

**Straight Talk: An Analysis of African American Homosexuality in Film and Television  
since the 1990s**

# **Straight Talk: A Thematic Analysis of Black Gay Males in Film and Television from the Ritual Perspective**

## **Abstract**

This exploratory research used textual analysis to examine 14 films and three television programs with Black gay males as main characters attempting to identify inherent messages about gay males and Black homosexuality. Specifically, it examined narrative content for recurring themes across media texts. The analysis revealed five major themes related to the lives of Black gay males, and found a broad range of character types that reinforced and debunked stereotypes of gay males. The results call for more in-depth study focusing on additional films and television programs to enhance the discourse on how stereotypes are perpetuated and ways they can be changed.

# **Straight Talk: A Thematic Analysis of Black Gay Males in Film and Television from the Ritual Perspective**

## **Introduction**

For most of film and television history, gay males in general and Black gay males in particular have been marginalized and symbolically annihilated. It has only been over the last decade or so that the visibility of Black gay males has increased due in part to changing attitudes about homosexuality as well as technological advances which now allow almost any one to enter the arena of cultural production. Films and TV programs are now the cultural story-tellers and provide both niche and mainstream audiences alike a glimpse into the lives of Black gay males in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What are these films and TV programs saying about Black gay males? What are Black gay males learning about themselves from these depictions?

The purpose of this study is to examine representations of Black gay males and Black homosexuality in popular culture through their depictions in selected films and television programs. Specifically, it will seek to answer the following research question: What themes emerge in the depiction of Black gay males and Black homosexuality? By analyzing the portrayals of Black gay males in entertainment media, one can draw conclusions as to what the audience, including Black gay males, is learning about this group.

## **Literature Review**

### Stereotypes of Gay Men

According to David J. Schneider (2004), “Everyday experience suggests that homosexuals are among the most stereotyped groups in modern life” (p. 489). Studies find that most gay stereotypes are negative, though some stereotypes are considered positive (Haddock, Zanna, & Esses, 1993; Staats, 1978). In a 1997 study of stereotypes about gay males, at least

60% of those questioned used some of the following words or phrases to denote characteristics of gays: feminine, sensitive, swishes when he walks, dainty, and affectionate. Words and phrases used to note uncharacteristic traits of gay males included: tough, masculine, sloppy, and macho. Not surprisingly, many of the aforementioned stereotypes can be found in media portrayals of gay men. For example, gay men were depicted as effeminate as early as the 1920s with the film *The Soilers*. The gay character in this silent film was a cowboy in appearance, but displayed effeminate mannerisms with his actions. This preliminary depiction led the charge for gay characters in films, according to Russo (1987).

In terms of television, stereotypes of gay males were introduced with the documentary film, *The Homosexuals*. This 1967 CBS film depicted gays as promiscuous and incapable of developing long lasting relationships ultimately setting the stage for how gay men would be represented on TV in the 1970s: as objects of ridicule (Hart, 2004). Upon the introduction of these roles, the characters were minimal at best, and usually existed in the midst of a heterosexual dominant figure or relationship. The characters were depicted as effeminate or ‘limp-wrist’ men who spoke with a lisp and were deemed sexual perverts (Becker 2006).

Recent history, however, suggests that Hollywood has introduced a new set of stereotypes of gay men through movies such as *Birdcage*. These new stereotypes are of gay men as highly likeable, fun people who have good taste, who are successful, who are chaste or faithful to their partners, who are physically attractive, and who others would like to hang out with (Streitmatter, 2009). These new “positive” stereotypes have occurred because of money or the perception that gay men have more disposable income than the average American, and what Streitmatter termed the presence of the gay mafia (gays and lesbians who are part of the Hollywood decision-making power structure).

## Black Gay Males in TV & Films

Compared to their White counterparts, the roles of Black gay males have been far less available. While representations of Black lesbianism date back to the nineteen-teens and early twenties in film, it wasn't until the 1960s and early '70s that Black gay male images on the screen would occur (Pincheon, 2001). And even though the range of representations improved, Pincheon (2001) still notes the problems inherent in those images. "Late twentieth century, pre 1980s representations of Black men in gay culture were primarily limited to nude and partially nude images found in erotic greeting cards, pornographic videos, and male nude magazines," (p. 54). Most of these images embellished characteristics of the Black male anatomy or sexuality, and highlighted the victimized or predatory Black gay man. In addition, these men were often blamed for the racism and homophobia they faced from the larger society. Furthermore, Harper (1995) suggests that the images of Black gay males were used to reinforce societal norms. "While the black gay man seems recently to have become a key figure for crises that, at present, threaten the very foundations of institutionalized culture in the United States, this should not be taken to mean that his representations have not functioned to buttress (often specifically by challenging) normative conceptions of race, sexuality, and gender identity since at least the Black Power era of the late 1960s" (p. 390).

According to Jon L. Clayborne (1974), stereotypes of Black males, which some may consider fallacies, have been perpetuated by an anti-gay bias and often restated as fact. He further contends that images of Black gay males have reinforced myths about homosexuality. Harper (1995) says that in films of the 1970s Black gay males served as foils to the main White characters that "constitute the normative center of the social world presented on screen," (p. 391). Examples of these films include *The Boys in the Band*, 1970; *Sweet Sweetback's*

*Baadaaass Song*, 1971; *Slaves*, 1973; *Drum*, 1973; *Next Stop, Greenwich Village*, 1975; and *Car Wash*, 1976. Many of these films featured camped up, black queens who were eccentric and sometimes socially estranged (especially the character in *Next Stop*) from others of their kind, whether black or gay (Harper, 1995). E. Patrick Johnson (1995) defines a queen as “a male homosexual who is particularly flamboyant, extremely effeminate and temperamental” (Page 128).

Moreover, Pincheon (2001) calls the 1970s a mixed bag in terms of depictions of Black gay men. For example, in *The Boys in the Band*, the 1970 screen adaptation of the off-Broadway play, Bernard was the lone Black gay character in the film and pined away for the handsome blond boy who lives in the house where his mother was the maid (McCullom, 2007). Television producer Kevin E. Taylor says Bernard “was everything stereotypical about Black gay men trying to blend into the White gay community in the post-liberation era ... Quiet, sterile, scared,” (McCullom, 2007, p. 1). Bernard’s role introduced the template for other Black gay male characters in mainstream productions – the so-called sassy sidekick. For Taylor, this stereotype was “defiant and proud, but desexualized. A sassy eunuch” (McCullom, 2007, p. 2).

Although presented as effeminate, proud, sassy and defiant, the Black gay character of Lindy in *Car Wash* (1976) is also presented as a central element in the film’s critique of racialized masculinity (Harper, 1995). According to Harper (1995), when Lindy mouths the famous line – “Honey, I am more man than you’ll ever be, and more woman than you’ll ever get.” – It simultaneously emphasizes his role in the film’s subtle gender critique and the masculine realm it depicts. Like *Car Wash*, images of black males in the Blaxploitation film era frequently used ‘queens’ to perpetuate gay stereotypes. Wlodraz (2004) writes the “conflation of

black stereotype with queer sexuality hints at the complex ideological power of the gay Black man in the genre...about the expansion of black *and* gay visibility in the 1970s” (Page 15).

In his critique of 1980s Black gay male representations, Riggs (1991) proposes that Hollywood (mainstream and non-mainstream) images of Black gay males misrepresent the community. He notes the images shown historically promoted caricatures, and combined with elements that promote “the Negro Faggot.” “Snap-swish-and-dish divas have truly arrived, giving Beauty Shop drama at center stage, performing the read-and-snap two-step as they sashay across the movie screen, entertaining us in the castles of our homes—like court jesters, like eunuchs—with their double entendres, their dead-end lusts, and, above all, their relentless hilarity in the face of relentless despair” (Riggs, 1991, p. 390). The representation of “Negro Faggotry” parallels and reinforces racist attitudes and constructions around Black identity in general; both sharing a dread of the deviant Other (Riggs, 1991).

The prime-time fag pantomimes, camp queens as culture critics ...who like ubiquitous black maids and butlers in 50s Hollywood films move along the edges of the frame, seldom at the center, manifest the persistent psychosocial impulse toward control, displacement, and marginalization of the Black Gay Other. This ...is no different than the phobic, distorted projections which motivated blackface minstrelsy (Riggs, 1991, p. 393).

He goes on to suggest that in the African American family tree of dominant caricatures of Black men, there is a direct line of descent from Sambo to the Snap Queen, from the Black Brute to the AIDS-infected ‘Black Homo/Con/Rapist’. “...sexuality is repressed, arrested. Laughter, levity, and a certain childlike disposition cement their mutual status as comic eunuchs. Their alter egos, the Brute Black and the Homo/Con, are but psychosocial projections of an otherwise tamed sexuality run amuck—bestial , promiscuous, pathological” (Riggs, 1991, p. 392).

Arguably, since the 1990s, more complex, multi-dimensional depictions of Black gay men have appeared on screen, but it is still a mixed-bag in terms of stereotypes and marginalization (McCullom 2007). The credit for establishing this change is given to the character Kyle in Spike Lee's 1996 film *Get On the Bus*. The two gay characters in the film were a contrast to the prevailing stereotypes of Black gay men. Writer Fred Smith says the character of Kyle was multi-layered. He notes the role brought much-needed depth to the presentation of Black gay men on film and depicted them as "working professionals, family men, community members, and active with issues" that are not necessarily gay or gay-related (McCullom, 2007, p. 4).

Other films that have received praise for depicting Black gay men in multifaceted ways include *Punks* (2000), *Brother to Brother* (2004) and *The Ski Trip* (2004). *Punks* explores the lives of three Black gay men and their Latino friend looking for love in Los Angeles. *Brother to Brother* captures the glory days of the Harlem Renaissance through the eyes of a poet who lived it and a young Columbia University student who is researching the era for a term paper. Of *Brother to Brother*, j. brotherlove says, "At its core, the film is an unapologetic look at a young gay man struggling to find himself. However, it also proved that films centered on Black gay characters could take on literary issues, transcend time, bridge generations, and do not have to be centered on HIV/AIDS," (in McCullom, 2007, p. 4). The 2004 romantic comedy, *The Ski Trip* is noted because it is one of the few Black films to explore the world of camp. Director Maurice Jamal says there hadn't been a film that was urban and camp with bold, politically incorrect characters who were gay men of color. He says that mainstream black films and even queer black cinema have a tendency to cast characters into a small box (McCullom, 2007). That small box, in the eyes of Freeman (2006), includes the desexualization of Black gay men in television

and film. He also points out that the depiction of the reality of Black gay life is often times obscured by other social issues. Steven Emmanuel, who runs the web site Queer Kid of Color, described the current state of Black gay male media representations as mediocre. He explained that from a media representation perspective Black gay men are usually HIV-positive and feminine. “Masculine Black gay males are closeted and have to bring home girlfriends to their families and friends so that they can create an illusion...I don’t know what else to call that but a system.”([www.afterelton.com/archive/elton/TV/2006/11/blackgaymen.html](http://www.afterelton.com/archive/elton/TV/2006/11/blackgaymen.html)).

Becker (2009) supports this notion and states, “Black men who refuse to come out have become even more common and widely vilified targets for such post-closet narratives,” (in Davis and Needham, Page 128).

In an article in Newsweek, titled Kings of Queens, Ramin Setoodeh ([www.newsweek.com/id/222467](http://www.newsweek.com/id/222467)) says minority images of gays on television have ‘struggled with assimilation and extinction, self-expression and alienation’ and these limited images curb the development of characters who evolve from stereotypes to three-dimensional characters. Keith Boykin, author and openly gay political activist, shares that sentiment. On his Internet blog, he writes some men are stereotypically portrayed as ‘queens’ in films which reinforces societal beliefs. Boykin contends ‘queen’ images noted in big-budget films and sitcoms are often used for comic relief, and limit the dimensions of the characters portrayed ([www.keithboykin.com/arch/2005/10/27/noah\\_arc\\_queen](http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2005/10/27/noah_arc_queen)).

In the documentary film *Tongues Untied*, a film focusing on Black gay men, Marlon Riggs suggests that “Black men loving Black men is [a] revolutionary act.” This ‘revolutionary act’ has not been depicted regularly in film and television especially in loving, monogamous relationships. Again, Boykin (1996) implies that debates about race and sexuality conclude that

“all Blacks are straight and all gays are White” (P. 90). Han (2007) agrees as he notes the monolithic images of the gay community purport that its members are rich and white as evidenced in many films and television programs including *Boat Trip* and *Will and Grace*; similar entertainment fare perpetuate the ideology that Black and gay are not synonymous.

As Harper (1995) puts it, “Print, cinematic, and videographic depictions of the range of sexual activities engaged in by men of African descent, however they identify their sexuality, are essential not only to African American men’s expanded sense of self, but to our continued survival in the face of a medical epidemic, in a milieu where we most emphatically do not constitute the social and cultural norm...” (p. 394).

### **Methodology**

This study uses textual analysis to identify the dominant messages about black gay males being communicated to audiences in selected films and television programs. The primary purpose of the analysis was to highlight major themes concerning the realities of life for Black gay males and/or issues surrounding Black homosexuality; it seeks to uncover the culturally significant content (Baran 2012) of the films and television programs by moving beyond one-dimensional investigations of stereotypes. The research investigates the “shared beliefs” (Baran 2012, 360) regarding African American gay males among the writers, producers and directors of media content. Consistent themes over time and across media texts could very well become the audience’s common sense beliefs and attitudes about the lives of gay Black males; i.e. cultivation effects.

The films and TV programs were chosen as units of analysis because they all feature gay Black males as the main character(s), cover a range of years with the majority released within the

last decade, and have received some positive attention for being important milestones in depicting the Black gay experience (see literature review).

The television program units of analysis include two seasons of *Noah's Arc*, (2005- 2007) the first television program to feature Black gay men as main characters; one season of *The DL Chronicles* (2007) – an anthology program with four episodes featuring different storylines and characters; and six episodes of *The Closet* (2005) – a short-lived series that aired on the now defunct Q Television Network.

In the films studied, three - *Cover* (2007), *Holiday Heart* (2000), and *Get on the Bus* (1996) were directed by straight Black males. *Rag Tag* (2006) was directed by a Black female of British and African descent. The film is set in London. *Strange Fruit* (2004) was directed by a White male. The films, *Punks* (2000), *Blue Print* (2007), *Epidemic Chronicles* (2010), *Finding Me: Truth* (2011), *Dirty Laundry* (2006), *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* (2008), *Finding Me* (2009), *Brother to Brother* (2004), and *The Ski Trip* (2004), were written and directed by Black openly gay men. In addition, 11 of the films are dramas and two of the films are romantic comedies. *Noah's Arc*, the television series, can be classified as a dramedy while *The DL Chronicles* and *The Closet* are classified as drama.

From a qualitative perspective, the analysis of the media text had an emerging, creative characteristic. The development of concepts and interpretations occurred inductively. The researchers analyzed the content independently looking for themes, patterns, repetition or commonalities in content/messages. After reviewing each film and program twice, the researchers shared findings to look for common themes, concepts, patterns, etc. Those themes, concepts, patterns, and themes with similar terminology were then collapsed/combine to form a

common theme. Consensus among the researchers was then reached regarding overall themes identified in the analysis.

## **Results**

Research Questions 1 and 1a asked what themes emerge in the depiction of Black gay males and Black homosexuality in the selected works and what are these films and television programs communicating to the Black gay males and the audience in general.

Several major themes emerged in the films and television programs which include: **(A)** Black gay males continue to be hampered by the myths and misconceptions surrounding homosexuality; **(B1)** Black gay males face a great deal of homophobia which manifests itself in a variety of ways including violence; **(B2)** a secondary theme - because of the ostracism and hostility they face in their communities, families and society at-large, Black gay males create strong friendship and non-traditional familial bonds; **(C1)** the Black gay community is not monolithic but multifaceted; **(C2)** a secondary theme - all Black gay males who are masculine are not in the “closet” or on the DL (Down Low – Black men who do not self identify as gay or bisexual often times maintaining relationships with women and sleeping with men without informing their female partners), and all Black gay males who are feminine do not consider themselves female/women; **(D)** Black gay males lead much happier lives when they are true to themselves; **(E)** Black gay males seek loving, long-lasting relationships like their heterosexual counterparts. For purposes of this particular paper, only the five major themes will be examined.

### **Prominent Themes**

**“There’s nothing wrong with me just because I’m attracted to men”**

**(A) Black gay males are hampered by the myths and misconceptions about homosexuality**

For this theme, the films and television programs dealt with a variety of issues surrounding homosexuality. Issues such as whether homosexuality is a choice, the nature verses nurture argument surrounding homosexuality, homosexuality as deviant, unnatural behavior, and gender role confusion were addressed. These issues were most prominent in *Get on the Bus*, *Dirty Laundry*, *Epidemic Chronicles*, *The Closet* and *Cover*. In a scene from *Get on the Bus*, for example, after the men become aware that there are gay men traveling with them, an older passenger, Jeremiah, suggests that being gay is an abomination (deviant) and offers to pray for the two men, as a means of praying the gay away. In the same film, one passenger asks who takes on the male role and who takes on the female role in their relationship. Religious overtones are present in *Dirty Laundry*, *Rag Tag* and *Cover* as well when characters use the Bible to deflect from dealing with homosexuality and to veil what others view as improprieties in sexuality.

In *Epidemic Chronicles*, when Shawn comes out to his mother she forcefully replies, “no you’re not.” After he explains how he feels and that he has known since he was an eight year old, she asks if another male had influenced him to feel and think that way. Finally, the mother replies, “Are you saying you like men?” Shawn’s father offers to get him help through the church. Shawn eventually tells one of his friends, “There is nothing wrong with me just because I’m attracted to men.”

Perhaps the best exemplar for this theme occurs in the TV program *The Closet*. In one episode, a husband and wife are having a conversation about their gay son. The father has accepted the fact his son is gay but the mother still holds out hope her son will change. The mother questions whether they did something as parents to make their son gay. The father’s reply touches on many aspects of sexuality that some people have trouble grasping: “It’s not a

behavior Clara,” he says. “We didn’t raise him gay. He didn’t learn it and he’s not going through a phase. And sleeping with any number of women is not going to make him want women. He’s gay and that’s just how God made him.” In another scene from the program, one character questions the notion about raising children to be gay. “How do you raise a child gay? Are straight people that dumb?”

In terms of gay males going through phases and sleeping with women to cure their male attraction, *The DL Chronicles* takes on that misconception as well. In episode “Robert”, the main character discusses why he married when he knew he was attracted to males. “I thought she could convert me; that I could be healed.” Also, in *The Closet*, one character says he doesn’t want his children to be near gay people because it could make them gay. His friends laugh at him and criticize his apparent ignorance with one replying “Larry dear, no one can turn a child gay.” Similarly, in *The DL Chronicles* Episode “Robert”, Robert and his daughter Rhonda have a conversation about his sexual orientation. “How long have you had this?” she asks. Robert replies, “Geez, you make it sound like some disease. It’s not something you can catch.” Scenes from *Strange Fruit* and *Dirty Laundry* hint at some people’s notion of gays belonging to a special club or group. For example, in *Dirty Laundry*, the mother has finally come to grips with her son’s sexuality so while at the family dinner she proudly proclaims, “This is my son Sheldon and he is one of the gays.” In *Strange Fruit*, the main character – William, is investigating the death of his friend Kelvin and goes to a gay bar. Accompanying William is Kelvin’s brother who introduces William to one of Kelvin’s friends and says, “He one of ya’ll.”

Finally, in both the *DL Chronicles* and in *Get on the Bus*, characters make references to men who are gay, particularly effeminate men, not being real men. Because he is attracted to men, he therefore must secretly want to be a woman. A mother of a down low Black man in the

*DL Chronicles* notes she is happy her sons weren't "trying to be gay, trying to be a woman" as she laments about the trials her neighbor must endure because her son is obviously gay.

### **"Being Gay Ain't Easy"**

#### **(B1) Black gay males face various forms of homophobia and intolerance including violence**

The issue of intolerance, homophobia and the difficulties Black gay males endure was depicted in several films, specifically with *Finding Me*, *Finding Me: Truth*, *Rag Tag*, *Epidemic Chronicles*, *Get on the Bus*, and *Strange Fruit*. The main character in *Finding Me*, Faybian, is physically and verbally assaulted by his father who is intolerant of his sexuality. The scene portrays Faybian packing a few items in a bag as he prepares to spend a few days with friends. In the scene, Faybian's father enters the room, incites an argument and begins to physically and verbally assault his son for being a 'faggot.' In *Finding Me: Truth*, which is the sequel to *Finding Me*, Jay is assaulted by members of his on again/off again boyfriend Omar's entourage. Omar doesn't identify as gay and doesn't like it when Jay shows up at his girlfriend's house to cause trouble. In another scene, Omar and his associates attack Jay a second time. How that attack ends is unresolved in the film as the scene then fades to black. In the scene noted earlier from *Epidemic Chronicles* when Shawn tells his mother he is gay, she slaps him as she shouts "No you are not." Also in the movie *Cover*, the central character Dutch is physically assaulted by his father after he (his father) learns that Dutch has been leading a double life and secretly engaging in sex with men.

The most brutal example of intolerance that leads to violence occurs in *Strange Fruit*. The film centers on William Boyals, an African American lawyer who returns home to Louisiana to investigate the death of his childhood friend, Kelvin. Both the friend and Boyals are gay. In

the film, Boyals is attacked physically on two occasions with one being an attempted hanging at the hands of one of the local Black crime leaders. The primary reason he was attacked was because he was a gay. At the beginning of the film, Kelvin is brutally attacked and hanged by the same mob. In another scene in the movie, one Black male spits in Boyals' face just because he is gay.

In the television program *Noah's Arc*, the main character, Noah, was subjected to a violent attack in an episode titled 'Under Pressure'. Noah was verbally and physically assaulted by three intolerant assailants. His attempt to quell the situation by stating he did not want any trouble is to no avail, and he is hit and kicked repeatedly with no one coming to his aid. He attempted to defend himself with the use of mace. In *The Closet*, two characters have an intense discussion on the subject of parents not being able to come to grips with their child's sexual orientation and going to extreme measures such as violence to try to change it. "Some parents even go so far as to beat their child for being gay," one of the characters notes. Moreover, in another episode of the program, one character suggests that all men living on the down low should be exterminated.

In *Holiday Heart*, the main character, Holiday, is threatened at gunpoint by a drug dealer who sees him as a threat. In *Get on the Bus*, Kyle (one of the two gay men on the bus) has a physical altercation with Flip who had been harassing Kyle and his former lover Randall for much of the trip. As Kyle punches Flip, with each punch, he calls on the name of famous Black gay males including James Baldwin and Langston Hughes.

Issues of intolerance were manifested in all of the films and television shows when main and supporting characters had to deal with verbal assaults. Characters who were deemed more effeminate were referred to as "f\*\*\*\*\*" or "sissies" and other expletives for their mannerisms

and nature. Even in films where characters were not depicted as effeminate, terms such as “f\*\*\*\*\*” and “queer” were used in the most demeaning ways possible. One of the best examples occurs in *Strange Fruit* in several conversations between William Boyals and members of the sheriff’s department. Particularly in the television show *The DL Chronicles*, the episode ‘Boo’, has a heightened level of derogatory comments about gay males, not just effeminate men. In *Punks*, a movie written, produced and directed by the creator of Noah’s Arc, a “straight” Black man has to defend his gay Black friend from the verbal attacks of one of his basketball playing buddies. Jo Jo goes up for a shot, misses and falls. Marcus, the main character who is gay, laughs along with everyone else on the court. Jo Jo chooses to retaliate against him instead of his straight friends. “What the \*\*\*\* you laughing at? If you think you can do better, bring your punk ass on out here.” Jo Jo goes even further with insults when he suggests that Marcus, who is a photographer by trade, is taking pictures of Jo Jo so he can use them for his own sexual gratification or sell on the Internet. Darby has to step in to stop Jo Jo’s assault. Later in the movie, Darby’s girlfriend makes fun of one of the characters, Chris who is transgendered. She asks if he stuffed his bra with tissue paper or silicon. She also asks if Chris’ wig was human hair or synthetic. She demeans all the characters when she calls them the “funny” neighbors.

**“I’m tired of begging for their acceptance. I need to be me.”**

**(C) Black gay males can lead happier lives when they are true to themselves**

Although Black gay males have been presented as effeminate and victims of violence, it is also fair to state depictions of Black gay males shown embracing who they are in terms of their sexuality may help to debunk the myth that gay men are not “real” men. In the films *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom*, *Cover* and *Dirty Laundry*, each film portrays characters coming into

their own; accepting the fact their sexuality may not be appealing to family members or society, but in order for them to be happy, they have to lead their lives based on their own beliefs, values and feelings.

In *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, Wade, Noah's partner, decides to get married despite not having his family present to witness and honor their union. As an attempt at redemption and reconciliation, Wade's mother attends and says that although it wasn't the life that she would have chosen for him, she understood that sexuality was not a choice despite what the religious zealots say. Wade tells his mother that if she didn't accept it, she could leave because he and Noah had been through too much to let anyone ruin their day or their happiness. Wade's mother stays. Also, in *Jumping the Broom*, Brandon a young college age student struggles with whether to come out to his parents. He says he wants people to know who he really is. After seeing how open everyone else was about their sexuality, he decides to come out to his parents but is disowned by his parents but gains strength from the support of Noah and his friends. Similarly, in *Brother to Brother*, the main character, Perry, is not accepted by his father because he is gay and ultimately ends up in homeless shelter because he is not welcomed. He too gains strength from those who accepts him and eventually finds his voice.

In *Cover*, Dutch shares with his father that he is not the man his father thought he was and knew he could not share the fact he was bisexual for lack of acceptance. In the same conversation, Dutch expresses that he has accepted who he is and also has accepted the consequences of his actions, i.e. losing the relationship with his wife and daughter, as well as losing the respect of his father who was prideful in calling Dutch 'a Maas man.' *Dirty Laundry* provides a story of redemption and acceptance when central character Sheldon accidentally exposes his interracial same-sex relationship at a church picnic. Embarrassed by the exposure,

Sheldon deals with the situation by accepting and presenting his partner as his boyfriend at a family dinner, where his mother, who struggled with her son's sexuality, openly accepts Sheldon and his boyfriend as family. In fact, the mother encourages her son to be proud of who he is; that he shouldn't hide who he is from anyone. *The Ski Trip* has a similar moment when Terry, who is very flamboyant, calls himself an average f\*\*\*\*\* who knows who he is and has made peace with it. Similarly, Byron, a self-professed b\*\*\*\* declares that he knows who he is and lives his life for himself, not other people.

In *Punks*, Darby, who for all his life had identified as heterosexual, comes to realize that he has fallen in love with Marcus as their friendship and relationship develop over the course of the film. Although he is fearful of those feelings and what to do about them, he decides not to fight what he is feeling. Ultimately, he breaks up with his girlfriend and declares his feelings for Marcus. Likewise, in *The DL Chronicles* Episode "Robert", Robert realizes that he had been running from who he really is most of his life. Although he knew he was attracted to men, he decided to marry his girlfriend after she became pregnant. Throughout the episode he is trying to hide the fact that he is gay from his daughter, Rhonda. Robert ultimately realizes that he has developed feelings for another man, accepts it and he and the guy continue their budding relationship.

Finally, in *Noah's Arc* season one, Wade and Noah go to a sports bar where Wade introduces Noah to his friends as his homeboy instead of his boyfriend. Later on, Wade and Noah fight and Noah tells Wade, "it's taken me a lifetime to get comfortable in my own skin. If you're embarrassed to be seen with the real me, that's on you. This is me Wade, take it or leave it." When they return to the sports bar, they return holding hands as a couple and Wade's friends are accepting of his relationship with Noah.

## **“Love is Love”**

### **(D) Black gay males seek loving, relationships like their heterosexual counterparts**

For this theme, the films *Punks*, *Rag Tag*, *Strange Fruit*, *Blue Print*, *Epidemic Chronicles*, *Finding Me*, *Finding Me: Truth*, *The Ski Trip* and *Holiday Heart*, as well as the television series, *The DL Chronicles*, *The Closet*, and *Noah's Arc* feature Black gay males as either in committed, monogamous relationships or seeking that type of relationship. In *The Ski Trip*, the main character, Corey, is a Black gay male who, upon turning 30, realizes that he is alone and wants companionship. As he talks to his best friend Terry about his dilemma, Cory notes, “I want to be able to go out on a romantic dinner and not just to some gay part of town. I want to buy a car, buy a house, and have a life with somebody. All we have is drama and sex; as we get older more drama, less sex. I want more than the drama and the sex.” Later in the film, Terry tells Cory that in life we're lucky to find someone who truly loves us warts and all, and that having a second chance at love is rare. According to Terry, people shouldn't let what others think of them and others' expectations rob them of a chance at love and happiness.

In *Holiday Heart*, Holiday, the central character, is mourning the loss of his police officer partner (Fletcher) who was killed in the line of duty. Holiday plans a trip to Paris to reclaim love that was lost when Fletcher passed on. In *Blue Print*, Keith and Nathan, while only having known each other one day, realize they may have finally found the One. In *Punks*, Marcus is an incurable romantic who desperately wants a monogamous relationship. He ultimately finds that in his next-door neighbor Darby. In the film *Epidemic Chronicles*, Kevin, a single father is looking for a meaningful relationship of his own. He asks his friend Jamal, “How is a brother supposed to find a serious relationship? Why can't I just find a brother who's together? He

doesn't have to be making a lot of money, he just needs to have his \*\*\*\* together .... If they ain't married, then they're on the DL. You know I can't be with someone who's married."

*Finding Me* and *Finding Me: Truth* are not only films about discovering one's self, but at the heart is a story about the romance between main characters Faybian and Lonnie. They meet and fall in love but break up because Faybian is not sure what he wants. In the sequel, Faybian realizes he does love Lonnie and sets out to win him back. In the film *Rag Tag*, Raymond (Rag) and Tagbo (Tag) are two guys who rekindle their friendship after 10 years. As 12-year-olds the two were inseparable but Rag was taken from his mother by social services and shipped off to live with relatives in Birmingham. Rag returns to London and they begin their relationship again finally coming to the realization that the feelings they had for each other were much more than platonic and they end up together despite the interference of Tag's father who felt they were too close as 12 year-olds. When the two declare their love for each other near the end of the film, Tag's father tries to use the Bible to justify his opposition. He says, "Sin is Sin." However, Tag's mother replies, "Love is Love." She tells Rag that there are people who come into our lives to provide things that parents, family and others cannot, and people have to accept that fact no matter how difficult it might be. She blesses their union because she wants her son to be happy.

The television programs *The Closet*, *The DL Chronicles*, *Noah's Arc* and the film *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* highlight monogamous relationships between Black gay males. In *The Closet*, characters Emory Lawsen and Brandon Pullman Lawsen have been together 12 years and are raising a son. *The DL Chronicles* highlights this theme in an episode titled 'Mark' with the couple Mark and Dante, and in the same episode Reggie gives Terrell an ultimatum regarding their on again, off again relationship. Once Terrell discovers his cousin is gay and in a

relationship with Dante, it makes it easier for him to take a leap of faith and enter into a committed relationship with Reggie. *Noah's Arc* depicts its characters' monogamous relationships in the interaction between Alex and Trey, as well as Chance and Eddie, and Wade and Noah. In *Noah's Arc*, the series, Chance and Eddie have a commitment ceremony and are raising Eddie's daughter together. The series *Noah's Arc* culminates with the film *Jumping the Broom*, which centers on the wedding of characters Wade and Noah. The only character who embodies the stereotype of gay promiscuity is Ricky. Likewise, in the *Ski Trip*, the only character depicted as promiscuous is Carlos; in *The DL Chronicles*, it is Boo; in *The Closet*, the character depicted as promiscuous is Jeffrey Freeman; and in *Punks*, the characters depicted as promiscuous are Dante and Hilton (after Hilton ends a relationship with his boyfriend; by the end of the film the couple reconcile). In all those depictions, the promiscuous characters were criticized by their friends who urged them to try monogamy.

**“Just because you think it’s cute to run around in a wig and a dress doesn’t mean everyone else does”**

**(E) The Black gay community is not monolithic but multifaceted and multidimensional**

There is a continuum of identities relating to Black gay males within all of the films and television programs covered that both perpetuate and debunk gay stereotypes. Many of the films and television programs provide at minimum one character that is portrayed as flamboyant, effeminate or soft through mannerisms, attire and language including references to males using female terms and identities. Characters are also feminized by their occupations, but not in the traditional, stereotypical sense. Unlike films and television programs of the past, the effeminate, flamboyant characters are balanced with masculine males; males who might be identified as straight when walking down the street. Specifically in *Noah's Arc*, *Noah's Arc: Jumping the*

*Broom, Punks, The Closet, Cover, Epidemic Chronicles, Blue Print, Finding Me, Finding Me: Truth, The DL Chronicles, Brother to Brother, Rag Tag, Strange Fruit, Get on the Bus, and The Ski Trip*, there is a dominant hetero-type male figure who is in fact a Black gay male. In *Noah's Arc*, the television series and film, supporting characters Wade, Trey, Eddie, Baby Gat, T-Money, Quincy, and Dre are Black gay males who do not display any feminine characteristics. In *The DL Chronicles* Episode "Robert", Austin is asked if he were openly gay. He says because of his stature and demeanor, most people think he is straight but he would tell the truth if asked. In *Epidemic Chronicles*, all the leading male characters (six) are masculine men. The only "queens" presented in the film are in two scenes with one taking place at a gay club. *The DL Chronicles* as well as *The Closet* and *Cover* depict masculine Black gay men who are not in the closet or on the down low. In *Epidemic Chronicles*, the only character presented as DL is John who is married and having extramarital affairs with men.

In several of the films and television shows analyzed, the issue of manhood and masculinity were debated. Whereas, the stereotype of gay men suggest that men are attempting to associate with women, the films *Cover, The Ski Trip, Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* as well as the television show *Noah's Arc* discussed masculinity in gay culture. Particularly in *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, the character Wade expresses his sentiment on the matter when discussing how he feels when introducing his partner, Noah (a more effeminate male) to his friends and colleagues. Wade suggests that men like Noah who are out and unapologetic about whom they are have more courage than men like him, knowing the ridicule that comes with being an effeminate gay man. In *The Ski Trip* as well as *Noah's Arc*, some characters took offense to being referred to as a woman. For example, supporting character Omar asks Byron "Must you always refer to us as ladies?" Also, Noah gives Baby Gat a disapproving look when

he arrives to take Noah on a date and says “Your chariot awaits my lady.” Other examples concerning the conflation of masculinity and manhood by the dominant culture include Noah telling his friends that wearing a dress doesn’t make a person any less of a man, and Chance telling two straight females that people cannot have it both ways: that gay men are not real men because they don’t take on the role of fatherhood and at the same time criticizing gay men who are fathers because children might suffer because their parents are gay.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Investigating Black gay males in films and television from a ritual perspective helps one begin to illuminate cultural messages both explicit and implicit. When considering the five major themes and two sub-themes identified through this analysis, one overarching theme that is appropriate to categorize the results is humanization; the films and television programs humanize Black gay men as being just like everyone else in their attempt at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Through the content, the desires, aspirations, fears and challenges of Black gay males are shared. The characters are stable, hard-working, fun-loving people who could move in next door and not disturb the present order. They are not psychotic or socio-paths who are out to pillage and plunder, nor are they out to bring innocent, straight people to the dark side (i.e. out to make everyone gay or all of society accept their sexuality). By expanding the types of characters being portrayed and the stories being told about Black gay males, the entertainment media provide audiences with an opportunity to go inside a world and community they may know nothing about. More importantly, perhaps, is through these more humanizing depictions audiences have an opportunity to examine their own beliefs and biases about and toward gays and homosexuality. For example, the notion that because a male is attracted to another male, he

therefore cannot be a man but has attributes similar to a woman or must want to be a woman is disarmed when effeminate gay men assert their manhood or challenge social constructions of masculinity. Portrayals of intolerant behavior are presented to suggest the difficulties Black gay males encounter both within and outside familial settings. This further suggests that if family members or parental units are not accepting of their lifestyles, how will Black gay males be accepted by society as a whole? Portraying Black gay males in their pursuit of relationships provides a glimpse into their interpersonal connections. With only a few characters being portrayed as promiscuous and the majority of others in monogamous, stable relationships or seeking such relationships the messages inherent in that depiction is again Black gay males are no different from any other human being. Most everyone wants or needs love and companionship regardless of orientation the films and programs conclude. Additionally, analysis of the films and television programs show that Black gay males forge close relationships with their partners and create environments of acceptance as defense mechanisms against homophobia and intolerance. Although this theme was not addressed in the results section of this paper, it should be noted as an over-arching message in many of the films and television shows studied.

Television programs and films have featured Black gay males who have become endearing characters despite the stereotypes that have been placed on them. While these stereotypes are problematic, the characters analyzed in this study go beyond the typical portrayal. The majority of the characters are three-dimensional and not the typical sassy sidekick, drag queen or down low Black male. These characters are representative of real people. The representation of Black gay males in television and film can be useful in determining what producers, writers and directors think about them as a group; what Black gay males might think about themselves; and what attitudes might be cultivated in audience members when

encountering these representations. Even with the presence of a broader range of portrayals, stereotypes of Black gay men remain prevalent and the limitations of their characters still leave room for improvement. The limited and often-times one dimensional roles depicting Black gay males means a lack of identification for a segment of men in society who are looking for potential role models, particularly when there isn't a real person available to be that role model.

The findings from this study corroborate well with some of the literature on the portrayal of Black gay males and also add another dimension in terms of more diverse, well-rounded characters breaking some of the stereotypes. The fact that there were images of masculine Black gay men who were out, closeted and DL indicates that there are those in the entertainment industry who understand there is a continuum of identities when it comes to Black gay males; that indeed the Black gay male community is multi-faceted and multi-dimensional. In fact, in *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, Alex questions the whole idea of coming out. "I would never tell anyone they have to come out," he says to Brandon.

Images of masculine Black gay men are still often limited in their dimension and often perpetuate them as closeted and struggling with their sexuality, which is probably the case for many men given the stigma associated with being gay. These images are significant as an ideology of who Black gay men are is emblazoned on television screens and in movie theatres. For the masculine male, the depiction of men not on the DL is one they might well identify with which is a departure from depictions of the past. These images may provide welcomed identifiable characters and potential role models for men who are in this mode in reality. The results of this study have relevance as it can be suggested that areas of entertainment for Black gay males should be further developed. The production of films and television programs that

speak to more than just stereotypes of Black gay men can potentially allow society to evolve in its feelings, reactions and treatment of said people.

Recent conversations relating to how directors and producers portray Black characters in 2010 at the Writers Guild of America-West panel discussion titled Flipping the Script: Beyond Homophobia in Black Hollywood expressed the need to develop films and television programs that do not continue to fill the mold of what has already been portrayed for Black gay characters. Panelists also noted there has been resistance in segments of mainstream culture to dispel the myths associated with being Black and gay which in turn continues the stigma.

#### Future Research

The fact that minimal scholarly articles have been written on the topic relating to Black gay men and the stereotypes perpetuated in television and film should allow for more research. The evolution of how Black gay males are portrayed would be beneficial to have a greater understanding of the roles of these characters. A more thorough examination of film history as it pertains to Black gay male characters can illustrate the extent to which they have been included in the films, the nature of those depictions, and how those depictions have changed since film's inception. Similar studies could be performed for television as well. In addition, studying the portrayal of Black gay males in primetime network television and in programs such as HBO's *The Wire* and *True Blood* can be beneficial as well. Are the Black gay male characters more well-rounded and three-dimensional in network television versus premium cable? Reception studies of films and TV programs that feature Black gay males can help us understand what draws audiences to the characters. Textual analyses of online programs such as *Drama Queenz* and *Friends and Lovers* can be used to compare with more traditional television in terms of depictions of Black gay males. One research question that could be addressed includes: Are

audience members more accepting of gays based on changes or perceived changes in their depictions? Such research could provide valuable data and create conversations that address intolerance, homophobia and acceptance of Black gay men in society.

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