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## Why All the Limp Wrists? Black Gay Male Representation and Masculinity in Film

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**Abstract:** Building on scholarship about black masculinity and white gay men in film, my research explores the representation of black gay males and their masculinity in film. Too often these men and their identities are presented in one-dimensional ways on screen which can negatively narrow an audience's view of real life black gay men. Scholars have looked at black masculinity and white gay men in film but few have looked at black gay men in film. This research fills that gap by opening up new avenues in which this topic can be discussed. The purpose of this research is not to present a correct representation of black gay men but to instead analyze these representations and give audiences a different angle through which to view these characters and the men they represent. Fourteen films made between 1976 and 2014 will be analyzed according to how gay black male characters are stereotypically represented, as will the tone of each film relating to its characters. The concept of intersectionality will be used to analyze these films. Intersectionality is the study of oppression through the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality. I use this as a lens through which to analyze the intersecting identities present in the films. Three central themes were formed from the analyses of the films: masculinity wins, masculinity as an artifice, and more human portrayals of black gay men. Using the three themes as vantage points, I hope to challenge the ways film represents the identities of black gay men and ultimately open readers' minds to a new way of thinking about these men and their masculinity, allowing these men to be seen in a more human light.

**Keywords:** *black gay men, masculinity, intersectionality*

The media possesses a lot of influence over society as a whole. Film is no exception to that. Often, people are influenced by what they see on screen. Too often in film, the people seen on screen do not reflect the people they represent. If a group of people are repeatedly represented in a certain way on screen, it will not only negatively influence an audience's perception on them but that group's own perception of themselves. A large number of films that contain black gay men constantly portray them in the same light: weak, submissive, and most of all, effeminate. By making the black gay man a stereotype, this characterization further oppresses an already marginalized group and makes audiences ignorant to the different identities of these men.

When gay black men are purported to be an effeminate stereotype, this stereotype completely disregards that gay black men can be masculine as well. Representations of black gay men and their masculinity, when displayed on film, can really shape how audiences view this group. I have viewed fourteen films, each containing black gay male characters (see Appendix A). This research

is not aiming to find an accurate representation of black gay men. Since these men have multiple identities, an "accurate" representation may not exist. The primary aim of this research is to analyze black gay men in film, their masculinity, how certain film portrayals of black gay men can affect an audience's view of not only the characters they see on screen but their real life counterparts, and how these analyses can help audiences view these men in a more human light.

The theory of intersectionality will be used as a lens through which to analyze the intersecting identities present in the fourteen films. Intersectionality is the study of oppression through race, class, gender, and sexuality and how these categories affect—inform and transform—each other. It is important to use it as a point of analysis because the gay black man is a walking intersectional identity. They are racially oppressed because they are black and not white. They are oppressed because their sexuality does not correspond with the dominant sexual orientation, which is heterosexuality. And though they are men, they are black men, which does not make them as nearly as privileged as white men. As

Marlon Riggs says, “Blacks are inferior because they are not white; Black Gays are unnatural because they are not straight. Majority representations of both affirm the view that Blackness and Gayness constitute a fundamental rupture in the order of things, that our very existence is an affront to nature and humanity” (Riggs 391). As a gay black man himself, Riggs experienced first-hand what his and other black gay men’s presence does to society. These stereotypes of black gay men can be a way to patch up this so-called rupture in society by confining black gay men to a certain image, one that does not give them any room to express other identities.

Using masculinity as a connection to the intersection of gender and race, Herman Gray says that “contemporary expressions of black masculinity work symbolically in a number of directions at once; they challenge and disturb racial and class constructions of blackness; they also rewrite and reinscribe the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality” (Gray 402). Black gay men are also representationally limited due to a particular form of masculinity that they are socialized to adhere to because they are men.

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant masculinity of society, and white males are the prime exemplars of this masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt 832). This specific type of masculinity is a basis for all others because of its powerful influence. Characteristics of hegemonic masculinity include having a strong patriarchal influence, strict gender rules, and the belief that women are always the subordinate. White heterosexual men are the main group of people that society shows properly embody this masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is not normal in the statistical sense because only so many men can properly enact it but it is “certainly normative. It [embodies] the currently most honored way of being a man, it [requires] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically [legitimizes] the global subordination of women to men” (Connell & Messerschmidt 832).

Kimmel explains how hegemonic masculinity outlines four distinct characteristics that all men are socialized to embody, lest they be seen as an “other”: “No Sissy Stuff (reject all femininity!)”, “Be a Big Wheel (materialism and wealth).”, “Be a Sturdy Oak (no emotion).”, and “Give ‘em hell (aggression)” (Kimmel 86). These traits of masculinity have a homophobic slant to them, and this is because masculinity is policed by homophobia for the reason that masculinity is supposed to reject anything feminine.

Homophobia acts as a counter to men who do not embody the four characteristics Kimmel outlines, forcing them to follow the rules of being a man or else be subject to ridicule, excommunication, etc. Black gay men being called “fag” is a clear example of this kind of policing because it is both insulting their masculinity and reminding them to be a man. This kind of policing can be seen in other works, such as C.J. Pascoe’s *Dude, You’re a Fag*, a book that analyzes the effect of the word “fag” among high school boys and how they police and judge their own and their peers masculinity. Jackson Katz’s *Tough Guise*, a film that shows how popular culture influences the male identity, does the same thing, placing a specific focus on how images in popular culture teach men to be tough and masculine and insult them if they fail to meet the criteria by calling them a “fag.”

The films employ the common characterization of black gay men as effeminate—hence the repetitive “fag” epithet—which makes it seem like femininity is the only way gay black men identify. Gay black men do not embody what a black man (typically heterosexual) is supposed to be. Their sexuality and how films constantly stereotype them makes black gay men seen as not “authentically black.” For black men, being authentically black encompasses black male characters that are commonly shaped by a stereotypically tough masculinity. Bryant Alexander elaborates on the black masculine aesthetic, calling it “strong, assertive, hyperaggressive, [and] hyperheterosexual” (Alexander 382). The overly tough masculinity detailed for the black aesthetic is based on

hegemonic masculinity because of how tough, black maleness enforces the key components of this dominant masculinity.

Being policed by the rules of hegemonic masculinity while black gay men try to embody it, black gay men are seen as an “other” by Marlon Riggs because they are homosexual *and* black (390). When a lot of films make black gay men seem as if they are only effeminate, this repetitive portrayal also makes it hard for them to embody the black aesthetic, since the black aesthetic is supposed to adhere to the characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity involves heterosexuality, and because black gay males are homosexual, this makes hegemonic masculinity that much harder to embody. The correlation between effeminacy and homophobia is a clear and thick one, influencing how society both regards black gay males and embody hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity and the black aesthetic make it easy for black gay males to be emasculated. Gay black males can be emasculated for a number of reasons and in these films it is mostly for being effeminate.

Three themes formed from the analyses of the films. Masculinity wins is the first theme and involves masculinity winning out over emasculation. The feminized black gay man will, through some event or happening, be seen as masculine by the end of the film. The second theme is masculinity as an artifice. This theme demonstrates how the masculinity that the character embodies is a sham, used as a sort of shield against homophobia and ridicule. More human portrayals of black gay men is the third and most significant. This theme shows that there are more successful representations of these men that show them not as stereotypes but in all their humanity, with human problems and emotions. The goal of this research is to show that these men are human and are more than just a single identity and that audiences should be given different angles from which to view these men.

No matter how a character is characterized, by the end of a film, most gay male characters “win,” often recovering a lost masculinity. A black man’s

masculinity helps establish him as a credible character; a tough, aggressive, and in-charge black man makes him authentically black. Authentic blackness, as E. Patrick Johnson puts it, often excludes more identities than it invites in (Johnson 48). Because masculinity is considered such an integral part of black authenticity, this connection often makes masculinity hard to perform (48). Though it may be hard for some of these characters to come off as masculine and authentically black due to stereotypes and the enforced effeminacy, they sometimes succeed.

In the films *Friday After Next*, *Get on the Bus*, *Kinky Boots*, and *Holiday Heart*, the key characters included are either introduced as feminine or masculine. There is no gray area for these characters. Gender is closely tied to these character’s identities and often intersects with other areas of their identities, like race. The characters may shift between femininity and masculinity but there is never a definite rest in the middle. Damon and Kyle (from *Friday After Next* and *Get on the Bus*, respectively) are decidedly more masculine and fall into stereotypical black masculine roles. These two characters give off an aura of the tough guy masculinity so that they will never be underestimated. Damon, for example, is an overly tough black ex-convict. Henry James describes a similar kind characterization that can be applied to Damon as being a part of “a particular type of black masculinity—one defined mainly by an urban aesthetic, a nihilistic attitude, and an aggressive posturing” (James 119). With characters embodying and acting out this kind of masculine image, femininity is seen as bad and should be avoided. This is due to femininity being devalued in an already patriarchal society; whatever is interpreted to be feminine is automatically assumed to be weak (Johnson 69). Damon will be analyzed first, followed by Kyle, who embodies bell hooks theory about the cool pose, as explained by Richard Majors and Janet Billson, (forced equanimity and austere masculinity are the main components) as it concerns black men (Majors & Billson 4).

Damon displays several indications that he is certainly manly: muscles, tough attitude,

cockiness, and dominance. But the fact that he is gay (and after being released from prison no less) undermines his masculinity. Craig and Day Day, the two straight protagonists of *Friday After Next* view Damon as a threat. Damon's mother, Ms. Pearly, is Craig and Day Day's apartment manager and because they are short on rent (having avoided her for weeks), Ms. Pearly confronts them about it. At the beginning of the conversation, it should be noted that both men were hostile towards Ms. Pearly and insulting her. Ms. Pearly then reveals Damon has been released and uses him as a threat: "When you spend twelve years on a level four prison yard, you become quite fond of little ol' girls like yourselves. So either I'm [going to] get my rent money today, or else somebody [is] getting their salad tossed tonight!" Craig and Day Day immediately say they will have the rent money as soon as possible and become fearful and submissive. Their masculinity is being compromised in this scene due to their fear of another man affecting their heterosexuality. The next scene shows Craig and Day Day running into Damon on their way out of their apartment complex. Damon forcefully gets them to form a group hug where he places both men in chokeholds. Damon tells the two he knows about their rent avoidance and reinforces his mother's threat by warning Craig and Day Day, "Show up here tonight without that rent money and we [are going to get] *real* motherfucking acquainted! Understand?" Craig and Day Day acquiesce to Damon's demand and he releases them shortly thereafter; Day Day cries as he walks away.

Damon's introductory scene establishes his fierce and threatening masculinity immediately. This scene also makes Damon's sexuality very clear: he is homosexual, which causes Damon's character to be paradoxical. Being gay, he is still affected by the effeminate stereotype because he likes men. Damon's masculine image is represented as over-the-top to prevent him from being effeminized. Intersectionality can be applied here because Damon is a masculine black man as well as a black gay male. Craig and Day Day see Damon as a threat both because he is

bigger and stronger than them and also because he could, wants to, and possibly might sexually dominate them. Damon's masculinity overpowers his homosexuality: he has masculine power, evidenced by how he can control Craig and Day Day through their fear of him. Even though he may like men, he is still seen as one due to his overly masculine persona and threats.

Damon may not fit the effeminate black gay male stereotype but he is still a stereotype, one that is overly masculine instead of overly feminine. Being overly masculine limits Damon's character mobility and depth, leaving him susceptible to stereotyping. Damon acts out hypermasculinity, which is detrimental to his character because of its rigid guidelines and rules; Damon's character is not allowed to be anything less than masculine. In this framework, there is masculinity, effeminacy, and the gray area between the two. The hypermasculine performance is forcing Damon to identify as masculine only. This demand places Damon's character in a confining box that limits how he is able to identify.

Although Damon is not the stereotypical effeminate black gay male, another character in the film is paired with him to implicitly take that place. Petite, vibrant, and very sharp-dressing, the character of Money Mike is the direct opposite of Damon. Going by stereotypes, Money Mike's character embodies effeminacy yet Money Mike's significant other is a woman. Money Mike is characterized to be less than a man by the film and its characters (he is a caricature of a character, over-the-top and clearly used for comedic effect because he is very effeminate) but it is not shown until Money Mike's encounter with Damon that Damon can also be emasculated.

Damon tries to rape Money Mike at Craig and Day Day's holiday-rent party. Money Mike resists but is about to be overcome before he takes a pair of pliers and clamps them onto Damon's testicles. The situation of rape becomes flipped in this moment as Mike instantly becomes the holder of power. He literally has Damon's manhood at his mercy and Damon, once masculine and dominant,

immediately becomes a weak, blathering submissive. This hurts his masculinity both physically and psychologically because Damon being at another's man's mercy is never supposed to happen, according to hegemonic masculinity. According to his overly masculine characterization, another man should be at Damon's mercy.

Damon's incapacitation leaves Mike rejoicing in the situation, the pliers being a metaphor for Mike "penetrating" Damon and therefore his loss of power. Towards the end of the film, Mike is about to release Damon, but only with Craig's help. It is then that Mike becomes scared, regressing back to his submissive persona, because he knows if Craig does not help, Damon will immediately come for him. Craig does not follow through and Money Mike is left running through the streets, an enraged Damon right at his heels.

Damon's masculinity is immediately restored—or will be once he gets his hand on Mike. Damon's and Money Mike's characters represent two stereotypical presentations of black masculinity. Either a black man is as masculine as Damon or prissy like Money Mike, and this is even more so for gay black men, who are most of the time purported to look and be like Money Mike. With those two stereotypes, there is often not enough room to represent other identities on screen.

Kyle from *Get on the Bus* is not seen as sexually dominant like Damon but is seen as more dominant in terms of masculinity. In the film *Get on the Bus*, Randall and Kyle are emasculated by their fellow patrons for having been in a relationship with one another. *Get on the Bus* involves a group of men on their way to the Million Man March in Washington and shows the characters of Kyle and Randall dealing with relationship trouble. Randall wants to be expressive about their feelings and talk about their relationship out but Kyle is against the idea, preferring to keep his distance. Kyle is seen as the more masculine character because of his distant, cool, but firm demeanor. Randall is the more

vulnerable of the two, as he demonstrates by wanting to talk about his feelings with Kyle. Kyle expresses his need for space after asking Randall out of annoyance, "Do you mind?" Randall responds with, "No, I don't mind. I mind that you're not man enough to admit that you love me." The reaction from other riders in the bus is immediate: there are calls throughout the bus of confusion and shock which quickly turn to expressions of disapproval. By saying Kyle is not man enough to admit his true feelings toward him, Randall questions Kyle's masculinity. Kyle seems uncomfortable with himself, with Randall, and what other people would think of him. What the other men on the bus happen to think is quite negative at first. The reactions to Randall's and Kyle's sexualities are met with shocked confusion and insults, the significance of this being that it shows how much effeminacy is tied to homophobia: somebody suggests the two get kicked off the bus and "skip" to the March; Randall is called a sissy; and when Xavier, the second youngest of the group, objects to all the homophobia, Flip says, "Oh, so you bend over and grab your ankles too?"

Kyle's masculinity, once questioned, has been rectified by the end of the film through his reconciliation with Randall. The two do breakup but it is under amicable circumstances, with Kyle noting that he may not want to be in a relationship at the moment but he is clear about himself. Kyle never descends into the effeminate stereotype of the black gay male but rather enacts the cool, black male.

The characters of Lola from *Kinky Boots* and Holiday from *Holiday Heart* are drag queens; unlike Kyle, their masculinity is always under fire. Being drag queens, they are seen as men acting as women making them appear submissive. Lola and Holiday encounter problems with this assumed submissiveness, as Holiday is underestimated by three thugs during a fight sequence at the climax of *Holiday Heart* and Lola is categorized as a joke by the heterosexual character Don.

Lola embarrasses Don in front of the factory's other employees by revealing herself to be male when she uses a deep voice to address Don after sitting on his lap in drag. Don spends the rest of the movie stewing away at this embarrassment until the two agree to have an arm wrestling match to give Don a chance to redeem his masculinity. This scene is certainly one of the most pivotal in the film because it pushes perceptions of masculinity and femininity outside the realm of stereotype by showing that there is depth to the concepts. Don challenges Lola to the arm wrestling match to get his respect back and to be seen as a man again by his fellow peers. Lola agreed so she could prove a point to Don: that she does not have to confine herself to his standards of being weak and effeminate. Near the climax of the match, it is made abundantly clear that Lola will win the match. Don looks as though he is about to break down out of frustration but Lola suddenly ceases resistance and Don wins the match. When the two meet up at the bar a bit later, Don asks Lola why she let him win. Lola states that she knows what it is like to be emasculated and does not want that for anyone. Even though Lola may have lost the match, she retained the power to do so on her own terms. She chose to let Don win so everybody could see him as masculine and Lola is the bigger man in this situation because she made a moral decision to let the weaker man, Don, maintain a semblance of masculinity. Lola is using what Gray calls "masculine privilege" for the fact that she had the power to win (402). Kimmel's four characteristics of hypermasculinity would concur with Gray, particularly the rules regarding "No Sissy Stuff" (86). "No Sissy Stuff" means never doing anything that would make the male appear less than masculine; the arm wrestling match is far from feminine. Lola may have lost the arm wrestling match but because she had the raw power of deciding to win or lose, she is the true winner.

Holiday is also seen as the bigger man in *Holiday Heart* when he defends Wanda, a woman he took in, and himself from three thugs who want Wanda and the bike Wanda has for her daughter,

Niki, for Christmas. The three thugs immediately think fighting Holiday will be an easy win, because he is a "fag." By equating Holiday to this homophobic slur, the lead thug emasculates Holiday by not even equating him to a person. When Holiday rises to the occasion and defeats them all single-handedly he does away with stereotypes and the thugs' notions about him. Holiday even shows mercy towards the leader of the group after punching him several times on the hood of his own car. After seeing the damage Holiday has done, Holiday releases him in disgust and goes to get Wanda to get them both to safety. Holiday is constantly demeaned throughout the movie by heterosexual black males for his sexuality and outward femininity due to dressing in drag. Yet, his masculinity comes out through violence to prove that he is a man and should not be underestimated, echoing the sentiments of *Tough Guise* since men are influenced by popular culture and society to use violence as a formula to solidify their masculinity. Holiday's masculinity is winning here because he successfully emasculated three men who thought they could do the same to him but failed. It's important for men to be seen as men but oftentimes—mostly all the time—the standards of being a man are too high and unrealistic.

In the films that correlate with the theme of masculinity as an artifice, the characters involved are affected by hegemonic masculinity in some form or another. Examples of these characters are Hooper from *Chasing Amy*, Paul from *Six Degrees of Separation*, and Carl from *For Colored Girls*. Hooper is an effeminate gay black male who pens a successful series of comic books. The protagonist of the comic embodies the tough black masculinity James talks about, being very angry, vulgar, and prideful, mainly expressing love of his race and hatred of white people (referring to white males as the white devil). When the protagonist Holden and his friend Banky enter the auditorium where Hooper is giving a presentation about his comic, Banky heckles him. This continues, with Hooper getting angrier with each insult, until he pulls out a gun and shoots Banky, effectively clearing the room

of the scared attendees. As soon as they are gone, Banky, Holden, and Hooper reveal the façade: Hooper reveals that the gun was fake and that he himself is actually a feminine black gay man. He's effeminate to the point where he embodies what Marlon Riggs' calls the "snap queen," a gay black man characterized by effeminacy and a sassy attitude, whose humor is mostly exploited for comedic affect (392). Hooper is actually good friends with Banky and Holden, since they are all comic book writers. Hooper is a character within a character. If his fan-base were to ever find out he were gay, his comic would most likely fail. He just pretends to be straight and masculine. If Hooper were to come out to his fan base, he would get backlash for it and sales would most likely drop because he would not realistically match with the character he has written.

A key scene concerning Hooper in the film places Hooper and Holden in a record store. Before this, Hooper is giving Holden relationship advice in his usual, feminine manner, completely uninhibited and comfortable. When talking to Holden, Hooper is quoted as saying, "I am a reviled gay man and to top it off, a gay *black* man, notoriously the swishiest of the bunch." He is both acknowledging his race and sexuality in this quote and the stereotypical femininity that come along with it. He seems to denounce them, as his tone is sarcastic. Hooper is an intersection of race and sexuality and relates to Nikki Sullivan's gay black vs. the black gay discussion. This discussion involves gay black men struggling with their racial and sexual identities; it is implied that there is never a complete congruence between the two, with a gay black man identifying more with their racial identity than their sexuality or vice-versa (Sullivan 69). While still talking to Holden, Hooper gets recognized by a young fan of his comics, who asks for an autograph. Like magic, Hooper immediately acts out a black masculine and angry persona, going over to the young boy and signing his comic book, while pointing out Holden as the "white devil." He tells the young boy to be strong and watchful, personifying pieces essential to black masculinity. After the boy leaves, Hooper goes back to his true self, sadly

remarking, "Look at what I have to resort to for respect. What is it about a gay man that terrifies the rest of the world?" This quote is significant because it is detailing the surreptitious sad reality (pretending to be heterosexual) that gay black men have to live in order to not only gain respect but avoid persecution. This exposes the fragility of masculinity by showing how men have to pretend to be a certain type of man, which is often difficult to embody. Black masculinity (as modeled after hegemonic masculinity) is practically unattainable, especially for black gay men. They are doubly oppressed due to their race and sexuality and, like Hooper demonstrates, have to do twice as much to suppress who they are and act out the traits of this unfeasible masculinity.

The characters of Paul and Carl from *Six Degrees of Separation* and *For Color Girls* are placed in have similar situations. Paul twists his way into the white elite by suppressing his racial identity and sexuality and acting out white masculinity. Carl, who is on the down-low (a state of hiding one's sexual tendencies toward the same sex while still engaging in relationships with the opposite sex), tries to justify his actions by saying that they are never feminine since he always take the dominant position. When the audience is first introduced to Paul, he is very well-mannered, speaks with good diction, and claims his father is the famous actor Sidney Poitier. It is not until later that the film reveals to the audience that Paul is not only gay but *learned* how to perform white masculinity. Paul is acting out a personal narrative that an author named Alexander Bryant has experienced. In his words, "I am perceived as a Black man trying to transcend his "natural" state, elemental and unsophisticated. I am perceived as a Black man who is trying to pass for White, not based on appearance, but in the metaphoric drag of linguistic performance and wearing the garments of academic accomplishment" (381). By trying to pass for white through his performance of white masculinity, Paul is trying to enjoy the privileges that come with that racial advantage, the same privileges the other main characters, Ouisa and Flan, enjoy thanks to their wealthy status.



The film revolves around Paul trying to scam Ouisa and Flan. The audience is given a flashback to see that Paul was a man on the street. When Trent Conway, a friend of Ouisa and Flan's children, finds Paul in a doorway, Paul is dressed in all-black street clothing. He is laid back and quiet but slightly threatening because of his appearance. Here, Paul embodying black masculinity, as he looks "hard"—tough, uncaring, and possibly violent. When he speaks to Trent, his diction is not nearly as proper as it was in the scene with Ouisa and Flan, the other two main characters. Paul plays a game with Trent where for every name he tells him about in his address book, Paul will give him a piece of his clothing. Besides this confirming Paul's homosexuality, this scene shows Paul exerting dominance over Trent, as Trent is the one practically begging Paul to have sex with him. In return for sex, Trent teaches Paul white, elite masculinity through diction, manner, and charisma, which is what made him so appealing and interesting to Ouisa and Flan (and all the other families he scammed).

Paul's farcical white masculinity in contrast to his cool but dominant black masculinity displays Paul having to put on a mask to fit in with this affluent crowd that people like Ouisa and Flan make up and suppress his other side. Masculinity is an artifice here because the Paul that Ouisa and Flan grow to know and like is not the real him. It is just an act and Paul's actual self and masculinity is displayed when he first meets Trent Conway. The white masculinity Paul tries to embody is hegemonic masculinity. To do it, he has to suppress his cool, laidback personality and dominance to be able to perform white masculinity properly. Indeed, when Ouisa and Flan find out Paul has been having relations with a male prostitute in their house, they react with a similar degree of shock to the revelation as the men did to Randall and Kyle in *Get on the Bus*. Flan tries to emasculate the male prostitute by referring to him by a thing, further enforcing the undeniable connection between homophobia and masculinity.

Carl's issue in *For Colored Girls* was not only that Carl was having sex with men behind his

wife's (Jo) back but how he viewed the whole situation. Throughout the film, Carl is distant. He misses dates, comes home late, and spends money without consulting Jo. Carl has to put up a large front for his actions because he is constantly emasculated by Jo. They both work, but she has the more successful job and it can be inferred that Jo repeatedly reminds Carl of this. The two constantly argue and Jo seems to take the more dominant role in the relationship, as she is the main provider. This figuratively suffocates Carl, who complains that he is not able to feel like a man in his own house due to Jo not offering him any reprieve from her authority and constant scrutiny. In the climax that concerns these two characters, Carl is confronted by Jo for his distant behavior and reason why:

CARL (when asked about infidelity): I have never been with another woman while I've been with you.

JO: What about a man?

CARL (angrily): What the fuck did you just say to me?

JO: Are you gay?

CARL: How are you gonna ask me a question like that?!

JO: How do you marry a woman and turn around and let a man bend you over?

CARL (very somber): Ain't nobody bending me over.

JO (incredulously): Oh, so you're doing the bending.

CARL: I don't wake up holding another man, walking down the street, holding some man's hands. That's gay, okay. That ain't me.

Jo confronts him about his alleged homosexuality further, and Carl finally gives in, giving the explanation that he is "A man, Jo. I'm a man every day of the week. I'm a man, I'm just a man who enjoys having sex with another man, Jo. No attachments, no fucking relationship... Just sex." This would make Carl fall into the down-low category of black males who claim

heterosexuality while engaging in secret sexual acts with other men. Carl seems masculine in every sense of the word. He is muscular, driven, and a husband to Jo. But his sexual activities put his masculinity into question. His race may have a lot to do with him having sex with men in secret, as the African American community is well known for its homophobia. His masculinity is further seen for the fact that during the oral sex, he was the receiver, therefore the “top” or dominating one and he was the one actively checking out the man in the opera. While talking on the phone with Jo in one scene, his eyes wander again. He exudes some of the same predatory nature as Damon from *Friday After Next* but is not as aggressive. Telling Jo about his activities is hard for him and he cries, which could put a chink in his tough, distant routine. The fact that he thinks having sex with another man is not gay if it is just sex further shows the rigidity and fragility of masculinity. Jo effectively ends their marriage, telling him to leave and “take your HIV with you.” as she has contracted it from him. Carl’s argument when it comes to his characterized masculinity can be summed up by Bryant: “I’m a man. I’m a Black man” (380). Once again shedding light on the walking intersections that black gay men represent, Bryant says this line to demonstrate that being a Black man is different from being just a man—or a white man, to be more specific. Carl is emasculated not only by his race but his own wife. Having sex with men was his affirmation that he was still a man.

When identities are oppressed, the oppression prevents black gay men from being seen as more than a stereotype. The rest of their identities are barred from discussion and when this happens, there is no middle ground between femininity and masculinity. The third theme involves more human portrayals of black gay males and, unlike the first theme, there actually is a middle ground for these characters: Lionel from *Dear White People*, Noah from *Noah’s Arc*, and Magnus from *The Skinny*. By representing these gay black male characters as people a wide audience can relate to on some level, the films do something

remarkable: they allow audiences to see these men as more than just their intersectional labels, such as black and gay. They get to see them as human, as people. *Dear White People* employed a clever marketing scheme when trying to create buzz about the film: the character Lionel happens to be one of the main characters and is shown quite frequently in the trailers and TV spots. In the poster used for the film’s wide release, he is the character shown on it. In the trailers and TV spots, Lionel is just shown as a college student dealing with being a freshman in college and with the racial tension the movie centers on. There is no mention of his sexuality at all in the trailers and the audience who is interested in seeing the film will most likely assume he is straight. This automatic assumption has to deal with the heteronormativity of society. In the film, it is revealed that Lionel is gay during his search for a dormitory. This key moment takes place at the beginning of the film. There are other key scenes telling of Lionel’s sexuality but what the film does here that humanizes black gay is that it focuses more on Lionel as a person than it does on his sexuality. As the movie dealt quite a bit with race, that part of his identity was put at the forefront but compared to this sexuality, audiences are revealed that he is gay and the film leaves it at that. For the rest of the movie, Lionel just is. To elaborate, the film makes Lionel more human and more relatable by painting him as a new college student struggling to find his place on campus, and, on a macro-level scale, in society. Lionel does not embody the stereotypical black gay man either, as he is very quiet and laid back in his personality. In fact, one can see him leaning more towards the “nerd” stereotype—the smart but often outcast and socially inept student—than that of the black gay male. Lionel’s characterization and his struggles have audiences create their perception of him based on what he is going through, not who he happens to like. While the film does touch on his sexuality, it does not become its main focus or a stereotype. The fact that they left Lionel’s homosexuality out of marketing meant that it was not as important as some of the other thematic material in the film. While Lionel being gay is noteworthy, the film

did not present it in a gaudy way—they treated it as something that just is, something that is normal or basic. I'm sure that those that have been to college have felt like Lionel at some point or another on a basic level, making him able to be seen as more of a person than as a gay person.

*Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* does place sexuality at the forefront but in a different way than most of the films listed here do and is one of the most important films featured in my research for two reasons: the cast is practically all black males and the movie does more than just show them as effeminate or hypermasculine. It shows them as human. Compared to the other films featured here, *Noah's Arc* is one of the only ones to give black gay men other identities to embody and perform. If one were to compare this film to one of the many featuring gay white males, it would be easy to see that among black gay males, the opportunity to identify in a plethora of ways is rare. White gay men are represented more than gay black men are in film and overall the media, having become the face of the queer community. White gay male's overrepresentation is not good for the community as, like hegemonic masculinity, it is shutting other identities out. Judith Halberstam says that "we all need to move far beyond the limited scope of white gay male concerns and interests" if we are to truly have a community that is well represented (Halberstam 231). *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* is also significant because it does what Marlon Riggs, as quoted by Amy Ongiri, calls revolutionary: it shows black gay men loving other black gay men (Ongiri 280). This is a rare occurrence in film because it is such a three-dimensional and in-depth experience. Love gives shape to these characters, just like it did to Ennis Delmar and Jack Twist in *Brokeback Mountain*, one of the most widely known films to feature gay white men. What makes *Noah's Arc* and *Brokeback Mountain* comparable to one another is that they show that there is more to gay men than just their sexuality. The films do however have an intersectional focus on race when compared to one another, which again puts emphasis on the

lack of gay black men in film compared to white gay men. As Dwight McBride puts it:

I could not help but allow myself to wonder what it would look like if [*Brokeback*] had been about two African American men. Two African American men could not possibly have been viewed as representing universal gay male experience in the way that the whiteness of the characters in *Brokeback* can and does. Even if we could get beyond that hurdle, would the film jive with the white cinematic and televisual image of gay life that mainstream U.S. culture has manufactured, packaged, and produced? (McBride 96)

If black men loving other black men was put on this large a scale, there is no doubt it would have been something noteworthy, garnering widespread social attention. But because race is intersectionally related to privilege (class), McBride may hold some truth when he doubts that it would be as big and effective as the original. On its own, *Noah's Arc* is still effective, being a good way for audience's to see that black gay men do not have to be stereotypes. It is just not as big or as well-known as *Brokeback Mountain*. The day a film like that gets made for black gay men will be the day a part of this research's goal will have come to fruition.

*Noah's Arc* involves a group of gay black male friends coming together for Noah's (the protagonist) and Wade's wedding. The film barely involves any heterosexual characters and its sole focus is on the union between two gay black men (and the troubles everyone faces during the time leading to the wedding). Noah and his friends face problems and deal with issues typical of getting ready for a wedding: Noah gets cold feet, both Noah and Wade worry about their parents' attendance, and the friends are having a time making sure everything goes according to plan. Chance and Eddie are already married themselves but are having marital problems. Brandon deals with rejection. Alex tries to cope with being so far away from his boyfriend and their child while also

using unorthodox methods to perform stress management. The film is definitely about black gay men and their sexualities and there is even a conversation on masculinity but the film also challenges audiences by frequently placing them in the character's shoes from the marital problems, stress management, and such. Yes, these men are gay and black but they're not exempt from the typical problems other people might face in their situation. Eddie and Chance clearly show that these characters are all flawed—but not because of their sexualities! They are not perfect because they are people, as clearly displayed in the problems they face during the movie and even the type of people they are: black gay men.

The film explores the masculinity and femininity stereotype through a conversation between the young Brandon and Noah's fiancé, Wade:

BRANDON (wondering about Noah's femininity): Do you ever think though, "If I was with someone more masculine?"

WADE: Sometimes. But it's a funny thing about femininity in a guy: you get used to it and stop noticing. You notice all the masculine stuff. The muscles, the angle on the face... Then you have to introduce them to a new person and for that horrible moment, you see it all over again. Suddenly you're scared. You think who am I? Do I really want this? But it forces you to face it, to be braver than you would've been if you had the easy option.

BRANDON: And it's like all the guys my age are so negative about anything that's different. And if you're not walking around in a wife-beater and your pants hanging off your ass then—

WADE: —Then you're not a real man.

BRANDON: Exactly! And we're all supposed to be 50 Cent or Terrell Owens and if you don't fit that mode, you don't even deserve to exist.

WADE: You know what man, it's like this: It takes a lot more courage to be yourself when

who you happen to be is somebody a lot of ignorant motherfuckers got a problem with. But don't get it twisted. Noah? He's ten times braver than I'll ever be.

This entire conversation contains many different ways black gay men think about and discuss masculinity. Brandon is speaking about the obsession in both the black gay community and gay community in general with masculine men. Most black gay men do not want a feminine man. Femininity, like with straight men, is shunned and rejected. Nobody wants a man who acts like a woman. Brandon is telling Wade this because Wade is the masculine man, a man's man, the virile, dominant person most gay men are stereotyped to be attracted to. Brandon is not very masculine and feels shunned by his own community. Wade even speaks about his own disdainful attitude towards femininity when he talks about that "horrible moment" when he has to acknowledge Noah's femininity. But he gets past it and sees the more masculine qualities in Noah but it is also indicated that he sees Noah more as a person than anything, especially when he says that Noah being able to embrace his femininity makes Noah braver than him. This is both seen as embodying the third theme and even the theme of masculinity winning, as Noah embracing his identity is seen as a source of power for him, and power is a trait of masculinity.

*Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* is a film that is about gay black men for gay black men. Instead of painting all the characters as one, repetitive and damaging stereotypical picture, it really gives them depth by showing that nobody is perfect, not because of their sexuality, but just of who they are as a person. And because the film is about two gay black men getting married, it employs one of the most universal and human themes there is: love. The film *The Skinny* shares many similarities with *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, like the cast being mainly gay black male characters, the theme of love, and the fun fact that they share the same director, Patrick-Ian Polk.

*The Skinny* is not about marriage. Instead it is about what transpires between five friends during

a Pride weekend in New York City. The film employs other themes aside from love, like trust and it is similar to *Dear White People* in how it portrays its protagonist, Magnus. Magnus' boyfriend is decidedly masculine, having a street-vibe and shown to be muscular, tattooed, and dominant—again, it embodies the cool pose. Magnus represents the gray area between feminine and masculine a lot of these films don't show. Instead of being portrayed as decidedly one or the other, Magnus is just as he is. To clarify, Magnus can be seen as the submissive one in the relationship but also displays masculinity when he punches his boyfriend after finding out about his infidelity. Other times in the film, Magnus displays a character just trying to find out what he needs and wants and dealing with the repercussions of a failed relationship. I don't think Polk, the director of *The Skinny*, wanted audiences to see Magnus as one or the other in terms of feminine (the stereotypical gay) and masculine; he has other characters that can take care of that. Instead, Magnus is like Lionel in terms of dealing with common problems and even characterization on a basic level. There is no limp wrist and there is no balled fist necessarily; Magnus rests on this middle ground that allows people to look past labels such as gay and black and just see humanity. Especially after dealing with the break-up, Magnus shows that humanely vulnerable, not masculine wise or feminine wise. The film doesn't make him out to be weak because he is sad or volatile because he retaliated. He is just experiencing human emotions that transcend race and sexuality. What these three films do that is important is give audiences a way to see through the stereotypes and labels and relate to these characters. Once they do that, they see them as human. No limp wrist here. Just a wrist.

The significance of this research lies in audiences seeing these men as human, but also acknowledging that their intersectional identities make them unique. This uniqueness of theirs is constantly misconstrued by film when movies take their race, gender, and sex and stereotype them. Stereotyping does nothing to further the imagination for audiences when they are

bombarded with the same dry representations of black gay men. Black gay men watching these representations of themselves on screen may feel confused, insulted, or even angry because they are not seeing who they really are on screen. The effeminate stereotypes and one dimensional stereotypes of either always masculine or always feminine strip audiences of the chance to see these men in different ways and simultaneously bars actual black gay men and their identities from view. By exposing these stereotypes, and analyzing their purpose in film, I hope to have opened audience's eyes to different avenues in which to examine and view these men. By being critical of certain representations, audiences and black gay males alike can know that what is seen on screen does not necessarily have to apply to real life.

Ultimately, that is the point of this research, for audiences to see that black gay men, though different, are just like them on the most basic level. The emphasis on humanity can also be applied to marginalized groups at large in how they are viewed by the dominant group, a group they are taught to try so hard to act like. Marginalized groups are people too and the more this is realized through various mediums like film, the closer audiences will get to letting the people in marginalized groups—gay black men, for example—be seen in all their three-dimensional, beautifully human glory.

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