

Two Snaps and a Twist: Controlling Images of Gay Black Men on Television

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Abstract

This essay addresses occurrences of gay Black men on television in order to offer sites of representation for future analysis. We critique representations of gay Blacks: the politics of respectability mutually circumscribe the depictions of all Blacks on television, across variations in gender and sexuality. In our critical-cultural analysis of the representational contexts available to gay Black men, we describe characters' relationships to other characters in a series and the significance of those individual portrayals to the larger framework of gay Black men on television. In our research we frequently discovered depictions of Black queer identities that involved interpersonal problems and violence. While cable television makes advances by depicting Black gay love relationships with depth and intimacy, there remains a degree of failure in representations of same-sex love relationships in terms of ascertaining lasting happiness, support, and normalcy, as is often depicted in heteronormative couplings.

Scholars interested in critiquing representations of gay Black men will find their studies complicated both by the scarcity of images disseminated and by the disparate literatures that separately address audiences of English literature, performance studies, and media studies. Accordingly, cultural analysis of African American lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) images remain dispersed, much like the television locales that feature queer imagery. This essay addresses occurrences of gay Black men on

television in order to offer sites of representation for future analysis. It also provides a theoretical approach for recognizing the collective instances of such imagery. Although critiques of gay Black men on television may appear in various publications, issues of production, dissemination, and reception remain the purview of media scholars. As Black feminist scholars of media, we critique representations of gay Black men for how the politics of respectability—a bourgeois schizophrenia that vacillates between critiquing structural systems of oppression and criticizing particular values and lifestyles of Black people (Higginbotham, 1993, p. 15)—circumscribes the depictions of all Blacks on television, across variations in gender and sexuality.

Dwight McBride (2005), in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* essay, critiqued representations of gay Black men on television asking:

...where in the popular or cultural imagination is the bourgeois, well-educated, fairly cosmopolitan black gay man?...Look for him on American television and once again (with the exception of the characters of Carter Heywood on *Spin City* and Keith Charles on *Six Feet Under*, both played, of course, by self-identified straight black actors) one comes up short, even when his white counterpart is perhaps better represented today than at any other time in television's history (*Queer as Folk*, *Will & Grace*, and *Sex and the City*, and the more recent Bravo additions of *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Boy Meets Boy*, to name only a few)...I raise the issue of representation to meditate on the possibility that more than mere accident or oversight is at work with regard to the paucity of media images of black gay men. An ideology or politics of respectability that has the power to create such a deafening silence is one that deserves at least our comment, if not our utmost attention (2005, p. B11).

McBride's question—Where is the gay Black man?—and his pessimism in light of the uneven development of White gay identity in comparison marks the start of our inquisition into the images of Black gay men that persist on television.

Citing *Queer as Folk* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, McBride calls attention to a racial politic at work in depicting same-sex relationships that continually *colorizes* the reception of gender and sexuality, even when the subjects are White. To illustrate McBride's point, the depiction of cautiously gay characters like Carter Sebastian Heywood of ABC's *Spin City* offers viewers a quietly conservative Black man whose subdued sexuality does not thwart his professionalism in a New York City mayor's office. Since Carter's sexuality is couched in his meticulousness, his sober disposition, and his extreme reliability, ultimately his gay identity appears less visible, less problematic, and more palatable for prime time television.

Racially, this construction is only accentuated by coupling Carter with the irresponsible, recklessly hypersexual, hyper-masculine and White Stuart Bondek, whose insatiable libido renders him incompetent in the work place. According to Shugart (2003), "the foil operates at a larger level such that 'familiar' (to mainstream audiences) homosexuality becomes the means for renormalizing heteronormativity" (p. 80). Carter's sexuality is normalized so that it does not connote the kind of trouble that can be witnessed through Stuart's behaviors, even as viewers are fully aware of Carter's queerness. Against a foil, Carter's image liberally suggests that gay Black men are not inherently "bad" insofar as their sexualities are properly managed or tightly contained and nearly invisible. The brute-like sexuality (Bogle, 2001) attributed to straight Black men is not seen in Carter because his homosexuality is "problem" enough. At the same time, constructing Stuart as wildly sexual does not threaten his normalcy because he is both White and straight—thus maintaining his claims to normalcy.

Depictions such as these do illustrate that network television is now willing to conceptualize Black men's sexualities in ways that do not necessarily threaten White women, while at the same time portraying alternate sexualities with a lack of depth. It is this "Other" context that we examine for its inclusion of Black gay types, even as it cannot contain them adequately. We consider contemporary (1990s-present) sites, network and cable, of television programming in order to ruminate on Dwight McBride's query, "Where is the gay Black man?" Guided by McBride's concern, we examine instances of gay Black men appearing on broadcast television's major networks—CBS, NBC, ABC, CW, and FOX—as well as cable television, especially subscriber-based channels such as HBO and Showtime. Additionally, we consider external data monitoring the quantitative changes in representations of gay Black men to support our findings. In our critical-cultural analysis of the representational contexts available to gay Black men, we describe the character's relationship to other characters in the series and the significance of those individual portrayals to the larger framework of gay Black men on television. In our research, we frequently discovered depictions of Black queer identities that involved interpersonal problems, violence, and (someone's) destruction. While cable television makes advances by depicting Black gay love relationships with depth and intimacy, there remains a degree of failure in same-sex love relationships in terms of ascertaining lasting happiness, support and normalcy, as is often depicted in heteronormative couplings.

Situating the Controlling Images of Gay Black Men

Locating ourselves within the field of Black feminism, we approach this examination drawing upon, and extending, Patricia Hill Collins' (2000) notion of the "controlling image" from her seminal text *Black Feminist Thought*. Her chapter, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images," identifies and critiques stereotypical, controlling constructions of Black womanhood and sexuality such as the welfare mother, the emasculator, the jezebel, the hoochie mama, and the hot mama. Hill Collins concludes that these images work as "powerful ideological justifications" for "intersecting oppressions

of race, class, gender and sexuality” (p. 69). The controlling image, it may be argued, is not restricted to the purview of critiques of femininity and heterosexism because its strength lies in its emphasis on the epistemological constraints to social interaction. Controlling images function as justifications for various oppressions by distorting reality through reducing the stereotyped subject to a controllable object. These objects are held up to be variously laughed at or ridiculed and/or rejected or scorned, consequently discounting their power as well as their claim to humanity. Likewise, media images of queer Black men control by representing insufficiently masculine practices as a set of categorical attributes to be quantified, and added together, resulting in the definition of the gay Black man. Viewers are urged to believe that the presence of purportedly queer behaviors such as dramatic outbursts, effeminate mannerisms, and outlandish dress must necessarily correspond to a gay identity, even where the man in question has not made such an identity claim for himself. Further, heavily imbuing the performance of gay identities with such exaggeration asserts the visible, detectable nature of gay Black men, thereby controlling the definition and reception of Black men’s sexualities across sexual preference. As a paradigm, controlling images with an attention to ideological and cultural constraints is applicable to other gendered moments.

Negro Faggotry: Programming Black Gay Men on Television

One of the more popular depictions of Black gay identity is best understood by Marlon Riggs’ (1991) coined term “Negro Faggotry” used to describe the minstrel-like portrayal of queer Black men. A “Negro Faggot” is the result of a “simplistically reductive” identity construction, recognized by the “mere signpost of effeminate, cute, comic homosexuality” (p. 392). Riggs argues that among Black producers and mainstream media makers, a “Negro Faggot” offers an Other *within* Black culture that enables an added layer of subjugation beyond race. Further, a Negro Faggot represents the only way of understanding the quagmire of being Black, male, and queer for, as Riggs argues, a Black gay man cannot *be* since this triple negation can never amount to what it means to be authentically

Black and adequately masculine within Black popular culture. Television portrayals frequently begin with comedic renderings of gay Black men, in keeping with representations of Blackness more broadly, and later evolve to more dramatic narratives that draw on particular Othering attributes to build a more detailed character.

Network TV

In the earliest popular treatments of Black gay identity, the characters appear properly contained or controlled within entertainment genres like the variety show and the situation comedy. When confined to the comedic, a genre that often relies on caricature and stereotype, gay Black men are easily illustrated and served up to prime time network audiences. Unlike shows outside of these genres that show Blacks as supporting characters to Whites or as members of an ensemble cast (e.g., *ER*, the *CSI* and *Law and Order* franchises, etc.), in the realm of the comedic Black gays are laughable enough to take center stage. No program took up this stance with more conviction than the Wayans brothers’ *In Living Color*. This variety show offered the “flaming” pair “Blaine Edwards” and “Antoine (‘Twan) Meriwether” in a reoccurring skit, “Men On...,” where each week, to the musical backdrop of “It’s Raining Men,” the pair would comment on film, books, art, travel, and the like. As a duo, Blaine and ‘Twan presented gayness as defined by hypersexual, highly sissified mannerisms, and high couture style. This peek into gay Black culture, supported by the “pseudo drag garb that signifies the ‘gayness’ of the characters,” (Johnson, 1995, p. 133) suggests to viewers that the dominant ideologies circulated about gayness are correct.

Equally interesting, while “this parody stereotypes all gays as ‘queeny’ and promiscuous,” it also helps to perpetuate “the myth that all gay men are misogynist” thereby placing “the responsibility of *all* black male misogyny onto black gay men (Johnson, 2003, p. 226) as revealed through their double-entendre contempt of everything female (e.g., they reviewed a visit to Holland, “the land of dikes,” disapprovingly). Conversely, in a Siskel-and-Ebert

manner, Blaine and ‘Twan regularly applauded everything construed as penis-centered (e.g., *Moby Dick*). Thus, while “Men On...” and *In Livin’ Color* portrayed the gay Black man, the combination of hypersexuality and misogyny in that portrayal shows Black queerness as comedic and worthy of ridicule.

The comedic nature of portrayals like “Men On...” may too easily be dismissed for their over-the-top nature. Many viewers would like to believe that stereotypes are both generally recognizable and easily refutable. Certainly, some of the more traditional, blatant stereotypes of Blackness are easy to identify and (if desired) reject, such as the classic Sambo depictions. However, Fiske (1987) in his chapter “Character Reading” from the classic text *Television Culture* reminds us that character representations on television function differently from those in other media. Television, with its series/serial structure format offers a continuous relationship with characters not seen elsewhere. Hence, the level of engagement moves the character, even the stereotypical one, into a more familiar relationship with the viewer.

The trivialization of Black gay men through the reduction of Black gay identity to attributes that are inadequately masculine and incorrectly feminine not only illustrates a controlling image but can be coupled with Gerbner’s (1972) concept of symbolic annihilation. In Tuchman’s (1978) application of symbolic annihilation to women, she argues that “all the mass media disseminate the same theme about women to all social classes: They announce their symbolic annihilation and trivialization” (p. 30). Gay Black men are subject to similar treatment on television as “the impact of the media upon sex-role stereotyping indicates that the media encourage their audiences to engage in such stereotyping” (p. 30), ignoring everyday experiences that may discount such stereotypes. Consequently, investments in stereotype use physical and performative markers of gender to adversely conceptualize Black queer identity as apparent and obvious.

Cable

Cable television offers the opportunity for weekly encounters through serial programming of gay and lesbian love relationships. Conspicuously, it is cable television and the genre of drama that feature the most well-developed gay characters, who are portrayed in love relationships but are also developed in the plot apart from their sexualities. In the 2000s, TV offered gay men such as Julien of *The Shield*, Keith of *Six Feet Under*, and Omar of *The Wire*, which also featured a lesbian named Kima. These characters represent some of TV’s earliest featured Black gays (especially in dramatic roles), thereby changing the traditional mainstream depiction in media of openly gay identity as a typically White experience. Interestingly, the consumption of these alternative texts comes at a high price, with viewers having to pay more through premium cable subscription fees to see fully developed gay characters, thus relieving the general public of the burden of witnessing a fuller sense of humanity for gay Black characters on television. Premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime offer the largest block of programming featuring representations of Black gays and lesbians and other characters of color. *Six Feet Under* (now cancelled, but available on DVD and re-airing abroad) and *The Wire*, both offered by HBO, feature gay Black men in the main story line. Notably, *The Wire* (which killed its gay Black man during the airing of its final season in 2008) and Showtime’s *The “L” Word* feature African American and multiracial gay and lesbian characters.

Cable network FX’s drama series *The Shield* featured one Black gay man, Julien, a fundamentalist Christian whose religious convictions led him to become self-loathing and self-destructive. Julien’s character is presented as a whole, complex figure whose moral compass invites discussion and debate. The presentation of Julien’s conflict over his sexuality reminds viewers that solutions around representational improvement are not tied to some elusive measure of the positive. Rather, Julien, when viewed among a range of images, demonstrates the multiplicity of sexuality representations and appears more complicated than a reductive identity summated

as Black, gay, and male only. The morose and brooding Julien recalls controlling images, as described by Hill Collins (2000), of the self-hating assimilated (e.g., tragic mullata). The assimilated/mullata becomes tragic because she must negotiate not only a mixed or tainted racial identity—Am I Black, White, or both?—but she may also be faced with the option of rejecting darker-skinned Blacks or “passing” for White. Her romantic decisions are heavily imbued with social implications for reading her identity as well. Likewise, Julien is self-hating and tragic, as the taint of his so-called homosexuality prevents him from achieving happiness. He tragically decides to “pass” for straight by marrying a Christian woman with a child and spends much of the series lamenting his entry into a sort of sexual miscegenation. As such, what E. Patrick Johnson (2005) terms as “quareness,” the predicament of being both Black and queer, is presented as a uniquely tragic cross to bear in a manner similar to mixed-race identity.

The example of *Six Feet Under* highlights a troublesome complexity and racialized hierarchy within gay identity. On the series, David Fisher, who is White, and Keith Charles, who is Black, are lovers. David (much like Julien) often appears morose, emotionally distant, and conflicted about his professional, familial, and sexual identities. This is in contrast to his more content, affectionate straight brother, as well as his mother and sister who seek out relationships and, as a result, are more sexually stable. According to MacKinnon (2003), David “the son whom traditions might have characterized as more feminine flees intimacy, choosing one-night stands over the love of Keith, again characterized against tradition as caring, generous-hearted and accepting of his sexual orientation” (p. 83). Keith’s investment in the troubled relationship with David, even as others who seem more stable work to court him, is puzzling as he is frequently subjected to a relationship that is absent of emotion and affection but is punctuated by sex. Sex in this relationship, at times initiated by Keith, is often used as a tool to calm David and diminish whatever angst he is experiencing at the moment. Though a far more whole and full representation of queer Black sexuality, Keith is still feminized at times as he insists on

pursuing a relationship with David, who is not sure if he is capable of loving Keith back.

Similar to this aesthetic of caring, Omar, of HBO’s *The Wire*, also displays love and affection for his partners, even as Omar’s violent profession as a drug stash-house robber and stick-up man lead him to shoot and kill. Interestingly, in a series that prominently features hypermasculine scenes of drug dealing, street violence, and police precincts, Omar’s sexuality does not diffuse the fear he invokes. With a wild-west affect, Omar clears street corners when he walks through, whistling, toting two large shotguns inside his trench coat. The havoc he is capable of causing is only incensed when one of his boyfriends is kidnapped, tortured, killed, and left on the hood of an abandoned car for public display, a brutality reserved especially for this gay man.

Down Low: Where Network and Cable Coincide

Attending directly to images of Black men, Julien and Mercer (1990) write, “while we recognize the oppressive dimension of these ‘negative’ images of Black men as ‘other,’ we are also attracted. We want to look, but don’t always find the image we want to see” (p. 2). The controlling image of gayness, achieved through stereotype, is ideological in that it solidifies homophobia as a cultural marker of Black identity. This phobia is reinforced through representations of the menacing gay Black man in depictions of the “Down Low Brother.”

A concept popularized by J.L. King’s (2004) book, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of ‘Straight’ Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, the down low brother is a non-gay identified Black man who sleeps with other men. The threat posed by living on the down low lies in secretly participating in gay sex that in turn threatens the health of Black women who unknowingly sleep with these secretly gay men. As a result, down low Brothers purportedly pose a unique threat to the Black community by spreading HIV and AIDS, infecting their unsuspecting female partners and the other men with

whom they sleep. Problematically, the down low phenomenon helps to reinstitute AIDS as a “gay disease” by attributing HIV infection rates to secret gay sex. Infusing the tale of life on the down low with health statistics that detail the rise in AIDS infections among Blacks (Stokes, & Peterson, 1998) lends the story an empirical credibility that is all too convincing while downplaying other explanations for the rise of HIV infections (See CDC.gov, April 2006, ‘Questions and Answers: Men on the Down Low.’).

Television’s treatment of this phenomenon began with King’s 2004 appearance on *Oprah*. He was joined by two middle-aged Black women who claimed to have been infected with HIV by seemingly straight men. The show emphasized that Black men on the down low and straight Black women are the new faces of HIV/AIDS. With *Oprah*’s predominantly White female in-studio audience and television viewership, King’s story of the down low offered audiences a tale of Black love as disastrously problematic, putting Black women’s lives at risk by the dubious practices of Black men who are not straight even when they proclaim to be. The implicit health risk suggested by King eventually received much infotainment treatment in examinations like BET’s “The Down Low: Exposed,” which extended the secret threat to college-aged youth. Becoming wildly popular with viewers, the down low even made it to prime time when NBC’s *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* depicted a married Black man killing his White lover, with whom he had a closeted sexual relationship, who threatened to expose their affair. The series, in the episode “Lowdown” (April 6, 2004), even explained the concept for viewers through its one Black officer. Detective Tutuola, played by former rap artist Ice T, stated: “Down low. Black men having sex with other men. They say it doesn’t mean they’re gay. It’s just sex...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.”

Talk of the down low across network and cable television maintains two attributes that inform public knowledge about the implications of queer lifestyles. First, as a phenomenon the down

low fails to attribute the spread of HIV/AIDS to unprotected sex, instead citing secret “homosexuality” as the real cause. In addition, down low Black men are depicted as being particularly promiscuous, as suggested by *Law and Order: SVU*, which also showed down low men meeting in groups for sex. This depiction recalls Hill Collins’ (2000) welfare mother/breeder stereotype—the Black female with a remarkable fertility that needs to be harnessed (p. 78). Similarly, men on the down low are surprisingly insatiable, and, by implication, the fertile production of infected sperm needs to be harnessed. Layli Phillips (2005) argues that “the ‘down low’ discourse as it currently exists actually aids and abets the spread of HIV/AIDS by standing as a scapegoat for the HIV/AIDS phenomenon,” situating responsibility in sexual preference rather than safe sexual practice (p. 8). Such scapegoating is predicated on what Phillips describes as a “neo-racist agenda” through “keeping Black women and men at odds (a ‘divide and conquer’ strategy), keeping Black people in the position of spectacle (subordination to the entertainment arena), and reinscribing long-standing stereotypes about hypersexuality and animalism (dehumanization)” (p. 9). Ultimately, race is as significant to the story of an AIDS epidemic as is sexual practice.

Second, the down low features a qualitative difference in the social impact of same sex relationships among Black men as compared to that of White men. The 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*, the story of forbidden love between two White cowboys, illustrates this difference. Using reviews of the film printed simultaneously to discussions of the down low for a content analysis, Richard Pitt (2006) found that “while the ‘Down Low’ black bisexual is described pejoratively as a threat to black masculinity and the health of the black family, the ‘Brokeback’ white bisexual (when described as bisexual at all) is described in pitying language as one who is constrained by the society around him” (p. 254). This experience of sexuality must contend with being misunderstood. Thus, in terms of the ‘down low’ and its consequences, it is the Black community’s homophobia that incubates closeted gays by disallowing the admission of a gay identity, and thus the community as a whole is partially accountable

for its own menace and its own destruction (McCarthy, 2006, p. 11A).

Conclusion

In our critical-cultural analysis of representations of Black gay men on television across network and cable programming, we did catch a glimpse of McBride's (2005) bourgeois, well educated, cosmopolitan black gay man on LOGO's *Noah's Arc*. MTV's LOGO network, a limitedly distributed cable network devoted to LGBT programming, featured Patrick-Ian Polk's self-identified gay Black in *Sex & the City*, featuring four gay Black men living in Los Angeles. In its short run (2005-2006), *Noah's Arc* depicted gay Black characters developed beyond their sexualities in an array of occupations. Problematically, although LOGO is devoted to LGBT programming, it too appears to have difficulty containing gay Black types, as *Noah's Arc* was abruptly discontinued after two seasons. Although the network did not use the language of "cancellation," LOGO (2007) did admit that *Noah's Arc* would have a new home "at the multiplex," in order to "open the door for greater storytelling depth, expanded creative opportunities and new audiences" (p. 1). As the discretion of an obscure network appears still too indiscrete, viewers of *Noah's Arc* must now turn to podcasts and movie theaters to enjoy *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, which debuted in October 2008 to select audiences.

Overall, with this critical, cultural analysis of these media text, we found that Black gay men on television are often used to symbolize the embodiment of turmoil and destruction in Black communities. Consequently, media portrayals of "quareness" disseminate images of hostility and discord among Blacks that work to control their sexualities and acceptance in mainstream society. Images of gay Black men on television further circulate many of the sociocultural problems believed to pre-exist in Black communities by mediating violence, deceit and infectious taint as inherent aspects of queer Black sexuality.

The treatment of male heterosexuality, which suggests masculinity in media, has witnessed evolutions, though it does not stray from its central theme of a rejection of femininity (which is, instead, linked with homosexuality in order to connote gay maleness). LaFrance (2002), in *Men, Media and Masculinity*, outlines a twenty-one point "partial list" of personality types that describe the images of men we see in media. Some of these types include hero, competitor, performer, villain, warrior, sexual aggressor, protector, provider, father, lover, expert, bumbler, monster, judge, frontiersman, and rebel. Though LaFrance elaborates on each of these and other personality types, it is important to note that several of these representations are more elusive for Black men generally, and specifically for those representing sexual diversity. Gay Black men rarely appear as heroes, protectors, warriors, or any other aggressively masculine, oft-times positively-construed constructions of Black masculinity. Real Black men who have constructive, meaningful, authentic presences in the lives of their mothers, sisters, and wives are not gay. For that reason, invisibility and inaccessibility to certain portrayals is as much of a controlling image as the presence of some of the more troubling representations.

Foucault's (1978) notion of "a regime of truth" serves as an appropriate reminder that stripping media of stereotypes is a utopian solution because definitions of identity are variable social constructions depicting what it means to be real, authentic, natural, and so on. Julien and Mercer (1990) elaborate, "it's not as if we could strip away the negative stereotypes of Black men, created by western patriarchy, and discover some 'natural' Black masculinity which is good, pure, and wholesome" (p. 3). In fact, the stripping of stereotypes is only one way of affecting change around intersecting images of oppression. Invisibility is yet another way. GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) has monitored trends in representation by documenting the frequency of queer characters on cable and broadcast television over the last 13 years, adding statistics on racial/ethnic identity to their studies beginning in 2005. GLAAD (www.GLAAD.org) reported that the 2004-2005 television season was a high point in the number of gay African American characters

appearing on television at seven, fluctuating between three and five across cable and broadcast television every year since then.

While LGBT characters represent a small percentage of all roles on television, never accounting for more than 3% of all characters, African American (Black) men find themselves occupying only a small percentage of that number with only five roles in the 2008-2009 television season (www.glaad.com). Even with new programs such as HBO's *True Blood*, CW's *Privileged*, and ABC Family's *Greek*, all of which include a gay Black character, the television climate remains relatively unchanged as these shows replace previously canceled offerings. Given the scant number of explicit depictions of gay Black men on television, future researchers examining representations of same-sex relationships among Black men must interrogate this lack and be keenly aware that the shifts in heterosexual representations have an impact on that against which they are marked. Scholars may consider issues of convergence that allow Black queer content, like R. Kelly's *Trapped in the Closet*, to flourish across mediums (melodramatic film and music-video television) to narrate Black men's various experiences of sexuality in a "closeted" fashion (Snorton, 2009). In the entertainment media, we are not encouraged to look too deeply at this hegemonic moment—"it's just TV." The solution then, is to continue to do just that, to look deeply and critically to examine media's controlling images.

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