in terms of geography, seems to be more common in some cities more than others—Chicago is not one of them. I do realize, however, that even in more metropolitan and inviting city cultures many men do choose to tour virtual spaces as they provide greater security and selectivity.

[148] This commonality, of showing only parts of the self, divorces these men from the personal or personable, but relegates them to apposition of being interested in nothing more than the sexual-physical aspects f queer life. Consequently, the space itself is ridden with interactants who make such announcements as "if you only have a dick/ass shot, you will be blocked." In addition, many participants indicate that they want to have access to "private pics"—which usually unveils a nude photograph or image.

[149] Though this study focuses and examines the narrative of DL men who are black, there were several men with whom I spoke who did not fit this category. For example, there was a white interactant named **DLWhiteBoi_26**, who explained his use of the term as signification of "keeping his business to himself." In addition, it was also to signal viewers of his profile that he was interested in "certain types of masculine guys." In addition, there was also **DL_LatinBro**, who also articulated similar reasons for his use of the term. However, he identified that he felt that the DL really spoke to how he and others like him (meaning latino men) "kept a low-key lifestyle." Much of his ideas illustrated that he felt that the DL gave a name to something he was always doing. Unfortunately, my conversations were contained to one or two conversations. I am not sure why men from other cultural-racial backgrounds were less willing to sustain contact. However, I sometimes felt that my approach may have been too culturally-specific, in terms of the textual voice I would use and the questions that I would ask. Indeed, the cultural knowledge of the ethnographer impacts the outcome of his dialogue with "others," even within cyberspace.

[150] DL men do not have a sole agenda on Steve4Steve. However, if one draws conclusions from the frequency of DL men's profiles where the genitalia sits in for the actual face picture, one may assume that the objective is almost

always sexual relations. Regardless, I have found that many men express a desire for more than sex—as they are hyper-conscious about potential sexually transmitted diseases and the risks of exposure.

[151] Indeed, the men who utilize their pictures are also often interested in "relationships" rather than just "1on 1 sex." This is significant as male-male relationships are a conventionally gay manifestation. Thus, many gay men in the space have begun to admit disinterest in those without face pictures.

[152] The last statement—"if he is a send off"—is a reference to whether the caller will actually meet when and where he says he will.

[153] I hope to have the opportunity to continue research on Steve4Steve and find more men who would be willing to answer the questionnaire. For this dissertation, however, I am satisfied with the fifty-percent outcome.

[154] This may be the greatest irony of DL men's operations within this space. As they disavow themselves as "fags," their comfort is largely predicated upon the large presence of gay men within the Steve4Steve site. Yet, this is an unacknowledged observation by those men who perpetually use "fags" to define themselves outside of a queer community.

[155] In addition, there are several codes and choices in constructing profiles that would prove most outsiders to be invaders to the site, rather than actual members of the "community."

[156] The absence of a discussion of these men is odd—as I have witnessed several men and women who have accepted various "arrangements" to account for the presence of spouses who prefer the company of different-sex, while the sexual company of the same-sex. Often, couples no longer sleep in the same bed, or even sometimes in the same household. Yet, they maintain their legal marriages for the benefit of the children and the fiscal resources gained through the perpetuation of their "institution."

[157] While this was only one example of a response, it is akin to the multiple responses that my counterparts have shared with me.

[158] See The History of Sexuality:Volume I, 69.

[159] It is important to note that the acts he engaged with women required a certain type of economic stability and positionality. In essence, his framing of the "dilemma for brothas," was one that was essentially about a middle-classedness being a scrutinizeable masculine performance.

[160] The power of the construction of the "suspect" is at the forefront of my head, as last month Romarr Gibson—the seven year-old wrongly charged for the murder of Ryan Harris—was found to have been involved in a shooting at a local Chicago gas station. Previously, he had been cited for an accidental shooting of a friend. Both of these instances followed his being a "suspect"—guilty before tried—in the aforementioned case involving the killing of Ryan Harris. This is one example that illustrates the power of the framing of black men as "suspects"—a naming which seems to impact and endanger their future.

[161] However, it is important to note that I am not certain that the DL would become extinct if these structures were not active. Admittedly, part of the idea that the DL is a by-product of certain systems is based in an assumption that DL has some pathological impetus. In fact, I would argue that with or without the mandates of visibility and invisibility, individuals would still practice discrete sexual acts. As many men have indicated, there is as much pleasure in the ability to not be seen as there is to be always visible. Nonetheless, with these two major operating regulating factor, the DL seems an apt positionality for individuals who wish to avert surveillance and demonization.

[162] While Jones's use of the "crimes of identity" is specifically concerned with race as a criminalizing factor, my use here attempts to draw a parallel with sexuality. I argue that sexuality is often a demonized identity, which is framed as a crime against the conventions of dominant paradigms.

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