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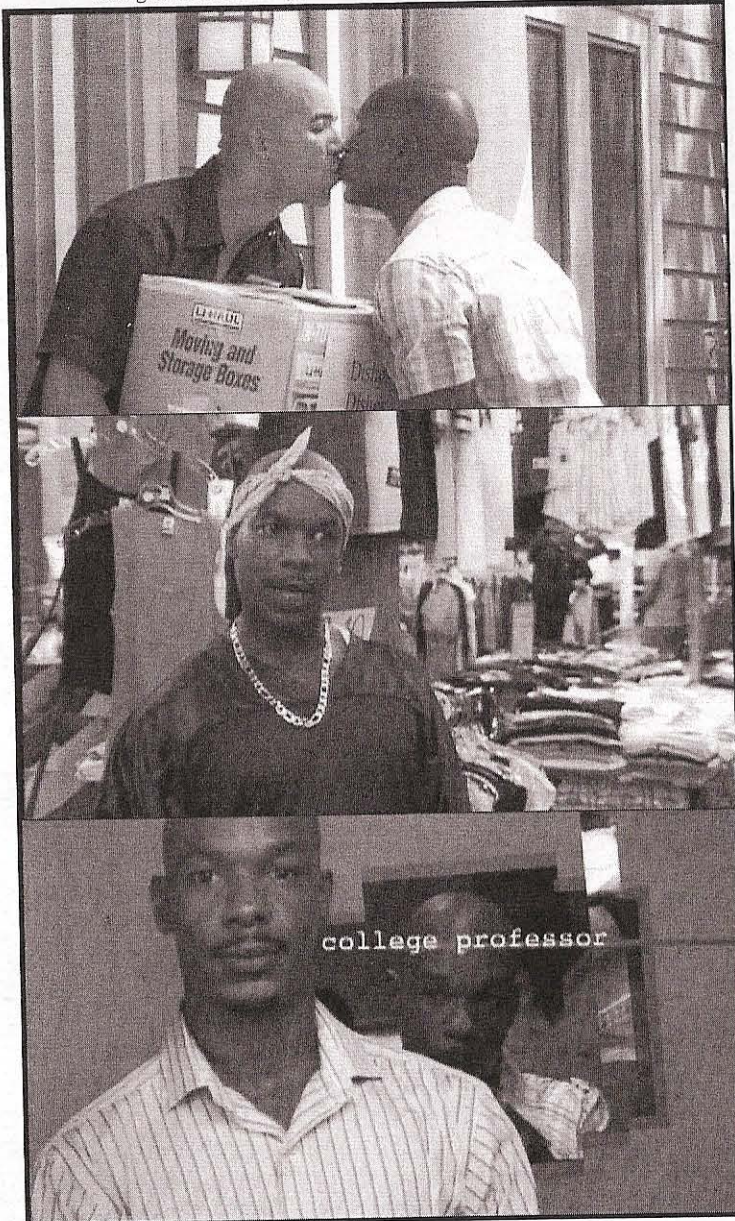
Roberto Strongman

**Sizing up the Queer Black Thug Lover:
The Down Low as Counter Discourse to Homonormativity**

Premiering in October of 2005, the Logo television series *Noah's Ark*—produced, created, and directed by Patrik-Ian Polk—focused on the lives of a small group of African-American gay men living in Los Angeles. In this “dramedy” (a hybrid genre combining both drama and comedy) there are significant filmic representations of same-sex loving black men that can be interpreted as resisting assimilation into mainstream American white gay culture. In an episode titled “Don’t Mess With my Man,” Chase, an uptight college professor, secretly follows his partner, Eddie, from their home in West Hollywood to South Central, Los Angeles to discover Eddie’s marital infidelity with a “DL thug lover.” This minor character, who remains unnamed in the series, is the paradigmatic “down low” (DL) man. He is a black man from the ghetto, who has sex with other men. However, he is not “out” because he does not consider himself gay. To upper-middle-class gay men like Eddie, this thug remains a lower-class abject who is nevertheless desired as he represents a hyper-masculine working-class ideal. Also adding to the sexual allure of the DL thug lover is the fact that he represents a fiercely independent homosexuality that resists assimilation to black and white bourgeois gay cultures. Through his resistance to homonormativity, this sexual, racial and classed subject constitutes a highly fetishized queer other, an exotic erotic. There is a need to re-appraise this subject in order to bring him from the margins and into the center of the conversation on queerness because his refusal to assimilate to in/out models of homosexuality provides an important critique to mainstream queer theories.

In order to achieve this recentering, this essay utilizes the cultural phenomenon of the down low to question the historical models of canonical queer texts that locate the transition between homosexual behavior to identity in late 19th Century Western societies. The experience of African-American men who have sex with other men and don’t consider themselves “gay” serves as an important perspective to interrogate the underlying racial assumptions of foundational Queer Studies theorists such as Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler. Because social construction is often achieved through the educational state apparatus, I am invested in the development of a counter-discursive pedagogy produced by the

Bourgeois Domesticity, Sex in the 'Hood and Sex in the City



Sex in the City vs. Sex in the 'Hood: In the Logo television series *Noah's Ark*, Black men who identify themselves as “gay” inhabit a world of bourgeois domesticity that is opposed to the licentious, yet enticing, space of the US Black neighborhood. The fact that some of the series’ characters regress to the veiled pleasures of the ‘hood for frequent sexual escapades evidences the constraints of Black assimilation to White middle-class gay mainstream culture. Images © The Logo Network

condition of the down low. As such, my argument is motivated by the need to introduce undergraduate and graduate students to these foundational theorists of mainstream Queer Studies, while at the same time making them aware of the limitations that these texts pose with respect to race and ethnicity.

My interest in the topic of the down low began in the late 1990s when I learned that the parks surrounding the Brooklyn Museum and Botanical Gardens in my neighborhood were cruising areas for homosexual African-American and Latino men who were often married or had girlfriends and did not consider themselves gay. These down low men (I could often see them from the window at my writing desk) forced me to reconsider the universalistic notions provided by my queer education. The rise of the gay subject—that English dandy embodied in Oscar Wilde’s *Dorian Gray*—was a textual image that I could not reconcile with the reality outside my window. What were the implications of a homosexuality without “coming out” or without “closets?” The down low at that point provided me with an opportunity to reconsider the limitations of a then emerging canon of Gay and Lesbian Studies. Developing a Black queer pedagogy then started to become for me a therapeutic strategy, or critical intervention, to overcome the trauma imposed by colorless “histories of sexuality” that omitted ethnicity from their theorizing.

Refusing to be named, categorized, subsumed under the title of “gay,” the down low remains decidedly a praxis whose dissident possibilities become most readily apparent in the productive ambivalence of its name. Is getting down low an urgent call to seek protective cover from academic, societal, and judicial authority? Could the DL initials stand for “double life,” or perhaps “denial?” Is it a vernacular reference to oral sex? Could “low” serve as a marker of socio-economic status? Does the redundant quality of the phrase serve to counter dominant discourses of Standard English grammar? Does the down low imply in its crudest sense that sexuality is a matter of location and not identity? Is there a verticalization of discourses of exteriority here whereby in/out becomes up/down? If there were to be a binary opposite to living on the “down low,” would it be being “upfront?”

Even as it has been a largely neglected analysis within academic circles, the phenomenon of the down low has been the object of much recent media attention. During the Spring of 2003, articles in *The New York Times* and other major national newspapers, and coverage in such television programs such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, have largely based their information on J.L. King’s influential book *On the Down low*. Certainly, this is a popular press book, not an academic one. Nevertheless, there is a need to bridge

the high and low in classrooms, and the readability of the text can make certain complex aspects of queer of color sexuality accessible to a broad reading audience, including undergraduate students. A most important feature of King's text lies in its contradictions. Even as it establishes the existence of sexual non-conformist subjects, J.L King's testimonial text, *On the Down low*, operates as an evangelical treatise that attempts to impose an in/out model on down low (also known as "DL") men via the trope of religious conversion. As such, it would appear that theoretical discourses—illustrated by Foucault, Sedgwick, and Butler—and popular discourses—like King's treatment of the DL—are determined to bring the possibly enabling transgression of the down low into compliance within racialized and historical models of what might need to be called "the homonormative," a paradigm of uniformity that furthers those elaborated by Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black*:

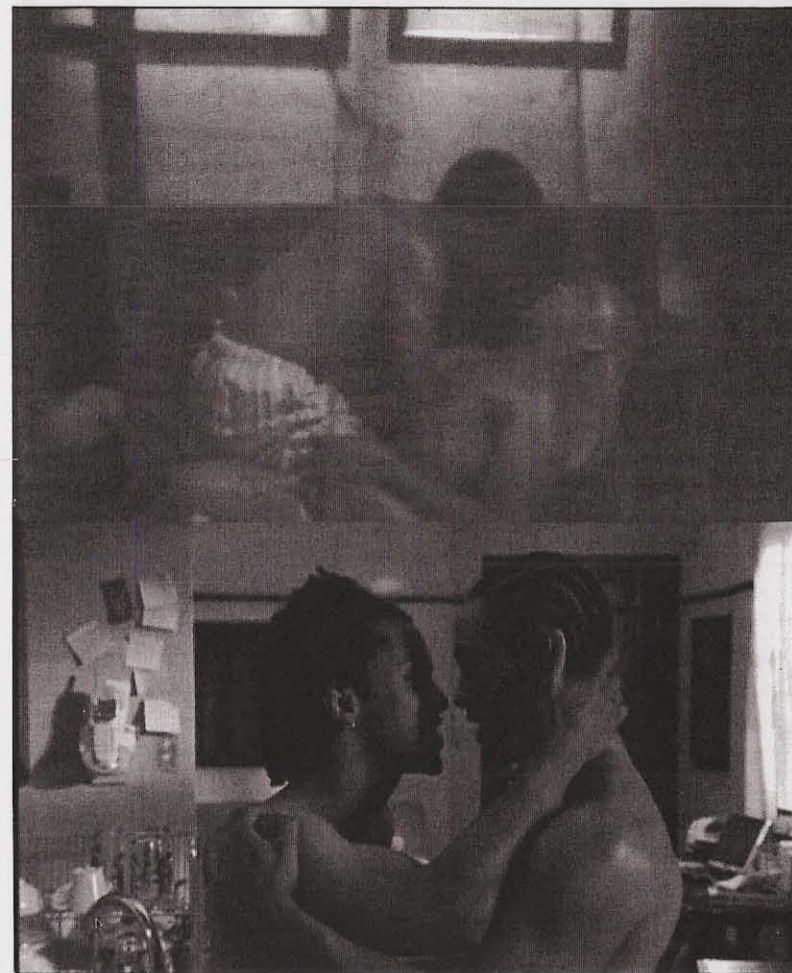
The universality of the citizen exists in opposition to the intersecting particularities that account for material existence, particularities of race, gender, class, and sexuality. As a category of universality, normative heteropatriarchy or heteronormativity exists in opposition to the particularities that constitute nonheteronormative racial formations. In this formulation, the citizen is a racialized emblem of heteronormativity whose universality exists at the expense of particularities of race, gender, and sexuality. (12)

In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz continues Ferguson's valorization of the heteronormative through a politics of disidentification:

Disidentification 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)

While both Ferguson and Muñoz see the most sinister threat to queer of color subjects as residing in hegemonic heterosexuality, my analysis calls for an exploration of the ways in which such a threat lies in assimilation to bourgeois mainstream gay culture. I propose a further study of the normativization that enables the reproductive, patriarchal heterosexuality that Ferguson

Chance as DL Thug and Chance as Professor



Chance as Professor and as DL Thug: Chance's break up with his upper middle-class lover prompts him to investigate the geography of the Down Low space, where he searches for a Black thug lover. His experiment with hip-hop and gangster language, posture, and styles provides a carnivalesque moment of transvestism and buffoonery. His passage from high to low culture is predicated on privilege and ennui. Having satisfied his curiosity and sexual cravings with a poorer, non-gay-identified black man, he returns to his bourgeois comforts, reassured of his superiority over the Down Low. The flight from his lofty station stems from an unarticulated disillusionment with "gay" identity and a deep longing to find delight in the dark, groping spaces inhabited by bodies that refuse to be defined by their pleasurable acts. Images © The Logo Network

and Muñoz critique in order to understand similar universalizing forces at work within queer communities. Homonormativity would explain various drives for homogenization within queer communities which enforce the class values of white bourgeois gay male elites onto queer others: queer people of color, gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual individuals. In addition to legitimating black invisibility within queer communities, arguably homonormativity is responsible for the condemnation of down low men within queer communities of color that we see in texts by Boykin and King as well as in the television series by Polk.

An elaboration of homonormativity as it affects black queer communities would account for the oppositional binarism in the show *Noah's Ark*. The show's protagonists are casualties of homonormativity, having succumbed to the trappings of gay mainstream culture, while the unnamed down low black thug stands as the outlaw resisting subject that my project seeks to re-appraise.

King utilizes a combination of heteronormative and homonormative discourses in order to condemn men on the down low. King valorizes Black male heterosexuality while at the same time promoting its subordination to mainstream notions of gay bourgeois sexuality. From its first pages, starting with the text's dedication where King says, "I also dedicate this book to men on the DL in hopes that looking in this mirror will be a catalyst to change," his attempt to normativize becomes clear. It is worth noting that this normativizing impetus is also apparent in Patrik-Ian Polk's *Noah's Ark* where DL men are presented as inferior to self-identified gay men. Nevertheless, King claims that black women are his primary audience, hence the preface of his dedication to DL men "also." Because the fastest growing segment of the population representing new HIV infections is heterosexual black women, King dangerously assumes that the main transmitters of HIV are black men who are functionally bisexual. In this, he is clearly reiterating Cathy Cohen's point in the black press about the troubling representation of HIV/AIDS as primarily a threat to heterosexuals (248). Rather than focusing on unprotected sex as a dangerous practice, King decides to blame these DL men as the segment of the population responsible for these rising infections among women. His deployment of the discourse of women's health as a way to locate the elusive outlaw DL subject and force him to make himself visible and accountable is indeed problematic in that it claims that the survival of one marginal group depends on the surrender of agency by another. The fact that the text has a woman, Karen Hunter, as its co-author further complicates the nexus between down low men and black women. The animosity between black men and women that the text foments betrays the claims of solidarity

inherent in the testimonial, autoethnographical authorship of the text.

The rivalry between King and another important writer of the down low, Keith Boykin, emerges in Boykin's claims that King attempted to recruit him as a ghostwriter. In his book, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex and Denial in Black America*, Boykin describes King as a mediocre writer driven by greed to find a co-author who would do most, if not all, of the work. "To listen to him on the phone, I did not get the impression that he was the most articulate communicator" (114), states Boykin. "Not only had he signed a deal that would make money for him, he had also expected that the co-author or ghostwriter of the book would make plenty of money as well" (115). The competition between the two writers is indeed founded on their simultaneous claims to a single commercial-discursive territory. Aside from Boykin's insights on the down low as a category across races in the US—illustrated in the "outing" of white New Jersey Governor James McGreevey (68)—both authors utilize similar rhetorical strategies and arrive at nearly identical conclusions regarding the down low.

Like television director Patrik-Ian Polk, J.L. King and Keith Boykin prioritize an in/out model as a standard and use this as a way to render non-conformist experiences as backward. This dangerous temporalization emplots the DL as "behind the closet" (King 20), a regressive position in relation to self-identified gay men. However problematic the linearity of this progressive developmental model might be, King uses it to discuss the complex layering of identities in multiply positioned subjects. An example of this is King's exposure of racism in the U.S. mainstream gay community. His presentation of the functioning of "gay" as a white category explains the alienation and lack of identification that gay black males feel within the mainstream gay male community. Similarly, King explains the secrecy surrounding the DL through a critique of homophobia within African-American communities. The text's treatment of the alienation from both racial and sexual communities is presented adequately, even if for the more sinister purpose of disabling the dissident power of the DL by steering it toward full assimilation into the mainstream gay rhetoric of "coming out."

King, Boykin and Polk's othering of the down low is fetishistic as it encompasses both Freud's conceptualization of the fetish as phallus substitution and Marx's notion of the abstraction of the commodity. This becomes evident in *Noah's Ark*, where the DL man in essence becomes the *commodity-as-phallus*. In the episode titled "Nothin' Going on But the Rent," Eddie confesses that his desire for the unnamed thug lover was motivated by Chase's sexual constraints imposed by his upper middle-class mores. Shortly after Eddie confesses his sexual need for an

objectified thug lover, Chase, in order to lure him back, begins to adopt the language, dress, attitude and demeanor of the ghetto down low man. Chase pays "T-Money," a down low man, for "thug lessons" that allow him to undergo a carnivalesque transposing of identities, from professor to thug. His impersonation involves wearing a headscarf, heavy jewelry, drinking booze out of a paper-bagged bottle, and learning how to roll up a blunt. In their own distinct ways, Eddie and Chase's desires for the down low display dissatisfaction with gay mainstream culture. While Eddie is sexually attracted to a DL thug and Chase merely seeks to emulate that aesthetic, both forms of desire acknowledge that the DL offers an alternative to their assimilated West Hollywood black gay lives. The objectified desire for the DL man as sexual stud and cultural prostitute constitute a fetishistic treatment of DL men by black gay men assimilated into gay mainstream culture.

The Director/Producer's brief presentation of down low sexuality works in the same manner. Patrick-Ian Polk's emphasis on the lives of upper-middle-class black gay men in effect subordinates the experience of elements of the black queer community that resist full absorption into commodified, gentrified, white gay culture. This voyeuristic perspective on lower-class black culture is one that has not gone unnoticed by the Nation of Islam, which on one occasion halted production of the filming because of complaints from blacks that a white crew was filming in their neighborhood (NPR 2006). The down low's ability to destabilize the comfort of gay mainstream cultures is particularly inconvenient for a project seeking to praise the lives of assimilated black gay men. However, the importance of the down low in African-American sexual cultures is undeniable. These competing narratives find expression in the kind of avowals and disavowals that fetishize the down low subject as a nameless, faceless threat to homonormativity.

The articulation of the down low phenomenon in texts by Boykin and King and in the television series by Polk provides critical tools with which to question the universalistic claims underwriting the foundational texts of Queer Studies. From a down low critical perspective, the histories of sexuality provided by Foucault, Sedgwick and Butler ignore race as a factor in the constitution of non-heteronormative sexualities. In *History of Sexuality*, Foucault traces the emergence of the homosexual from the disparate behaviors that constituted sodomy:

As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them.

The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. (43)

In Foucault's history, there are no national, class or racial specificities for which to account. Through the notion of the DL, students can be encouraged to question Foucault's chronology and his generalizations from the European context—in this case a London context—for the entire world. Foucault's usage of the dandy, in the image of Walter, the author of the Victorian pornographic text *My Secret Life*, as the personification of such a transitional moment can be presented as a partial and a local figure unable to speak for the entirety of sexually dissident subjects. Indeed the notion of the down low can help students question for whom Foucault's text speaks, who it omits and how this omission might be ironically fruitful for the DL subject as it enables him to escape the mechanisms of social surveillance. Yet students would still be able to profit from Foucault's exposure of the homosexual as a social construct and be exposed to his concept of "genealogies." This might imply a reconsideration of sexual alternatives to "gay" and "lesbian" models that might be more appropriate for black queers.

Following the steps of Foucault, Sedgwick asks why, out of so many sexual preferences, "precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of 'sexual orientation'" (8). Like Foucault, Sedgwick's chronology of homosexuality is not given a geography and an ethnicity, all the while remaining immersed in a white Anglo-North American worldview that is unable to see itself as particular. Students should be challenged to see beyond the givens of the text and to consider how down low sexuality has escaped the grasp of these Western histories, taking account of the pejorative and enabling possibilities of this erasure.

Foucault's "practices of confession" (58), in which he traces the birth of the talking subject through various state apparatuses, is a technique further elaborated by Sedgwick in her discussion of closetedness: "Closetedness itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourses that surrounds and differentially constitutes it" (3). Through the notion of the down low, students can be allowed to see that the silence of the closet may not necessarily acquire meaning in opposition to the category of "gay," but rather could attain this meaning

in opposition to other sexual categories that might be racially inflected. In fact, by analyzing a filmic or televisual character such as the unnamed thug lover in *Noah's Ark*, students might be able to consider how silence itself might constitute a category of sexual identity, and not the void Sedgwick purports it to be.

In fact, the radical black queer pedagogy I propose would direct students to conduct biographical research of African-American queer intellectuals in order to question the validity of in/out models on their sexual lives. Such research would reveal the limitations of "practices of confession" to the understanding of the sexual lives of African-American writers and activists. For example, what we find in queer Harlem Renaissance writers and Black Civil rights leaders is not so much an imprisoning closet as a sexual inner sanctum, a space in which internal dialogue takes precedence over declarations to the world outside. One needs only to recall James Baldwin's account of John's burgeoning queerness in *Go Tell it on the Mountain*:

John stared at Elisha all during the lesson, admiring the timbre of Elisha's voice, much deeper and manlier than his own, admiring the leanness, and grace, and strength, and darkness of Elisha in his Sunday suit, wondering if he would ever be holy as Elisha was holy. But he did not follow the lesson, and when sometimes, Elisha paused to ask John a question, John was ashamed and confused, feeling the palms of his hands become wet and his heart pound like a hammer. Elisha would smile and reprimand him gently, and the lesson would go on. (13)

John's inner conversation in the space of the Sunday school lesson at church presents us with an example of a meditative and prayerful contemplation of sexual desire rather than a closet model of enclosure/disclosure found in white coming-of-age accounts such as Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story*. Baldwin's sexual inner sanctum finds a parallel in the sexual coming-of-age that the queer writers of the Harlem Renaissance underwent at their Harlem residence and meeting place: Nigerratti Manor. A.B. Christa Schwarz in *Gay Voices of the Harlem Renaissance* notes how Claude MacKay, Countee Cullen, Richard Bruce Nugent, and Langston Hughes utilized the space of the house to come to terms with their own sexualities (12). The space of the inner sanctum, rather than the closet, is one that reappears in the depiction of forest groves in the landscapes and poetry of African-American painter and poet Richard Bruce Nugent, who

Thomas Wirth credits as "one of the reigning divas of Nigerratti Manor" (15). The inner sanctum as space of sexual knowledge is also a strong feature in the life of Martin Luther King Jr.'s advisor Bayard Rustin. His biographer, John D'Emilio, for example, makes important references to his religious-based pacifism and the undisclosed nature of his homosexuality (306). The DL and inner sanctum of African-American intellectuals are queer African-American strategies of sexual dissidence that resist white bourgeois models of sexual alterity that rely on notions of "coming out."

While Butler's refining of J.L. Austen's notion of "speech act" through her concept of "performativity" is indeed a more sophisticated notion than the closet, it nevertheless remains unexplored in terms of race. In fact, Butler declares that:

It seems crucial to resist the model of power that would set up racism and homophobia and misogyny as parallel or analogical relations. The assertion of their abstract or structural equivalence. . . misses the specific histories of their construction and elaboration. (18)

Butler's statement epitomizes the complaint that E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, the editors of the groundbreaking anthology *Black Queer Studies*, voice when they argue that "black studies has historically elided issues of (homo)sexuality and/or how queer studies has elided issues of race." What the editors and contributors of the volume fail to address, however, is how the down low demonstrates that the demand to separate the discourses of race from those of sexual orientation is unrealistic, detrimental and impossible for those on the margins of normality and respectability. A black queer pedagogy would read Butler and material about the DL in order to balance race and sexuality as indivisible categories of personhood. Indeed, Butler can be useful to understand the DL body as a body that matters, a body that performs itself, a body that names itself through its behavior, all the while refusing a concrete identity.

The cost of refusing a gay identity becomes evident in the characterization of the DL man in *Noah's Ark*. When Chase discovers his lover Eddie having sex with the unnamed thug, he crashes the minivan into the thug's house, unleashing the full force of his socioeconomic status onto someone who is already downtrodden. Since the DL man doesn't want to disclose his sexuality to the authorities, no charges are filed. While this implies that the wealthy remain legally immune to consequences of their violence, it also presents the high price the wronged man is willing to pay to maintain his down low status. That the thug successfully avoids

detection by the social and police radars through a strategy of flying down low presents a tremendous emancipatory praxis of what Julia Kristeva, in *The Powers of Horror*, calls "the abject."

In conclusion, it has been my contention that the phenomenon of the down low should force us to reconsider the continuing importance of behavior, as opposed to identity, in Queer politics. This analysis does not propose that the down low constitutes a new sodomy, but rather it is an attempt to disseminate knowledges of alternatives to Western notions of homosexuality. I suspect that the dissident potential that enabled the DL to circumvent the crystallization of sexually non-normative behaviors in 19th-Century white Euro-North America holds within it the clues to understand our current historical moment. At the Bangkok 2004 international AIDS conference, a new name emerged that began to substitute for the term "gay." Could "MSM," "Men who have sex with Men," be signaling towards an epistemic shift in which behavior, rather than identity, is, once again, the primary designator of sexuality? It would appear that in the early 21st-Century post-civil rights political climate of the U.S. "doing" is overtaking "being" as the feature defining sexual orientation, and that African-American DL men are at the forefront of this epistemic change. Could the repressed be returning to implant a new order?

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