



NOBODY IS SUPPOSED TO KNOW

Black Sexuality on the Down Low

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Transpositions

The myth of our potent sexuality has been, I would argue, not only a great burden but also one of the most potent means by which we have resisted—or at least adapted—racist and racialist oppression.

—Robert Reid-Pharr, *Once You Go Black*

Myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion.

—Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

On April 16, 2004, Oprah Winfrey began her episode “A Secret Sex World: Living on the ‘Down Low’” with an unusual announcement: “I’m an African American woman.” Her studio audience responded with laughter. Realizing, perhaps, that her show opener had not elicited the intended reaction, Winfrey explained that the producers of *The Oprah Winfrey Show* had had a similarly skeptical, perhaps even dismissive, response when she discussed her choice to open with a declaration of her identity:

When I told the producers I wanted to say that, they go like, “*Really* now?” But I’m an African-American woman, so when I picked up the paper the other day and saw this headline, it really got my attention. The headline says, “AIDS is the leading cause of death for African-Americans between the age of 25 and 44.” That is startling! All my alarms went off. Not only are more Black people getting AIDS in record numbers . . . more women, listen to me now, more women, more college students and people over 50 are at greater risk than ever before. Today, you’re gonna hear many reasons why AIDS is on the rise again. Here’s a shocker! It’s one of the big reasons why so many women are getting AIDS. Their husbands and their boyfriends are having secret sex with other men. [*Audience moans.*] Okay, I’ll let that sink in for a minute. [*Audience laughs.*] Okay, so this lifestyle even has a name. It’s called “living on the down low.” Okay, living on the down low.¹

Winfrey's uncharacteristic opening exemplifies the kinds of affective responses people have to the "news" of the down low (also referred to as the DL). Her identifications heighten her attentiveness to certain dimensions of the story, increasing her sensitivity to recent news reports about human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) rates for black women, college students, and people over age fifty. Winfrey's distinctive mode of punctuating exposition with her own commentary—"That is startling!" "Here's a shocker!"—is intended to convey these emotions to her audience and viewers at home. Indeed, we as her audience respond with equal measures of attentiveness even if we are not shaped by the same forms of identification or history. Journalist Ellen Hume has described Winfrey as a host who acts as "fellow sufferer" with her viewer.² In the 2004 episode on the down low, perfectly pitched to reach black, middle-class heterosexual women, Winfrey aimed to expose her viewers to the suffering produced by secrecy.

Later, in an update episode, Winfrey would return to the familiar contours of down-low narratives, leaving her initial definition intact while adding a triumphant tone: at least two segments featured the unveiling of previous guests—formerly self-professed, down-low men who, by the time the show aired on October 7, 2010, were describing themselves as gay. Foremost among them was the motivational speaker J. L. King, author of the *New York Times* best seller *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of "Straight" Black Men Who Sleep with Men*. King's commercially successful *On the Down Low* reads as part memoir, part advice column, and part ethnography, in which he is both "native informant" and "expert" based on his experiential access to the sexual practices of men on the down low. The book opens with a description of cruising at church, in which King's suspicions are confirmed that his lust object is similarly on the down low through an exchange of glances and an infinitesimal locking of gaze.³ This practice of looking—and looking "too long"—between men delineates King's membership in an underground, secret society of black men who have sex with men and do not identify as gay or bisexual. Positioning himself as the whistle-blower, King's exposé salaciously constructs the pleasures and dangers of men who are not "in the closet" but, as he purports, "behind the closet."⁴

In the 2010 episode, King described how his experiences on his *On the Down Low* book tour caused him to shift his thinking about identity, resulting in his decision to describe himself as a "black gay proud man."⁵ In

contrast to his first foray on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, King seemingly corroborated a story Winfrey was eager to tell. As Scott Herring has pointed out, the 2004 episode proved King was a “train wreck of an informant”—performing a series of refusals (rather than responses) to defer explaining his sexual practices or commenting on black male sexuality more generally.⁶ The effects of King’s coming-out narrative were numerous. While they may have been recuperative for the individual, they maintained a dichotimization of black women as unknowing victims and black men as, in the words of David Malebranche, “predatory liars, cheaters and ‘mosquito-like’ vectors of disease when it comes to HIV.”⁷ It also gave Winfrey an opportunity to demonstrate to her audiences that these men were gay all along, confirming for her audience an impossibly smooth narrative of conversion (or perhaps emergence) over the vexed (illegible) representation of situating blackness and queerness in the awkward embrace of the down low. King’s proclamation also recuperated Winfrey’s own public persona, as his self-identification as gay and her congratulatory response helped to manage the way the phrase “down low” might also characterize the persistent rumors concerning Winfrey: namely, that Winfrey has been in a secret long-term relationship with her best friend Gayle King.

Concretized as a term in the early 2000s, “the down low” has been one in myriad discursive practices that link black sexuality with duplicity. However, the down low is fundamentally polysemous, as it stands in for a group, a sexual practice, a location for said practices, a discursive concept, and a mass mediatized spectacle. Even as colloquial understandings of the term typically include Latino men in definitions of the down low, and many have argued for a decoupling of blackness from this particular disidentificatory sexual practice, the down low continues to circulate in popular culture as a black sexual phenomenon. The coupling of black and queer is not new, and numerous scholars have attended to the co-constitutive production of blackness and queerness.⁸ The down low’s emergence in the early twenty-first century reflects a set of logics that naturalize the equating of blackness with sexual duplicity even as it manufactures an increasing demand for materials that facilitate the disciplining and surveilling of black bodies. This is not exceptional: part of what informs media representations of the down low is an assumption—a popular, long-held myth—that both the truth of race and the truth of sex are obvious, transparent, and written on the body. As such, this book begins with a simple premise: the

down low, commonly understood to describe a group of black men's sexual practices, might actually characterize the condition for black sexual representation. Black sexuality then is figured within a "glass closet," a space I define as marked by hypervisibility and confinement, spectacle, and speculation.⁹

This book proceeds as an examination of popular materials—news, film, television, gossip blogs, and music—to ascertain the inception of the down low and its contemporary modes of circulation. Raymond Williams has provided three senses of "popular" culture that are present among the materials examined in this study. One is the sixteenth-century meaning of popular as "low" or "base." Second is the late seventeenth-century sense, in which popularity is often regarded as undue or untoward tactics and cultural practices to curry favor with "the people."¹⁰ Third, in its most contemporary sense, popular is something that is simply well liked. The multiple meanings of popular characterize most of the materials I take up here. The artists, songs, and films are often derided both for their content—down low—and for their technical and generic form of relatively low-budget melodrama. Peter Brooks describes melodrama as a "mode of excess" with a fundamental drive toward "expressivity" and a principal mode of "uncovering, demonstrating, and making operative the essential moral universe in a post-sacred era."¹¹ Furthermore, since its inception in popular culture, melodrama has been as invested in producing certain forms of identificatory legibilities—racial, gender, sexual, among others—as it has been with dramatizing moral code.¹² Down-low melodramas most often recirculate racial, gender, and sexual myths that produce down-low men as either morally corrupt predators or victims of a pathological culture (i.e., blackness) that repudiates queer identities.

Nobody Is Supposed to Know also engages with various discourses that intersect with the popular in the literatures of public health and epidemiology, law, folklore, and policy. These crossings produce a terrain for the emergence of the down-low figure as a discursive concept and contemporary metaphor for the instability in fixing categories of sexual identification to blackness. Frequently, the figure of the musician emerges, such that we might imagine a certain recurring melodic strain underpinning the media representations of the down low. Organized around these intertextual chords, my introduction proceeds as a series of notes, arranging the vectors of ideas as well as signifying how music structures down-low narratives. My notes are played as a critical accompaniment to the bright-

er sounds of the more official discourses. I encourage you to hear the sounds of the low-down register like blue notes, played in a lower pitch for expressive emphasis.¹³ There is a synergistic exchange between blue notes and black content, between the down low and what blues pianist and composer Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey described as the “low-down blues.”¹⁴ My book also follows the patterns of musical texts, which “don’t usually disclose themselves fully: audiences go through complex interpretive acts to understand them.”¹⁵ Bearing these things in mind, I offer up my notes as furtive transcriptions that will continue to unfurl in each succeeding chapter. Each note is a form of “phasing,” a technique in music in which a pattern is repeated and manipulated so that it separates and overlaps itself, then rejoins the original pattern. There will be moments where it will feel that we are getting out of phase before we get back in sync.

To be clear, I am not interested in verifying the existence of men on the down low; this book does not attempt to reveal black men’s (or anyone else’s) sexual practices. Instead I am asking, as Eve Sedgwick has done in *Epistemology of the Closet*, “how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating.”¹⁶ That is, this book asks why (and even how) the down low is made to matter at the turn of the twenty-first century. If we are ever to truly understand the full weight of the closet in its contemporary operation, we must consider the example of the down-low figure not as an instance of a closeted gay man but as a mass-mediatised form that exists in a particular moment in HIV/AIDS history. Even though it is no longer appropriate to describe AIDS as a “gay” disease, the “secret lifestyle” of same-sex desire and practice is an instrumental part of down-low narratives. The fact that the down low persists in popular culture requires examinations of the complex relationships among identifications, sexual expression, and new technology in a rapidly increasing culture of surveillance. Through the use of a variety of methodological approaches, *Nobody Is Supposed to Know* provides an overview of the down low’s creation and circulation, paying critical attention to its appearances and effects in different spaces and times. Throughout the book, I point to the relationship between down-low figures and the more general appearance of black sexuality in representation and make use of the “glass closet” as a metaphor and analytic to describe how black sexualities are characterized by hypervisibility and confinement and subject to regulation and surveillance.

Focusing on the racialized, sexualized, gendered, and variably classed body of the down-low figure affords us new opportunities for the study of difference and the discursive strategies attendant to negotiating multiple forms of stigmatized identifications. Among these strategies, I focus on “ignorance” as a modality and performance that intervenes in discourses taken by shame’s analytic promise. Although shame has been a generative way of linking processes of racialization and sexuality in one analytic frame, I offer ignorance as an alternative mode for thinking about how the co-constitutive practices of racialization and sexuality interact. To analytically deploy ignorance requires considering a space where blackness and queerness can and do combine in ways that suspend (and not merely reinforce) social prohibitions.

But perhaps I am rushing the tempo. Let us proceed in due course.

Exposition: The Social Construction of an HIV/AIDS Risk

Down low, n. [1990s+] (US Black), a state of secrecy. [DOWN LOW adj.]

Down low, adj. [1990s+] (US Black), covert, secret [i.e., keeping a low profile].

—Jonathan Green, *Cassell’s Dictionary of Slang*

On February 7, 2001, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article on the “emergent phenomenon” of the “down low,” a term that typically refers to black men who have sex with men and women and do not identify as gay, bisexual, or queer. By year’s end, numerous other media outlets were reporting on the down low as well, including the *New York Times* (February 11, April 3), *USA Today* (March 15), the *Columbus Dispatch* (March 19), the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (April 1), the *Chicago Sun-Times* (April 22), the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (June 3), the *San Francisco Chronicle* (June 4), the *Village Voice* (June 6), *VIBE* magazine (July), *Jet* magazine (September 8), *Essence* magazine (October), the *San Diego Union-Tribune* (December 2), and the *Los Angeles Times* again (December 7).¹⁷ The popularization of the concept of the down low has not only meant a flurry of news and opinion articles in the mainstream and black press but also a bevy of television exposés, documentaries and feature films, and books.

The coverage has been primarily focused on two aspects, roughly categorized as the down low as a health risk and the down low as an aes-

thetic and racialized mode of masculinity. The *Village Voice*, for example, linked the down low with “homo thugs,” another term in popular circulation, which often refers to men who have sex with men who identify as part of hip-hop communities.¹⁸ Both aspects of coverage stem from what I refer to as a biopolitics of representation, or the scopical will to identify, reproduce, and subjugate bodies and populations through symbolic systems and structures. This impetus is facilitated by nationalist ideologies, which attempt to define, among many other things, notions of “citizenship,” feelings of belonging, or the lack thereof attendant to identifications such as race, gender, and sexuality and the representations of such terms.

The media coverage that sought to emphasize the health-related implications looked to HIV/AIDS researchers and the disciplines of public health, epidemiology, medicine, and social work among others to explain the relationship between down-low men and the reports of disturbingly high numbers of new HIV cases among black women in particular and black people more generally. However, in his national best-selling book *Beyond the Down Low*, Keith Boykin claimed that AIDS rates had in fact declined in the four years directly preceding the emergent news story.¹⁹ According to the 2001 year-end report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), new cases of women with HIV were three times more likely to be black than white or Latina that year, and the rates for African American men remained behind the rates for white men.²⁰ Black men reported contracting AIDS through heterosexual contact far more frequently than white, Asian, Native American, or Latino men, and had substantially higher numbers contracting HIV through sex with intravenous drug users and HIV-infected persons and from unspecified sources.²¹ An apparent connection between white men and black women could just as easily have been drawn, but the miscegenation narrative did not prevail as a means to explain the possible cause for HIV transmission. Boykin points to several factors that led instead to the initial media frenzy over the down low, including an issue of timing—2001 marked the twentieth anniversary of the AIDS epidemic—and the availability of a poster boy in the form of J. L. King, who made his first public appearance talking about the down low at a conference in Washington, D.C., in February of that year.²²

In a rather self-conscious report titled “HIV and AIDS—United States, 1981–2000,” the CDC described that “AIDS incidence increased

rapidly through the 1980s, peaked in the early 1990s, and then declined. The peak of new diagnoses was associated with the expansion of the AIDS surveillance case definition in 1993.²³ While careful to underplay the connection between the changes in reporting protocols and the changes in the demographics of HIV/AIDS cases, the CDC also suggested that “in the early 1980s, most AIDS cases occurred among whites. However, cases among blacks increased steadily and by 1996, more cases occurred among blacks than any other racial/ethnic population.”²⁴ The reports from 1996 also demonstrated the steady increase of heterosexual contact as the cause of exposure more generally, while cases from male–male sexual contact and intravenous drug use declined. Cathy Cohen’s *The Boundaries of Blackness* (1999) enumerates many of the factors that influenced these statistics as well as the relative inattention from black political communities to AIDS during the 1990s, including the impact and legacy of the Reagan administration and its anti-AIDS and anti-black policies, the various racial blunders made by the CDC, beginning with linking AIDS to Haitians, and the veritable invisibility in news coverage (both print and broadcast) of AIDS cases among women, people of color, and the poor.²⁵

Notable exceptions included the widely covered announcements by professional athletes Earvin “Magic” Johnson in 1991 and Arthur Ashe in 1992 that they were HIV positive. Johnson’s announcement, Cohen argues, forever changed the quantity of coverage focused on AIDS in black communities.²⁶ However, as Cohen and Phillip Brian Harper explain, the discussion of Magic Johnson did not mention black gay men or black men who sleep with men, “only the occasional [piece] written by a fan to refute the rumors of Magic’s possible bisexuality.”²⁷ Johnson’s own emphatic declaration of heterosexuality and call for abstinence among black youth did much to contribute to an effective silencing of any discussion of male–male sexual relationships and created a roughly analogous situation of rumor and disavowal that forecasted much of the contemporary rhetorical structure of the down low. Down-low narratives often amplify fears about sexual contagions while simultaneously anticipating and foreclosing conversations about safer sex.

As this book argues throughout, it is more productive to understand the narrative dimensions of the down low as reflections of media representations of black gender and sexuality more generally, akin to Enoch Page’s argument that highlights how media representations of black mas-

culinity indicate mass media's biases and the anxieties blackness produces in the national public sphere. "Portrayed as incompetents of a violent nature, unembraceable black males are featured in media images that seem to threaten the body politic, including the visible and often invisible bureaucratic and corporate arenas of cultural manipulation" of what he refers to as "white public space."²⁸ According to Page, both "positive" and "negative" representations of black men are constructed as unembraceable in the media, an argument he strengthens through textual analysis of films such as *The Color Purple* (1985) and *Malcolm X* (1992) and news coverage of black male celebrities and leaders such as Michael Jordan and Louis Farrakhan. Page concludes, "Racialized and gendered information inscribed in contemporary black male imagery is racially filtered through the whiteness of our national seeing I/eye."²⁹ Here, the use of I/eye suggests that images of "unembraceable" black men designate a psychic and visual "other" that simultaneously enables the constitution of white subjectivity and the maintenance of white order.

Both in the psychology of reception and the politics of circulation, the down low reflects contemporary anxieties about the nature of citizenship, national values, and social norms. As Michelle Wright and Antje Schuhmann suggest, "in the white American and white European imagination: racial 'Others' [are] always already sexualized [and] serve to mediate white Western negotiations of identity."³⁰ The down-low figure is one exemplar among many contemporary and historical characters, such as Bigger Thomas, "Willie Horton," and Nushawn Williams, which re-presents—that is, reframes and represents—black masculinity as dangerous, prone to trickery, promiscuous, and contaminated while also framing white masculinity and sexuality as less susceptible to such problems. In chapter 1, I attend to these figures and others in a genealogy of visual logics and discursive events that make the down low intelligible at the turn of the twenty-first century. While being careful to examine the conditions of possibility that give rise to the succession of discursive objects under review, I highlight how visibility shapes contemporary receptions of the down low. I suggest that visual logics that situate blackness as a site of innate sexual deviance are repeated and modified (if not refined) over time and indicate how the imbrication of race and sexuality in popular discourse, like the down low, curtails certain possibilities of (public) intimacy even when such narratives are framed as revelatory.

The introduction of the term “down low” in popular culture to refer to the necessity of keeping something or someone private occurred at roughly the same time as the emergence of “MSM” (men who have sex with men) in public health literature. In 1994, Salt-n-Pepa with En Vogue released the single “Whatta Man,” originally found on Salt-n-Pepa’s 1993 album *Very Necessary*. Built around a sample of the 1968 Stax Record hit “What a Man,” Salt-n-Pepa member, Cheryl “Salt” James and Hurby Azor wrote a song to salute black men. Following En Vogue’s harmonized hook, James rhymes:

And although most men are hos, he flows on the down low
'Cause I never heard about him with another girl.³¹

Salt-n-Pepa’s crossover hit marks one of the earliest uses of the term “down low,” and it praises down-low men for practicing sexual discretion. In the lyric, James’s speaker explains that she expects her man to cheat with other women (and possibly, though not explicitly, with men) because “most men are hos,” but the narrative shifts the blame from infidelity to speculative modes of communication (and her good fortune of having not heard); the lyrics credit the latter (the “he-said/she-said crowd”) as the actual threat to the speaker’s continued esteem for her partner. In this regard, down low is shown to be predicated on a version of public and private—where rumor and gossip figure a public audience and the imminent possibility of scrutiny for the female partner. The down low, as such, emerges as the private concern of the down-low man. Later musical iterations remix and diverge from this formulation.

Other topical songs in the mid-1990s include TLC’s 1994 single “Creep” and Brian McKnight’s “On the Down Low,” the first track on his 1995 sophomore album *I Remember You*. However, the most famous instantiation of the down low in song, the one most principally responsible for remaking the down low into a morality tale, came in 1996 with Robert “R.” Kelly’s single “Down Low (Nobody Has to Know).” The song, which was produced, arranged, written, and composed by Kelly, reached number four on the *Billboard Hot 100* and number one on the *R&B Singles* chart. “Down Low” also gave the musical group the Isley Brothers, who were featured on the track, their first Top 40 pop record since their 1980 release “Don’t Say Goodnight (It’s Time for Love),” and it revived the career of the group’s front man Ronald Isley, who continues to use the moniker

“Mr. Biggs.” The cinematic quality of “Down Low” resembles that of a short film, with dialogue, elaborate set design, and extensive character development through the lyrics. R. Kelly also released a second version—a significantly sped-up remix of the first—in 1998. In both versions, Kelly elaborates on the pleasures of moral transgression while introducing punishment as the seemingly inevitable conclusion of down-low narratives. Kelly’s songs were topping the charts at the same time as Andrew Sullivan published his notorious November 1996 *New York Times Magazine* cover story “When Plagues End”:

Gay liberation was most commonly understood as liberation from the constraints of traditional norms, almost a dispensation that permitted homosexuals the absence of responsibility in return for an acquiescence in second-class citizenship. This was the Faustian bargain of the pre-AIDS closet; straights gave homosexuals a certain amount of freedom; in return, homosexuals gave away their self-respect.³²

Here, Sullivan constructed an argument that relates stricter forms of self-regulation with the rewards of full citizenship and a renewed sense of health and vitality for queer people (“homosexuals”) living in a post-AIDS era. According to Sullivan’s logic, the era of AIDS produced a different kind of public relationship to homosexuality, in which queer people are able to participate in the public sphere after properly situating their sexual lives in the private sphere. The moral valence of his argument—a kind of homonormativity deeply indebted to (and reminiscent of) black respectability politics—suggests that the false privacy of the pre-AIDS closet required certain public acknowledgments and disavowals that may have ultimately constructed the conditions for the (homosexual) closet to function as a space for containment and observation. According to Sullivan, the pre-AIDS gay person was always marked publicly as a (over)sexed body; relatedly, the condition of living in such a marked-upon body constructs any sexual activity as licentious.

In his presentist account of the AIDS epidemic, Sullivan points to the relative ease for people—primarily middle-class and upper middle-class white gay men—to manage their illness with antiretroviral drugs. Phillip Brian Harper has critiqued the implicit racist and nationalist implications of such claims, suggesting that, although it is true that Sullivan

does not mean to deny the fact of continued AIDS-related deaths, “the form that his declaration assumes does constitute a disavowal—not of death, per se, but of the significance of deaths of those not included in his notion of racial-national normativity.”³³ Sullivan’s disavowal is also informed by an ignorance of the impact of AIDS on blacks, Latinos, poor people, and drug users, all routinely underreported in the news coverage of HIV/AIDS. Cohen explains that “though male-to-male sexual transmission was recorded by the CDC as the leading route of transmission of HIV among black men through mid-year 1997, those black men engaging in sex with other men, whether they identified as gay or not, did not merit the attention of the *Times*’s reporters and editors.”³⁴

The term MSM gave expression to newer “risk categories” in public health research, designating subpopulations or groups by sexual behavior rather than by identity in order to capture the experiences of people who have sex with people of the same gender. Both the terms down low and MSM seemed to begin as euphemisms. In the case of MSM, the term represented a shift from the 4-H model of designating high-risk populations—homosexuals, hemophiliacs, Haitians, and heroine addicts—that was prevalent in the 1980s. Down low, on the other hand, must be understood among a constellation of terms that often refer to sexual discretion or the lack thereof, such as the roughly synonymous phrase of “keep it on the quiet tip” (QT) or the down low’s semantic inverse and antithesis “low down.” To be low down implies that one lacks the necessary discretion that the down low (paradoxically) requires.

Secrecy is typically defined as the condition or fact of concealment, and as the definitions of the down low suggest, secrecy in these narratives implicates both actors, who are expected to practice sexual discretion, and audiences, who must maintain a state of secrecy.³⁵ Yet the public secret of the down low seems also to exemplify Foucault’s repressive hypothesis, where sexual discourse circulates and proliferates vis-à-vis rhetorics of secrecy and prohibition.³⁶ It is as anthropologist Michael Taussig explains, “an unstable and uncapturable blending . . . of concealment and revelation.”³⁷ Like the down low, MSM is constructed as a public secret within public health discourse and the HIV/AIDS medical-industrial complex, as an addendum (and possible corrective) to the notion of “out”—a proclaimed sexual orientation or identity—that describes a constituted population defined as just out of reach.

The linguistic coupling of *down* and *low* draws together a number of inferences. *Cassell's Dictionary of Slang* gives several entries for “down” and “low,” with “down” being “aware, conscious of, knowledgeable”; “to be part of the current (youth) fads and fashions”; “alert, keen, to get on, tough”; “owing, deficient in”; “feeling well, happy, at one with the world”; and “fashionably dressed, chic.” Whereas for “low,” it includes “any form of depression [opposite of HIGH, n.] (1), and slightly contrived.”³⁸ The range of definitions suggests a contradictory formulation that explicitly parallels the dual treatment of down low in the news as, on the one hand, an aesthetic practice and, on the other, the source of disease. The use of “low” to constitute a form of depression is instructive, particularly in light of the parenthetical addition “slightly contrived.” The articulation of affect and performance is one I discuss in greater depth in chapter 2, where I examine how melodrama becomes an important mode for expressing the anxieties tied up in down-low narratives—its over-the-top production sensibilities highlight a story line that connects the down low to derision and scorn.

“Down,” however, indexes a way of knowing—“to be fully aware”—of that which is, in the case of the down low, an unknowable entity. As Jason King points out in his *Village Voice* article “Remixing the Closet: Down-Low Ways of Knowing,” “DL is itself a way of organizing one’s life around the common trait of sexual desires, complete with a unique language. Solicitors in personal ads and chat rooms signify degrees of authenticity with coded monikers such as ‘serious DL brotha’ and ‘real roughneck nigga.’”³⁹ King’s examples of the down low’s “unique language” also signal a linguistic preoccupation with the “real.” As the monikers “serious DL brotha” and “real roughneck nigga” suggest, authenticity seems already out of reach for the chat room users, presumably looking to find similar men online.

On the one hand, these rhetorical moves gesture toward the seductiveness of down-low narratives to explain sexual desires without making recourse to a gay, bisexual, or queer identity, which is often racialized as white and gendered as feminine in popular discourse. They may also indicate a more general problem of nomenclature as it relates to black same-sex desire and identification, as evidenced by the proliferation of terms and phrases to describe black people who experience or act on same-sexual desire, such as “same-gender loving,” or “in the life,” or “in the

family”—or, in academic discourse, E. Patrick Johnson’s work on “quare.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, they gesture toward the way black sexuality is already figured as down low. Or, in a quintessentially Baudrillardian gesture, down low is simulacra—“it is the truth which conceals that there is none.”⁴¹ The down low is one effect of black sexual hypervisibility; in psychoanalytic terms, it is a “symptom”—the repressed returned to us through processes of condensation and displacement. The down low also parallels contemporary interest in reality television and social networking sites, and is emblemized (and memorialized) in figures such as Michael Jackson, Whitney Houston, and Luther Vandross, whose sexualities continue to animate conversations even after their deaths.

An Improvisation on Glass: Materializing Difference

In 1964, a small black-owned and -operated gay bar called the Big Glass opened on the corner of Fillmore and Sutter Streets in San Francisco.⁴² It was among a number of businesses that catered to the influx of more than 40,000 new black residents to the city’s Western Addition after World War II. Surrounded by jazz, blues, and rock-and-roll venues, the Big Glass enjoyed the patronage of its black gay clientele until its eventual closure in 1968. During its four years of operation, patrons witnessed and some probably even participated in a six-day riot in the fall of 1966, which broke out in Bayview/Hunter’s Point, Fillmore, and parts of the Haight after police shot a black teen suspected of car theft. Perhaps some of the Big Glass regulars were also members of the Western Addition Community Organization (WACO), a group of residents, local business owners, and church leaders who banded together in 1967 and filed suit against the city’s “urban renewal” plans for Fillmore Street and the surrounding area. More than likely, the Big Glass went the way of many other businesses in 1968 when the Redevelopment Agency eventually displaced numerous Fillmore Street businesses and residences under the auspices of rebuilding the neighborhood.

There is no record of how the Big Glass took on its name. In fact, there is little archival evidence of the daily life of the little bar. It is often included in Fillmore histories among a litany of places that represented the heyday of the Fillmore district before its eventual transformation due to local government-led gentrification initiatives. Alternatively, it is given a one-sentence treatment in contemporaneous publications and historical

accounts of LGBT social life as the first black gay bar to emerge in San Francisco. The Big Glass seems to occupy space—both physically and as a matter of public record—in ways similar to the description from Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods of black geographies: it discloses “how the racialized production of space is made possible . . . as invisible/forgettable at the same time as invisible/forgettable is producing space—always, and in all sorts of ways.”⁴³ Largely forgotten and seemingly naming its invisibility, the Big Glass notably emerged and persevered during one of the heights of police repression, at the nascent stage of organized black resistance in the Fillmore, and at a pivotal moment in rock-and-roll history. Perhaps the allusion to glass signified the ways that queer presence lay at the heart of this historical moment. In any case, the Big Glass served as a meeting space for patrons at the intersection of at least two forms of stigmatized identifications, and its seeming invisibility in the archive gestures to how glass and its chemical properties reveal the politics of visually apprehending difference. In this sense, glass is not merely a metaphor but it is shaped by and embedded within our daily materiality. Its materiality is part of why down-low narratives emerge and sustain now.

We live in a glass-cloaked society—a civilization that requires glass for nearly every aspect of our everyday lives, from eating utensils, mirrors, and storage containers to laptops, cell phones, digital televisions, and an array of other creature comforts. In their history of the material, Macfarlane and Martin explain that while glass is a ubiquitous substance, it remains invisible to us. “When we do notice glass we may find it difficult to place, for it tends to slip between categories. This is one source of its attraction and power. Glass is strange. Chemists find it defies their classifications. It is neither a true solid nor a true liquid.”⁴⁴ Glass is brittle yet infinitely malleable; it is transparent, chemically inert, and durable. It is not coincidental that glass structures our understanding of the representational world. Whether it is the glass that makes up the screens of our television sets and computers, or the mirror, a looking glass that allows us to understand how we might appear to others, this substance is endemic to our understanding of representation and to forms of mediation more generally. There are often, if not always, elements of distortion and projection when working with glass. Even as one looks at a computer screen, the flat glass plate intended to visualize data retrieved in the coils and wires buried within, one still catches glimpses of oneself on the

screen. This not-quite-looking at oneself that always accompanies looking at something else is analogous to the experience of the media critic.

Glass is a medium that carries its own meanings. Similar to McLuhan's argument for the importance of studying the media itself (and not simply its contents) in an effort to understand how messages are perceived, glass as a form of enclosure becomes important to study in its own right. Whether glass creates the fourth wall to the programs we bring into our homes every night or structures the space of the closet, as I deploy it throughout this project, it is critical that we understand how those things that have heretofore gone unnoticed substantively shape our perceptions of the mediated world. Focusing on the elementary, quotidian, virtually invisible materials that structure our visual world and language helps us to engage and more precisely describe the fundamental principles of representation. In other words, it allows us to consider how messages that are already naturalized, dominant, preferred, or intended are actually composed of smaller individual parts that fit together as smooth as glass. My project is interested in the mediated construction of the down low as a coherence of a set of mass-mediated narratives constructed by technologies of racialization, gendering, sexuality, and other forms of identification—a space produced in and through discourse, which is fundamentally hard to place. I assert that the (meta)physics of the glass closet are like the physical properties of glass, sometimes liquid and sometimes solid, located in the slippages of categorization. If we understand the closet as a racialized metaphor, then we must fully consider what it means when black bodies enter the illuminating space of the closet. It resembles the phenomenon of peering into a lit window at night—the contents inside captured by the glass frame.

The glass closet shares with its syntactical cousin the glass ceiling a sense of immobility; each term describes alternatively how the materiality of racial and sexual difference structures a restrictive parameter that precludes movement. Both metaphors speak to the way stereotypes fix people where they stand. To transgress each of these structures, the figure must be transformed. The materiality of glass provides a critical window into how we infer meanings and how we shape our identities, which share the key properties of glass in being both brittle—breaking readily—and malleable—having a capacity for adaptive change. The privileging of visual logics over other modes of sensory perception mirrors a desire to understand difference as a transparent fact. There is no identity without mediation, which

the concept of glass helps us to understand directly by demonstrating the complex and even contradictory ways visibility structures our perceptions of others and ourselves. Glass, as modifier, points to the simultaneous fragility and durability of the closet metaphor as it also gestures toward the terrifying realities of black sexualities being fixed under glass.

A Crescendo on the Closet: Confinement, Display, and the Materiality of Blackness

Although definitions of *closet* vary over time and across different regions of the world, the most common understanding of the term in North America is as a small, enclosed space, typically used for storing items such as clothes, dried goods, or linens. Closets can be freestanding, such as a wardrobe, or built into the wall of a larger room. The closet as a metaphor to describe the concealment of homosexuality materialized around the end of the nineteenth century as a “historical subject” alongside the homosexual. It was at this time that same-sex desires were undergoing codification in arenas of secular authority such as medicine, psychiatry, and the legal courts. Thus, the closet emerged to describe a nascent condition of surveillance and regulation; its protective measures—ensured by a person’s ability to pass, to be read as something other than his or her identity—guarded against the constitution and criminalization of a new kind of person, “the homosexual.”

Interpretations of the closet as metaphor have also varied over time. Michael Brown describes three interpretative approaches to the closet as metaphor: comparative, interactive, and poststructuralist. For Brown, there is an evolutionary quality to the understanding of the term, such that each approach or theory represents a more complex understanding of the closet’s metaphorical potentiality. From the comparative perspective, the closet is a shelter from oppression; it functions rhetorically as an indication of the specific forms of legal and cultural persecutions that queer people face. He argues, “Comparison theory highlights how spatiality is readily part of our epistemology of the closet. . . . Most importantly, it tropes on meanings of concealment, elsewhere-ness-yet-proximity, darkness and isolation, with the potential for movement or escape.”⁴⁵ This potential for mobility resides in the liminal threshold of the closet door and the presumption that the “outside” of the closet is a less regulated—if not utopian—space for the unrepressed, unencumbered, and unregulated

queer subject. Comparative interpretations of the closet rely on a set of logics that place darkness and enlightenment and concealment and freedom in opposition to one another. These logics are put in crisis in the case of blackness, where darkness does not reflect a place from which to escape but a condition of existence. In other words, there can be no elsewhere when darkness is everywhere. In the context of blackness, the closet is not a space of concealment but a site for observation and display.

The closet as it appears in (progress) narratives about gay subject-making serves to draw on an implicit colonialist sensibility that figures the “dark secrecy” of the closet with the premodern and the primitive and the subsequent open consciousness of an “outside” of the closet with modernity and civilization.⁴⁶ In his essay “Beyond the Closet as Raceless Paradigm,” Marlon Ross describes the various problems attendant to using the closet as a comparative metaphor for epistemologies of black sexuality. For Ross, the claustrophillic obsession with the closet as it appears in Foucault, Sedgwick, and other canonic works of (white) queer theory obscures and ignores the variations and discrepancies in the processes of identification within and among people of color and poor people. Ross argues that queer theory’s “fixation on the closet function as the grounding principle for sexual experience, knowledge, and politics . . . diminishes and disables the full engagement with potential insights from race theory and class analysis.”⁴⁷

Interaction and poststructuralist interpretations have attempted to address the problems of analogical thinking that structures the comparison approach. In contrast to the comparison approach, interaction theory requires that the closet is not read as a simple y is like z comparison; rather, interaction theory stresses “the twist, tension or opposition as well as the easy comparison being made in a metaphor through what Ryle (1955) called a category mistake.”⁴⁸ In this way, the closet is a site structured by queer oppression, yet the rhetoric of the closet cannot fully capture what queer oppression looks like or the way the closet acts as both shelter from and a manifestation of domination. As Steven Seidman suggests, “The closet is a term used to describe the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men. It describes their absence—and alludes to their ironic presence nonetheless—in a society that, in countless interlocking ways, subtly and blatantly dictates that heterosexuality is the only way to be.”⁴⁹ Poststructuralist approaches, on the other hand, rely on subversion to turn metaphor inside out. For

the closet to work, it must be everywhere and nowhere, “as a secret and effusive, ethereal influence.”⁵⁰ Brown explains that a poststructuralist account of the closet metaphor “implores us to be aware that metaphors can carry along with them a whole system or networks of beliefs that do powerful epistemological work, but remain tacit and unacknowledged.”⁵¹

Eve Sedgwick’s groundbreaking analysis of the closet has been central to queer studies’ understanding of sexuality as a key epistemological concern, although her tacit reliance on nonracialized bodies has been largely unremarked upon in the field.⁵² Sedgwick situates her closet theory in a discussion of Foucauldian forms of silence. For Sedgwick, “‘closeted-ness’ itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of silence—not a particular silence, but a silence that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse that surrounds and differentially constitutes it.”⁵³ In Sedgwick’s theorization of the closet as a transparent enclosure, predicated on variegated performances of speech acts of silence, she provides a road map for understanding the axiomatic distinction of homo-hetero as an effect of discourse. However, turning to Foucault’s formulation of silence and to the particular passage that Sedgwick cites in her argument provides different pathways that reveal how Sedgwick’s relative silence on racial ontologies works in the service of her closet theory. In his chapter, “Incitement to Discourse,” Foucault argues:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.⁵⁴

At different moments, the style of this excerpt mirrors its content, revealing and concealing Foucault’s meditation on silence by signaling

how silence organizes discourse. Foucault's writing (in translation) is repetitious, offering multiple descriptions of the same phenomenon, where silence is triply defined as "the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers." Foucault's first definition pivots on the concept of choice (that is, the choice to decline to speak) and is indicative of a set of power relations that privileges the speaker within the discourse. The second definition, by contrast, implies the absence of choice as it describes how some speech is made off-limits by regimes of power/knowledge. Implicit in this definition is the sense that some speech is forbidden due in part to the status of the speaker. The third definition hinges on the notion of "discretion," or what could be described as limited choice, signaling how "caution" structures "what one says and does not say" to different audiences. Sedgwick takes up these definitions of silence to argue that discourse is structured by both the presence and the absence of speech.

Sedgwick's citation of Foucault in her discussion of "closeted-ness" nearly includes the sentence arguing against a binary opposition between speech and silence in full, except for this phrase: "how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required." Her decision to excise this moment in Foucault, which emphasizes how silence and silencing are differently distributed along particular bodies and institutions, is paradigmatic of Sedgwick's silence on how her closet (theory) might function differently for racialized inhabitants. Even when Sedgwick acknowledges that "different axes of oppression" structure "complex embodiments"—an insight she suggests is "the first great heuristic breakthrough of socialist-feminist thought and of the thought of women of color"—she does so to support a conclusion that the "comparison of different axes of oppression is a crucial task, not for any purpose of ranking oppressions, but to the contrary because each oppression is likely to be a uniquely indicative relation to certain distinctive nodes of cultural organization."⁵⁵ This is an important insight, yet Sedgwick's project appears to overlook the perspectives of the socialist-feminists and women of color she points to. Her analysis is one example of a more pervasive problem in critical theory, not explicitly concerned with race, where scholars name and dispense with the reality of multiply marked bodies in favor of thinking about the "uniquely indicative" relations—in her case, (homo)sexuality—produced one axis at a time.

Sedgwick's use of "heuristic" is of note, as the term typically refers to an experience-based method for solving problems such as those of racial, sexual, and class oppression. A heuristic also acts as a rule of thumb or a common-sense approach to addressing such concerns. Reading the special centrality Sedgwick gives to homophobic oppression as an epistemological concern, then, reinforces how her closet theory "depends on a notion of the uneven development of the races, such that a miniscule, easily identifiable clique of elite white men (Wilde, Melville, James, Nietzsche, Proust) ambiguously do or do not determine the process of sexual identification for everyone touched by modernity, regardless of race, class, gender, geography, degree of cultural 'advancement' into modernity, etc."⁵⁶ For Ross, this problem is closely tied to Sedgwick's methodological approach: "the method of close readings . . . is intimately related to the closed set of male European texts that exemplify the *closet* binary as formative to a *closed-off* modernity and modernism."⁵⁷

Thus, when Sedgwick gestures toward a universalizing (as opposed to a minoritizing) view of sexuality as constitutive of ways of knowing in Western culture, her methods and objects constrain her closet theory from thinking about the axiomatic conjunctures of race and sexuality, tacitly fixing whiteness as a universal condition. She admits as much when she suggests, "Vibrantly resonant as the image of the closet is for many modern oppressions, it is indicative for homophobia in a way it cannot be for other oppressions. Racism, for instance, is based on a stigma that is visible . . . so are the oppressions based on gender, age, size, physical handicap."⁵⁸ When Sedgwick takes up the notion of the glass closet as a site that licenses both insult and the "far warmer relations . . . whose potential for exploitiveness is built into the optics of the asymmetrical, the specularized, and the inexplicit,"⁵⁹ her closet still relies on a theory of embodiment that disavows how racialization, and particularly ideological and political commitments to anti-blackness, are the conditions for the phenomenological experience of pornotropic exploitation that gives rise to the glass closet as a collective rather than an individual concern.⁶⁰ Sedgwick suggests that coming out of the (glass) closet precipitates an "imponderable" set of concerns about the closet as a site for an "open secret," yet her methodological preferences—and choice of objects—are precisely what makes the glass closet incalculable in her analysis.⁶¹

Black feminist theorist Audre Lorde reminds us of silence's failures to conceal multiple forms of identification and demonstrates how the closet

as metaphor is a supple fantasy that constructs simultaneously a space of confined refuge and a place of freedom from such constraints. Popularized by feminists and activists of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), Lorde's discussion of silence—"My silences have not protected me. Your silence will not protect you"—is an example of the types of discursive demands that make the closet's supposed silences untenable.⁶² Lorde discusses her relationship to the closet in her mixed-genre memoir *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982), in which she depicts the closet as a space that compartmentalizes difference. Lorde writes, "Downtown in the gay bars I was a closet student and an invisible Black . . . uptown at Hunter [College] I was a closet dyke and a general intruder."⁶³ For Lorde, there are always multiple closets and, more important, multiple experiential excesses that structure her relationships alternately to the downtown gay bars and to student life. Her description of herself as "an invisible Black" and "a general intruder" gestures toward a theory of blackness as that which is unable to be covered: the spectacularity and hypervisibility of Lorde's blackness is always met with either hostility or disregard. As Lorde makes clear, there is no cover for blackness just as there is no escape from the colonialist legacies implicit in the closet's metaphoricity.

W. E. B. Du Bois uses a litany of visual metaphors crucial to this conversation about black visibility. His theorizations of the veil and the color line comprise some of Du Bois's most cited insights on race. Part of, if not the primary objective of the "color line"—the relation between darker and lighter races—is to describe how the visualization of difference and the concurrent production of mechanisms by which to delineate race are seen as obvious ontological facts rather than as complex ideological processes. In turn, Du Bois's writings on the "veil" and "double consciousness" suggest that there is a predominant mode for seeing race that engenders an awareness of looking while being looked at through the distorting prism of the veil. As Du Bois writes in his first chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world."⁶⁴ For Du Bois, then, the veil is a metaphor for the sociogenic experience of blackness; it positions double-consciousness as a critical optic for black people in negotiating the condition of hypervisibility.⁶⁵

Although both Sedgwick and Du Bois provide useful analytics for understanding how identity is produced through visibility, they do so in ways that Susan Gillman and Alys Eve Weinbaum describe as a “politic of juxtaposition,” which is “grounded in a form of combination that acknowledges simultaneity and association, and yet elects not to work through how it is that connections among the movements . . . might be conceptualized or produced.”⁶⁶ Gillman and Weinbaum’s observations about Du Bois can be applied to Sedgwick: in both theories, different identities are inserted into the text “to create ‘blocs’ of syndicated or associated meaning, and then removed from circulation after its moment of utility, after its use value has been realized as an exchange value.”⁶⁷ As such, while Du Bois’s visual metaphors, particularly the “color line,” and Sedgwick’s work on the closet are both generative for the conceptualization of the glass closet, my project recuperates some of the analytic absences that occur in theory focused on “race” or “sexuality” exclusively. In these absences, which of course are also coupled with a haunting presence of heteronormativity and anglonormativity, I offer the glass closet as an analytic to work through multiple axes of oppression, which in their disorderly mess produce the down-low figure and demonstrate how blackness transforms the closet from a space of concealment—however partial or contingent—to a site of confinement and display. My formulation of the glass closet thematizes that very narrowing in and the claustrophobic feelings produced by technologies for surveilling and producing blackness as an object of sexual knowledge. To understand down-low figures, critics cannot afford the luxury of thinking through one axis at a time; nor do down-low narratives allow for us to distinguish one aspect of identification from the other. These figures illustrate how multiple identifications cohere, coalesce, condense, and concretize in representation, which, like glass, bends and curves as it hardens over time.

Synching Race, Rethinking Sex: On Biopolitical Representations of Black Sexuality

In the episode “Low Down” from the popular television show *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*, Detective Odafin Tutuola (Ice-T) provides the necessary break in a case involving the tawdry murder of a Bronx assistant district attorney (ADA). The episode opens with police officers interrupting an assembly of sex workers. As the women walk

away, the cops spend an unusual amount of time heckling a transgender woman named Keisha (played by the well-known drag performer Harmonica Sunbeam). Eventually they discover the episode's murder victim, ADA Jeffrey York (Dean Strange), strangled with red leggings in the front seat of his car. After Detective Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) has identified York's body, the audience learns that Benson and York had a sexual relationship at some point prior to the action of the narrative. Initially the clues point to Keisha, particularly after the detectives ascertain that the used condom at the scene of the crime did not contain the semen of the victim. When they are unable to explain why Keisha would want to kill York, they follow up a number of other leads, which all eventually come to a dead end. Although we do learn that ADA York is HIV positive, a fact that precipitates much of the drama of the episode as Detective Benson gets tested for HIV and prosecuting attorney Casey Novak (Diane Neal) risks her bar certification to tell their prime suspect's wife to get tested as well, the detectives are only able to move forward on the case when Detective Tutuola is able to crack the prime suspect's "poker game" alibi.

CHIEF: Here's what I don't get: why are all these men protecting him?

TUTUOLA: Maybe they all have something to hide. I think they're on the down low.

CHIEF: The what?

TUTUOLA: The down low: black men having sex with other men.

STABLER: Every one of these men is married, and some have kids . . .

TUTUOLA: That's sex on the down low. They say it doesn't mean they're gay.

MUNCH: What does it mean?

TUTUOLA: It's just sex. They hang out, have a few drinks, pretend that what goes on downstairs isn't who they are. You grow up being black, you're supposed to be a man, become a father, church, your family, your friends, they all see being gay as being a white man's perversion.

BENSON: But white men have problems dealing with it too. There's a whole epidemic of gay white men on crystal meth. They have to get high to have sex.

TUTUOLA: It's different for black men. They go out, have sex with other men, then come home have sex with their woman and pretend they're straight. [Meaningful stares from the other detectives.] Don't look at me, I just know stuff.⁶⁸

Interspersed throughout Tutuola's interrupted monologue are all the key elements (and contradictions) of down-low narratives. According to the logic of the episode, down-low men are "gay" but pretending otherwise; they are self-hating (like white gay meth users?) but also compliant with racialized heteronormative gender expectations. Tutuola, as a native informant of sorts, explains the "realities" of the down low and positions it as a by-product of the pressures and strictures of black masculinity. That this knowledge is met with suspicion, evidenced by the meaningful stares and Tutuola's defensive response, is characteristic of these types of exchanges, where knowledge about the supposed imperceptibility of the down low implies some sort of experience for the speaker, particularly when that speaker is marked by similar forms of racialization. As the episode bears out, down-low figures stage how suspicion and surveillance are routine techniques for visualizing blackness.

Down-low narratives also air anxieties about the possibility of refusing to comply with sexual identifications, of resisting being gay or even MSM and therefore resisting forces of categorization, which structures a biopolitical will-to-know. Foucault's conception of biopower relies on an understanding of the role of the sovereign's frequent recourse to biology and ever-increasing emphasis on information and institutions to delineate and subsequently produce differentiated populations, which are managed in life and (sometimes to the point of) death. For Foucault, this process—a technology of governance but also a tool for value extraction—is termed racism, which enables the exercise of biopower as "the old sovereign right of death."⁶⁹ Foucault's choice of the term "racism," even though he does not deploy the term in a conventional sense, is instructive to understanding how and why biopower becomes a particularly apt explanation for understanding down-low narratives. If, according to Foucault, sexuality is one of the most significant strategies for the constitution and management of populations, then the down low clarifies how sexuality operates as a racist technology—in both the conventional and biopolitical sense. Pop cultural depictions of the down low are racist, as they rationalize (and validate) the distribution of (black) deaths and

make possible the murderous functions of governmental and governing institutions and their various culpabilities in the spread of HIV. Although scholars and journalists have rightly argued that down-low sexual practices are not the exclusive terrain of black men, the persistent linking together of blackness with secretive, deadly sex is a manifestation of how the sign “black” functions in relationship to contemporary forms of governmentality. That these logics are perpetuated through popular culture should not be a surprise, given that popular media serves a mediating function between the sovereign, the citizen, and the others. Exercises of sovereignty are constituted in and through mechanisms of communication as power is defined through the circulation of its appearances.

Law and Order: SVU also dramatizes the function of confession in down-low narratives, as the episode pivots around several confessions, which lead to the eventual capture of the suspect as well as the rendering of his sentence. As Foucault reminds us, “next to the testimony of witnesses . . . the confession [has become] one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing the truth.”⁷⁰ And yet, as he also makes clear, confession is the proof of power, even as the confession is rhetorized as an unearthing of one’s personal truth. Down-low discourse typically follows this general principle: queerness is the “truth” of black sexuality yet blackness (as a site of hyperbolized homophobia) keeps this fact hidden. Part of what makes down-low narratives compelling objects for analysis is their ability to demonstrate how biopolitics fundamentally shifts how we see (and do not see) that which we are apparently looking at, and yet the down low also illuminates how impossibly messy it is to distinguish black life (and death) from biopolitical techniques for living.

As the “Lowdown” episode evidences, down-low men are “unseen” by the law; it is through their confessions that governance is maintained. Although numerous scholars have attended to the neoliberal logics that structure the intelligibilities of programs like the *Law and Order* franchise, Julia Kristeva provides another analytic with which to explore the relationships between and among narratives about personal responsibility, punishment, and crime. Kristeva, drawing in part on Guy Debord, argues that in a world predominated by spectacle “we no longer speak of culpability, but of public menace. . . . Crime cannot be found at the same time as prohibition; as a result, people are increasingly excited when they think they have unearthed a guilty party, a scapegoat.”⁷¹ Kristeva suggests then that surveillance and punishment are always “theatrically

mediatized,” staging a catharsis for a national audience: “Though we are not punished, we are, in effect, normalized: in place of the prohibition or power that cannot be found, disciplinary and administrative punishments multiply, repressing, or rather normalizing everyone.”⁷² Kristeva’s point about the normalizing effect of mass-mediatised crime and punishment provides one starting place for an analysis of down-low representation.

Take, for example, the media fiasco surrounding Nushawn Williams, an HIV-positive black man in Jamestown, New York, a counterexample (of sorts) to confirm how representations of black men as predators articulate with (biopolitical) modes of governance. Although there were no specific rumors about his same-sex desires or practices, public health officials and the news media credit him with the creation of a micro-epidemic of HIV in a small (mostly white) town in upstate New York. The criminalization of Williams’s sexuality, revealed by his pleading guilty to two counts of statutory rape and one count of reckless endangerment in 1999, demonstrates the political stakes of a biopolitics of representation while also serving as yet another instantiation of being tried in the court(s) of public opinion. As Thomas Shevory suggests, representations of the down low and of HIV-positive black men more generally could be understood as the production of “moral panics,” which “dredge up feelings of fear and shame as they reveal real or potential social disorder.”⁷³

Shevory, drawing on the work of Stanley Cohen, argues that the primary function for the mediated creation of moral panics is to manage potentially disruptive public forms of deviance, which must also be understood in terms of their relationship to the maintenance of capitalism. Citing Stuart Hall’s work on crime, Shevory argues, “The perception of and control over crime exist . . . within an ongoing ‘crisis of hegemony’ that pervades the postwar capitalist state.”⁷⁴ The demonization and potential criminalization of the down low help to explain newsrooms’ focus on the urban underclass rather than the structural factors that constitute the phenomenon. The down-low figure often appears alongside other more “respectable” figures—the out gay man, the unknowing, virtuous wife, or the heterosexual male friend or father figure. Often these figures are rendered responsible through their oppositional relationship to the down-low figure. That is also to acknowledge that being an out gay man is not a uniquely privileged identity but rather becomes a viable alternative to the trickery and treachery of men on the down low.

This relativity of sexual privilege is foundational to work in sexuality studies. For example, in Gayle Rubin's model of sexual hierarchies, marginalized and oppressed expressions of sexuality are at the edges of her circular representation. Nestled inside the outer ring is a concentric circle that features normalized, privileged sexual practices. Part of the genius of Rubin's diagram is its ability to represent how norms are structured by the margins. Its circular shape also implies a spectrum within each category such that we can imagine groups of people whose sexual practices are closer to the margins than the center. Relatedly, Rubin's model visualizes the place where marginal and normative categories figuratively brush up against one another. Narratives like the down low highlight the tensions that surround this line of contestation. However, overlaying discursive processes of racialization onto Rubin's diagram allows us to focus on the actual porousness of the inner ring, especially as it relates to representations of normative and non-normative sexual practices among racialized bodies.

As Hortense Spillers has argued, "the concept of sexuality originates in, stays with, the dominative mode of culture and its elaborate strategies of thought and expression."⁷⁵ Focusing on black women, Spillers argues that sexuality as a model—a system of signs—forecloses the opportunity for critics to think through the mutually constitutive processes of race, gender, and sexual practice. From this perspective, one could argue that the dominant discourse in sexuality studies has remained ill equipped to think about categories of sexual practice as impossibly contaminated by race.⁷⁶ We can find evidence for this in the representation of dotted lines as solid ones, which forgoes important discussions on the dynamics of racialized sexuality—namely, how biopower contributes to the smoothing out of disjunctures that inform categories of sexual identification. This porousness between categories draws our attention to another critical feature of Rubin's diagram. If we were to lay one model on top of the other, Rubin's diagram and a blueprint of Bentham's Panopticon, we also notice that apprehending sexuality requires panoptical modes of viewing. The margins structure the center through a specific form of looking where those closer to the center are surveilling the margins (and vice versa). This biopolitical mode of looking focuses on groups of persons rather than on institutional actors, which serve to delineate said groups. As Robin Coleman and Jasmine Cobb argue, "It is through the gaze that power is exerted . . . more, that power becomes a controlling look that works not only to

objectify but also, at times, to oppress. . . . It is this power structure that too works to deny mutual looking . . . or mutual gazing . . . where understanding is gained between looker and the looked upon in absence of unequal levels of power and control.”⁷⁷ This process of looking—an exponentializing of Du Bois’s double consciousness—is captured by the idea of the glass closet, which is uniquely situated in the crossfire of these gazes.

Interlude/Epistemologic

Eve Sedgwick’s essay “Interlude, Pedagogic” begins with an excerpt from Randall Jarrell’s poem “Hope” that, among other things, describes a childhood memory in which the speaker recalls his (or her) mother’s fainting. It begins: “She resembles a recurrent / Scene from my childhood. A scene called Mother Has Fainted.” In the following pages, Sedgwick turns to two scenes of protest that signify upon this poetic epilogue. In the first, she describes witnessing an action of civil disobedience by a dozen union employees regarding a labor dispute at Amherst College: “the spare and indicative Americanness of the scene, like reading Thoreau . . .” Her own role in witnessing it “made standing still with my mouth shut feel like embodying the whole Bill of Rights.” “It was the snow,” she writes, “that seemed most to guarantee the totality and symbolic evenness of this pure, signifying space.”⁷⁸ Here we might take the snow as a metaphor that precipitates the dangers and possibilities of this initial scene. The whiteness of the snow, the pageantlike, intimately scaled space, the “austere” speech act of silence, the immobility and refusal all parallel what she describes as the “great white scouring abstraction Money.”⁷⁹ In other words, this idyllic and idealized memory of her participation in this earlier protest should be understood within traditional notions of democracy, which are inextricably tied to national belonging, whiteness, and heteronormativity. The protest could be represented in such a way because the identities of the protesters and their claims were already understood to be legitimate in the context of the democratic process.

This memory sharply contrasts with a different protest that Sedgwick spends the majority of her essay discussing: an ACT UP protest of the local North Carolina Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) station, which had refused to air Marlon Riggs’s documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989). Not only was there a difference in space, which she describes as “already

designed to provide a checkerboard of tedium and violence,” but perhaps more importantly there was a difference in the content for the protest: “a fight about blackness, queerness, and (implicitly) AIDS: properties of bodies, some of them our bodies, of bodies that it seemed important to say most people are very willing, some murderously eager, to see not exist.”⁸⁰ Indeed, she mentions that the inherent dangers bound up in the notion of protest were already encoded as black—as an understanding of the physical dangers endured in the spectacular protests of the long civil rights movements. Here, the identities and the demands of the protesters are substantively different, so the strategy of visibility and articulation must be, in Sedgwick’s terms, “a voluntary self-violation,” “a willed assumption of stigma,” all hinging on the necessity of going public as a written-upon body. Sedgwick writes:

Our need to be exemplary bodies sprang from the history of radical denial of exemplary function to black gay bodies at the intersection of two kinds of community that seem so often to carve each other out of perceptual existence: a tacitly racist white gay community for whom a black queer body, however eroticized, might stand as a representation of blackness but could never seem to embody queerness itself, and a more or less openly homophobic African American community by whom the queerness of any black figure must be denied, suppressed, or overridden for that figure to be allowed to function as an embodiment of black identity or struggle.⁸¹

From this place, Sedgwick offers a double formulation for how to understand the strategy at work in the North Carolina protest, which she describes as “shaming and smuggling.” The constative logic of shame aimed to discredit the pretense at representing the public maintained by the local “public” broadcasting station, using shame to challenge the station to comply with airing the film. The performative practice of smuggling enacted representation, presenting the protesters as the very “inrepresentably dangerous and endangered conjunction, black and queer” that PBS sought to repress/censure. Even though Sedgwick suggests that many of the bodies indeed were not black and queer, it was nevertheless the intention of the protesters to bring this kind of stigmatized body into public view.

In Sedgwick's ruminations, she offers up herself as another marked body—a sick body—whose fainting dramatized the weight of representation. By fainting, Sedgwick muses, her own body served as a “queer testimony,” a productive deviation from the codes of expected conduct at a protest. And so from her queer conduct she offers up yet another theoretically rich idea in the notion of “displacement” as, among other things, an identificatory process that allows for an understanding across difference, where a bald white woman living with cancer might also have an understanding of black queer HIV-positive men. These forms of displacements—happening at the protest and in the classroom—might provide a unique vantage point for understanding the limits—and thus also the contours—of discourse.

Making use of Sedgwick's notion of displacement, I suggest that we might imagine the tactics of shaming and smuggling as not simply describing the North Carolina protest scene, but rather—and precisely due to what displacement allows—mapping the contours of scholarship on black queer representation. Within recent years, most notably in the field of queer theory, a number of books have taken up the generative intellectual and political possibilities of shame.⁸² Often, shame serves as a theoretical prism by which to examine the black bodies and narratives that are smuggled into these scholarly texts. Shame has come to articulate the types of affectivities produced across difference, but such discourses emerge at precisely the point where privilege encounters stigma—and, as a result, they indicate far more about the analyst than the discursive object. As Jack Halberstam has argued, “at the microlevel, the subject who emerges as the subject of gay shame is often a white and male self whose shame in part emerges from the experience of being denied access to privilege.”⁸³ The consequences are, as Halberstam explains, that as gay shame balances the pride/shame binary, it also makes white gay politics the only visible form of queer critique.⁸⁴

This white queer critique, however, is still premised on a notion of otherness, which requires (smuggles) black and brown bodies for its analysis while white sexual norms are established in opposition to an imagined aberrance inherent in black and brown identities. Returning to the Jarrell poem that opens Sedgwick's essay, we find that the scene she excerpts occurs directly after the memory of a nightmare that the speaker is remembering: just as he is about to wake and tell his wife, he gets caught

up in a childhood memory about his mother who had fainted. The poem describes a group of figures in the dream as being upright, fishlike “giants in brown space-suits” who reveal to the speaker a story about Sleeping Beauty.⁸⁵ As Jarrell writes, “It was the old story / But ended differently.”⁸⁶ It is through the speaker’s nightmares (about racialization) that the story of his fainting mother (Sleeping Beauty) emerges, even as its relegation to the speaker’s dreams might foreclose any consideration about how racialization influences his interpretations of the circumstances of his conscious world. The speaker’s fainting mother and Sedgwick seem to share in common a relationship to the “giants in brown space-suits” to tell a narrative that ends differently. And yet the struggle that occurs, like the hellish scene at the North Carolina protest or the wresting of racial analytics from foundational concepts in queer theory, sets the stage for an articulation of theory that hinges precariously on the displacement of white guilt to shame as an analytic.

The combination of black and brown with queer and shame has a genealogy, which forces us to recognize how projections of inhibition have also enabled resistant practice, sometimes through the embodying of behaviors presumed by a racist public but often through spectacular acts of nonrecognition in which black and brown people have made use of their sexualities as potent weapons against racism and heterosexism. The degree to which black and brown people have appeared uninhibited is not merely a result of racist reading strategies but also a performative tactic, which relies on the subversion of knowledge and a deft manipulation of spectacle, which I refer to as “ignorance.” Among many others, Sedgwick attends to the category of ignorance and its corollary problems—“psychological operations of shame, denial, [and] projection”—as proliferating opacities in Foucauldian regimes of truth: “Insofar as ignorance is ignorance of a knowledge—a knowledge that may itself, it goes without saying, be seen as either true or false under some other regime of truth—these ignorances far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth.”⁸⁷ For Sedgwick, ignorance operates in tandem with knowledge in the circulation of socially agreed-upon truths, but also “it can bring about the revelation of a powerful unknowing *as* unknowing, not as a vacuum or as the blank it can pretend to be, but as a weighty and occupied and consequential epistemological space.”⁸⁸ While Sedgwick’s thoughts on the location of ignorance

in the production of power-knowledge regimes is instructive to my thinking, my work carefully attends to the ontological and phenomenological fact of blackness to explicitly take up how the concept works in racial-sexual relations that allow ignorance to operate as a tactic of refusal.

In this sense, a scene described in Frederick Douglass's *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) is of particular import to my reworking of the concept, as it highlights how ignorance pivots on visibility and communication to emerge as a performance that provides cover for particular behaviors. In reference to his "old master," Douglass writes,

He little thought that the little black urchins around him, could see, through those vocal crevices, the very secrets of his heart. Slaveholders ever underrate the intelligence with which they have to grapple. I really understood the old man's mutterings, attitudes and gestures, about as well as he did himself. But slaveholders never encourage that kind of communication, with the slaves, by which they might learn to measure the depths of his knowledge. *Ignorance is a high virtue in a human chattel; and as the master studies to keep the slave ignorant, the slave is cunning enough to make the master think he succeeds.* The slave fully appreciates the saying, "where ignorance is bliss, 't is folly to be wise."⁸⁹

Here Douglass points to at least two ways that ignorance operates in relationship to power, where it is both a tactic for domination and subversion. For the old master, he enacts ignorance by refusing the kinds of communication, which might cause him to reconsider his opinion of slaves. For the slave, ignorance is conceptualized as a "high virtue" and a tactic rooted in the enslaved person's knowledge of the slaveholder's unknowing. Douglass's explication of the term seems to draw on the etymology of the word, which is derived from the Latin word *ignorans* and carries two meanings: to be unknowing or to ignore knowledge of some specific issue, idea, or thing. Douglass's writing, however, also points to the processual and performative dimensions of ignorance's meanings. Ignorance for the slave, in Douglass's example, is not a liberatory gesture but rather a technique for living under the repressive regimes of plantation governance. So too, for the down-low figure, ignorance functions as one available tactic to negotiate the conditions of a glass closet.

In everyday parlance, if we were to call someone ignorant, we would presumably mean that the person in question is uninformed about a particular matter. Ignorance, however, has several meanings, which circulate particularly in black vernacular speech, including a lack of “typical” regard for decorum, a state of being flagrantly politically incorrect, or behavior of a shameless kind. In this sense, to be ignorant also carries a definite affective charge—and those to whom it is attributed are both chastised and applauded for their flagrant disregard of social laws and codes. These quotidian performances of ignorance, which often appear in relation to a figure’s gender and sexual comportment, do not suggest that norms and mores do not exist; rather, these prohibitions contribute to the conditions that make subversion possible. Take, for example, how ignorance works in legal-judicial circles, such as the legal term *ignorantia juris non excusat*, which describes the principle that ignorance of the law does not excuse its offender. Ignorance delineates a fundamental problem of unknowing constitutive to the epistemic production of the law such that *ignorantia* represents a space “prior to or before the law” that must be reincorporated (*non excusat*) in order to prosecute. So, too, is my interest in how ignorance as a performance can enact a space structured by prohibition yet unfettered—at least in the moment of performance—by such concerns. In these moments of performance, ignorance may make it possible for black bodies to take part in sexual pleasures in a different register, where glass enclosures might turn into echo chambers or amplification devices for inharmonious chords.

Thus, while glass closets, stabilized by biopower and sutured together by institutional and social modes of regulation, may be a condition of black sexual representation, they are not spaces in which their inhabitants lack the capacity to act. Those figured within the projections of a panoptical public imaginary, do act—sometimes in strategically incomprehensible ways, which is to say, in ways that gesture toward the limits of racial-sexual knowledge.

Coda

There is a difficulty in discussing down-low figures without making some recourse to where said figures occur in space. Foucault’s “docile bodies,” for example, are pliable in the machinery of capitalist modes of production as well as in the clinic, the prison, the university, and other

institutional and neo-institutional sites of discipline and governance. The term “down low” invokes a particular body as well, featured in the pages of newspapers, in films, on television, in music videos, and in other forms of mediated space. Nick Couldry and Anna McCarthy develop the term “mediaspace” to grapple with a number of questions that emerge in thinking critically about space in mediated culture.⁹⁰ Almost immediately, media critics are forced to contend with questions of scale, which map out the uneven trajectories between representational space and lived experience.

In a small-scale content analysis I conducted on news portrayals of the down low, I found that very often down-low figures are located in urban space. Major cities across the United States, including New York, Atlanta, Chicago, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, serve as the spatial backdrop for such narratives. Within these cities, several smaller but archetypal locations are also enumerated: churches, schools, universities, nightclubs, and prisons. The mapping back and forth between the intimate spaces of black sociality such as the church or the bar on the one hand, and the anonymity provided by the sheer magnitude of cosmopolitan sprawl on the other, suggest that down-low narratives contain a fundamental tension that speaks to the contradictory and disorienting process of locating the significance and signifiatory power of the down-low (trickster) figure. In what follows, this book takes up the down low’s flow and, as such, is principally interested in four themes (a quartal chord in a diatonic scale): transparency (and, of course, its opacities), rumor (and verifiable information), ignorance (and its truths), and concealment (and its vulnerabilities and revelations). Methodologically, I employ an array of analytic approaches, most often making use of close readings of critical theory and popular culture to analyze the circulation and emergence of down-low narratives and their implications for the representational politics of black sexuality more generally.

In addition, I make use of a symptomatic reading strategy to parse contemporary epistemological figurations seemingly hidden in plain sight and to buttress against deconstructionist excesses and strict formalist approaches, which overly determine and narrow the implications of a given “text.” That is to say, I read for what my materials cannot help but say so that I can analytically explore down-low narratives’ defensive strategies (or preferred reading structures) and thus read side by side the coexistence of two stories: the down low and the glass closet.⁹¹ Each chapter

takes a historical approach on this ongoing story, bringing together, through the aid of (and sometimes in spite of) relevant social theory and various aspects of the mediated construction of the down low. I explain how the glass closet ensures that certain ideologies, material conditions, and historical contexts remain illegible, thus suggesting that narratives like the down low are not only clearly written and rehearsed but also consumed and reproduced differently among various audiences. This project endeavors to be a media archaeology of the present, particularly attentive to the spaces and histories that constitute this contemporary moment in representation and to what they signify for categories of identification, including but not limited to notions of “race,” “class,” “gender,” and “sexuality.”

Like an hourglass, the chapter discussions move from wide ranging in scope to more focused examinations of particular figures and pop-cultural phenomena only to broaden again. As a genealogy, Chapter 1 takes up a series of discursive events that produce a shared grammar for a national viewing public to accept the down low as a compelling narrative to explain recent trends in HIV transmission. Chapter 2 narrows its focus and features a close reading of R. Kelly’s episodic hip-hopera *Trapped in the Closet* to demonstrate how the glass closet and ignorance can function in tandem with one another. Chapter 3 turns to the church, the veritable birthplace of the down low, and traces the media scandal that surrounded the prominent Atlanta-area pastor Bishop Eddie Long and his out-of-court settlement with four young male plaintiffs on charges of sexual misconduct. Chapter 4 widens the lens of analysis to examine how speculations about aberrant sexuality cohere to a range of black bodies and genders, as I explicitly take up the question of what is queer about black celebrity.

On the one hand, down-low narratives seem like variations on the same theme, a twenty-first-century remix of an age-old story, in which blackness is figured as sexually dangerous and morally dubious. On the other hand, the quirks of representation, which enable a view of the glass closet, might demonstrate a suspension of such recourse to moralism. In any case, the down low tells us about the limits of current sexual epistemologies, which seem to unravel in their attempts to make sense of a narrative that signals a figure that is both everywhere and nowhere. Perhaps we should proceed forward without an attachment to making sense at all. Rather, let us trace how ignorance and other tactics might be of more use to us.