

We Wear the Mask: African American Contemporary Gay Male Identities

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This study examines the various ways African American men identify themselves sexually. Many African American men practice same-sex relationships but do not identify themselves as bisexual, gay, or homosexual. A case study approach was used to analyze data gathered in Atlanta, Georgia using 110 male respondents. The researcher found that these men divide their identity because of multiple social factors. The conclusions drawn from the findings suggest that homophobia, heterosexism, and poor constructs of black manhood are the foremost reasons African American gay men cannot accept a gay identity.

*"We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes"*

—Paul Laurence Dunbar

In his audacious poem, "We Wear the Mask," Paul Laurence Dunbar dares to tell the world that black people adorn a repugnant mask simply as a means of survival. Similarly, contemporary African American gay men wear many masks as a means of survival, but beneath the mask lays no vestige of a healthy identity. Contemporary African American gay men willingly adorn their mask "that grins and lies" because a history of racism and homophobia has robbed them of the possibility of self-esteem and self-love; thus, a mask perfectly accessorizes their self-hatred. Yet, the construction of the mask cannot singularly be accredited to racism and homophobia because it is also perpetuated by many of these contemporary men. In other words, contemporary African American gay men are complicit and in many cases agents in the same homophobia that oppresses them. Consequently, the mask is willingly worn, and simultaneously, there is a loss of identity. The problem for many black gay men was maintaining a hierarchy of identities that produces a

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confusion driven by identifying as black first or as gay first. The problem now is that contemporary African American gay men do not want to identify at all with being gay. Consequently, they have created a new hierarchy of identities or labels to substitute their sexual identity. The labeling process further perpetuates stereotypes. In his "Here be Dragons," James Baldwin (2001) observes the workings of labels. He maintains:

But once you have discerned the meaning of a label, it may seem to define you for others, but it does not have the power to define you to yourself. The condition that is now called gay was then called queer. The operative word was faggot and, later, pussy, but those epithets really had nothing to do with the question of sexual preference: You were being told simply that you had no balls (p. 211).

Those labels that Baldwin highlighted have not diminished, but have actually flourished today and have created such offspring as "down low" or "DL."

Of the many labels employed by contemporary African American gay men, "Down Low" is overwhelmingly the most problematic because its two syllables possess a multitude of meanings and identities ranging from those men who are aware that they are gay, but do not profess their sexual identity, to those men who are otherwise convinced that they are heterosexual and only have sex with men. The former is the result of a silent movement toward masculinity—a movement that rejects anything female or feminine. This movement toward masculinity declares war on anything remotely feminine because femininity is seen as an abhorrent weakness in men. In "A very straight gay: Masculinity, homosexual experience, and the dynamics of gender" Connell (1992) suggests:

In the dynamics of hegemony in contemporary Western masculinity, the relation between heterosexual and homosexual men is central, carrying a heavy symbolic freight. To many people, homosexuality is a negation of masculinity, and homosexual men must be effeminate. Given that assumption, antagonism toward homosexual men may be used to define masculinity, a stance Herek (1986) summed up in the proposition that "to be a man in contemporary American society is to be homophobic—that is, to be hostile toward gay men particularly" (p. 736).

Furthermore, the scheme for contemporary African American gay men is (1) to be as close to manic masculinity and sexism as possible in order thereby to escape homophobia from heterosexuals—black and non-black alike; (2) to then be or act homophobic as a means of acceptance; and (3) to participate in the hierarchy of men as Connell suggests. Said differently, many contemporary African American gay men believe that they must be homophobic and divide their sexual identity from their black male identity in order to be accepted and to maintain a high ranking in the hierarchy of men. It is through this logic that statements like, "I can't stand no faggot ass nigger" can be heard from the mouth of a black gay man, even in an all-gay environment, as was stated by one respondent in my study.

The contemporary African American bisexual man who considers himself "Down Low" is reasoned by the popular media to lead a double life. However, the lines

between gay and bisexual have become extremely blurred. Though bisexual implies attraction to both sexes, many black gay men wear bisexual masks in an effort to enjoy the heterosexual privileges bisexual males enjoy—this is not a new phenomenon, but the preponderance of current cases is certainly phenomenal. Many contemporary African American same-sex men believe they are not bisexual, gay, nor homosexual and they lead heterosexual lives while simultaneously having sex with men. This heterosexual man is grouped with neither bisexual nor gay men because he does not accept his sexual behavior. These are only three of the eight identities I found in my recent survey among African American gay men in Atlanta.

The federal observance of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday symbolizes freedom to many African Americans, and similarly, many African American gay men observe the holiday as the commencement for black gay pride celebrations across the United States. One of the biggest ceremonies takes place in Atlanta, which is viewed by many as the black gay capital. However, this gay capital is home to very few openly gay African American men—many of the men who attend the black gay pride ceremony do not identify as gay. I constructed a survey in an attempt to determine the extent of identity fragmentation among African American gay men. The following is the presentation of the collected data.

Of the 110 men willing to complete the survey, 109 currently have sex with men. "Gay" and "virgin" are not typically thought to be synonymous. Many believe that being gay is merely defined by sexual practice; as if the only way to understand one's sexual attraction is through the act of sex. However, one respondent between the age of 18 and 22 views himself as a gay virgin. I asked how he knew he was gay without having had sex with a man. He responded, "People always ask me that, but I just know. And nobody ever asked my twin sister how or why she knows she's straight." In *One of the Children*, William G. Hawkeswood (1996) wrote:

Meaning is more important than actual sexual behavior in the development of homosexual identity. Actual sexual experience with other males is neither a necessary nor a sufficient factor in labeling oneself as homosexual, and sexual relations with women do not necessarily lead to a "bisexual" or "heterosexual" self-definition. "Doing" does not necessarily eventuate in "being" (p. 11).

Heterosexuals and homosexuals should be judged by the same standards. Additionally, the perpetuation of the idea that gay being negates the virgin status is problematic because it assumes that heterosexuality is natural, consequently making homosexuality unnatural, which thereby creates many problems for those men attempting to forge a non-heterosexual identity, and encourages many men to engage in sex with both men and women.

Suggesting that one must have sex to be homosexual also creates a burden of sexual prowess in African American gay men. A sense of experimenting with sex to discover their identity subsequently allows them to digress into a state of frequent sex. It produces an increase in dangerous sexual practices, an increase in sexually transmitted diseases among black men and women and, a loss of sexual identity. Rampant sex allows many men to divide their identity where the only thing that becomes important to them is an orgasm as they repress their homosexu-

Table 1
Sexual Identification (*n* = 110)

	Number	Percent
Gay	39	37
Straight	19	8
Down low bisexual	15	13
Bisexual	10	9
Homosexual	8	7
Down low	7	6
Down low gay	7	6
Down low homosexual	4	3
Total	110	100

ality. It then becomes plausible for one to say, "I'm not gay, I just mess around" because he is not required to own his desire or homosexual behavior. However, the gay virgin's response was representing something much deeper. It represented a need to call all men who have either sexual attractions to men or who have sex with men "gay" because giving them various options actually causes more confusion among black gay men. Furthermore, if a man has had any type of sex with another man, he must also be seen as gay or homosexual because giving him the option to be heterosexual in light of his sexual experiences affords him heterosexual privilege, and again, the freedom to fragment his sexual identity when convenient. This also causes a great disconnect between black gay men because this option will not be extended to every black gay man and those men who will be offered the option would likely distance themselves from those men who will not have that option.

Moreover, 8% of the men responded that they no longer have sex with men. They indicated that this exempts them from being classified as gay. Many believe they must be seen as gay, or at the very least bisexual, sense the straight identification further perpetuates heterosexism. For example, 33% of the respondents currently have sex with women and 27% have sex with both men and women; however, only nine percent identify themselves as bisexual. Similarly, 17% identify themselves as straight and two percent identified themselves as down low and straight; yet, they all have sex with men. They did not see being gay as a possible sexual identity for them. However, the two percent who identify themselves as down low and straight are admitting in a masked way that the heterosexual label is not accurate. When questioned further, one respondent retorted, "I am DL when I am trying to get with a nigga' and straight when I'm trying to get with a ho" (see Table 1). His reasoning suggests that his sexual identity is based on sexual relationships but his gender identification is determined by his sex object. This seems to corroborate my earlier claim that misappropriated sexual prowess precludes sexual identity. Additionally, this same respondent exempts himself from a gay identity. I approached him on Cypress Street, a place in Atlanta that is notorious for male prostitution. Many of the male prostitutes also agreed that this respondent and others like him are not gay. They view such male sexual behavior as unrelated to sexual identity. Only a small proportion of the men (7%) identified themselves as homosexual.

The aim of these men appears to be to avoid social stigma by not acknowledging

Table 2
Gender Identification (*n* = 110)

	Number	Percent
Identify as masculine	58	54
Identify as effeminate	14	9
Identify as both	38	37
Total	110	100

their gay sexuality. Some would interpret that as internalized homophobia. Conversely, six percent identify themselves as down low. These men, like many of the other men, do not see the contradiction in the down low status. Being on the down low not only characterizes them and their behavior as dreadful but it also dehumanizes them because it diminishes their authentic identity. Forty four percent of all respondents suggested that there is a gap between gay, homosexual, and down low identities. That suggests that the majority of these men, though not openly gay, have some sense that their sexual identity is gay.

On the other hand, 58% identify themselves as masculine, 12% identify themselves as effeminate, and 34% identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate. Many of the men who identified themselves as both masculine and effeminate would likely be deemed effeminate by societal standards. Those respondents who identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate do so to maintain a level of heterosexuality. Table 2 presents a distribution of gender identifications. Maintaining a level of heterosexuality affords these men heterosexual privilege. These men see heterosexuality, maleness, and masculinity as a sort of three-piece manacled suit and in order to be vogue and acceptable they must model the entire oppressive outfit. Moreover, masculine and effeminate polarities among contemporary African American gay men appear to be the deciding factor in gay identification. Effeminate gay men express more difficulty in appearing as heterosexual; therefore, a gay identity is the only identity allowed to them.

Facing oppression from society in general and from a black gay community in particular, those who are effeminate must either learn to be masculine or live as an outcast. This claim is substantiated by the large number of men who identify themselves as masculine, as well as those who argue that they are both masculine and effeminate. The effeminate gay male is positioned lowest in the hierarchy of men, and arguably they are the most oppressed. Effeminate gay men are often oppressors of women even though gay men are oppressed and that perpetuates sexism and reproduces homophobia.

For example, if an effeminate gay man can appear less feminine in certain instances, he can in fact be as oppressive and sexist toward women as a heterosexual or masculine gay man. An effeminate black gay colleague told me that he was not sexist but said, "Black women in the south need male leadership and they like it." He further contends that black gay men who are not completely certain about their sexuality "should continue to have sex with women until they get tired of it, but while having sex with women they must have sex with men to compare it." These sexist and patriarchal statements promote sexism and homophobia and contribute to a cycle of oppression. Black effeminate gay males possess the ability to appear

as both heterosexual and masculine, both of which provide them with heterosexual acceptance and an enjoyable hierarchy position over women.

Furthermore, effeminate gay men must not revel in their oppression, nor revel in sexism, but must vehemently challenge the same sexism that leads to their oppression. Connell (1992) wrote:

Some groups of openly gay men emphasize masculinity as part of their cultural style. Closeted gay men enjoy the general advantages of masculine gender and even effeminate gay men draw economic benefits from the overall subordination of women (p. 737).

This finding relates directly to the problematic construction of manhood in America. If one expresses masculinity, he is not hated as vociferously for his homosexuality as his effeminate counterpart. This loophole in American manhood characterizes sexism but it also characterizes a foremost reason why the down low exists as a sexual identity. Sexism and heterosexism practiced by both heterosexuals and homosexuals are at the root of the many problems gay men face in forging a homosexual identity. A heterosexual and female colleague of mine always asks, "Why don't they just come out?" Her question is typically preceded by a homophobic and heterosexist language: "I hate bisexuals" or "I usually get along better with masculine gay men." She knows that such words prohibit African American gay men from asserting their sexual identity. This point is especially important because many African American women are the victims of men who lead double lives. Yet, they contribute to reinforcing nondisclosure by engaging in a stigmatizing and disciplinary language.

Twenty percent of the men surveyed are open about their sexual desire and behavior to almost everyone. All of the men in that 20% category identify themselves as gay, homosexual, or bisexual, and again, 63% of these men identify themselves as effeminate. The remaining 37% identify themselves as both masculine and effeminate.

The ability to be open about one's sexual identity is important for a healthy maturation and two respondents said that they can be open about their sexual identity at all times. Eleven respondents are open to their family about their sexual identity, but as one respondent pointed out, "Who is family for a punk? He continued, "Right, other punks." The family that these men may be open to about their sexual identity may in fact not be their biological one. It is plausible to suggest that they are not truly open about their sexual identity. One married respondent said, "Everybody in my family knows." His statement seemed odd but it was not uncommon, because many of the respondents, especially those that considered themselves straight, nonchalantly spoke about their wife, their families, and their sex with men. Such responses suggested that it is possible for many black families to be aware of a member's homosexuality and to accept it. Yet, that seems uncommon. It is also questionable as to how accepting this particular respondent's family is of his homosexual identity because he is married. Essex Hemphill (2001) wrote about the need for the acceptance of black homosexuality in "Does Your Mama Know About Me?" Hemphill sees the acceptance of the black homosexual by the black family as essential to the existence of the black community.

We [black gay men] are a wandering tribe that needs to go home before home is gone. We should not continue standing in line to be admitted into spaces that don't want us there. We cannot continue to exist without clinics, politics, organizations, human services, and cultural institutions that we create to support, sustain, and affirm us. Our mothers and fathers are waiting for us. Our sisters and brothers are waiting. Our communities are waiting for us to come home. They need our love, our talents and skills, and we need theirs (p. 300).

Hemphill's recommendation falls upon deaf ears, most often it seems, because their heterosexual counterparts still overwhelmingly do not respect contemporary African American gay men. Six percent stated that they were simply afraid to profess a gay identity. This is understandable due to a tacit historical context of symbolic and physical violence directed at homosexuals. Similarly, nine percent contend that it's too hard being both black and gay. Both admissions suggest that the combination of their double minority status and a violent historical context are problematic for a black gay man forging a contemporary African American gay identity.

Furthermore, five percent of the respondents are not open about their sexual identity simply because it is more difficult to obtain male mates after acknowledging a gay identity. Similarly, seven percent suggested that they were not open about their sexual identity because they are "real men." Since the black family and church are typically synonymous entities among African Americans, a parallel between the four percent who are not open about their sexual identity merely because of their families and the two percent who cannot be open because of religion is perfectly logical. Michael Eric Dyson realizes this antagonism between the black church and African American gay men when he wrote, "In the main, a theology of eroticism must be developed to free black Christian sexuality from guilty repression or gutless promiscuity" (Dyson, 2001, p. 325). Dyson's theology of eroticism is suggesting that black churches begin to embrace the multitude of erotic feelings that many black churchgoers possess, thereby decreasing the exclusion of black homosexuals from black churches. The establishment of Dyson's poignant proposal in every black church—Christian and non-Christian—might end much of the separation between homosexuals and heterosexuals in the black community and likewise in the black family.

Additionally, 24% of the respondents agreed that all of the reasons listed in the survey were grounds for not professing their sexual identity. However, all but one of the men agreed that none of the aforementioned reasons presented in the survey prohibit them from being open about their sexual identity. They identify themselves as either straight or down low; consequently, they do not see a need to be open about their sexual identity. The one respondent who did not identify himself as straight or down low, identified himself as openly gay all the time. However, 98% of the respondents agreed that they couldn't be open about their sexual identity at all times. Similarly, 71% of the respondents agreed that their sexual identity affects them in every facet of their life.

Furthermore, age played an interesting role in survey responses. While it seemed like aging would define maturity level and self-acceptance, it did not because those who accepted a gay identity most frequently were between the ages of 18 and 22. Though this respondent age group was not the highest in number surveyed, their

Table 3
Age of Respondents (*n* = 110)

	Number	Percent
18–22	21	19
23–27	20	18
28–32	22	20
33–37	20	18
37–40	14	13
41-and Over	13	12
Total	110	100

responses were most affirmative in regards to accepting a gay identity. Table 3 presents a distribution of the age of the respondents. Ages 23 through 37 seemed to be marked by promiscuity and an importance attached to external validation. Age 23 is approximately the time that most of the men became independent. Many respondents from this age group suggested that they had just graduated from college or were fast approaching a college graduation. Some suggested that they had recently obtained corporate jobs. Others suggested that they had recently joined the military. There were other respondents in this age group that said they were thugs and enjoyed the urban culture that is reinforced by hip-hop music. Many of the respondents who were between ages 28 and 32 were married. In total, these roles prohibit disclosed gay identity.

The age group 33 to 37 was largely comprised of men who were married and/or identified themselves as straight. It appears that most of the men surveyed wanted families comprised of wives and children between ages 25 and 35 and they also still exhibited a need to enjoy a high level of social acceptance. On the contrary, many of the men aged over 37 were accepting of their gay identity. As they aged they became more accepting of their sexual identity. However, most of the men over 37 that identify as gay also see themselves as effeminate men. This might mean that being straight was less of an option for them. The majority of the men who identified themselves as straight were between the ages of 28 and 36, which are also the age groups containing most of the men who were still having sex with women and who were married. The men who identified themselves as bisexual were distributed between the age groups. Most of the bisexual men were between the ages of 23 and 32.

Moreover, age seems to impact sexual identity acceptance or rejection because identity is related to levels of maturity. However, the aforementioned distributed characteristics suggest that the foremost cause in sexual identity acceptance or rejection among contemporary African American gay men are social factors that may or may not be related to age. Social factors such as race, race awareness, economics, class, gender polarities, family, religion, profession, education, and environment that contribute to the level of sexual identity acceptance or rejection by African American gay men.

The listed suffocating forces that contain these men are debilitating and further hinders their human development over their life span. It makes it impossible for most of them to live healthy lives. The down low lifestyle cuts life short; it sepa-

rates the black community and the black gay community. So deeply rooted in hatred, the down low thrives like a cancerous plague, divesting and devouring all who are consumed by it. African American men have become its prey, have been and are being devoured as their identity is divested.

APPENDIX

Below is the survey I administered to examine sexual identity among African American men who have or have had sex with other men.

Please circle the response that best describes you.

Please circle an age group:

- a. 18–22 b. 23–27 c. 28–32 d. 33–37 e. 37–40 f. over 41

(1.) Have you ever had any type of sex with another man?

- a. yes b. no

(2.) Do you currently have sex with men?

- a. yes b. no

(3.) Do you currently have sex with women?

- a. yes b. no

(4.) Is there a difference between gay, homosexual, and down low?

- a. yes b. no

(5.) How do you identify yourself?

- a. gay b. straight c. bisexual d. down low/DL e. homosexual

(6.) Do you consider yourself

- a. Masculine b. effeminate c. both masculine and effeminate d. neither

(7.) Who are you open to about your sexual identity?

- a. everyone b. family c. friends d. co-workers/employees
e. church members f. only sexual partners

(8.) Do you feel that you can be open about your sexual identity at all times?

- a. yes b. no

(9.) Do you feel that you cannot be open about your sexual identity at all times because

- a. you are afraid
b. it's too hard being both black and gay
c. most black men like other black men who are not open about their sexuality
d. because you are a real man

- e. because of your family
- f. because it goes against your religion
- g. all of the above
- h. none of the above

(10.) Do you think that sexuality affects your status in

- a. the black community
- b. the black gay community
- c. work
- d. church
- e. school
- f. all of the above

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