

## An Intersectional Analysis of Television Narratives of African American Women with African American Men on “the Down Low”

By: [Cerise L. Glenn](#), Andrew R. Spieldenner

Spieldenner, A.R. & Glenn, C.L. (2014). Scripting hate crimes: Victim, space and perpetrator defining hate, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 28(1), 123-135. doi: 10.1080/10304312.2013.854873

The final publication is available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12119-013-9189-y>

**\*\*\*Reprinted with permission. No further reproduction is authorized without written permission from Springer. This version of the document is not the version of record. Figures and/or pictures may be missing from this format of the document. \*\*\***

### **Abstract:**

The controversial phenomenon of “the down low” has created fear and suspicion of male sexual partners among many African American women. Being on the down low refers to men that lead seemingly heterosexual lives, yet secretly have sex with other men. Popular media have portrayed this topic more widely in more recent years and generally focus on African Americans. Two popular television shows, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* and *Girlfriends*, have dedicated episodes centering heterosexual African American women partnered with African American men on the down low. The popular television film, *Cover*, features an African American woman who learns her husband secretly has affairs with other men. Black feminist thought provides an intersectional frame for analyzing the content of these portrayals of Black women in relationships with men on the down low. The analysis demonstrates that the down low associates more affluent African Americans with socially deviant behavior and issues, such as hyper-sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Further, they show newer interpretations of African American women “in love and in trouble” and that African American men often have to disguise and remain silent about their sexuality to garner acceptance into their communities.

**Keywords:** African American relationships | Down low | Television | Black feminist thought | Black masculinity | HIV/AIDS in the media

### **Article:**

Portrayals of sexuality on television have generated controversy among those in the entertainment industry and viewing audiences. Although mostly fictional, television stories often resonate with viewers to modify or reinforce the way they perceive and frame “real” issues and people as depicted by characters (Murphy et al.2008). Since underrepresented groups are often presented in more limited ways, portrayals of their sexuality on television merits attention (see Bogle 2001a, b; Collins 2000; Dates and Barlow 1990). Dates and Barlow (1990) note that

“racial representations help to mold public opinion... [and] set the agenda for public discourse on the race issue in the media and in society at large” (p. 5). They further assert that these images of racial minorities are especially problematic because they are constructed in ways that are selective, partial, one-dimensional, and distorted and do not contain much character depth to reflect complex social issues or lived experiences.

This project examines a relatively recent phenomenon in African American television narratives—the marriage of a heterosexual African American woman with a “down low” African American man. Being on the “down low” refers to African American men that lead seemingly heterosexual lives, yet secretly have sex with other men (Boykin 2005). While this has garnered significant attention in a range of media outlets, this project examines the stories found on network and cable television to explore how these formats portray African American relationship discourses. More specifically, we aim to examine narratives that feature the voices of women as a central aspect of the storyline along with their partners on the down low. By including the stories of women, we contribute to the body of literature on down low discourses that focus primarily on Black masculinity and sexual stigma (see Johnson 2011; McCune 2008). By using tenets of Collins’ (2000) Black feminism as a framework, we utilize an intersectional approach to examine how two fictional popular entertainment television shows, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (SVU) and *Girlfriends*, and the film *Cover* frame the issue of the down low in committed, romantic relationships between Black women and Black men. This study is situated in contemporary trends of television portrayals of African Americans and the influence of “down low” narratives upon perceptions of Black sexuality, revealing how these television programs frame this phenomenon for viewers.

### **African American Sexuality and Popular Television**

Historically, African Americans have had little control over how they are depicted in media, including television (Bogle 2001a; Dates and Barlow 1990). Many of the images commonly portrayed reflect stereotypes of African Americans—which include mammies, matriarchs, jezebels, bucks, toms and coons (see Bogle 2001a, b; Collins 2000, 2005; Jackson 2006). Depictions of sexuality are embedded in many of these traditional stereotypes, especially the jezebel and buck, which portray Black men and women as sexually deviant (Bogle 2001b; Collins 2000, 2005). As Collins (2000) explains, “... being White marks the normal category of heterosexuality. In contrast, being Black signals the wild, out of control hyperheterosexuality of excessive sexual appetite” (p. 129).

Although stereotypes still persist in television, contemporary trends and milestones in programming have created more visibility of African Americans (Squires 2009). Squires (2009) attributes this to the rise of cable and newer networks focusing on African Americans, such as Black Entertainment Television (BET) and the CW, coupled with the popularity of dramas, especially the police procedural genre, which includes African American characters more consistently. However, shows featuring predominantly African American ensembles, on both

network and cable programming, are overwhelmingly sitcoms and music videos (especially since Viacom acquired BET in 2006 and canceled news programming). This continues to constrain images of Black sexuality since sitcoms often make light of sexuality and other social issues, while music videos contain hyper-sexualized content (Dates and Barlow 1990; Squires 2009). African American characters in dramas are often underdeveloped within a backdrop of European American characters. These depictions have largely been heterosexual; media and television depictions of African American gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters are rarer. Squires (2009) also notes that Viacom launched a film division of BET to create “Black” made-for-TV movies and air movies featuring predominantly African American casts. Another African American themed cable network, TV One, launched in 2004; however, the influence of these new television formats has not been largely examined.

### **A Contemporary Context of Black Sexuality: Framing of “the Down Low” in Popular Discourse and Media**

The shifting landscape of African American images combined with the socio-historical framing of African American sexuality on television provides an opportunity to examine how narratives of sexuality influence ways of understanding contemporary social phenomena, including health epidemics. The transmission of HIV/AIDS continues to be a serious health concern and African Americans are disproportionately impacted by this disease (CDC 2007). According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), while only 14 % of the US population, African Americans represent nearly half of the total amount of HIV/AIDS cases in the country (CDC 2012). As of 2010, African American gay and bisexual men constitute 70 % of all those newly diagnosed African American men (CDC 2012). In 2010, African American women constituted 62 % of all new HIV diagnoses amongst women (CDC 2012). Most HIV-positive African American women are exposed by sexual contact with men, but it is unclear how the men were infected (CDC 2007). One popular narrative pertaining to this issue is the “down low”—that is, heterosexually-identified men who have sex with other men (Collins 2005; King 2004; Phillips. 2005). This issue continues to be stigmatized and connected to HIV/AIDS research, particularly how it connects to risky sexual practices influencing its transmission to partners, controversies regarding social awareness and acceptance of Black male sexuality, as well as disclosure or nondisclosure of those practices and behaviors (Barnshaw and Letukas 2010; Dodge et al. 2008; Malenbranche 2008; Millett et al. 2006; Spieldenner and Castro 2010). For reasons such as these, Boykin (2005) criticizes the use of the term “down low,” indicating that it blames African American gay men for the growth of HIV within African American communities, reflects homophobia, and limits discussions of manhood. More recently, studies about African American gay men’s lives move beyond sexual health practices. These include discussions about relationships with family and other African American men, as well as the performance of a down low identity as a practice of masculinity in Black gay spaces and a means of eliciting desire (see Johnson 2011; McCune 2008).

In addition to scholarly research, the down low has been featured in both ethnic and mainstream media outlets. Popular magazines covering African American issues and concerns, such as *Jet*, *Ebony*, and *Essence*, have dedicated stories about men on the down low. Black Entertainment Television (BET) ran an hour long documentary entitled “Down Low Exposed.” Mainstream news, such as ABC and the *Washington Post*, have also featured this phenomenon and framed it as a “Black” issue. In addition to magazines, news, and the documentary, television shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, *ER*, *Law and Order: SVU*, and *Girlfriends* have featured the down low as a central theme of an episode. A made-for-TV movie, *Cover*, also has a plot that centers on the down low and plays regularly on BET and other cable stations. Both news and entertainment media have covered the “down low” phenomenon as a crisis in African American communities partly causing the rising number of HIV/AIDS cases among African American females due to the secrecy of Black males about their homosexual practices.

Given the emergence and pervasiveness of “down low” narratives in health discourses and media, an emerging body of research examines how race and sexuality influence these narratives. Black males are pathologized in the media as a threat to Black masculinity and the health of the Black family (Pitt 2006; Tapia et al. 2010). Conversely White males exhibiting the same behavior are ignored, overlooked or are framed through pitying language and constrained by society around them. To illustrate this point, Pitt (2006) cites two episodes of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. On the episode featuring Black men, the teaser claimed, “Sex, lies, and double lives: It’s a shocker. It’s called living on the ‘down low.’ Men with wives and girlfriends secretly having sex with other *men*. One man blows the lid off this sexual underground” (Rakieten 2004a). On the show featuring White men, the preview declares “Secret lives: Husbands and fathers who were secretly gay share their struggles” (Rakieten 2004b). While this study explores salient issues regarding stigma and sexuality, it does not explore the relational space that down low men have with their female relational partners.

### **Black Feminist Thought: An Intersectional Approach to African American Identities**

Black feminism offers both a theoretical vantage point and a methodology. Black feminism offers the possibility to explore subject matter particular to the lives of African American women in nuanced ways, including intersectional analyses that engage race, class, gender, and sexuality (Coleman 2011; Collins 2000; Nash 2008). Coleman (2011) points to the diversity of media studies work that has utilized Black feminism. Collins (2000, 2005) explains that Black women’s sexuality is closely connected to their intersectional positions in contemporary United States society. Dominant ideology ignores their sexuality altogether or includes it as it relates to the issues of African American men. Collins (2000) explains how “Everyone has spoken for Black women, making it difficult for us to speak for ourselves” (p. 124). Discussing their own sexuality becomes difficult for African American women because saying anything even slightly negative about African American men resonates as taboo within African American communities. The norms of racial solidarity coupled with sexual stereotypes of both Black men and women cause

African American women to subordinate their needs to the needs of African American men (Collins 2005; Stevens and Phillips 2003).

In addition to coping with oppressive forces in dominant mainstream society, many African American women must also counter oppression from African American men since they often learn to be a “man” by asserting male, heterosexual privilege (hooks 2004; Orelus 2010). Collins (2000) states that “many Black women reject feminism because they see it as being antifamily and against Black men. They do not want to give up men—they want Black men to change” (p. 152). This causes the “love and trouble” tradition in African American women’s relationships with African American men. This notion embodies the pain many heterosexual African American women endure as they try to empower themselves through notions such as Black feminism, while simultaneously negotiating relationships with men whose thoughts and actions encompass both sexism and racism. These relationships are further complicated by those that claim that African American men experience a more severe form of racial oppression than their female counterparts.

To counter oppressive forces from more dominant members of society, African American women often create and utilize what Collins (2000) deems “safe spaces.” These spaces consist of love relationships, deep friendships, family, and self-defined notions of identity. These safe spaces help African American women cope with multiple forms of oppression that can be debilitating. The spaces these women believe are safe may not be when others compromise them, such as African American males, who may have a vested interest in maintaining one or more forms of women’s oppressive conditions.

Not only do many African American women elect to stay silent about their oppression and engage in love and trouble relationships, they internalize other aspects of dominant ideology as they marginalize others. Collins (2000) asserts that heterosexism, the belief that heterosexual behavior is inherently superior to other forms of sexual expression, runs rampant in African American communities, even with African American women who experience multiple marginalizations: once as a female in a patriarchal society and again as an African American in a White dominated society. This has caused many African American women to construe their heterosexuality as the one true form of social power they have in mainstream United States society, especially since a substantive portion of African American women do not have capitalist notions of “class” power. Furthermore, many African Americans associate homosexual behavior with notions of whiteness and refuse to accept it as a reality in African American communities (Collins 2005). African American communities in general have either tried to ignore homophobia or avoided serious analysis of this issue.

Black feminism unpacks the multiple layers of identity that African American women have in United States society, which can make it difficult for them to negotiate their own identity and relationships with others, including African American male partners. Furthermore, it provides a frame for understanding the complexities of the down low phenomenon as articulated in popular

television discourses. This provides more visibility to the often silenced issue of Black sexuality, yet can be problematic when framed within larger social discourses of race, class, and gender of African American social identities. Our study contributes to this body of literature by examining portrayals of sexuality through the narrative frame of the down low as featured through a range of fictional television programs: (1) *Girlfriends*, a predominantly African American cast sitcom that originally aired on CW and now runs on syndication on TV One, (2) *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, a popular police drama with an African American cast member that airs on network television and on syndication, and (3) *Cover*, a made-for-TV movie on BET's new film division. These narratives reflect a diversity of genres and target audiences, as well as center relationships with the female partner as a key part of the storylines. We selected these texts because they continue to air repeatedly on television and are available through distributions outlets, such as Netflix; therefore, these texts are available to multiple audience viewings and for analysis. Since the focus of our project centers on fictional relational narratives of men and women, we excluded reality programming, including *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, and documentaries.

### ***Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, Girlfriends and Cover: Synopses of Depictions of the Down Low***

#### **Law and Order: Special Victims Unit**

*Law and Order: SVU* is a popular spin-off of the NBC series *Law and Order*. Like the other *Law and Order* television shows, *Law and Order: SVU* consists of an hour long drama that features a detective squad in New York City, NY. The episode "Lowdown" features the down low phenomenon. This episode first aired on NBC on Tuesday, April 6, 2004 in the show's fifth season. Re-runs of this episode continue to run regularly on cable television stations, such as USA. This particular episode begins with the murder of Jeff York, a White male prosecutor. Andy Abbott, a fellow prosecutor, stages his death to look like York was murdered by a prostitute. The prosecutors were intimately involved; however, Abbott, the African American male prosecutor, has a wife and two children. He killed York in order to prevent him from disclosing his homosexuality to his friends and family. Abbott, however, has contracted HIV from his affair with York. His wife gets tested and discovers that she has contracted HIV as well (Nathan and Taylor 2004).

#### **Girlfriends**

*Girlfriends* first aired on UPN and later aired on the television networks CW and TV One, which cater to a younger, more ethnically diverse audience. This 30 min situational comedy features four African American females with very different lifestyles. The character Joan Clayton is a very successful businesswoman. Although she has business savvy, she has difficulty maintaining relationships with men. The episode entitled "The Pact" first aired on Monday, March 17, 2003. Clayton reflects on her missed chance at love when she encounters Reesie Jackson, who took Clayton's college boyfriend, Brian. Clayton believes that Jackson stole her chance at the perfect

life since the two later married and had children. Jackson later reveals that she has AIDS, which she contracted from her husband who is on the down low (Marburger and Marburger 2003).

## **Cover**

*Cover* began airing on BET in 2008. The film centers Valerie Maas, a college-educated photographer trying to find a new home with her family after moving from Atlanta to Philadelphia. Valerie's life with her husband, Dutch, is told in a series of flashbacks, including her first exposure to her husband's mysterious partying past. Through the course of the film, Dutch's homosexual behavior is revealed, as well as the HIV exposure from one of his friends. Valerie learns that two of Dutch's close friends from college, Ryan and Kevin, are also on the down low. Valerie and Dutch divorce, and Valerie returns to her life and home in Atlanta (Reid and Duke 2007).

## **Analysis: African American Women with African American Men on the Down Low**

We analyzed these programs through multiple viewings separately and then discussed potential themes utilizing Black feminism as a frame. We centered our analysis on relationship narratives of African American women with African American men on the down low. This yielded the following themes: (1) Black (Homo)Sexuality: A Threat to Success and Class Achievement, (2) In Love and Trouble: Disruptions of Family and Romantic Safe Spaces, and (3) Silence and Secrecy: Lack of African American Male Voice and the Taboo of Airing "Dirty Laundry."

### **Black (Homo) Sexuality: A Threat to Success and Class Achievement**

In each of the stories, the down low is framed as a threat to mainstream notions of normalcy and achievement targeting upper middle class African Americans, particularly those who create traditional family structures framed through discourses of capitalist achievement. African American upper-class heterosexual men are the closest to the dominant ideology of the White male ideal (Collins 2000, 2005). What should be the "perfect" man in terms of occupational achievement and heteronormativity may be sexually deviant, thereby distancing him from the idealized vision of masculinity (Hanke 1998; Trujillo 1991). In "Lowdown," the group of African American men who have secret affairs with other men are represented as affluent men that embody what other males in the African American community should strive to achieve. Abbott is a prominent assistant district attorney. DuShawn McGovern is an ex-football player turned real estate investor who has also achieved prominence in the community. Jerome Adams is an established businessman who also likes to have sex with other men in secret. In *Cover*, the Maas family is also upwardly mobile. Dutch is a psychiatrist working toward building his own practice. His friends, Ryan and Kevin, also work toward financial success. The presence of more affluent African American men in these narratives reflects more positive images on a surface level than those associated with stereotypes; however, they function to reinforce dominant ideology related to Black male sexuality, further reifying the distance between Black and White normalcy (Bogle 2001b; Collins 2005; Jackson 2006).

The African American women in these stories also depict how their quest to achieve more social power through traditional means of marrying an upwardly mobile man may in turn render them powerless, thus nullifying their social power potentially obtained through class status (Collins 2000). Mary Ellen Abbott, the wife of Andy Abbott, Reesie Jackson, and Valerie Maas have what should be the perfect married life with their affluent husbands. However, their husbands' lack of honesty, decency, and self-control has significantly damaged their lives. In "Lowdown," Assistant District Attorney Novak discloses Andy Abbott's HIV status to his wife. Mary Ellen Abbott replies, "You've ruined my life." Novak responds, "I didn't expose you to HIV. Andy did." Her statement implies that although she is the one that informed Abbott that she should be checked for HIV, her husband is ultimately the one to blame for her being HIV positive, reducing her power to provide for her children and herself.

Mary Ellen Abbott acknowledges that her husband has infected her and then addresses how she can protect her children. She states, "My little girls ask me what their daddy did wrong. What am I supposed to tell them?... How do I tell them I'm HIV positive? I don't want my girls to suffer. What am I going to do?" The scene then cuts to the interrogation room where Andy Abbott is being held. Mary Ellen tells him, "... by the grace of God I will live long enough to see our girls grow up." As he cries, he accepts Novak's plea and agrees to a sentence of 7½–15 years in prison. Andy Abbott's secret lifestyle has not only ruined his life, but those of his loved ones which his class status and power should have been able to protect. Reesie Jackson in "The Pact" also suffers the same negative effects of being married to a man on the down low who has infected her with AIDS. Her husband's secret lifestyle has impeded her ability to financially care for herself. Her narrative juxtaposes against Joan Clayton, who did not get Brian as a husband, but enjoys a successful career and more prominent social lifestyle as a single woman. These images of more affluent African Americans do not work to reflect positive attributes of their communities and social identities, such as through earlier television shows like *The Cosby Show* (Dates and Barlow 1990; Squires 2009). Conversely, being involved with someone on the "down low" mitigates potentially positive portrayals of Black achievement and empowerment.

Similarly in *Cover*, Dutch's secret affairs destroy Valerie's dream of being a successful couple. After her friend shares her suspicions that Dutch is on the down low, Valerie looks for him and finds him in the shower with his friend, Ryan. Valerie confronts them with a gun before racing away. The discovery leads her to engage in self-destructive behavior, such as excessive drinking, and she soon becomes the focus of a criminal investigation when Ryan is murdered. The criminal behavior caused by and because of Dutch's actions reinforces notions of stereotypes regarding the criminal activity of African-American men, particularly the thug image, usually associated with males of a lower socio-economic status (Jackson 2006). Similar to notions of the thug, these men engage in dangerous, self-destructive behavior to obtain what they want; however, these men are even more dangerous because of the secrecy and deception that destroys their families. Their inability to control their class "power" erodes potential messages of empowerment. Although these men attempt to achieve social power and mask their sexuality through traditional

notions of hegemonic masculinity, the underlying portrayals of their sexuality, danger, and self-destruction reflect the same threats posed to African American communities as constraining, negative racial stereotypes. Their occupational and financial achievement does not protect them or their families from harm, showing a further departure from the “power” of hegemonic masculinity usually associated with White, upper-class males (Connel and Messerschmidt 2005; Glenn 2013). Conversely, their inability to be responsible for their actions and the well-being of their families results in the dismantling of traditional, nuclear family structures as it removes Black males from the household, either through imprisonment, impending death, or divorce.

### **In Love and Trouble: Disruptions of Family and Romantic Safe Spaces**

The portrayal of the “down low” as deceptive, deviant sexual behavior encourages African American women to distrust African American males in romantic relationships, which contributes to doubt regarding the attainment of a happy relationship without sacrificing personal gains and empowerment. In “The Pact,” Joan Clayton is a successful career woman who owns her home and can take care of herself financially. Despite her achievements, she feels she is lacking a crucial piece of the perfect life- a husband. Joan believes that Reesie Jackson has taken this away from her when she stole her college boyfriend, Brian. Clayton continues to hold a grudge against Reesie as she states, “You ruined my chance for a perfect life.” As the two begin to argue, Reesie exclaims, “Do you want the AIDS he gave me, too?” Joan is shocked to hear this news and later states, “In a way, Reesie has saved my life.” In this instance, Clayton has been spared a destructive relationship by *not* being involved with Brian and she is better off without her “dream man.” This works in connection with discourses of upward social mobility, positioning the females as “good” women who work hard and engage in heterosexual romantic relationships with Black men possibly to their own detriment. This simultaneously sends the message that they want too much out of life and may not have both a successful career and a successful romantic relationship (Collins 2000; Glenn 2011). Instead of creating a connection with African American men, these representations encourage distancing oneself from them for fear of negative health and personal consequences (Malenbranche 2008; Phillips 2005; Pitt 2006).

Although Joan is spared from a deceptive husband and an incurable disease, the wives in these narratives are exposed to HIV/AIDS from their husbands, exhibiting risk and danger in their marriages. Additionally, they succumb to more traditional notions of femininity, including passivity and submission to their husbands (Collins 2005). Marriage should be one of the “safe spaces” African American women utilize to counter hegemonic pressure to modify their identity (Collins 2000). Instead, what they deemed safe brought them harm, which they may have been spared if they opted not to have these relationships. The juxtaposition of Joan and Reesie’s stories also show how opting for traditional forms of femininity encroaches upon the ability to protect oneself from a spouse. The married women are framed as passive victims of their husbands’ wrong doing. African American women may be better off pursuing their own interests

and protecting themselves not only from dominant mainstream society, but from members of their own community who may also hurt them.

In *Cover*, Monica, a successful doctor, asks her husband, Kevin, to end his affair with a man because she wants to have kids and “be normal.” When Kevin denies her request, Monica walks into traffic in a suicide attempt. This adds a new dynamic to love and trouble relationships which have generally been told about women of lower socioeconomic status. Even achieving the ideal life does not save African American women from love and trouble relationships with their male partners as they have been “punished” for trusting their husbands without question. This serves as a cautionary tale for women who move away from notions of the strong Black woman to embrace those associated with dominant notions of femininity. Although this can encourage women to be happy with their own personal achievements and not seek fulfillment of their notions of the perfect life from a man, it does so in a way that fosters fear of the possibility of being involved in a happy, successful romantic relationship. This tension between African American men and women can be partly linked to the hesitance of African American men to challenge dominant norms of masculinity, as well as the difficulties of departing from these institutionalized norms (hooks 2004; Orelus 2010). When they internalize notions of African American femininity and masculinity, they can engage in controlling behaviors. This control often appears in the form of hegemonic masculine notions, such as patriarchy, that men must protect women (Hanke 1998; Trujillo 1991). As noted in the preceding theme, the men on the down low adhere to hegemonic notions of masculinity to cover their sexual secrecy. Not only does this shelter them from homophobia, it arguably provides their wives and children with protection of societal acceptability under the guise of normalcy. This leads to what Collins (2000) deems the slippery slope between protecting African American women and controlling them. African American women often feel that they help African American men retain their sense of manhood when they subjugate their needs to them (Collins 2000; Hine 1995). At the same time, African American women’s self-reliance and self-valuation benefit their communities. Thus, the “love and trouble” relationship between African American men and women continues to persist in these narratives.

Despite the erosion of safety in romantic relationships, the women in these narratives find support in other types of “safe spaces” associated with African American culture, including religious communities, friends, and their own resilience (Collins 2000). In *Cover*, Valerie finds community with her best friend. Through this friendship, Valerie is brought into a large African American church—replete with a women’s group. In the women’s circle, Valerie hears stories of other women coping with adultery and other issues. Another woman in the circle, Charlotte, has been diagnosed HIV-positive through contact with her adulterous male partner. Reesie Jackson and Mary Ellen Abbott distance themselves from their husbands and prepare to take care of their children alone. Interestingly, neither Jackson nor Abbott feel sorry for themselves and view this as their cross to bear for engaging in love and trouble relationships. Despite the problematic

representations of romantic relationships, affirming messages about the depth and breadth of women's support in other areas exists.

### **Silence and Secrecy: Lack of African American Male Voice and the Taboo of Airing “Dirty Laundry”**

The African American men on the down low have limited voice when explaining their sexuality in these narrative reconstructions, rendering their sexuality silenced. Although the silencing of sexuality is discussed regarding African American women, the pressure for men to lead seemingly heterosexual lifestyles reflects that this remains a taboo subject. Their fear of being ostracized from friends, families, and other community members fosters their silence and secrecy about their sexual preferences (Collins 2005; hooks 2004; Lapinski et al. 2010; Orelus 2010).

Brian Jackson is only featured in “The Pact” during flashbacks to Joan Clayton's and Reesie Jackson's experiences with him in their college days. Even then, he has a limited amount of lines and character development. In *Cover*, neither Dutch nor his circle of friends explains their sexual choices. Andy Abbott spends the vast majority of the time in “Lowdown” vehemently denying any romantic involvement with York and leading the detectives down other avenues for suspects. The down low phenomenon is primarily revealed through the conversations between Tutuola and the other detectives investigating York's death, as well as between Tutuola and McGovern. When the detectives make their case, Abbott uses the silence surrounding the down low as part of his defense since he knows that his alibi of playing poker with his friends cannot be broken. When Tutuola returns to McGovern's office to inform him that he will be testifying against Abbott, he replies, “I worked too hard to get where I am to mess it up now.” He believes that if people discover that he is on the down low, his life will be destroyed. Tutuola threatens to subpoena him and McGovern flatly tells him that he will lie under oath with his hand on the Bible before disclosing the truth. Although safe spaces exist for women, they do not exist for the men on the down low, further reinforcing the need for secrecy and silence.

The taboo of discussing homosexuality and bisexuality is linked to the taboo of HIV (Bond et al. 2009; Boykin 2005; Collins 2005; Lapinski et al. 2010). All of the programs deploy stigmatizing tactics at the interpersonal and institutional levels. The institutions include the legal system in *Law & Order: SVU*, the African American church in *Cover*, and marriage in *Girlfriends*. The use of institutions serves to constrain African American identity within narrowly defined limits of “normalcy” including sexuality, gender and even socioeconomic class. They compound the stigma of sexuality defined as “deviant” by silencing the possibilities within other identity areas; therefore the “real” crimes against the women are the ways that their down low partners take away their upper middle class status and infect them with HIV. For instance, Assistant District Attorney Novak breaks the silence of Andy Abbott's affair, which gains her leverage. She informs his wife that York was HIV positive and suggests that she get tested as well. Even though it is against the law to disclose someone's HIV status, breaking this silence becomes a necessary step to convince Mary Ellen Abbott that her husband is on the down

low. When Mary Ellen Abbott confronts her husband after learning that she is also HIV positive, she tells him, “I forgive you for what you did, but I cannot forgive you if you let your children, friends, and families be destroyed... A trial will do that. It will drag us all through the mud.” For her, airing “dirty laundry” carries more trauma than her HIV positive status, being married to a homosexual/bisexual man, and uncertainty regarding how this will impact their children. Andy Abbott takes the plea and Novak agrees to seal the record regarding the details surrounding how and why he murdered York.

Instead of fostering awareness and conversations about sexuality and HIV, these narratives support closure of discourse and denial of different sexualities in Black communities. The sympathy lies with Valerie Maas, Reesie Jackson, and Mary Ellen Abbott who are morally responsible and should not be blamed for their husbands’ transgressions. Their husbands are depicted as villains who masqueraded as good, upstanding men that duped their wives. African American men are “low down” as the episode title of *Law and Order: SVU* suggests. Although these shows portray the wives as victims, this line of thinking reifies silence and secrecy regarding sexuality in the African American community that negatively impacts the entire community.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

The episodes “Lowdown” and “The Pact,” and the television film, *Cover*, represent different genres of television programming, reflecting a diverse mix and representation of narratives. As Squires (2009) and Dates and Barlow (1990) discuss, increasing the diversity of programming containing African Americans and including them in key roles in those programs should provide more visibility to the depth of their experiences and promote more positive images. These programs do add more depth to the portrayals of Black identities as they tell stories of more affluent African Americans that depart from traditional stereotypes (Bogle 2001a, b). The Black male characters are gainfully employed and provide financially for their families. These programs, however, simultaneously address the down low phenomenon projecting sexuality as a cause of alarm and concern in African American communities. This suggests that both mainstream and African audiences are more comfortable seeing “successful” African Americans on television, yet subtler versions of Black male sexual stereotypes still remain, particularly regarding hyper-sexuality, criminal behavior, and lack of control (Jackson 2006). It is possible that these images function as an improvement when compared to overtly racist stereotypes, yet do so in ways that do not challenge dominant notions of Black masculinity. Unlike images of achievement associated with White masculinity, higher class status and occupational achievement do not provide the gateway to success or happy traditional, nuclear familial structures. When these traits are coupled with Black masculinity, negative associations with sexuality are evoked and trigger collective cultural fears about Black men’s achievement. Even though they seem successful, they may be hiding dangerous secrets that erode potential means of empowerment that should lead not only to financial success, but familial and romantic stability.

Within this limited view, Black men's homosexual acts and identities potentially work against Black community empowerment (Gerstner 2011).

Black feminist thought addresses the romantic relationships between African American men and women, especially the tension Black women negotiate between self-empowerment and forms of control by others (Collins 2000; Glenn 2011). In these narratives, African American men elect to protect their sense of masculinity to the detriment of their wives, children, and selves. This repositions typical constructions of power usually centered around material and social control, which manifests through hegemonic notions of masculinity and economic gain. The men aspire for both types of control, yet end up losing both despite great efforts to mimic heteronormativity. Since the women cannot protect themselves from their husbands, the validity of this safe space, a key form of resistance in Black feminist thought, is questioned and they remain in love and in trouble. The loss of power, framed as a threat to class achievement and the disruption of safe spaces, reflects both the danger of attempting to adhere to sexual scripts of heteronormativity and the difficulties both men and women may face when challenging systemic forms of hegemony.

The tensions of empowerment and control that manifest in love and trouble relationships have largely been framed as a result of lower socioeconomic position, with little material means or ways to access avenues of self-empowerment. This study expands this frame to reflect how middle and upper middle class women also face this predicament, as historically women may have felt obligated to remain in troubling relationships due to lack of financial freedom and feelings of obligation (Collins 2000). The portrayal of Joan, however, departs from typical portrayals of Black women in love and in trouble, yet does so in a manner that reflects another concern for middle Black women-being alone (Collins 2000; Glenn 2011). Since Black women have the lowest rates of marriage in the United States, these narratives reflect the double bind of choosing between being troubled and in love or without a romantic partner. Joan's story presents an opportunity to show a happy, empowered single Black woman, yet she only feels grateful because Reesie saved her from the fate of contracting HIV from her former college boyfriend.

By positioning the African American women in these romantic relationships as victims, these narratives also serve to undermine nuanced discussions of sexuality. In each, the women are constantly the victims of their men—in the context of HIV infection. By remaining victims, the women are incapable of taking responsibility for their relationship choices. They cannot control their exposure to HIV, thus limiting the possibility that African American women can and do indeed make choices about their sexual practices. They negate the possibility that the women are aware of their husband's sexual preferences and could engage in a mutually beneficial discussion and understanding of how sexuality functions within their relationships (Robinson 2009). Ironically, even as the women are framed as victims to the men, the men are silenced within the narratives. The African American men are never permitted to tell their stories, reifying the limits of African American sexuality discourse (Collins 2005; Phillips 2005). This teaches African American women *and* men not to air "dirty laundry" while quietly suffering. This silencing, in turn, allows dominant ideology to create images of African American sexualities without much

recourse or challenge. It also works in conjunction with the narratives of down low behavior as a threat to attaining upward social mobility and having positive romantic relationships.

Despite the outcomes of this study, there are limitations, particularly regarding selected texts for analysis. Although including more texts increased the diversity of the programming examined, longer texts provided more context and character development than the shorter sitcom. Future research could examine additional narratives that expand our understanding of Black male sexuality, such as Noah's Arc on LOGO, which follows the lives of a group of Black gay male friends. These types of narratives currently exist in niche markets, however, and as such, for our analysis, the primary concern was broadcast television widely available to the general public. Future research could broaden the use of intersectional analyses to expand the cultural frame of the United States and include nationality, since homosexuality and bisexuality are sensitive subjects among Black populations within the diaspora. As television stations and distribution networks continue to expand, examining the reach of this discourse on a more global scale would provide more insight regarding the down low as an international phenomenon. Since texts that have aired repeatedly since the original airdates were selected for inclusion, future studies could examine how multiple viewings and advancements in distribution influence audience perceptions of the significance and prevalence of the down low in romantic relationships.

## References

Barnshaw, J., & Letukas, L. (2010). The low down on the down low: Origins risk identification and intervention. *Health Sociology Review, 19*(4), 478–490. doi:10.5172/hesr/2010.19.4.478.

Bogle, D. (2001a). *Prime time blues: African Americans on network television*. New York: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Bogle, D. (2001b). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, and bucks: An interpretive history of Blacks in American film* (4th ed.). New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Bond, L., Wheeler, D. P., Millett, G. A., LaPollo, A. B., Carson, L. F., & Liao, A. (2009). Black men who have sex with men and the association of down-low identity with HIV risk behavior. *American Journal of Public Health, 99*(S1), S92–S95.

Boykin, K. (2005). *Beyond the down low: Sex, lies and denial in Black America*. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers.

CDC. (2007). *A heightened national response to the HIV/AIDS crisis among African Americans*. Atlanta: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

CDC. (2012). *HIV among African Americans*. Atlanta: US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control & Prevention.

- Coleman, R. M. (2011). 'Roll up your sleeves!': Black women, Black feminism in *Feminist Media Studies*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 11(1), 35–41.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. New York: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2005). *Black sexual politics: African Americans, gender and the new racism*. New York: Routledge.
- Connell, R. W., & Messerschmidt, J. W. (2005). Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender and Society*, 19(6), 829–859. doi:10.1177/0891243205278639.
- Dates, J. L., & Barlow, W. (1990). *Split image: African Americans in the mass media*. Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press.
- Dodge, B., Jeffries, W. L., I. V., & Sandfort, T. G. M. (2008). Beyond the down low: Sexual risk, protection, and disclosure among at-risk Black men who have sex with both men and women (MSMW). *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 37(5), 683–696. doi:10.1007/s10508-008-9356-7.
- Gerstner, D. A. (2011). *Queer pollen: White seduction, Black homosexuality and the cinematic*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Glenn, C. L. (2011). You can have a man OR a career: Negotiating perceptions of African-American female professors' social identities. In E. Gilchrist (Ed.), *The experiences of single African-American women professors: With this PhD, I thee wed* (pp. 221–234). Lanham: Lexington Books.
- Glenn, C. L. (2013). White masculinity and the TV sitcom dad: Tracing the “progression” of portrayals of fatherhood. In R. L. Jackson & J. Moshin (Eds.), *Communicating marginalized masculinities: Identity politics in TV, film, and new media* (pp. 174–188). New York: Routledge.
- Hanke, R. (1998). Theorizing masculinity within the media. *Communication Theory*, 8(2), 183–201. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.1998.tb00217.x.
- Hine, D. C. (1995). For pleasure, profit, and power: The sexual exploitation of Black women. In G. Smitherman (Ed.), *African American women speak out on Anita Hill-Clarence Thomas* (pp. 168–177). Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- hooks, b. (2004). *We real cool: Black men and masculinity*. New York: Routledge.
- Jackson, R. L., I. I. (2006). *Scripting the Black masculine body: Identity, discourse, and racial politics in popular media*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

- Johnson, E. P. (2011). *Sweat tea: Black gay men of the South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- King, J. L. (2004). *On the down low: A journey into the lives of "straight" Black men who sleep with men*. New York: Random House.
- Lapinski, M. K., Braz, M. E., & Maloney, E. H. K. (2010). The down low, social stigma, and risky sexual behaviors: Insights from African American men who have sex with men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 57(5), 610–633.
- Malenbranche, D. J. (2008). Bisexually active Black men in the United States and HIV: Acknowledging more than the "Down Low". *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 37(5), 810–816. doi:10.1007/s10508-008-9364-7.
- Marburger, K., & Marburger, M. (Writers). (2003). The pact. [Television series episode]. In K. Grammar (Producer), *Girlfriends*. Los Angeles: UPN.
- McCune, J. Q. (2008). Out in the club: The down low, hip-hop, and the architecture of Black masculinity. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 28(3), 298–314.
- Millett, G. A., Peterson, J. L., Wolitski, R. J., & Stall, R. (2006). Greater risk for HIV infection of Black men who have sex with men: A critical literature review. *American Journal of Public Health*, 96(6), 1007–1019.
- Murphy, S. T., Wilkin, H. A., Cody, M. J., & Huang, G. C. (2008). Health messages in primetime television. In D. Kunkel, A. Jordan, J. Manganello, & M. Fishbein (Eds.), *Media messages and public health: A decisions approach to content analysis*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Nash, J. C. (2008). Strange bedfellows: Black feminism and antipornography feminism. *Social Text*, 26(4), 51–76.
- Nathan, R. (Writer) & Taylor, F. (Director). (2004). Lowdown. [Television series episode]. In D. Wolf (Producer), *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. New York: NBC.
- Orelus, P. W. (2010). *The agony of masculinity: Race, gender, and education in the age of "new" racism and patriarchy*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Phillips, L. (2005). Deconstructing 'down low' discourse: The politics of sexuality, gender, race, AIDS and anxiety. *Journal of African American Studies*, 9(2), 3–15.
- Pitt, R. N. (2006). Downlow mountain? De/stigmatizing bisexuality through pitying and pejorative discourses in media. *Journal of Men's Studies*, 14(2), 254–258.

Rakieten, E. (Executive Producer). (2004a, April 16). *Oprah* [Television broadcast: “A secret sex world: Living on the down low”]. Chicago: Harpo Productions.

Rakieten, E. (Executive Producer). (2004b, October 27). *Oprah* [Television broadcast: “My husband is gay”]. Chicago: Harpo Productions.

Reid, R. S. (Producer) & Duke, B. (Director). (2007). *Cover* [Motion picture]. USA: 20th Century Fox.

Robinson, R. K. (2009). Racing the closet. *Stanford Law Review*, *61*, 1463–1533.

Spieldenner, A. R., & Castro, C. F. (2010). Education and fear: Black and gay in the public sphere of HIV prevention. *Communication Education*, *59*(3), 275–282.

Squires, C. (2009). *African Americans in the media*. Malden: Polity Press.

Stevens, D. P., & Phillips, L. D. (2003). Freaks, gold diggers, divas, and dykes: The sociohistorical development of adolescent African American women’s sexual scripts. *Sexuality and Culture*, *7*(1), 3–49.

Tapia, R., McCune, J., & Brody, J. D. (2010). Dangerous profiling: Recent media representations of Black male sexuality. In J. Battle & S. L. Barnes (Eds.), *Black sexualities: Probing powers, passions, practices, and policies* (pp. 119–137). Piscataway: Rutgers University Press.

Trujillo, N. (1991). Hegemonic masculinity on the mound: Media representations of Nolan Ryan and American sports culture. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, *8*(3), 290–308.