

# Downlow Mountain?

## De/Stigmatizing Bisexuality through Pitying and Pejorative Discourses in Media

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This article examines the differing approaches the media took to black and white male bisexuality following a 2001 *Los Angeles Times* article and Ang Lee's film, *Brokeback Mountain*, respectively. Using content analysis of more than 170 articles written between 2001 and 2006, the author finds that the media pathologized black bisexuals' behavior while either ignoring or sympathizing with white bisexuals' behavior. While the "Down Low" black bisexual is described pejoratively as a threat to black masculinity and the health of the black family, the "Brokeback" white bisexual (when described as bisexual at all) is described in pitying language as one who is constrained by the society around him. In addition to exposing these differences, the author examines the reasons the media share these different viewpoints of, essentially, the same sexual behavior.

**Keywords:** bisexuality, down-low, *Brokeback Mountain*, stigma, media bias, black men

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Imagine for a moment a movie about two black steelworkers in Chicago's southside. These men argue that they "ain't queer" in spite of the fact that they get together a couple of times a year to have sex with each other. When they have sex,

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alcohol is often involved; condoms never are. Neither ever uses the word “love” to describe what they’re feeling. Both are married, have children, and enjoy all of the privileges of heterosexuality (i.e., status, security, progeny). They wear masculinity like a heavy cloak: taking jobs, driving trucks, and wearing clothes that mark them incontrovertibly as men’s men. They consider the ramifications of expressing their attractions openly and decide that “it’s nobody’s business but ours.”

If that movie had come out in 2001 when no less than 20 news outlets and magazines were running stories about the so-called “down-low” phenomena or three years later when Oprah Winfrey was exposing “this sexual underground,” these two characters would be villainized as examples of a worrisome trend—men living on the down-low—which was being described as the root cause of the spread of HIV-AIDS in the black community. Their sexual behavior would be pathologized, they would be called dishonest and delusional, and their decisions to hide their behavior would be perceived by some gay activists as a dangerous cop-out. Newspaper and magazine articles almost unanimously excoriated black bisexual men as both deceptive (Harris, 2004) and dangerous (Johnson, 2005). This movie about black bisexual men would likely have received the same kind of pejorative treatment that black bisexuals themselves received in most discourse following the *Los Angeles Times*’ “discovery” of them (Stewart & Bernstein, 2001).

But make the characters white cowboys, plant them in 1960s Wyoming, and their secret lives become something to be pitied. Stephen Holden’s (2005) review of *Brokeback Mountain* is representative of how the media described the main characters’ relationship: “*Brokeback Mountain* is ultimately not about sex but about love ... love stumbled into, love thwarted, love held sorrowfully in the heart” (p. E1.1). Of 140 articles written about this movie in mainstream newspapers, none referred to the Jack and Ennis characters as bisexuals, let alone as men living on the down-low. Without exception, reviewers and culture pundits saw it as a movie about “two gay cowboys” in spite of the fact that both characters state, categorically, that they’re not gay and appear quite capable of carrying on enthusiastic physical relationships with their wives. Instead of being villainized for their dishonesty, Jack and Ennis are lionized as men who stalwartly kept their extramarital, homosexual relationship alive in spite of cultural injunctions against such behavior. Even Jack’s cruising Mexican back alleys for anonymous sex and his reciprocated flirtations with the also-married Randall Malone are ignored in what amounts to a kind of media whitewashing of Jack’s “down-low” behaviors. Because the bisexuality of these characters is practically ignored by the media, no flurry of news articles or magazine examinations of the “white bisexual” phenomenon followed the movie’s premiere. Instead the movie served as a catalyst for discussions about societal pressures that cause homosexual men to remain in the closet, a set of discussions that had none of the pejorative tone that followed society’s introduction to black bisexuality.

This tendency in the media to portray black bisexuals as duplicitous heterosexuals while portraying white bisexuals as victimized homosexuals does not end in the print media. Oprah Winfrey did two shows less than a year apart, one on black men (April, 2004) and a second one dealing with white men (October, 2004) who have sexual relationships with both genders. Each show was initiated by a book’s publication—Carol Grever’s (2001) *My Husband is Gay* and J.L. King’s (2004) *On the*

*Down Low*—but the shows seemed timed to coincide with the media’s focus on the issues raised by the “down-low” articles and the film *Brokeback Mountain* (Ossana, Schamus, & Lee, 2005). The tone of the teasers for each show reflect the differences in how black bisexuality and white bisexuality are treated. The teaser for the show on black men read, “Sex, lies, and double lives: It’s a shocker. It’s called living on the ‘down low.’ Men with wives and girlfriends secretly having sex with other *men*. One man blows the lid off this sexual underground” (Rakieten, 2004a). Conversely, the show on white men was about “Secret lives: Husbands and fathers who were secretly gay share their struggles” (Rakieten, 2004b). Again, these descriptions depict the same behavior—male bisexuality—differently.

Some might argue that the media took their cues for responding to the black “down-low” phenomena and the corresponding white “brokeback” phenomena from spokesmen for these communities. When interviewed, “down-low brothas,” as they proudly called themselves in some print stories, looked very much like the boogeymen the media claimed they were. They weren’t seeking loving, long-term relationships. They were ignoring media messages about condom use and sexually transmitted diseases. They frequented environments where alcohol and drugs were pervasive. They even bristled at the idea that they might be “gay” or “bisexual.” White men, on the other hand, described themselves as otherwise moral men trapped in a society that would not let them express themselves freely. In fact, some described themselves as gay men who were forced to embrace the facade of heterosexuality out of the same fears Ennis expressed when he said, “Bottom line is: we’re around each other an’ this thing, it grabs hold of us again at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and we’re dead.” Trapped in loveless relationships with women, white bisexuals are depicted as sympathetic victims of a world which refuses to allow them the freedom to just ... be.

The problem with this argument is that there is a clear difference in where the media looks for these spokespersons. Because the catalyst for stories on bisexual black men was the fear that these men were infecting black women with HIV-AIDS, most stories about black bisexuality (like, incidentally, most scholarship on black male homosexuality) included comments from public health officials. For example, in a *New York Times* story (see Denizet-Lewis, 2003), the author mentions HIV-AIDS nearly 50 times and uses AIDS Task Force counselors as primary sources. In addition, reporters cruise Web chat sites and the black equivalent of predominantly white circuit parties to find black bisexual informants. Interviews at these events, with all of the concomitant drug use, alcohol abuse, and condom-free sex, lead the reader to assume that this is representative of the black bisexual experience. While descriptions of white circuit parties (e.g., Philadelphia’s Blue Ball) suggest that both gay and bisexual men attend these parties, none of the practically nonexistent articles on white bisexuals ever interview men there. Instead, informants for articles about “Brokeback Men” are recruited from the client lists of family therapists and social workers or even support groups for married couples struggling with the male partner’s admission of homosexual infidelities. Experts in these articles aren’t public health officials raising alarm about dishonest men bringing diseases home to their partners. Instead, they are anthropologists and sociologists who pity men trapped in “mixed-orientation marriages.” Absent are mentions of sexually transmitted dis-

eases, intentional dishonesty, or (in many cases) bisexuality itself. When describing white men who lead sexual double lives, reporters tend to describe them inclusively as “gay or bisexual.” When those men are black, they’re usually labeled “down-low.”

Stories about black bisexuals tend to aim their criticism at the men themselves while stories about white bisexuals focus their criticisms at homophobic cultures that force these men into closeted lifestyles. Part of this difference seems to stem from racist stereotypes about black male sexuality (Marable, 1994). The assumption in “down-low” discourse is that black bisexual men are engaging in these sexual liaisons for very different reasons than *Brokeback Mountain*’s Jack and Ennis do. Instead of being drawn to extramarital encounters with men because of the more respectable emotion of love, black men are presumed drawn to them by a more base emotion: lust. They’re seen as sexual predators who, incapable of controlling their need for sexual release, abandon principle for a few moments of pleasure with whomever is available. There is woefully little accounting of the numbers of black men—58% in my recent survey of black men in an Atlanta gay chat room—who describe themselves as “down-low” or “not out” but are actually seeking something more than just a physical relationship with other men. Writers discounted the fact that the same kind of cultural stigma that kept Ennis in the closet in 1963 still kept black same-gender loving men in closets in 2003. While Stonewall helped promote communities where gay or bisexual white men could find respite from heterosexist sanctions against their relationships, there was no similar movement for black gay and bisexual men. They were (and are) still trapped in a social reality where they can neither find room to be gay in black America nor room to be black in gay America. As a result, many black men who might otherwise live their lives as uncloseted gay or bisexual men are forced to straddle sexual boundary lines, yielding to cultural expectations *for* men while secretly submitting to their personal attractions *to* men.

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