

## ARTICLE

### **The Down Low and the Sexuality of Race**

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**ABSTRACT:** There has been much interest in the phenomenon called “the Down Low,” in which “otherwise heterosexual” African American men have sex with other black men. This essay explores the biopolitics at play in the media’s curiosity about the Down Low. The Down Low serves as a critical, transgressive heterotopia that reveals the codetermination of racism, sexism, and heterosexism in black male sexuality.

**Keywords:** Foucault, race, sexuality, biopolitics.

In this essay I offer a Foucauldian interpretation of the phenomenon in African American culture referred to as “the Down Low.” The cleanest definition of the Down Low is that it is a social scene in which otherwise heterosexual black men have sex with other men (usually also otherwise heterosexual black men). This scene came to the fore when it was (erroneously) connected at the beginning of the millennium to an alleged increase in HIV infection rates in African American *women*, the supposed “unaware” heterosexual partners of Down Low men. Although the connection turns out to be unfounded, the forces of power at play in the discussion of the Down Low have real racist, sexist, and heterosexist effects in African Americans. Any black sexual politics must keep these effects on the formation of African American identities in mind.

Of use for such mindfulness are Foucault’s philosophical methods. Foucault’s account of sexuality and race offers black sexual politics helpful tools for cutting past tradition and seeing the workings of power relations that created not only racial identities but genders and sexual orientation. The Down Low, a phenomenon that seems to stump black sexual politics, becomes clearer in light of Foucault’s work on resistance, transgression, and heterotopia.

I apologize up front for what is missing from the analysis here. Since the Down Low is discursively about black heterosexuality and the men who identify with such, this essay does not give sufficient justice to the issues facing black homosexual communities in general, nor does it address other minority cultures, cultures that are equally affected by white supremacy in both racial and sexual ways.

### Beyond Intersections to Codetermination

Cornel West says in *Race Matters* that “[e]veryone knows it is virtually impossible to talk candidly about race without talking about sex.”<sup>1</sup> Much of anti-black racism, West contends, hinges on white sexual fears and an overall taboo on sexual discourse. Foucauldian influences reveal themselves when West writes that “many white Americans still view black sexuality with disgust. And some continue to view their own sexuality with disgust. Victorian morality and racist perceptions die hard.”<sup>2</sup> In order to have any real analysis of race relations in the United States, West claims, one must look at how sexuality plays a role not only in the way white people perceive black people but also in the way black people understand themselves as sexual agents in a white supremacist world. Although West addresses questions of gender, “biological” sex, and sexual orientation, West’s main focus is on the very sexual acts themselves.

Ellen Feder makes similar comments at the beginning of her book *Family Bonds* concerning race and gender.

[I]t is by now a truism that the ways that we become boys and girls, men and women cannot be disentangled from the ways in which we become white or black men and women, Asian or Latino boys and girls. Such theoretical analyses have contributed in important ways to discussions of how gender is “raced” and how race is “gendered.” And yet, there has been little comparative analysis of the specific mechanisms that are at work in the “production” of each, that is, how they are intelligible as categories, together with the ways these categories come to make sense of us—as raced and gendered human beings.<sup>3</sup>

One cannot talk, for example about how one becomes a woman (in terms of the social construction of gender) without also taking into consideration the race of the one becoming a woman. Feder believes that race and gender cannot be disentangled from each other, whereas West seems to suggest that sex is something different than race, although a needed element in order to analyze race relations.

Ladelle McWhorter writes in her *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America* that race and sexuality cannot be treated as separate, discrete things. Agreeing with Feder’s claim above yet going beyond the focus on gender, McWhorter adds sexual orientation to the discussion of race.

It is simply impossible to understand racism in the United States without some understanding of how sexuality functions to normalize individuals and regulate populations. It is impossible to understand sexism or heterosexism in the United States without some

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<sup>1</sup> Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 120.

<sup>2</sup> West, 122. The Foucauldian influence lies in the account of Victorian sexuality at the opening of *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* (New York: Vintage, 1978), 3.

<sup>3</sup> Ellen K. Feder, *Family Bonds: Genealogies of Race and Gender* (New York: Oxford, 2007), 3.

understanding of how race functions to humanize and dehumanize individuals and to produce and reproduce populations. But *race and sexuality are not merely mutually influential. They are historically codependent and mutually determinative. Approaching them separately therefore insures that we will miss their most important features.* Yet that is just what most people do—even some of the most sophisticated and thoughtful of theorists.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike West, McWhorter denies that there is “race,” “gender,” or “sexual orientation” by themselves. Race, gender, and sexual orientation are nodes in one and the same *dispositif* of power relations.

Although race, gender, and sexual orientation are indeed constantly codetermined, each is capable of being strategically used without paying proper attention to its companions. This is precisely what has happened in both the academic literature and the activism outside of the academy. McWhorter offers a genealogy of the political relationship between blacks and the LGBT community as an example of how the battle for civil rights for one group may not (nor need not) match the civil rights battle of another group.<sup>5</sup> Yet, nonetheless, we must be aware of the arrangement of power that makes both groups subjugated to the dominant (in this case, racist and heterosexist) discourse. This lack of attention is not an accident, nor is it anyone’s fault. The movement of power, Foucault reminds us, “is tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms.”<sup>6</sup> Power prefers that one look at race exclusively while gender and sexual orientation rest on the periphery, or that one look at gender, etc. As Feder writes, “the chiasmic production of racial and sexual difference is concealed by discursive attention to the operation of a single category of difference that appears narratively to exclude, or at least push aside, the other.”<sup>7</sup>

The lesson to be learned here is that codetermination might be the best way to Foucauldianly approach the question of the “intersection” of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Both Feder and McWhorter make compelling cases for such approach. On the one hand, this approach is difficult given the way power seeks to obscure its own operations. Yet, on the other hand, “in moving our gaze from one to the other we can nevertheless make each visible—and more: We can become aware of the ways that each shapes the other and of the way in which the evidence of this shaping itself fades away.”<sup>8</sup> Some objects of analysis will be easier to move one’s gaze around than others. McWhorter gives us an archaeological account of normalization as the site from which race, sexism, and heterosexism emerge. Feder does a genealogy of the modern family. In this article I will not be able to articulate neither an adequate archaeology nor a sufficient genealogy of the Down

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<sup>4</sup> Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington: Indiana, 2009), 14-15 (emphasis mine).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-28.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1; An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 86.

<sup>7</sup> Feder, *Family Bonds*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

Low, but I believe that the Down Low provides us with yet another place to “see” race, gender, and sexual orientation in one fell swoop.

### The Biopolitics of Sex and Race

Foucault’s writings give us great strategies for approaching the question of race and sexuality (incorporating gender and sexual orientation as well as sexual acts). Both race and sexuality are strategies that emerge from a new kind of power arrangement called “biopower.” In *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, the emphasis is more on sexuality. In the 1975-76 “*Society Must Be Defended*,” the emphasis is more on race. Against the older *dispositif* of sovereignty, Foucault presents the notion of *biopower*. Biopower is a new possibility of power that emerged at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Whereas sovereign power exercised the right “to take life or let live,” biopower “foster[ed] life or disallowed it to the point of death.”<sup>9</sup> There are two kinds of biopower that Foucault describes. There is disciplinary power, a power that Foucault describes as “an anatomo-politics of the human body,” and there is regulatory power, which is “a bio-politics of the population.”<sup>10</sup> Foucault presents his view of race almost exclusively in terms of regulatory power or biopolitics.

Foucault tells us that biopolitics is not merely interested in the disciplinary production of docile bodies, but also “the ratio of births to deaths, the rate of reproduction, the fertility of the population... the birth rate, the mortality rate, longevity... together with a whole series of related economic and political problems.”<sup>11</sup> Biopolitics did not replace discipline but complemented it: biopolitics extends the power of control over bodies to whole populations, not just the “body of the condemned.”

From the eighteenth century onward (or at least the end of the eighteenth century onward) we have, then, two technologies of power which were established at different times and which were superimposed. One technique was disciplinary; it centers on the body, produces individualizing effects, and manipulates the body as a source of forces that have been rendered both useful and docile. And we also have a second technology which is centered not upon the body but upon life: a technology which brings together the mass effects characteristic of a population, which tries to control the series of random events that can occur in a living mass, a technology which tries to predict the probability of those events (by modifying it, if necessary), or at least to compensate for their effects. This is a technology which aims to establish a sort of homeostasis, not by training individuals, but by achieving an overall equilibrium that protects the security of the whole from internal dangers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 138.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 139. It seems that most commentators use “biopolitics” and “biopower” interchangeably; others reserve “biopower” strictly for the counterpart to disciplinary power. I prefer to think of discipline and biopolitics as forms of biopower.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*,” *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, translated by David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 243.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

This new power will not seek to absolutely control the actions of each and every individual. It is more efficient to govern based on rates: birth rate, crime rate, disease rate, and death rate. A population would be well-governed, for example, if the crime rate was not increasing, or if the murder rate stayed low. Of course, certain sectors of the population might have higher crime rates than other sectors, but as long as the overall average crime rate was flat or slightly decreasing, all would be considered well.<sup>13</sup>

Sexual acts, Foucault states, are prime candidates for consideration given their ability to be used in both disciplinary power and biopolitics. One's own sexual practices can be the target of surveillance or discipline, but they can also become statistical fodder for the marriage, fertility, and birth rates of a given population. As Foucault tells us, "[s]ex was a means of access both to the life of the body and the life of the species. It was employed as a standard for the disciplines and as a basis for regulations."<sup>14</sup> Since one's own sexual practices affected the overall population in the future, disciplinary control of the sexual body increased and new concerns about the sexual health of the population emerged. Since diseases could be hereditarily passed on to subsequent generations (the problem of degeneration), sex "represented the precise point where the disciplinary and the regulatory, the body and the population, are articulated."<sup>15</sup> One had to be vigilant about one's sexuality (sexual acts, gender performance, and sexual desires or orientation) because it not only affected one's own health but the overall health of the population and its future generations. In this sense, populations are forced to "live": they must act in such a way so as not to jeopardize the health and longevity of future generations.

If sexuality names the strategy of biopower that forces certain people to "live," then race serves as the arrangement of power that allows certain people to "die." Foucault tells us in *"Society Must Be Defended"* that the modern configuration of racism is no longer an antagonism against foreign enemies or simply an aesthetic dislike of people with different physical features. It is instead a decision about who can "die," whose crime and mortality rates can be higher, whose actions need less (positive) vigilance since they do not "count" in the overall judgment of the population. Foucault gives us a clear definition of modern racism:

What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die... It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely so, as races.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Foucault flushes out these methods in the 1976-1977 lecture course *Security, Territory, Population*.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, 146.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *"Society Must be Defended,"* 252.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 254-255.

Races will be classified in terms of those worth preserving and those not worth preserving. The races not worth preserving will have powers applied to them such that, in their dying, the “living” of the race worth preserving will be not only preserved but augmented. The death of the subrace is seen as helping the main race live and thrive: “the death of the other, the death of the bad race, of the inferior race (or the degenerate, or the abnormal) is something that will make life in general healthier ... the enemies who have to be done away with are not adversaries... they are threats... to the population.”<sup>17</sup> Nazism is Foucault’s key example of power seeing to it that one group of the population lives (the Germans and Aryans) while ensuring that another group of the population dies (the Jews, Slavs, mentally ill, physically disabled, homosexuals, and political dissidents). These people must die in order to preserve the very life of the former. Although the Nazi regime is an example everyone will perhaps agree with, Foucault is not afraid to remind us that socialism can be equally problematic insofar as one of its goals is to control life and death by means of social programs.<sup>18</sup>

My phrase “the sexuality of race” refers to the fact that racism is not merely about “not liking” someone from a different ethnic background. Racism is intimately connected to and codetermined with questions of birthrate, disease, abnormality, and degeneracy. It is important to note as a corollary that racism affects everyone insofar as everyone is placed into two biopolitical groups: the ones who must live (and are therefore forced to live by means of disciplinary controls to promote “good hygiene”) and those who are allowed to die (and are therefore forced out of life by means of disciplinary controls such as the police, the prison, the asylum, the concentration camp, etc.). In the United States, white people have the “burden” of preserving “the race” against abnormal risks that could lead to degeneracy. Non-whites are deemed degenerate, so no one is overly nervous about whether crime rates are going up in *those* neighborhoods (as long as it does not spill into *our* neighborhood). After all, those people are allowed to die.

### **The Down Low “Crisis”: King vs. Boykin**

There are many ways to approach the topic of the Down Low. The phrase “on the down low” is not a new phrase; it means that whatever is being done is being done in secret or “under the table.” In black culture, the phrase usually refers to secret sexual affairs. In recent years, however, the term refers to a variety of things, all of which are associated with a particular secret sexual life: black men who have sex with other black men while living otherwise “heterosexual” lives. The Down Low is the sexual activity that takes place; it is also “where” such activity happens. Additionally, it is a discursive concept, one that broke onto the national consciousness and connected race and sex together in a way that fortified long-standing racist and heterosexist views. In this section, I focus on the discursive concept. In later sections, I will address what I take to be some interesting facts about the

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 255-256.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 261.

Down Low from the Foucauldian point of view: the Down Low as an act of transgression and as a kind of heterotopia that could serve as a space of resistance against racism and heterosexism.

There is only one true investigative book on the Down Low worth citing in an academic article: Keith Boykin's *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America*. Boykin, a gay black journalist and writer, provides a history and strategic map of the Down Low discussion. Without citing Foucault or even claiming to have been influenced by Foucault, Boykin gives us a brief archaeology and a sufficiently strong genealogy of the Down Low. The book presents what Boykin takes to be all the major moves of discourse and the forces of power that used and misused the Down Low phenomenon. Boykin's motive for writing the book was to respond to J. L. King's bestselling book *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep With Men*. King's book was the book that, once the press caught wind of it (including an appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*), brought the Down Low "to the surface." King, who at the time of writing the book was still unsure of his sexual orientation (although he has more recently "come out" as a bisexual man), sensationally describes his interactions with men on the Down Low and provides suggestions for women about how to figure out whether one's partner is secretly on the Down Low. The primary audience for the book is African American women. Nothing in the book generalizes the story to other racial groups. For King, the Down Low is exclusively black. Since he was the one to write about it, King is often treated as an "expert" in this area.

King does not equate the Down Low with homosexuality or even bisexuality, although his definition of the Down Low suggests it. He lists four non-Down Low sexual orientations for black men. First, there are gay men who "are over there—far away from them [Down Low men]. Gays march in parades, hang out at gay clubs, go to gay beaches. Gay people may even attend gay churches. They may have the gay flag on their homes and cars."<sup>19</sup> Next there are closeted gay men, men who are gay but not public about their sexual orientation. Third, there are bisexuals, who King describe as those who "want it all" and "may suggest that a third party join them" in sexual activities.<sup>20</sup> Finally, there are straight men, "(a.k.a. heterosexuals), who I believe are in the majority. A straight man would never look twice at another man."<sup>21</sup>

The Down Low man, King describes, is "behind the closet... These brothers don't even want to be called DL [Down Low]. They will not openly admit their desires for men. Even if caught in bed with another man, a DL man will deny that anything homosexual is going on. He will blame it on drugs, liquor, the lack of sex from his woman, depression, his weakness, or the need for attention."<sup>22</sup> In King's account, the Down Low is simply the

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<sup>19</sup> J. L. King, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men*, with Karen Hunter (New York: Harlem Moon, 2004), 19.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

denial of what he presents as the homosexual impulse. Yet King does not want to equate the Down Low to homosexuality or bisexuality. He points this out in terms of popular culture and depictions of black (sexual) masculinity:

When you think of gay, you think of RuPaul or '70s singer Sylvester or Blaine and Antoine, the very feminine critics in "Men on Film" from *In Living Color*. *That's gay*. You can be a big, buffed pro-football player or a critically acclaimed actor, but if you tell anyone that you sleep with men, all your accomplishments go out the window. You become the gay football player or the gay actor...

There have been several white movie stars, athletes, politicians, and business leaders who have come out, and continue to do their job without the backlash. It's a helluva lot easier for white folks to accept homosexuality, because they have their "out" Elton Johns and Ellens, their *Queer as Folk* and *Will and Grace*. They're not tripping. Could a famous, popular black athlete ever come out like the Olympic diver Greg Louganis did and get the same treatment? I don't think so.<sup>23</sup>

As one can see, King uses both racist and heterosexist views in order to describe homosexuality in general and black homosexuality in particular. For King, black people cannot be both black and gay. His examples of gay black men show this: he presents two drag queens and two fictional characters. Meanwhile, his examples of white gay people only include the characters of *Will and Grace*; the rest are living famous people. King suggests that black people feel differently about homosexuality than whites. For King, homosexuality overrules any claims of black manhood: "If they [Down Low men] tell the truth and say they're gay or bisexual, they will be called a 'fag.' That's the worse word you can call a black man. When a man is called a fag, it hurts. It basically strips away your manhood. You're saying I'm less than a man."<sup>24</sup>

The main thrust of King's book is to discourage Down Low behavior due to his claim that the alleged increase of HIV infection rate in African American women was due to black women contracting HIV from Down Low sexual partners. The message of the book is that Down Low men need to "come out" so as to no longer be involved in risky behavior that puts black women at risk. Women should likewise become "Down Low detectives" and try to figure out if their partners have any homosexual inkling. Women will have to do this, King argues, because "DL men look at themselves as invincible, strong black men. They ain't catching that 'gay disease.' When you talk about HIV and AIDS to them, you're talking about those limp-wristed people."<sup>25</sup> Men on the Down Low do not consider themselves to be gay and therefore do not see AIDS as something that affects them. King

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21-22. Cf. Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 82. He quotes a gay hip-hop club attendee who says, "Straight-up homies, niggaz, and thugz can do whatever they want. You can walk through projects and be gay. But you can't walk through the project and be a faggot."

<sup>25</sup> King, *On the Down Low*, 26.

finishes the book by encouraging (black) churches to be more accepting of homosexuality so that men would not have to live on the Down Low out of fear of religious condemnation.

Boykin's book seeks to present the facts about AIDS in the African-American population and show that the whole interest in the Down Low that has emerged recently was a ploy of sensational journalism and J. L. King's desire for money and fame. The data Boykin presents clearly shows that there is no correlation between AIDS rates in African American women and men on the Down Low. His critique of King is personal: King asked Boykin to be the ghostwriter of *On the Down Low* (allegedly) because it would make a lot of money for them (and it did, especially since black women bought the book and it was featured on *Oprah*). The media ate up King's story and made him the "spokesperson" for the Down Low, allowing them to put a face on their story. Boykin critiques this willingness to be a spokesperson, writing that "a few opportunistic blacks are all too willing to tell white America exactly what they want to hear about us [black people]... [W]hite America is all too willing to publicize and promote controversial black figures who are severely ill-informed."<sup>26</sup> Boykin spends a lot of the middle chapters of the book discrediting King's claims, telling personal anecdotes about meeting King and what others thought of King's efforts. Boykin writes that "[t]he worse part of the down low story is that it is being promoted by a black man who is using America's fear of black men to advance his own agenda."<sup>27</sup>

Boykin's main argument, however, is not about King, nor is it really about the Down Low proper. The book shows that the HIV infection rate among African Americans—both men and women—has been too high, even back in 1982 when AIDS first came onto the public scene. According to Boykin, the Centre for Disease Control (CDC) reported that 23 percent of initial AIDS cases were African American and that 50 percent of all women with AIDS were African American by 1986.<sup>28</sup> This data shows that the crisis predates the hoopla surrounding the Down Low at the beginning of the millennium. By 1995, the CDC claimed that black people made up the majority of new AIDS infections.<sup>29</sup> Yet, even though it was clear then that African Americans were most affected by AIDS, the news media said nothing. Then, in 2001, a scandalous statistic was reported. It was claimed that one in every three young black gay men was HIV positive, although the study should not have been counted as valid since it did not apply evenly across cultures, states, and cities.<sup>30</sup> Only then did interest peak. Using an (albeit false) statistic about black gay men, racist views emerged about not only black gay men but black men in general. Black men are depicted as disease carriers, now not just of moral diseases (degeneracy, feeble-mindedness, etc.) but of AIDS. Since men on the Down Low sleep with these AIDS-infected black gay men, they would become infected and pass AIDS to their female sexual partners, hence the large

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<sup>26</sup> Keith Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low: Sex, Lies, and Denial in Black America* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 2005), 77-78.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

number of black women with AIDS. Boykin points out, rightly, that this conclusion should have never been drawn. J. L. King became the Ubuesque spokesperson for the Down Low,<sup>31</sup> and the Down Low as a biopolitical threat was established.

Meanwhile, it turns out, the number of black female AIDS cases has decreased over time,<sup>32</sup> but that fact was not reported. The story, Boykin argues, was just too good. Boykin protests such media frenzy over false data, writing that:

[t]he same energy that had been spent on uncovering a story that wasn't there could have been spent on breaking down stereotypes by showing black gay and bisexual men who were in healthy relationships, or exposing the problem in the assumption that all blacks are straight and all gays are white, or educating the public about how to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Apparently, those stories were not as exciting.<sup>33</sup>

The truth of the matter, Boykin claims, is that the media has no interest in presenting healthy black same-sex relationships. By not doing so, we are able to catch a glimpse of the discursive strategy in American discourse: black men are only of interest if they are heterosexual rapists or, in this case, carriers of AIDS.

Unlike King, who promotes a countermovement of fear and distrust in response to the Down Low, Boykin gives "clinical" answers: safe sex, regular HIV testing for those involved in risky sexual and drug-related lifestyles, and open dialogue about sex in America. For Boykin, the hoopla surrounding the Down Low reveals a kind of denial, but not a denial of one's sexual orientation. Instead, the Down Low shows us that there is a denial about our sexual lives and the need to think about sex in terms of our health. For example, if condom usage increased across America, the spread of HIV would be drastically reduced regardless of the promiscuity of any particular sexual partner. Additionally, black people need to stop believing that they are somehow immune to HIV, as if only white people or flamboyant homosexuals contract the disease.

### **The Down Low as Transgression**

I now turn to two Foucauldian possibilities of thinking about the Down Low. I present these possibilities as positive movements, although I am in no way condoning the layer of deception involved with the Down Low lifestyle. This analysis hopes that there is a way for the Down Low to exist without black men entering into what appears to be monogamous heterosexual relationships with non-suspecting women. As Boykin says, sexual honesty

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<sup>31</sup> "Ubuesque" here refers to *Roi Ubu*, an Alfred Jarry play. Foucault uses the term in his discussion of the grotesque in the 1974-1975 lecture course *Abnormal* to refer to a power that is instantly discredited, although life and death itself is determined by that power: Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975*, edited by Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003), 6, 35-6.

<sup>32</sup> Boykin, *Beyond the Down Low*, 106.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

and safe sexual practices will go a long way in fighting the negative consequences of Down Low behavior.

What if one were to see the Down Low as a particular kind of critique of race and sexuality in the United States? We get hints of such a critique in James Baldwin's essay "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood." In this article written for *Playboy*, Baldwin describes something like the Down Low (without race being an explicit factor) back in the 1960's, pre-family-friendly Times Square:

There were the stores, mainly on Sixth Avenue, that sold "girlie" magazines. These magazines were usually to be found at the back of the store, and I don't so much remember them as I remember the silent men who stood there. They stood, it seemed, for hours, with the magazines in their hands and a kind of miasma in their eyes. There were all kinds of men, mostly young, and, in those days, almost exclusively white. Also, for what it's worth, they were heterosexual, since the images they studied, at crotch level, were those of women.<sup>34</sup>

This heterosexual scene changes, however, once one is in the restroom. Baldwin does not challenge the men's heterosexuality but instead states a truth about American society:

These men, so far from being or resembling faggots, looked and sounded like the vigilantes who banded together on weekends to beat faggots up... These men looked like cops, football players, soldiers, sailors, Marines or bank presidents, admen, boxers, construction workers; they had wives, mistresses and children. I sometimes saw them in other settings—in, as it were, the daytime. Sometimes they spoke to me, sometimes not, for anguish has many days and styles. But I had first seen them in the men's room, sometimes on their knees, peering up into the stalls, or standing at the urinal stroking themselves, staring at another man, stroking, and with this miasma in their eyes. Sometimes, eventually, inevitably, I would find myself in bed with one of these men, *a despairing and dreadful conjunction*, since their need was as relentless as quicksand and as impersonal... At bottom, what I had learned was that the male desire for a male roams everywhere, avid, desperate, unimaginably lonely, culminating often in drugs, piety, madness or death. It was also dreadfully like watching myself at the end of a long, slow-moving line: Soon I would be next. All of this was very frightening. It was lonely and impersonal and demeaning.<sup>35</sup>

This "despairing and dreadful conjunction" is the American ideal of manhood, which, he claims, not only grounds the American ideal of sexuality but also the American ideal of race. This ideal of manhood "created cowboys and Indians, good guys and bad guys, punks and studs, tough guys and softies, butch and faggot, black and white."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James Baldwin, "Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood," in Toni Morrison, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: The Library of America, 1998), 820.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 820-821 (emphasis mine).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 815.

Baldwin's tale is about how his homosexuality saved him from such an ideal of manhood, which in turn helped him deal with the racist forces that operated upon his black body. He discusses his relationships with white women as relationships that made his race come to the forefront: white girls "found a black boy to sleep with because she wanted to humiliate her parents."<sup>37</sup> In the gay scene, however, Baldwin was not forced into his racialized role, and more than often was saved from racist violence by gay white men. The gay scene allowed Baldwin a mild respite from the heterosexist and sexist expectations of his blackness, although "in the daytime" those expectations returned in full: He was often beaten up for being both black and gay, primarily by those who at night were his lovers.

Baldwin writes that "all of the American categories of male and female, straight or not, black or white, were shattered, thank heaven, very early in my life. Not with anguish, certainly; but once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself."<sup>38</sup> For Baldwin, being black and gay offered a living critique of America's understanding of masculinity and race. Just as white women could have sex with black men, in secret, as a form of resistance against their own female heterosexual whiteness, men could have sex with other men, in secret, as a form of resistance against their own heterosexual masculinity. Homosexuality for Baldwin is that which shatters superficial orderings of people. Ironically, homosexuality is presented as a solution for America's *race* problem.

The Down Low offers a similar possibility. The Down Low transgresses white supremacy in both its racist and heterosexist forms. It complicates the clean categories of sexual orientation by resisting the dominant discourse of the closet in exchange for a highly-nuanced network of black bodies and pleasures. After all, there are gay black men, black men who challenge heterosexist assumptions on male bodies (and even on black male bodies). It is tempting to make the Down Low fit the model of resistance already at work in the LGBT community. It might be more interesting, however, to not do so, and allow the Down Low to be its own form of critique. If Baldwin presents homosexuality as a solution for America's *race* problem, perhaps the Down Low can serve as a solution to both America's *race* and *sexuality* problem by divorcing the question of sexual act and sexual partner from the question of (external) gender and race roles.

### **The Down Low as Critical Heterotopia**

Could the Down Low also be considered as a site that criticizes American racism and heterosexism while nonetheless "residing" inside of such strategies? Foucault's notion of heterotopias could be of use in this regard. Foucault's essay "Different Spaces" gives us the following description of heterotopias:

There are also, a probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places, actual places that are designed into the very institution of society, which are sorts of actually realized

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 824.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 819.

utopias in which the real emplacements, all the other real emplacements that can be found within the culture are, at the same time, represented, contested, and reversed, sorts of places that are outside all places, although they are actually localizable.<sup>39</sup>

I want to claim that the Down Low can be understood as a heterotopic space in which real blackness, masculinity, and even heterosexuality can come together to have sex with men in a way that contests and reverses the biopolitical strategies placed upon black masculine bodies. The Down Low is a “different space” compared to the societal ordering that forces black bodies to be heterosexual, regardless of any given black man’s sexual activities.

Foucault outlines six features that describe heterotopias. First, “there is probably not a single culture in the world that does not establish heterotopias.”<sup>40</sup> Every culture has that space for transgressions to the power arrangement, hence the constant possibility of freedom against domination). Second, “the same heterotopia can have one operation or another, depending on the synchrony of the culture in which it is found.”<sup>41</sup> As mentioned above, the Down Low has referred to different kinds of secret sexual affairs at different times. The third characteristic of heterotopias, that they have “the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves,”<sup>42</sup> is well demonstrated by the Down Low. The Down Low is a site for (otherwise) “straight” men who have sex with other men but are not—contrary to the dominant discourse’s demand that anyone who sleeps with members of the same sex to be homosexual or bisexual—“gay.” The Down Low presents itself as a sexual contradiction in a way that being in the closet does not. It is almost as if the Down Low welcomes and savors the contradiction in a way that closeted gay life does not.

The fourth feature of heterotopias is that “heterotopias are connected with temporal discontinuities.”<sup>43</sup> Insofar as a man on the Down Low lives an otherwise heterosexual life, their life moves in accordance to heterosexual time (e.g., adolescence, dating, marriage, family, etc.). Yet the Down Low is discontinuous with this sexual temporality insofar as the sexual activities involved do not have to obey the same timeline (one can be married in heterosexual life yet single on the Down Low, or one can be unattached in heterosexual life yet attached on the Down Low). Fifth, “heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time.”<sup>44</sup> The Down Low, for its private nature, is quite public. One finds the Down Low present in public spaces: gyms, churches, non-gay clubs, and “public” websites like Craigslist and Ashley Madison (which perpetuates the old sense of “Down Low” as well with its slogan “Life’s too short. Have an affair.”) Finally, Foucault notes that heterotopias “have a function in

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces,” in Robert Hurley (trans.), and James Faubion (ed.), *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology: Essential Works of Foucault (1954-1984), Vol. 2* (New York: New Press, 1998), 178.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

relation to the remaining space.”<sup>45</sup> The Down Low is directly connected to the racial and sexual spaces occupied by black male bodies. These spaces have been constructed so that black male bodies are constituted and understood in terms of heterosexuality. Only on the Down Low can these men keep every piece of the puzzle together: blackness, masculinity, and heterosexual societal expectations.

The Down Low is only one of many heterotopias in the black community. Black people have many different “different spaces” that resist and critique the white supremacy that exerts force on their non-white bodies. What unites them all is the Foucauldian fact that power is everywhere. The omnipresence of power does not automatically imply domination, but it does mean that every place could be classified in terms of domination or resistance. Some places in black society seem to reinforce racist power: prisons, churches (in some cases), liquor stores, check-cashing stores, etc. Other places, however, critique such forces: juke joints and other music venues, churches (as sites of community organizing and social resistance), Afrocentric pageants and festivals (including, for example, Kwanzaa, a holiday that few non-blacks understand as a critique of white supremacy), and, in this case, the Down Low.

Although heterotopias critique strategies of power that are prevalent in a given space and time, one must not forget that even heterotopias are mirrors of the very power that they critique. Robert J. Topinka points out this fact in a recent essay on Foucauldian heterotopias:

Critics who argue that heterotopias offer the possibility of resistance often refer to these spaces as counter-sites, and Foucault does describe a contestation enacted by heterotopias... Yet these formulations will not shed the dominant order. To be sure, such a confrontation offers the possibility of irritating dominant forms of order, but any new knowledge formations will emerge with the imprints of both hegemonic and heterotopic space... Heterotopias reconstitute knowledge, presenting a view of its structural formation that might not otherwise be visible.<sup>46</sup>

The Down Low indeed critiques heterosexist, sexist, and racist forces, but these very forces are the forces at play in the Down Low. In this sense, the Down Low, although subversive, acknowledges the forces that it mocks, even to the point of building resistance out of the very same forces that would eliminate the Down Low. It is honest to say that most black men on the Down Low are not explicitly formulating their activity in terms of critique of dominant discourse. That fact, however, does not matter, for resistance to power does not require explicit formulation. The goal of the Foucauldian is to make such resistance explicit in terms of power relations (which is being attempted here).

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 184

<sup>46</sup> Robert J. Topinka, “Foucault, Borges, Heterotopia: Producing Knowledge in Other Spaces,” *Foucault Studies*, No. 9 (2010), 60.

### **Beyond the Down Low?**

In conclusion, the Down Low offers us an interesting heterotopic space in which to think about the movement of biopower. While some work has already happened, more work needs to be done in order to think about and critique the heterosexist and racist forces that play on black bodies. Keeping with Foucault's main methodological divisions (archaeology, genealogy, and ethics), I offer a brief task list. Although these tasks focus on black people, people of all races, genders, and sexual orientations could find new possibilities of resistance and critique by examining the strategies of biopower at play in the constitution of contemporary subjectivity.

The archeological project would be to formulate the historical *a priori* of discourses on black sexuality. This would require a history of the shift in theories of race as well as the advent of modern sexuality (Foucault already begins to outline these in "*Society Must Be Defended*" and *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*). The archaeology would need to explore the discursive objects (black bodies, sex drives, "blood", etc.), enunciative functions (are they medical? juridical? religious?), concepts (degeneracy, polygenesis, evolution, hypersexuality, etc.), and strategies (economic, political, social, religious) that created the discursive space in which black people were so radically defined in terms of sex (compared to other minority cultures).

The genealogical project would require a mapping out of the racial and sexual apparatuses deployed on black bodies, especially more work on prisons and schools, along with possible heterotopias. Extra attention would need to be devoted to how white supremacy achieves some of its racist ends by having blacks fight against blacks on sexual issues like homosexuality and interracial relationships. One would also need to explore how blacks monitored their own race and sexuality out of a sense of self-discipline (panopticism). In other words, is the Down Low truly a heterotopia in response to white supremacy, or is it a self-imposed carceral system used to "hide" "abnormal" styles of blackness? A deeper look into black sexual politics would be required.

The ethical question requires an examination of problematizations and practices of the self in response to white supremacy. What kinds of black person can one become in light of the racism and heterosexism that defines blackness at this moment of history? What are the possibilities of resistance and freedom? Should blackness be embraced as a cultural identity or abandoned as a historically contingent machination of biopower?

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