

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Intersectionality and Quare Theory: Fantasizing African American Male Same-Sex Relationships in *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*

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In this critique, we articulate Black queer images relating to same-sex relationships and marriages portrayed in the film Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom. Grounded in a quare framework, we focus in particular on the intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, and class in the text. The themes of heteronormativity and White queer normativity are engaged through the Black gay male characters and through the motifs of consumerism, monogamy, and marriage. We argue that the characters perform a Black gay male fantasy in line with mainstream American cultural ideals.

doi:10.1111/cccr.12054

Recent years have seen the rise of representations of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (GLBTQ) characters in media. Within communication studies, scholars have examined these representations (Battles & Hilton-Morrow, 2002; Bennett, 2007; Dow, 2001; Sender, 2006; Shugart, 2008), noting the ways same-sex desire reinforces heteronormativity. Avila-Saaverdra (2009) found that “the overwhelming majority of queer characters on television remain gay white males” (p. 18). This trend can be seen on the LOGO cable network, which serves the GLBTQ community (Avila-Saaverdra, 2009). These GLBTQ media productions can be understood as an affirmation of U.S. capitalism and a promotion of consumerism (Sender, 2004, 2006; Shugart, 2008). Gandy (1998) asserted, “The creation of a consumer culture, and the associated ideology of consumption, has to be recognized as a critical moment in the transformation of capitalism” (p. 29). Thus, the representations of gay men, who are “young, white, Caucasian, preferably with a well-muscled, smooth body, handsome face, good education, professional job, and a high income” (Fejes, 2000, p. 115), are

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the media productions of hegemonic ideology that functions to support a capitalist system of power and assimilate voices that stand in opposition to dominant culture.

While these studies have been instrumental in critiquing the relationships between commercialism, patriarchy, and queerness, in many cases Whiteness remains unexplored. Phillips and Steward (2008) observed that the conflation between Whiteness and queerness occurs, “due to the cultural visibility and academic productivity of White gay men and lesbians” (p. 381). In this regard, Crenshaw’s (1991) and Collins’s (2000) theories of *intersectionality* have not been fully articulated. Delgado and Stefanic (2012) asserted, “‘Intersectionality’ means the examination of race, sex, class, national origin and sexual orientation, and how their combination plays out in various settings” (p. 57). They wrote that the intersection, or what Collins (2000) termed interlocking nature of identities is inseparable, and we must consider how our multiple identities simultaneously reproduce particular sites of oppression and exclusion. Thus, we seek to center our analysis in this critique on the film *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom*, a romantic comedy centered on four Black gay men to articulate the functioning of intersectionality.

Offering an Other voice to the White dominated repertoire of GLBTQ programming, series *Noah’s Arc*, a gay romantic comedy, offered a Black cast to the LOGO lineup. The television series ran two seasons from October 19, 2005, to October 4, 2006. *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom* (Viacom Logo Films) brought the television series to the silver screen in 2008. The narrative of the television series and subsequent film *Noah’s Arc* revolves around romantic relationship issues among four Black gay male characters (Andreoli, 2005). *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom*, which opened at number one in the independent box office, won the 2009 Outstanding Film-Limited Release of the 20th Annual Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) Awards (IndieWire, 2008; Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, n.d.). *Noah’s Arc* was the first high-rated LOGO cable network series focusing on Black gay male characters that returned as a film with the recognition. The characters offered a stark racial contrast to previous popular representations of GLBTQ characters such as *Queer as Folk*, *Ellen*, or *Will and Grace*, which featured all White worlds, with little to no representations of GLBTQ people of color. Yep and Elia (2012) noted the importance of *Noah’s Arc* writing, “It was the first time in television history that a series exclusively devoted to gay Black men was produced” (p. 892). Thus, *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom* offers a significant example of Black queer images.

By adopting E. P. Johnson’s (2001, 2005) “quare” (an African American vernacular of saying queer) framework, we read the text to explicate the racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) embedded in the material realities of Black queers. Quare theory, based in Moraga and Anzaldúa’s (1983) theories of the flesh, emphasizes the material lived experiences of GLBT individuals of color. E. P. Johnson (2005) wrote, “‘Quare’ offers a way to critique stable notions of identity, and at the same time, to locate racialized and class knowledges” (p. 127). E. P. Johnson (2005) argued that even when White queer scholars acknowledge the contributions of queer people of color,

they fail to recognize “the ways in which their own whiteness informs their own critical queer position” (p. 130). This perspective is supported in the media, as Squires (2011) argued that Black and gay identities are often framed as distinctive identities, “essentially *de-intersecting*” them (p. 65). Quare theory asks that we recognize that acknowledging the experiences of Black queer people is not a move toward essentialism, but instead a move toward expanding our understanding of queerness. Additionally, quare theory destabilizes the racial privilege of Whiteness embedded in the queer theoretical position, as it forces queer theory and queer theorists to be accountable to a raced body, rather than abstraction, disembodiment, and the devaluing of experience (E. P. Johnson, 2001, 2005). Quareness is born out of the specific historical context of African Americans. This specificity is important as it locates the material effects of U.S. (emphasizing Southern) history on queer African Americans, honoring the importance of identity in a queer perspective that often holds anti-identity politics at its center, but making sure that identity does not become so generalized that it is rendered meaningless. For that reason, quare theory focuses on making sense of how the multiplicity of race gender, class, and other subject positions creates the social world for GLBT members of color and plays a role in construing their knowledges.

In this quare reading of *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom*, we hope to create a space for queer theorists to further locate the racialized, gendered, and class knowledge(s) of GLBTQ members of color within the academic discourse. E. P. Johnson (2001) urged, “if social change is to occur, gays, bisexuals, transgendered people, and lesbians of color cannot afford to be armchair theorists” (p. 18). For that reason, our purpose of this critique is to create a space of dialogue for the further articulation of same-sex relationships and marriages by acknowledging racial, gender, and class differences. Phillips and Steward (2008) asserted, “Race-d queer discourses often queer queerness itself in ways that are, as yet, un- or underarticulated” (p. 383). Thus, our purpose is not to object to same-sex relationships and marriages but instead complicate representations.

Black sexualities and masculinities

The historical evidence of same-sex practice and desire in African American communities can be traced to precolonial Africa (C. A. Johnson, 2001). For example, Nero (1991) introduced a slave narrative that exposes the existence of same-sex practice during the slavery era. Additionally, some GLBTQ African American writers, artists, musicians, and entertainers inspired the Harlem Renaissance in 1920s and 1930s (Nugent, Gates, & Wirth, 2002). However, discussion of gay and lesbianism within African American communities has often not been publicly discussed.

Intimately connected to discussions of sexuality are discussions of masculinity. hooks (2004) argued that by the end of slavery “patriarchal masculinity had become an accepted ideal for most black men, an ideal that would be reinforced by twentieth-century norms” (p. 4). Collins (2004) wrote that Black masculinity was negotiated through understandings of the economic and political climate during the

Jim Crow era, when Black men were seemingly emasculated, yet were depicted as being “naturally” hyper-heterosexual (p. 64). The intersectional contours of masculinity manifest through race, class, gender, and sexuality, where hyper-heterosexuality is an expectation of Black masculinity, and heteronormativity represents a site of reinforcement of Black masculinity in the face of emasculation.

In the 1960s prominent Black writer Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) framed White masculinity as homosexuality, arguing that White men were “trained to be fags” and calling them “soft and weak” (as cited in hooks, 2004, p. 14). hooks (2004) linked this attack on White masculinity to common strategies used in militant Black power rhetoric, which did not critique patriarchy as much as it critiqued White men for not fulfilling the “primal ideal of patriarchal manhood” (p. 14). E. P. Johnson (2003), drawing on the work of Marlon Riggs, articulated a connection between Black masculinity and silence, argued, “vulnerability was associated with femininity” (p. 31). These ideas about masculinity, informed by intersections of history and power, further made their way into problematic sexual stereotypes within the Black community. Same-sex desire between men was “Whitened” because of the historically racist depictions of Black sexuality as hyper-heterosexual (Collins, 2004). This focus on hyper-heterosexuality made same-sex desire among Black men unimaginable because same-sex desire did not result in reproduction (Collins, 2004). hooks (2004) argued that Black men have been victimized by stereotypes produced by White elites (part of a White supremacist capitalist patriarchy) originating in the 19th century that hold to the present day including “the image of the brute — untamed, uncivilized, and unfeeling” (p. xii). In an effort to counter the emasculation of Black manhood, the patriarchal rhetoric of Black militants that “Whitened” and feminized homosexuality acted to reinforce Black masculinity. Both White and feminine act as clear markers of opposition — what Black manhood is not (Collins, 2004). Thus, Black masculinity was shaped from a defensive stance.

This hyper-heterosexualization of Black men continued through the decades, more recently morphing into the image of the hustler, pimp, or player (Collins, 2004). Media representations of this masculinity position Black men as aggressive thugs who refute accusations of Black male weakness by dominating “strong black women” (Collins, 2004, p. 189). Each of these stereotypes served to maintain ideological oppression and stigmatize Black men’s sexuality. As a result of this hyper-heterosexuality, Black gay men were not deemed “authentically” Black because Black sexuality, in the eyes of Whites, was defined through the lens of promiscuous heterosexuality. The stigmatization of same-sex desire continued, as it was connected to disease and Whiteness, which E. P. Johnson (2003) argued “stems from both the racist stigmatization of black sexuality and blacks’ response to it” (p. 53). Hemphill (2001), writing of the way that some view gay African American men, stated that homosexuality is sometimes viewed as the “final break in masculinity” (as cited in E. P. Johnson, 2003, p. 37). Others, such as Riggs (1995), have followed suit, critiquing the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and authentic blackness. Both Griffin (2000) and Hutchinson (2000) acknowledged that some Afrocentric thinkers

claimed that homosexuality was a perverse sexual practice imposed on Africans by Europeans. Collins (2004) argued that Black gay sexuality might present a threat to Black heterosexuality because within “the universe of Black masculinity, gay Black men pose a threat to a beleaguered Black male heterosexuality that strives to claim its place at a table dominated by representation of White-controlled masculinity” (p. 174). Social stigmatizations and penalties such as community isolation, violence, and prejudice occur when Black men do not conform to the heteronormative masculine performance (Potoczniak, 2007).

As enslaved peoples, Blacks found in religion and spirituality a refuge from their oppression and a tool to encourage hope in the face of insurmountable hardship (Levine, 2007). Christianity helped them cope with the circumstances of a history of systematic oppression, mistreatment, and racism and it continues to be a foundational aspect of African American culture (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni, & Soto, 2002). The legacy of commitment and uplift of the Black church maintains the importance of the church within African American communities (Harris, 2008). Consequently, the belief systems ingrained within the Black church inform African American culture. E. P. Johnson (1998) wrote, “African American gays are not afforded the same latitude in terms of expressing their sexuality (or spirituality) as their heterosexual counterparts” (p. 404). E. P. Johnson stated that gender performances of “femininity by Black gay men may be ‘tolerated’, but African American gay men are rarely if ever out of the closet” (p. 404). Spirituality, history, and identity are intimately connected in ways that can make coming out of the closet difficult for many Black queers.

Connected to the struggle over definitions of masculinity is the devaluation of the feminine. E. P. Johnson (2003) argued that effeminacy is “read as a sin of homosexuality”; thus, gay men are devalued (p. 69). E. P. Johnson, analyzing performances by Eddie Murphy, Damon Wayans, and David Alan Grier, argued they deploy “negro faggotry” to demean, disparage, and exclude Black gays from “authentic” blackness by linking homosexuality with effeminacy. E. P. Johnson (2003), writing about the characters portrayed by these actors, argued that they justify traditional beliefs about Black gay sexuality, as Black gay men are represented as “sissies, ineffectual, ineffective, womanish in a way that signifies inferiority rather than empowerment” (p. 72). Collins (2004) stated that in these representations Black gay men become “surrogate women, with the benefits and liabilities that this implies” (p. 173). Femininity as a performance of queer identity reinforces Black masculinity as distinctly unfeminine within the Black community. In an effort to protect Black masculinity, the feminine performance becomes widely accepted as what identifies homosexuality, and excludes Black gay men from Black manhood. Moreover, these negative discourses can be seen in some African American cultural artifacts, most prominently in hip-hop music as an act of hyper-masculinity (Collins, 2004). Some hip-hop artists often malign gay men in their work (Boykin, 2005; Cannick, 2006). These musical artifacts may also perpetuate violence against gay men in a society (Tyler, 2001). Hegemonic ideologies about gender and sexuality continue to construct an environment that condones

and connects hyper-masculinity with heterosexuality, while stigmatizing queerness by connecting it to (maligned) femininity.

Some African Americans distance themselves from communicating about GLBT identities because they are seen as relating to “deviant” forms of sexual expression (Harris, 2008). Sexuality can be a protected and “private” matter because of the history of perceived deviance of Black sexuality and the consequent effort of the Black community to “normalize” their identities (Collins, 2004). Where the hegemonic gender roles of dominant society suggest heteronormativity, Blacks may adhere to these gender norms. Gay and lesbian identities are racialized and coded as White (Collins, 2004). Though GLBT identities may be “tolerated” in African American communities, Crawford et al. (2002) concluded that these “African Americans must not disclose or display their sexual orientation” (p. 180). Reinforcing the assumption of “deviance,” queer men may not be stigmatized when they remain closeted. In the context where African American communities use hegemonic ideals as a normative yard stick, community solidarity arises where the old adage “don’t air your dirty laundry in public” (public reading White) means that sexuality, specifically nonsubscriptive sexual behaviors, are matters not to be discussed.

In more recent years, we have seen the emergence of the image of the “homothug” (Lewis & Kreutzer, 2003) and discourses about the “down low (DL)” (King, 2004; McCune, 2008, 2014; Snorton, 2014) which are connected to representations of hyper-masculinity, hip-hop culture, and Blackness. These are men who have sex with other men, but identify as heterosexual (King, 2004). Writing of men on the DL, McCune (2008) argued, “These men challenge this overdetermination of the closet as a container of shame, pain, discomfort, and anxiety—offering a counternarrative of discretion as a tactic of survival” (p. 299). Additionally, “the performance of heterosexism” by some DL men “seems to work in collaboration with a larger desire to be ‘cool.’ The queer subjects who yell ‘faggot ass nigga’ can feel a part of a larger black, masculine sphere—one that usually excludes them” (McCune, 2008, p. 307). McCune (2008) continued, “In this way, the utterance of the profane empowers the speaker/chanter, affirming his status as appropriately masculine” (p. 308). Elaborating on these performances of masculinity, Yep and Elia (2012) argued that the expected performance is “a hypermasculine man who penetrates but is never penetrated” (p. 906). Boykin (2005) and McCune (2008, 2014) have attempted to texture these images of Black masculinity and sexuality in order to create spaces of possibility for Black queer men that resist stereotypes. The recent coming out of R & B singer Frank Ocean has further pushed the boundaries of current representations of Black queer men and Black masculinity.

Given the historical conditions of Black sexualities and masculinities, we offer a quare reading of *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom* to illustrate how even in a potentially transgressive representation of Black same-sex desire and marriage, White queer normativity drives the narrative and norms that govern it. Without a quare critique, queer theory runs the risk of contributing to “postracial” discourses that assume we have moved past race. Instead of asking the question of “if race matters anymore,”

it is our task to “illuminate how race matters differently today” (Mukherjee, 2011, p. 180). We point out spaces of contradictions in the film not only to demonstrate the oppressive nature of White queer normativity, but to locate how race matters. In doing this, we suggest what queer representations might look like. Muñoz (2009) argued that “we are not yet queer,” as he saw queerness as “an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future” (p. 1). As we are accountable to a queer critique, we reveal the potentially oppressive structures of White queer normativity.

Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom

The narrative of the film *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom* revolves around Noah Nichols and his best friends’ (i.e., Alex Kirby, Ricky Davis, and Chance Counter) weekend trip to Martha’s Vineyard to celebrate Noah’s marriage to Wade Robinson at Wade’s family vacation home. Alex comes alone because his husband Trey needs to babysit their newly adopted child from Ethiopia, though the two video chat throughout the film. Chance, a college professor, brings his husband, Eddie. Ricky brings his 19-year-old date, Brandon, whom he has recently met, and who is coincidentally one of Chance’s former students. Each male same-sex relationship starts to disentangle as these four couples go to separate bachelor parties. Alex leads the preparation for Noah and Wade’s wedding, taking multiple caffeine pills to remain alert. Noah’s boss Brandy and her client, rapper Baby Gat, join the wedding weekend without invitation and attempt to disrupt the festivities. Right before the wedding, Noah’s mother and Wade’s mother show up, adding more tension. During the course of the film, many questions about marriage are raised as the characters relate to commitment challenges surrounding gay men. The film ends with Noah and Wade’s wedding ceremony.

Quaring *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom*

In our queer reading of *Noah’s Arc: Jumping the Broom*, we identify two major themes; heteronormativity and White queer normativity. Six specific themes (i.e., representations of singular, stable, essentialized sexuality; discussions of safe monogamous sex; family and gender values; class; consumerism; language) compose the two major themes that emerged from our reading. These themes are explored below.

Heteronormativity

Singular, stable, essentialized sexuality

Sexuality is illustrated as a singular, stable, and essentialized construction within the film. Dialogue about relationships and commitment in the film reinforces this concept. For example, Wade’s mother shows up at Noah and Wade’s wedding right before it starts, because Noah inadvertently told her about their wedding, believing that she was already aware of it. She asks Wade to explain why he did not tell her he was gay and getting married. Wade answers being raised in a Christian environment prevented him from coming out. She replies, “Wade, you are my son. And although this may not

be the life I would have chosen for you, I have it on very good authority that sexuality is not a choice.” Wade’s mother’s response goes against a *quare* perspective, which acknowledges that for some, sexuality is political. Wade’s mother’s response renders Wade’s *quare*ness apolitical through disciplining it with popular discourses associated with religion (i.e., “Hate the sin, not the sinner”). This contradiction is evidenced when she participates in the ceremony to celebrate Wade’s same-sex marriage; yet, she grimaces when she watches Wade and Noah kiss each other. Wade’s mother chooses to maintain her relationship with her son, but still demonstrates disapproval of outward signs of affection, which in some ways pushes Wade back into the closet. This film’s portrayal of sexuality reinforces that gays and lesbians strategically utilize the singular, stable, and essentialized description of sexuality as a way to be accepted by the heteronormative environment.

The film further reinforces the singular, stable, and essentialized concept of sexuality through another character’s body rather than showing the complexity of Black *quare* men’s experience. Baby Gat, a hip-hop rapper, is a “closeted” gay man. Baby Gat expresses his desire to be with Noah as his romantic partner, although Noah rejected Baby Gat previously due to his closeted gay identity. As McCune (2008) argued, coming out of the closet is constructed culturally as universal experience of self-fulfillment. Coming out of closet is often associated with modernity, uncritically accepted as a space of progress, which can be oppressive to *quare* individuals who must negotiate their sexuality *and* their raced identities. Ross (2005) wrote of coming out of the closet as a raceless paradigm by saying, “This narrative of progress carries the residue, and occasionally the outright intention, borne with evolutionary notions of the uneven development of the races from primitive darkness to civilized enlightenment” (p. 163). The structuring of coming out of the closet through the progress narrative fails to account for the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and class; assuming that queer people of color are “backwards” if they are not out by its standards. The idea that visibility equals power is not attendant to the convergences of race and sexuality, which are central factors in the lived experiences of queer people of color. When Baby Gat expresses his feelings, Chance reinforces that Baby Gat must be openly gay to date Noah, which reaffirms Chance as the voice of White gay normativity centered on the metaphor of the closet. Baby Gat answers that “we can work something out.” This line suggests that Baby Gat must engage in the performative embodiments of stereotypical Black hyper-masculine “hip-hop” star image in the public space.

Relegated to performing his gay identity within private spaces because of his profession, Baby Gat’s gay performance occurs among Noah and his openly gay friends in the film. McCune (2008) maintained, “If we must accept the idea that black men do play, dwell, or reside in the closet, it is indeed a *quare* one” (p. 299). Rather than seeing the idea of coming out of closet as a Eurocentric paradigm that signals White modernity (Ross, 2005), the characters’ stance toward the idea of being in the closet forecloses any possible critique of it through the vilifying of Bay Gat as uncivilized. Intersections such as race, religion, ethnicity, and class that make the experience of coming

out different for various cultural/ethnic groups are silenced in favor of a master narrative of “progress.” Baby Gat’s performance of Black masculinity through being a hip-hop artist reinforces existing classed images of gay men in media as elitist. With hip-hop, and rap, as an art form coming out of Black poverty, Baby Gat as the closeted character silences the multiplicity of class statuses of gay men of color. Through Baby Gat’s performance of stereotypical Black masculinity as brutish and uncivilized, a view supported by the remainder of the cast, dominant heteronormative and homonormative assumptions of Black masculinity are reinforced, and the middle and upper classes remain the only safe space for openly gay men.

The complex contradictions of Black gay male experiences are ignored in stark contrast to political orientation between being in versus out of the closet in the film. While Baby Gat’s desire to stay in the closet is tied to his economic livelihood, some audiences may read his performance in and out of the closet in various spaces of private and public spheres as resistive to the discourse of being out of the closet and progress. Baby Gat’s performances function against the normalizing discourses of Noah and his friends in ways that resist their rigid view of the closet and progress.

This film further more portrays adoption of gay identities as a way of life, as a singular and stable process for Black gay men. Following Noah’s struggle to acknowledge his homosexuality, Wade finally decides to marry him. During the wedding vows, Noah describes his perception of Wade’s sexuality by saying, “You were straight. Or so I thought and you thought.” Wade’s heterosexuality is indicated as “mistaken” in this speech line. He has successfully transformed to become gay. The same-sex marriage plays as the discourse of commitment and the discourse of proof that Wade will continue to be gay. In this sense, Wade’s “identity confusion” has been resolved by marrying Noah. This narrative proposes that the experience of becoming an African American gay male is alike a continuum, a stable and singular process rather than a multiple and unstable process, which ties back to Ross’s (2005) critique of the closet’s construction as a raceless paradigm that is grounded in a narrative of progress.

As sexuality is represented as singular and stable, same-sex marriage is also represented as an established performance for Black gay men to conform to the heteronormative lifestyle. Same-sex marriage is represented as a cultural institution that allows African American same-sex couples to develop, pursue, and sustain their same-sex love for life. At the wedding, Wade says:

I asked you to marry me because marriage is a deed. I asked you to marry me here at my family’s home to prove to you that I have no shame to place our name together in front of whole world.

Noah responds, “My love for you grew quietly,” and “I knew I loved you when just the sight of you pierced me.” These lines reinforce that same-sex marriage is the discursive performance for gay men communicating their love for each another. Assumptions concerning the nature of love saturate the cultural institution of same-sex love.

Safe monogamous sex

The film reinforces in another way the role of same-sex marriage as a discursive site. Ricky is promiscuous and claims not to believe in marriage. In the beginning of the film, Ricky says, “I do not believe in marriage” and “monogamy for men is a contradiction.” However, Ricky is actually in love with Noah. This secret is revealed toward the end of the film and illuminates a contradiction between his stated beliefs of same-sex marriage and his actual beliefs. Brandon, Ricky’s young weekend date, discovers Ricky’s secret feelings for Noah and has a conversation about it with him.

Brandon: I figured something out, why you do what you do. All the sex is just a distraction.

Ricky: From what?

Brandon: The truth.

Ricky: And what truth would that be exactly?

Brandon: That you are in love with Noah.

Later, Brandon tells Wade about Ricky’s feelings for Noah at Wade’s bachelor party. Brandon says [Ricky] is not against marriage. He is just against Noah’s marrying someone that is not him. Finally, Ricky discloses his feelings for Noah before the wedding. He clarifies that his love for Noah is not as friends and/or as “girlfriends.” He admits that his promiscuity is a distraction from his love for Noah. The narrative proposes that sexually playing the field is a way not to face the “truth” — love among gay men. This reproduces the heteronormative notion of monogamy by implying that all gay men are in search of their one “true” love, and this love will lead them to marriage.

This representation of same-sex marriage emerges out of the Western cultural conceptualization of marriage. Rauch (2004) maintained that many citizens in the West believe that “love sustains marriage, many people will tell you, and marriage sanctifies love—but it is the love, not the marriage, which makes the bond” (p. 17). The emotional bonding is the discursive element in same-sex marriages. Rubin (1998) observed that the GLBTQ communities highly value long-term and committed relationships rather than short-term and casual relationships. Thus, same-sex marriage is an official legal recognition for same-sex couples to sustain their love in their long-term committed relationships.

A further twist in the narrative punches home the theme of monogamous same-sex love. Brandon questions whether or not Ricky is interested in pursuing a monogamous relationship. Noah replies, “Not really, he calls it saying yes to life.” Wade retorts, “More like saying yes to STDs.” Subsequently, Ricky is arrested by police for lewd conduct in a public park. The tryst in the park was with a stranger. When Ricky is dropped off at the house by a police car, Wade looks at him with disappointment. Noah, Alex, and Chance call upon Ricky to explain what happened. When Ricky jokingly talks about his arrest, Chance sarcastically congratulates him, “Bravo, Ricky.” Noah asks, “On my wedding weekend, really?” To which Ricky responds, “Your wedding, not mine” and walks away from the conversation.

His friends nonverbally express their resentment toward Ricky in his absence. This representation encourages sexual monogamy in same-sex relationships. Yep and Elia (2012) argued that Ricky plays the role of the “foil,” and “Monogamy is marked as the sought after sexual norm on the series” (p. 905). The wedding plays as a cultural performance in which sexual activity between two individuals is officially permitted but only under the sociocultural and political surveillance of sex (Bell, 1999).

The negotiations of safe sex and condom use in African American men’s same-sex relationships appeared in the film. At Noah’s bachelor party, he, Alex, Ricky, and Chance talk about the appropriate time to stop using condoms in a monogamous relationship. Noah asks, “When do you guys think it is okay to stop using condoms after you’re married?” Alex, an HIV/AIDS educator says, “That is tricky” and informs him that he stopped using condoms in his 11-year monogamous relationship with Trey after their first 5 years. Chance then discloses that he always uses condoms with Eddie for hygiene purposes. This narrative reproduces the HIV/AIDS discourse common since the 1980s, which identifies gay sex as the disease’s source, notwithstanding the reality that the epidemic has overwhelmingly been transmitted heterosexually. However, the White heteronormative culture stigmatizes MSM (men who have sex with men) of color as the source of spreading HIV/AIDS (McCune, 2014). Thus, the discourse of HIV/AIDS impacts the film’s representations of monogamous relationships among gay men of color as sexual promiscuity among men is frequently regarded negatively (Rotello, 1997; Rubin, 1998; Yep, Lovaas, & Elia, 2003).

Family and gender values

The film represents the hegemonic ideology of family and gender values as the core of African American men’s same-sex relationships and commitment. During the preparations for the wedding, Noah and Wade have a conversation about family planning.

Wade: What do you think about kids?

Noah: We haven’t moved in together yet, papa.

Wade: That’ll change on Monday.

Noah: Then we can discuss it on Monday. We’re respectable married folk, no kids out of wedlock for us.

At this point Noah is hesitant about having children as he considers it a big step to even marry Wade. However, Noah tells Wade, “I’d like to have children, but no time soon” the following day. Wade happily hugs Noah and hopes that they will have a life similar to the prescribed heteronormative marriage scripts. Noah’s comments also reinforce this, as he notes that they will become “respectable” when they get married while at the same time implying that children between nonmarried people is not respectable. This heteronormative family value is also reinforced through two other couples who have children (i.e., Alex and Trey adopted a boy from Africa and Chance and Eddie have a daughter from Eddie’s previous heterosexual relationship). Children and child rearing become central tenets of the characters’ committed relationships.

Conventional family and gender roles and dynamics are pivotal in the film's representation of African American men's same-sex relationships. The performative aspects of butch/masculine-femme/feminine characterize three same-sex relationships that are portrayed in the film. Noah is a "femme" gay man who appears to be very flamboyant. Wade is a butch/masculine gay man who conforms to the hegemonic masculine appearance with a high proportion of muscles. When they are physically affectionate, Wade holds Noah from the back as if to protect him. At their wedding, Noah wears a pink vest and long coat, while Wade wears a light gray tuxedo. Noah and Wade's dinner conversation with their friends reinforces the performative aspects of the body's masculine domination and feminine subordination.

Brandon: Have you guys decided on names yet? Will you [Wade] take Noah's name? Or yours? Or hyphenate?

(Noah and Wade respond at the same time).

Wade: We have not decided yet.

Noah: We are going to hyphenate.

Wade tells Noah later, "If you [want to] put my name on yours that is cool with me. But I do not know." In this sense, a masculine gay man does not think of changing his last name, whereas it is a choice for a femme gay man to take his husband's name. This dynamic reinforces the patriarchal tradition of gendered marriage, where a man's surname is highly valued and family lineage should follow a patriarchal progression. The heteronormative dynamic is also reproduced through other couples' relationships throughout the film. Alex acts and behaves more flamboyantly than his partner Trey. Chance is physically smaller than his partner Eddie. Thus, the dynamics of African American same-sex relationships as represented go against more fluid understandings of gender as argued from a *quare* perspective.

White queer normativity

As intersecting with the heteronormative representation, Black gay men and their same-sex relationships are represented according to the normative White queer gaze. The film omits the racialized and class knowledge(s) about performative aspects of Black gay men in favor of an idealized hegemonic norm. Their intersectional experiences are not complexly layered, as a *quare* perspective would call for. The characters are "normalized," in the sense that they are upper middle class or wealthy, to appeal to the interest of White queers from the upper middle class or wealthy who are the target audience of the LOGO cable network. Discursive elements establish this upper middle class or wealthy White queer American norm throughout the film.

The location of the wedding is the first indicator of U.S. upper-middle or wealthy class status. From the moment we meet the characters on the ferry to Martha's Vineyard, the well-dressed men, Noah even donning a fur coat, set the stage. Through conversation, we learn that the wedding will be at Wade's family vacation home, establishing generational wealth, at a minimum for Wade. Martha's Vineyard is an island

off the coast of Massachusetts with a legacy of affluence. A vacation tradition for the president of the United States, it exudes exclusivity. It is also a well-known vacation destination for affluent African Americans. Wade's parents reside in Orange County, California, an affluent White community. Noah's parents are presented as upper middle class. At the last minute, Noah's mother flies from California to Massachusetts to attend the wedding on Martha's Vineyard. Noah's father promises to throw a big reception party once when they return to Los Angeles, because he could not make it to the wedding. The setting that builds the film's story about African American men's same-sex relationships is grounded in the upper middle class or wealthy White queer American standard that we see in shows like Showtime's *Queer as Folk* or *The L Word*. Ownership and access serve to distance the characters from typical associations of African American men being in poverty.

Problematizing this further, E. P. Johnson (2005) critiqued that render middle class Blackness as inauthentic through his reading of Champagne's discussion of Marlon Riggs's *Tongues Untied*. He argued:

[I]n his class-based analysis Champagne reads literary selections, material goods, and clothing aesthetics as "evidence" of the film's middle-class leanings. However, he fails to recognize that the *appearance* of belonging to a particular class does not always reflect one's actual class status. In the black community, for instance, middle-class status is often performed—what is referred to in the vernacular as acting 'boojie' (bourgeois). (E. P. Johnson, 2005, p. 134)¹

The occupations of the main Black gay characters reinforce the film's representation of same-sex relationships through the upper middle or wealthy class lens. The men appear to be *bourgeois* rather than *boojie* because they actually have financial privilege and access to material goods. The men are not performing out of their class status; their status is bourgeois. Noah is a successful screenwriter who has obtained a graduate-level education. Chance is a college professor. Alex is an HIV educator who owns his own clinic targeting African American and Latina/Latino individuals in Los Angeles. Ricky is the owner of a fashion boutique on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles. Brandon is a college student. We do not discount the power of these representations of upper middle class Blackness; however, we argue how they might render Blackness more amenable to White queer normativity and consumption.

Consumerism

Similar to class, consumerism is a motif throughout the film. The characters wear expensive clothes and carry designer handbags. They have high-tech gadgets, as demonstrated in particular by several video conferences Alex has with his spouse over the weekend. These representations of the main characters are normalized into the middle- and upper-class White queer culture and are clearly not the reflection of the working class culture in which the majority of African American men are socially and culturally positioned in the United States. This representation is interesting in

that it shows upper or middle class African Americans, which is not the problem; rather, as Gray (1995) wrote about *The Cosby Show*,

The show seemed unable, or unwilling, to negotiate its universal appeal to family, the middle class, mobility, and individualism on the one hand and the particularities of black social, cultural, political, and economics realities on the other. While effectively representing middle class blackness as one expression of black diversity, the show in turn submerged other sites, tensions, and politics of difference by consistently celebrating mobility, unlimited consumerism, and the patriarchal nuclear family. (p. 82)

Collins (2004) framed contemporary representations of Blackness within what she terms “the new racism,” which is “characterized by a changing political structure that disenfranchises people, even if they appear to be included” (p. 34). Representations of the new racism further marginalize by giving the impression that racism is over (Collins, 2004). In discussing commodity consumption and “bling” culture, Mukherjee (2011) argued, “Black advancement within materialist hierarchies stands out as incontrovertible proof of the democratizing power of consumerism” (p. 180).

The materialism motif also exercises a stereotype of the GLBTQ community that they are fashionable, materialistic, and well-to-do. Despite the fact that most gay men are poor or working class, Smith argued that “as long as lesbians and gay men are characterized as people who have huge amounts of disposable income and who are kind of fun and trendy ... just a little on the edge but not really threatening ... probably capitalism can incorporate them” (Gluckman & Reed, 2004, p. 462). Thus, gay men remain invisible outside of a consumerist context in society at large, and media representations of the gay community continue to represent their conformity and normalcy in line with mainstream American culture.

Language

The norm for verbal and nonverbal performance among characters is strongly grounded in the White queer standard. Most characters (Noah, Wade, Ricky, Chance, Eddie, and Brandon) speak standard American English according to the White normative American standards. Alex engages in performances associated with African American women. Alex says “hey girl,” “girl,” and “un-huh,” when he talks. Also, Alex makes his points straightforwardly and authoritatively. Moreover, he engages in the nonverbal art form of snapping. E. P. Johnson (1995) asserted that “the ‘SNAP’ is onomatopoeic inform, in that the word sounds like the behavior. It consists of placing the thumb and the middle finger together to make a snapping sound” (p. 125). Though snapping is considered part of the African American cultural performance, the recent commoditization of African American culture into the mainstream popular cultural context pushes snapping to cross the racial line (E. P. Johnson, 1995). However, the slang and gestures used by Alex are not used to ghettoize the character. They are a performance of a feminine identity and gender role. The characters do not speak in language that could be described as street, or Ebonics. Alex’s cultural and

ethnic identity performance does not become a threat as other characters conform to the standard White normative American communication. Thus, verbal and nonverbal performance among characters is framed by the White queer cultural standard to create a comfort in the audience perception.

Fantasizing African American men's same-sex relationships

The performance of heteronormativity and White queer normativity engaged in by the film acts to fantasize African American men's same-sex relationships in ways that ignore the possibilities of queerness. Cultural indicators of African American heritage can be seen throughout the film that attempt to make the film more "authentic" in its representation of Blackness, a strategy seen in other films such as *Chasing Papi*, which was billed as an authentically Latina/Latino film (Moreman & Calafell, 2008). Thus, we argue that *Noah's Arc: Jumping the Broom* ideologically serves an upper middle class or wealthy audience who has access to the LOGO channel cable network.

To further pay homage to this ideological representation, Noah and Wade "jump the broom," a tradition that served as an open declaration of a marriage among slaves when such marriages were not legal and protected unions. In this respect, "jumping the broom" becomes symbolic of the progression of civil rights. The African American tradition rooted in inequality and oppression now becomes a shared struggle with the GLBTQ community. Jumping the broom symbolizes marginality, and a history of oppressed groups finding ways to circumvent systematic racism, sexism, and gender inequality. In a resistive reading, we could see the practice of jumping the broom as one of the few in the film that attempts to attend to the tensions surrounding the lived experiences of Black same-sex loving men, as it brings together histories of racial, sexual, and class oppression. Within the context of our larger analysis, the question is whether this is indeed a moment of transgression in the film, or a moment of commodified "authentic" Blackness that allows White consumers to "get a bit of the Other" (hooks, 2006).

We recognize that the film is a product that some Black queers find spaces of connection with, even though it is largely marketed to White queers. This is why we need to problematize the film. While it is not our project to engage in audience studies, it is our project to understand the paucity of images that exist in the field of representation. Through a queer reading, we have located how the text is consistent with dominant ideologies, and we have pointed to spaces where there may be connection for queers of color (i.e., jumping the broom; tensions between religion and sexuality). While the film conforms to dominant ideologies, it is possible that there may be some glimmers of cultural resonance for queers of color; however, audience analysis that goes beyond the scope of this essay would be needed to determine this.

This White heteronormative and homonormative production of images relating to Black gay men and their relationships retains unquestioned assumptions that are buried in the practice of same-sex marriage. Particularly, the intersection of all specific themes (i.e., singular, stable, essentialized sexuality, safe monogamous sex, family and

gender values, class, consumerism, and language) emerging from this analysis characterizes normative assumptions when we think about the “ideal” same-sex marriage in the White heteronormative United States. The critical question is whether queers live outside of heteronormativity when power and privilege concentrate around heterosexuality. The fantasy that this film presents is the constrained knowledge that gay men in general want to be “just” like White heterosexuals, because a way of gay life is contextualized within the White heteronormative institution.

Given that perspective, this film’s description of African American men’s same-sex marriages and relationships symbolizes a fantasy that the success of Black gay men is to live their “American” dreams according to the White heteronormative prescribed scripts for queers. This move toward the American dream ignores the lived experiences of racism, as it assumes an equal playing field for all. Stephans (2010) observed, “Growth in gay and lesbian media visibility has coincided with the mainstreaming of ‘queer theory’ in academe and its normalizing of Whiteness” (p. 245). In the film, normalizing the performative embodiments of race, gender, sexuality, and class just like White queers is described as a successful performance for Black gay men. In doing so, Black gay men become “gay” and embrace gay identity as a way of life. Thus, the fantasy omits to address the intersectional knowledges of Black gay men, essentially quare perspectives.

In conclusion, queer theorists must continue to raise questions, such as what are the unique and particular challenges that GLBTQ members of color must negotiate as a result of their racialized, gendered, and class positionality? In what ways do GLBTQ members of color deal with the queer politics? And in what ways do we as academicians give voices to GLBTQ members of color? By addressing these questions, hopefully, the academic discourse of GLBTQ members of color will play as praxis to go beyond academia. In doing so, queer theorists can take a step toward theorizing the importance of collective resistance in queer America.

Acknowledgments

We appreciate Dr. John Downing and multiple blind peer-reviewers for their careful and in-depth critiques and evaluations of this study.

Note

- 1 For a more expansive discussion of boogie, including the potentially resistive qualities of boogie performances, see Alexander (2011).

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