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A Family of One's Own: Reconstructing Queer Families of Color in Film

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A Family of One's Own: Reconstructing Queer Families of Color in Film

A Thesis

Submitted to the graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English
American Literature

by

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Abstract

I will focus on the resistance to white heteronormative depictions of the American family occurring within two contemporary films directed by gay black men—*The Skinny*, directed by Patrik-Ian Polk, and *The Happy Sad*, directed by Rodney Evans. These movies complicate understandings of black gay male relationships by humanizing the characters and providing clarity about the motivations behind the decisions these characters make. As opposed to simply associating their queerness and immorality, the directors of these films explore what brings people to the various social positions they occupy. In this way, these directors resist the tendency to pathologize either blackness or queerness (and blackness/queerness at the expense of one another). The films I use do not structure family through the heteronormative model of relationships. Of there is no sight or mention of actual biological family members. Despite these factors, the groups of people presented in these films display their love and affection for each other in ways that resist monolithic narratives about queer kinship. Additionally, I will argue that these narratives regarding black homosexuality are not attempting to fit inside the mold of the racialized patriarchal determinants of the family.

Keywords: gay black, queer black, queer black studies, queer families of color, queer communities, queer kinship, gay black film, queer cinema,



Introduction

Though the Supreme Court's striking down of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 2015 has opened the door for millions of same-sex couples to get married, this law represents only the semblance of equality. For gay people of color, the legislation of gay marriage has done little to improve how they are perceived socially. *Against Equality*, edited by Ryan Conrad, offers a critique of the ways that marriage equality has been a movement that has centered upon white homosexuals. The face of marriage equality has been whitewashed, even though people of color occupy a significant percentage of those who would potentially stand to gain from the passing of gay marriage. Meanwhile, people of color as a whole have been positioned as being opposed to gay marriage. UC Berkeley law professor Russel Robinson tells the story of

how he invited a colleague, who is black, to join a panel that was to discuss conflict with black and gay communities. While in the airport, the colleague asked a gay white man to move his luggage off a seat so she could sit down. Out of nowhere, the man responded that she and “her people” were the reason that they (presumably, white gay people) lost Prop 8. The author writes:

The man thought that the professor’s skin color was enough to mark her as an enemy of gay rights. He needed to know nothing more than that she was a black woman. As it turns out, she is a strong supporter of gay rights. She voted against Prop. 8, and even provided advice to pro-same-sex marriage groups. Also surprising is that it never seemed to occur to the man that the professor might be queer. (Robinson 1020)

What this incident highlights is a white perception of the supposed hyper-homophobia within the black community. Such a myth seeks to attribute the exclusion of LGBT communities to black people. Homophobia in black cultural spaces does have specific origins. However, those origins only point to the dominance of the white heteropatriarchy. Roderick Ferguson writes,

Liberal ideology has typically understood the family as that institution that provides stability and civility against the instability and ruthlessness of civil society. That ideology has historically constructed the African American family as an insufficient tether against the chaos of civil society. Liberal ideology has recommended conforming to the heterosexual nuclear family model as the appropriate way to bear such burdens. (20)

In order for black communities to survive, they were encouraged to adopt the heteronormative ideology that constructed the concept of the American family. The adoption of this structure led to material benefits, while non-conformity came with penalties. This pressure can be traced back to the Reconstruction Era (and even earlier). Speaking of the American Freedman's Inquiry Commission and the Freedman's Bureau, Ferguson explains, "...the bureaus attempted to rationalize African American sexuality by imposing heterosexual marriage upon the freedman through the rule of law as a condition for citizenship" (86). By positioning homosexuality (and other nonheteronormative sexual identities) as a threat to the survivorship of black communities, the heteropatriarchy has created a power structure that relies on the perpetual separation of "queer people" and "African Americans." Cinematic portrayals of gay black men reiterate the supposed homosexual threat to black communities.

The opposition to homosexuality in some black cultural spaces has produced the so-called "downlow" or "DL" phenomenon. Downlow refers to (black) men who are not openly gay or queer. The term also refers to men who have sex with women without revealing their same-sex interactions with their partners. Tyler Perry's *For Colored Girls* (2010) and Bill Duke's *Cover* (2007)--both directed by heterosexual black men--portray the consequences of this DL behavior in their movies: black DL men are outcast from the family, experience physical violence, and spread disease. In *Cover*, the protagonist's husband cheats on her with another man, contracts HIV, and is held responsible for the symbolic destruction of the black family. *For Colored Girls* features a CEO (played by Janet Jackson) who also discovers that her husband is cheating on her and contracts HIV from homosexual sex. Here, the black man is framed as the reason why black women

cannot be successful and “have it all.” This sort of trite representation has demonized black men and puts them in the position of a scapegoat—a segment of the black community upon which it can cast its communal aspersions. What these films fail to do is place the DL phenomena within the context of the more oppressive structure of white supremacy. These films end up dehumanizing the characters by reducing their actions to moral turpitude, as opposed to exploring the conditions that might have led to gay black men to feel that their race and masculinity are at odds with their sexuality. And while that logic is easy to fall into (i.e. the personal responsibility narrative that pervades conservative thought), it supports the white supremacist ideology by excluding the very real effects of the exclusion of queer black people from the legal, political and social realms.

Historically, black gay men have not been in control of narrating their lives within larger cultural conversations. But within the last decade or so, gay black men have utilized a number of spaces including film and social media as a way to have more authority over depicting their experiences. Many of these narratives deal with gay black men and their relationship to traditional family structure. These images feature a radical reconstruction of gay black men and their rights to occupy or recreate a familial space. Representations of queer black men in spaces like social media and film offer more diverse portraits of queers of color, while rejecting the idea that black men are necessarily ashamed of their sexuality. While that is an important aspect to explore (because it offers us the opportunity to criticize power structures), mainstream ideology has tended to highlight the DL gay black man as the poster-child of the pathological when discussing queer black sexuality.

The photo above represents an example of such interventions via social media, as it contrasts the image of the DL black man and expands the spaces that black gay men can inhabit. The Instagram photo is of Kaleb Anthony and Kordell Lewis, two gay black men, who sparked a national conversation when they took a photo with their two children while combing their children's hair. The post received over 52,000 likes and a number of reposts on other sites. Though some reacted negatively to the image, the photo was one that pleased many gay black men (and their allies) who had never seen an image like this before in such a public arena. Their use of Instagram represents the intersection of the queer and the mainstream—an audacity present oneself differently from the dominant ideology's depiction of your social position. The two men, who are classically attractive, and have athletic physical builds--traits normally associated with masculinity--are performing a traditionally feminine act (combing hair); therefore this photo can be said to deconstruct ideas behind race, masculinity and sexuality. After the photo went viral, the camera company Nikon created a commercial featuring the two fathers and their backstory to this picture. In the video Kordale says, "We get up at 5:30 and we eat breakfast, then we do our daughters' hair. Parents that can get up at 5:30 and do their daughters' hair, no matter who they are, that's a family" (Kordale). The fact that Nokia used Kordale and Kaleb in their ad represents the normalization of their family structure. It also symbolizes the sort of inevitability of the changing face of families. Families like Kordale and Kaleb illustrate a broader view of the way that queer black sexuality looks. As opposed to the stereotypical images of black men being in sketchy situations, ashamed of their sexuality, Kordale and Kaleb represent a queered model of familial construction.

The reason the photo became a topic for conversation (both positive and negative) is because they put forth an image of black queerness that is not usually depicted.

While I believe that images such as the viral Instagram photo of Anthony and Lewis indicate a shift in the conversation concerning black sexuality and kinship, for my thesis project, I will focus on the push back against white supremacist depictions of the American family occurring within two contemporary films directed by gay black men—*The Skinny*, directed by Patrik-Ian Polk, and *The Happy Sad*, directed by Rodney Evans. These movies complicate understandings of black gay male relationships by humanizing the characters and providing clarity about the motivations behind the decisions they make. In this way, these directors resist the tendency to pathologize either blackness or queerness (and blackness/queerness at the expense of one another). The films I plan to use leave out the traditional “nuclear” family, and opt for a group of friends who serve as familial connections. Additionally, I will argue that these narratives regarding black homosexuality are not attempting to fit inside the mold of the racialized patriarchal determinants of the family. Characters in *The Happy Sad*, for instance, react to the tension posed by the pressure to conduct their family-building in a particular manner, thereby contesting the power of white supremacist normativity. Like Kordell and Kaleb, the respective couples in this film reject the restrictions placed on their socially defined categories. In other words, they begin to carry out or perform their kinship in ways that disempower racialized heteropatriarchal constructs of the family.

Theory and Framework

My theoretical base will be queer of color critique, utilizing works such as Roderick Ferguson's *Aberrations in Black*, Jose Munoz's *Disidentification: Queers of Color and the Performances of Politics*, and Rosemary Hennessy's *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, as well as others. These theories have the potential to shed light on the work that these films do as texts that "disidentify" with mainstream political thought. Ferguson comments on the way that idealized notions of family constructions were both racialized and sexualized: "...between 1880 and 1925 white labor, using the rhetoric of the 'American Standard of Living' demanded the protections of state and capital for the explicit purposes of perfecting and representing the heteropatriarchal family...In this context, African American familial forms and gender relations were regarded as perversions of the American family ideal" (86). We see the legacy of these earlier "American standards" today. The films I will analyze disidentify with traditional notions of family structures by expanding the ways that queer people can perform kinship. Instead of limiting them to the oppressive structure of the nuclear family, these films expand the familial spaces that queer people can occupy. Hennessy argues that the standard American family is one institution (out of many) that creates dead identities, which "accept that limiting the range of human potential into categories of identity is natural or pragmatic" (218). These cinematic texts disassociate from the language of restriction and work to broaden the potential of queer relations.

The first film I will analyze is Patrik-Ian Polk's *The Skinny*. Polk is probably one of the most prolific contemporary gay black directors. Polk has directed numerous movies centered on the gay black male experience including *Noah's Arc: Jumping the*

Broom (which was also a series on LOGO) and *Blackbird*. These movies speak to the power of marginalized communities taking ownership of their narrative and *The Skinny* is no different in that respect. The movie, set in New York during gay pride weekend, follows the events of a group of friends who meet up with the protagonist, Magnus, who is a medical student. Though not biologically related, the four men and one woman (all black and queer identifying), represent a cohesive family unit, and this cohesiveness is emphasized throughout the movie. At one point, the viewer learns that Magnus and his friends met while attending Brown University. While we do not get much more information than that, it is safe to assume that Brown, which is one of the more liberal of the Ivy Leagues, still might not have been the familiar territory for gay people of color. Thus, it is possible that they formed a kinship group based on similar social identities.

The second film I will consider is *The Happy Sad*, a 2013 film directed by Rodney Evans, which features a gay black couple (Aaron and Marcus) who have been together for 6 years. The conflict develops when, after they decide to have an open relationship, one of the partners begins to fall in love with Stan, a guy he meets online. The movie represents the complexities of how gay black men relate to one another, exploring topics such as monogamy, cheating and forgiveness. Rodney Evans' casting choices concerning *The Happy Sad* are an important comment on the necessity for diverse characters in films. In the play upon which the movie is based, Marcus and Aaron are not black. But in a 2013 interview, Evans reveals he decided to make the couple black because of actors he wanted to work with (Reelblack). By incorporating a queer black couple, the film is able to function as commentary on the portrayals of gay black men in a larger conversation concerning diversity in movies and their ability to reconstruct the

aesthetic of gay black kinship. The film also weaves together (and in many ways, parallels) the struggles of Annie and Stan, an assumed heterosexual couple, who both begin to discover their same-sex attractions. For Annie especially, the pursuit of a nuclear family causes the anxiety she feels throughout the movie. When Annie breaks up with Stan, he becomes involved with Marcus (after meeting him on a gay chat site), which presents threats of its own. The merging of these two couples provides commentary on the unstable nature of the conventional family.

In *Families We Choose*, Kath Weston writes on the differences between biological and chosen families: “Gay or chosen families might incorporate friends, lovers, or children, in any combination. Organized through ideologies of love, choice and creation” (27). Weston’s assertion comes from people’s refusal to place limitations on those who fulfill specific roles in their life, just because those functions are not based in biology. These chosen families work as the nucleus, a relational center, to which queer people can return. In the tradition of films such as Jennie Livingston’s seminal documentary *Paris is Burning*, in *The Happy Sad* and *The Skinny*, familial connections between people are not limited to those who are biologically related or to those who become family through state-sanctioned marriage.¹ In fact, these films implicitly argue against uncritically valuing heteronormative kinship forms over others. They imply that perhaps families created from experiences of oppression, such as the queer family in *The*

¹ Livingston explores the ball culture that provided a safe haven for many drag queens and other queer identifying people during the 1980s. The competing factions were grouped together in “houses” with a “mother”—the head of the household, who serves as the overseer of her “children.” Many of the younger participants interviewed stated that they found themselves within this group due to their biological family ostracizing them. The use of biological terms even in spaces where those terms do not conventionally apply signals the failure of traditional family units to deal with queer men and women.

Skinny, serve more value than those to whom one is born. These forms complicate the “look” of a family and those representations both reflect and shape the material, lived experiences of queer black men.

As such, this thesis project contributes to the diversification of discourse regarding family, race and sexuality. In particular, I will consider how *The Happy Sad* and *The Skinny* reject the negative stereotypes regarding gay black men--representations that have very material consequences. Sean Cahill reminds us that “Antigay marriage amendments to state constitutions disproportionately harm Black same-sex couples and their families because they are already economically disadvantaged compared to Black married opposite-sex couples, as well as compared to White same-sex couples” (238). Furthermore:

because Black and Latino same-sex couples are twice as likely as White same-sex couples to be raising children (particularly Black and Latino lesbian couples), and because they earn less and are less likely to own the home they live in, policies restricting family recognition, whether of partner relationships or parent–child relationships, disproportionately harm Black and Latino same-sex couple families. (Cahill 220)

Socially, attitudes towards black homosexuality contrast greatly with those regarding white homosexuality, and this is reflected in responses to cinematic depictions of gay life. For instance, *Brokeback Mountain*, a movie about two white gay cowboys, was met with extremely positive reviews and won multiple Academy Awards, despite the evidently contrary relationship between homosexuality and the masculine culture of cowboys. The high production value of the film represents a desire for mainstream

America to invest in the narratives about gay white men, while gay black men's experience is constantly excluded from mainstream discourse and major Hollywood productions and distribution. The films analyzed in this paper will show that independent film has provided opportunities for gay black men to resist the stereotypes in films like *Cover* and *For Colored Girls*, which have plagued and pathologized them.

The Skinny

In *The Skinny* and *The Happy Sad* heterosexual people are noticeably (or perhaps not noticeably) absent. It might strike some viewers as odd, or rather unlikely, to have an entire cast of characters who are queer identified. (Polk's other movies feature the same dynamic. Very often, heterosexual people are not even brought up.) The idea of an all-queer cast is possibly meant to expose our assumptions about the ways people relate to one another. In that moment, the audience has to set aside what they believe this group should look like (more diverse sexually/racially). This moment would perhaps entail an experience similar to Munoz's disidentification—a moment in which viewers realize the dominant ideology undergirding their beliefs. The audience must view life from the perspective of a minority, in this case, queer black men. The lack of queer people throughout cinematic history was and is a purposeful erasure of non-heteronormative identities. Therefore, the formation of Magnus's all black, all queer, "crew," as they call it, illustrates the results of cultural and societal oppression that forces marginalized people to unite with one another through the mutual experience of oppression. The lack of queer people in heterosexual spaces, such as the cinema, stems from a history of exclusion, while the absence of heterosexual people in queer spaces is rooted in survival

and kinship. Additionally, in order to avoid being associated with homosexuality, heterosexual characters have not often been depicted in queer spaces. Polk is speaking to the way in which oppression and exclusion from mainstream society have brought LGBT communities, and especially LGBT people of color, together.

From the beginning of the film, viewers see just how close-knit this group of people is. Magnus's boyfriend accompanies him as he waits for his friends. Upon arrival, Joey, one of Magnus's friends, kisses him on the cheek and calls him "baby." Even though Magnus's boyfriend is clearly inches away, Joey is comfortable expressing that level of intimacy with his friend. These sorts of physical confirmations of their friendship are shown multiple times through the film.

Two other central characters in the film are Kyle and Sebastian. Sebastian is the youngest and most sexually inexperienced out of the group, while Kyle is the uber masculine "trust fund baby." Sebastian is more effeminate than Kyle, which traditionally serves as a signal that they might not get along. The tragic effeminate gay man has been an archetype in LGBT films (directed by both heterosexual and homosexual directors). This character/trope is often seen as the point of conflict for movies and television shows because it confirms the power dynamic and ideology shared by those who indulge in heteronormative gender and sexual stereotyping. Yet, numerous times Kyle is seen grabbing or caressing Sebastian, even going so far as to lay Sebastian on his chest as they take a nap.

Langston is a queer black woman who became friends with Kyle after they realized, upon trying to have sex, that they were both gay. Through this supposedly failed sexual experimentation, Langston is initiated into Magnus's group of queer black people

suggesting that sex has value even when sexual identities of the people involved do not correlate.

Polk is creating a space where the differences in the performance of gender are celebrated as diversity within a group, thus reimagining the relationship that queer people of color can have with each other. Additionally, the body becomes more than a sexual object, an idea which counters the depictions of the overly-sexualized gay black male body in other films like Bill Duke's *Cover*. This suggests a communal access to the body that symbolizes the closeness of this group. Though they are not physically related, they are able to express the same level of familial connection through their physical interactions. Because the body is viewed in more than sexual terms, Magnus's group is queering the way that friendship is carried out. In *Cover* the antagonist forms a group with other men whose sole purpose is to have sex, and while I don't think Polk is moralizing, he is offering up a way that queer black physical interaction can be rooted in something other than sexuality.

Rules, as a kind of social contract among friends, play a significant part of this film and they legitimize the bond of these five friends. This theme appears as innocently as everyone expecting Kyle to remove Joey's ex-boyfriend from his friend circle on Facebook. When Kyle asks why, they collectively respond "Because we all did." Even though Joey and his ex have been broken up for years, the group maintains a tight reign on their collective behavior. The major tensions in *The Skinny* all revolve around the threat of this structure being undermined. The first "invader" is Magnus's boyfriend, Ryan. Naturally, anyone attempting to enter any close-knit circle would have to be vetted. Initially, Magnus's friends express suspicion about Ryan amongst themselves, especially

after Joey overhears Ryan asking Magnus for money. This mistrust is further exacerbated when they find out that Magnus and Ryan met on a hookup site, leading them to ask if Magnus knows him as well as he thinks (I will address the problems with this assumption later). Magnus quickly defends Ryan and tells them that they both deleted their profiles when they got into a relationship. However, shortly thereafter, while cruising online, they finds Ryan's account on a hookup site. Their suspicions confirmed, the group tells Magnus, who then decides, in order to catch his boyfriend in the act of cheating, to follow Ryan into the sex party being advertised on his page. Magnus quickly breaks up with Ryan, only to find out that, along with cheating on him, Ryan has shot porn in his apartment while Magnus was away. Clearly, Ryan represents a danger to the stability of the crew, not only because of the emotional damage he has caused Magnus, but because those repercussions extend to the rest of the group.

The anxiety that results from Magnus's relationship troubles affects the trajectory of the entire weekend. As a result of the break up, the rest of the group must rally together to support Magnus during a time that was supposed to be fun and exciting for them. The feeling of responsibility and protectiveness towards one another is also seen when Langston is talking to Joey about his difficulty in finding a job (he jokes, "Who knew an Ivy League degree in semiotics would be so valuable?"). When he refuses to talk about it, Langston responds, "That's fine, but we're going to have to talk about it soon. We're your friends, you know. We're not going to let you sulk down there in Atlanta without a fight." The trust and dependency they have in each other form the foundation of their relationship. Though they are scattered across the country, with different financial, academic and career statuses, they express a deep commitment to one another. This

commitment, born in part out of society's exclusion of queer people, is what maintains the bonds between them. So when the group suspects that Ryan could potentially disrupt the balance of their group, they take it upon themselves to find out for sure.

Race, Class and the Politics of Respectability

The film humanizes all the central characters in the film by not limiting the motivations of their actions to a simplistic moral righteousness or moral depravity. By exploring the oppression that individuals experience, this film advocates for a more complex understanding of queer black sexuality through characters like Ryan. Though what Ryan has done seems detestable, Polk does not demonize him in the same way that other gay black males have been in other films. In *Cover* (Bill Duke) and *For Colored Girls* (Tyler Perry), gay black men exist only to bring downfall to black women. (In both of those films the men cheat on their spouses with other men, contract HIV and give it to their partners.) After their break up, Ryan pleads with Magnus to speak with him when they run into each other at a gay club, and he explains his behavior: "Crack addicted-mother, in and out of foster homes and group homes since I was 3-years old. I been on my own since I was 15. So yeah, I've done some things to survive. But hey, it is what it is." What is really interesting about what Ryan says is the ambiguity of the "things he has done to survive." We do not necessarily know what those things are, or how they helped him survive, but here is a place where queer of color critique can be useful in exploring the causes and results of social oppression.

Both Magnus and Ryan experience the oppression of being both black and gay; however, there is a stark and important difference between them: Ryan grew up poor,

while Magnus was very well off. Queer of color critique posits that analysis of oppressive forces in society are best explained from the point of view of those at the bottom and/or those most marginalized. Munoz's concept of disidentification becomes a very useful tool of analysis here. He says, "Disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (25). What disidentification requires is a consideration of how intersections of social identities (race, gender, sexuality) contribute to oppression. Ryan who is poor, black, and gay navigates life through whatever restrictions bind his identities. Though he is gay and black, Magnus has class privilege that prevents him from experiencing some of the hardships Ryan does. Magnus says, "Spare me the woe is me sob story," and Ryan quickly retorts, "Oh, it's not a sob story, this is my reality." Here, class is the defining difference between Ryan and Magnus. Polk does not exactly excuse Ryan's betrayal, but he offers a more sympathetic view than we have seen of gay black men in the past. Polk is arguably practicing disidentification by even giving voice to the motivations behind Ryan's actions as opposed to completely characterizing him in black and white terms. In this case, Ryan experiences the power differentials of race, class and sexuality that are exacerbated by modern capitalism. Allowing Ryan (and the people he symbolizes) to be heard offers the audience a perspective generally not seen in other films featuring gay black men.

We also get a glimpse of the damage that having limited forms of kinship causes. The nuclear family is a privileged category in American society. Magnus benefits from this not only socially but economically as well. Magnus implies that his parents are still together, and that they make money through real-estate investments. The ability to amass

wealth is one of the advantages of a stable home. But Ryan, who has been in and out of homes without any consistent support network, does not have the privileges that come with heteronormativity. Furthermore, when Magnus goes off to an Ivy League university (an option offered to him through his class privilege), he quickly finds another support system through Kyle, Sebastian, Langston and Joey. After they say their last goodbyes outside of the club, the camera pans to Magnus's friends who are patiently waiting to embrace him. Then the camera refocuses on Ryan who is in the center of the screen. This position emphasizes the negative space on both sides of him, representing the isolation that he has felt his entire life. He is looking into the distance and shaking his head, presumably at the knowledge that his place in life is not entirely of his own doing. Regardless of Magnus's decision to end their relationship, he does seem to have forgiven Ryan, while also gaining some awareness about his own use of respectability politics to condemn Ryan. His initial refusal to talk to Ryan, followed by his more sympathetic treatment of Ryan, positions Magnus as a model for realigning our thinking regarding Ryan's social position. He plays this role earlier in the movie when he discusses how he met Ryan.

Polk interrogates the preconceived (and arguably stereotypical) assumptions that the group has about other gay black men. When Magnus originally tells the group where he and Ryan met, they express further suspicion. For one, they comment on the irony of someone as conservative as Magnus meeting his boyfriend on a hookup site. Langston says, "You make no secret of your uber-traditional plans to find the perfect husband, get the perfect career, the 2.5 kids. . .this just doesn't seem like the place for that." Langston is surprised that Magnus, who touts traditional pathways to marriage, would do so

through such an unusual, or queer, way. Heteronormative ideology has carved out very specific ways of finding relationships, while portraying other methods as deviant.

Generally, queer people have not had access to the spaces/institutions that allow for the development of long term/ monogamous social and amorous relationships. As a result, LGBT people have had to create their own spaces. These spaces, however, have not always looked “respectable” (which is what Langston is actually calling into question, the respectability of the people who cruise these sites). This bourgeois sensibility is exactly what scholars like Roderick Ferguson are attempting to deconstruct. Magnus responds to Langston by saying,

“Yeah, but if I’m on there, why can’t there be other guys on there like me...The same guys online are the same guys we see in the club...at Pride. How do you know you can trust anybody you meet whether you meet online, the club, the gym...church?”

What Magnus is rejecting is the assumption that black male sexuality carries an inherently heightened level of danger and that the means by which queer black men come to make connections is riskier. The association with the dark, anonymous shadowy figure has haunted queer men of color for decades (and is part of the long legacy of slavery). This recurring depiction is due in part to how black queer men (and queer people in general) have been ostracized from mainstream American and some African American communities. In his “No Body There: Notes on the Queer Migration to Cyberspace,” Douglas Harrison offers an explanation for the association of oversexualization and queer communities and the role of online dating/cruising sites:

The Internet makes it safe to do or simulate online what so many people who are gay or questioning their sexuality are too afraid to do in the “real” world. This helps explain why gay chat rooms are so crowded with sexual explorers. In effect, virtuality promises many of the benefits of socially integrated living... (288).

Harrison is pointing out what may be the genesis of the stereotypes regarding queer people in online spaces. The traditional path to forming relationships has been privileged for heterosexual couples simply because their sexuality has been viewed as normal. However, because queerness has been characterized as deviant, these communities have been pushed underground, thus limiting the spaces and opportunities where participants can interact. By associating black queerness with danger or a threat, and by denying the routes to traditional relationship formation, predominantly queer spaces have been portrayed as the antithesis to American family values. Essentially, the crew believes that the site that Magnus and Ryan met on is not a place for legitimate formations of relationships. Polk’s awareness of the sexual and racial stereotypes about queer men of color allows him to address them in a way that humanizes everybody involved. While Magnus’s class status may allow him to meet people outside of these online spaces, it is precisely Magnus’s social position that makes his acceptance of these hookup sites so powerful. By aligning these online spaces with church, grocery stores and the club, he is normalizing the use and necessity of these sites and claiming that all three have the capacity to nurture connections among queer people. Even Magnus, who wants a relationship that arguably conforms to white supremacist notions of kinship formations, is not “above” using a hookup site to find a serious relationship. Polk may be speaking to

queer people of color who have conflicted feelings about the legitimacy of mediated sex or dating through online formats.

Against a Bourgeois Model of Sexuality

Though Ryan's cheating is a major plot device, he is not the only character who threatens to undermine the structure of the crew. Kyle's failure to protect Sebastian almost causes the crew to fall apart. Sebastian tells everyone that during Pride weekend he wants to have sex for the first time, and he wants it to be with Kyle (it's unclear however whether or not Kyle knows about this). But he is uneducated about anal sex. He pleads with Langston and Joey to teach him. The way in which they educate him speaks to the closeness of their relationships and resists bourgeois sensibilities regarding sex. Magnus, Langston, and Joey each have assigned teaching duties. Magnus, who is a med student, and is initially resistant to the idea of Kyle and Sebastian having sex, shows Sebastian the consequences of having unprotected sex. Showing him pictures of various sexually transmitted diseases, he frankly warns Sebastian, "This is what can happen if you let a bunch of dudes nut in you." Magnus's concern does not come simply from being a doctor, but from a place of personal experience. The importance of safety and protection are constantly reinforced in the movie, and Magnus wants to pass that knowledge on to Kyle. In many ways, Magnus is the protector of his group of friends. His role as a med student bolsters his responsibility for the health and safety of his community of friends. If this friend group is a microcosm for larger LGBT group dynamics, then HIV would surely be the major threat. For this reason, Magnus is careful to talk realistically about the dangers of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. His

attempts to protect Sebastian represent yet another instance in which, as we will see later on, interactions between individuals within the group affect group dynamics. Sebastian's relationship with Magnus and the rest of the group (especially the guys) is like that of a little brother. He's innocent, inexperienced and idealistic. His friends try to root Sebastian's ideas about his relationship with Kyle in reality, because it is unclear whether or not Sebastian and Kyle have the same goals for the progress of their relationship. But when/if it does not work out, they at least want to equip him with the knowledge to protect himself. Langston, lovingly called a gay porn "aficionado," is to show Sebastian how to perform as a "bottom." She shows him a couple of pornographic videos and directs him to how the performer arches his back and other techniques to make anal sex easier. This approach to Sebastian's education could be seen as crude and a violation of decency, but, according to his more experienced friends, it is necessary if Sebastian is to be as knowledgeable as possible about what he is getting into. The frankness with which they speak about sexual acts is in part due to the lack of sexual education received by non-heterosexual people and also speaks to the sex positive aspects of queer culture. This network is important because other outlets for educating themselves may not be as readily available. Joey highlights the importance of community when he tells Sebastian, "I only wish I had another gay to teach me these things while I was growing up."

Perhaps the most direct and honest scenes in the film, Joey vacillates from academic descriptions of various anatomical parts to candid instructions on how to rid the body of waste, using words like "poop shoot" and "getting your hole royally plunged." He also shows Sebastian a variety of ways to clean oneself before sex. At one point, Kyle says, "I'm not sure I can figure this all out," to which Joey responds "Don't worry, baby,

I'm here to coach you through it. . . I only wish I had a more experienced gay to help show me the douching ropes.” He then proceeds to stay in the bathroom as Sebastian tries to clean himself. This scene is of particular importance because it shows how LGBT people have often had to rely on one another for information that is not as accessible through mainstream avenues. This information strengthens the relationship between Sebastian and his friends because not only can they connect through mutual oppression/heteronormative marginalization, but Sebastian also gets the benefit of the knowledge that his friends have gained.

What Langston, Magnus and Joey have done is akin to the traditional “birds and bees” talk that parents have with their children. The difference is Sebastian’s friends do not mince words or use metaphors and this difference is important. LGBT communities have been stigmatized as having extraordinarily higher rates of STI’s and HIV. One article states,

The burden of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is high among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (MSM) (1). High HIV prevalence, lack of awareness of HIV-positive status, unprotected anal sex, and increased viral load among HIV-positive MSM not on antiretroviral treatment contribute substantially to new infections among this population (Paz-Bailey, 960).

While healthy sex practices and effective treatments have been a lynchpin in the movement for queer equality, pathologizing stereotypes that question the viability of queer people (and thus, queer relationships) work in the service of maintaining heteronormativity. Part of why this belief has persisted is based in a reality of the lack of

resources that go towards educating queer people on safe sex and the lack of frank, sex positive discussion of all forms of sexuality in our culture as a whole. In “Because She Was My First Girlfriend, I Didn’t Know Any Different: Making The Case For Mainstreaming Same-Sex Sex/Relationship Education,” Catherine Donovan and Marriane Hester argue,

Sex education is largely shaped by Government targets to reduce unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases in school-aged children and teenagers. Alongside these concerns has been the increasing desire to promote family life and positive parenting in attempts to tackle social exclusion, the causes of which are largely believed to lie in the breakdown of traditional family life.

According to Donovan and Hester, sex education has serviced capitalism by reducing the amount of money spent on families or bodies that do not fit into the nuclear family (unwed parents, single parents, poor etc). All of these efforts are hetero-centric, which shows that, historically, there has been no place for queer people within the American nuclear family.

School is one of the places where we learn about socially accepted behavior and form kinships such as friendship, classmates, teammates and even romantic/sexual relationships. But if the very place in which we are introduced to these connections, fails to teach its LGBT students how to interact with each other sexually, then in essence, it has denigrated the value of queer social relations and rendered queer people vulnerable to sexual health issues. As a result, many LGBT people have had to navigate their sexuality on their own. Part of queer people’s education may be the use of these sites as a place for

forming gay social networks addressed earlier. All of these factors amount to a sort of outlaw culture regarding the current state of same-sex/LBGTQI sex education. The state apparatus has not included LBGTQI-related education because homophobia encourages the erasure of queer sexuality. In actuality, ignoring homosexuality and not addressing important questions, the state has created a disenfranchised and physically vulnerable group of people. The lack of concern regarding same-sex/LBGTQI education has manifested in poor medical knowledge about the needs of queer people, higher rates of STDs and other negative consequences. Sebastian's friends are direct with him so that he can avoid those negative consequences, because they simply can't afford to skirt around certain issues. Polk is obviously cognizant of sexual discrimination; so Sebastian, innocent as he is, must be broken into the harsh reality of that history of bias against queer people and how that bias can be detrimental to the health of queer people of color. Despite their efforts, the group cannot totally protect Sebastian from the threats that surround him.

On the night that Sebastian plans on having sex with Kyle they go to a club. Magnus tells Kyle to take care of Sebastian. Kyle attempts to look after his friend, even as Sebastian begs him for some ecstasy pills. Kyle denies him a couple of times, trying to preserve Sebastian's innocence, but eventually gives in and lets him try it. They immediately go dancing and the camera swirls around the room as they dance to the pulsating electronic music. The next scene shows Kyle, groggy and nearly incoherent, sitting at the bar waiting for Kyle, unaware that he has left. Two men approach Sebastian, saying that they know where Kyle is. They slip something in his drink and pretend to take a very inebriated Sebastian to his friend. The next morning, Sebastian wakes up in bed

with the men and slowly comes to realize what has happened. He reaches underneath him only to reveal the blood that is a result of his being raped. He quickly calls Magnus who rushes to pick him up. Because acts of rape and sexual misconduct have constituted a significant amount of queer black images, Polk navigates this scene carefully. Polk positions the two rapists as threats to not only Sebastian, but his friend group, as well as the LGBT community as a whole. Pride Weekend is supposed to be a time where queer people come together for solidarity, instead the two men take advantage of Sebastian. Polk clearly and emphatically disapproves of their actions, as we will see later on. However, he does not cast that as the fault of the entire LGBT community.

The anger that the group feels towards Kyle stems from feeling like he has not held up his position within the group. They use words like “irresponsible” to describe Kyle, because they understand that he has violated the relationship dynamic of the group. From the beginning of the film, Kyle seems comfortable leaving the safe space of the crew. (Earlier I alluded to his still being friends with Joey’s ex on Facebook, even though clearly his friends saw this as a betrayal.) He has a habit of doing things his own way. He cruises with men he has just met, and he goes to the gym while the rest of the group goes out to eat. Perhaps he does not feel as beholden to the group as the rest of them do. But that makes what happens to Sebastian even worse: much like any family unit, the actions of one person reverberate throughout the group. Kyle’s frivolous attitude endangered his friend. Magnus and his friends are aware of Kyle’s flaws, like his vanity and selfishness, yet they accept him for who he is. They become frustrated with him only when his behavior negatively affects someone else in the group.

Magnus takes Sebastian to the hospital where he gets tested for HIV. When the doctor returns with the results, he asks Sebastian if he wants Magnus to leave. Sebastian replies, “No, I want him to stay.” If we place this scene in the context of the way that partners of LGBT patients have been treated, it is an important move for Sebastian to allow Magnus to sit in on the doctor’s confidential conversation. Until the passage of DOMA, most LGBT partners have had very little rights, if any, regarding their partner’s well-being. Those rights are usually conferred only to biological family members or legal (heterosexual) spouses. This is just another way that society has privileged reproductive bodies and relationships over non-reproductive relationships. Part of why partners of LGBT patients (before DOMA passed) were not given rights may have to do with society’s homophobic views. As opposed to familial bonds that are believed to be forged in loving homes, homosexuality has been associated with deviant sex, not love. Our society demonizes overtly sexual behavior, and because homosexual couples have not had the legal right to get married, they have not been able to openly define their relationship in ways that defy this stereotype. Additionally, marriage was seen as a legitimizing relationship, so “partners” were not recognized as essential family members. So this is another example of how attitudes towards LGBT people have influenced laws that affect their relationships. People can’t have a say in the medical care of their partners because they aren’t married, yet the option to marry has not even been available to them. Though marriage equality was a step forward for equality for LGBT people, the legal and social benefits that accompanied the law have had the most impact. Healthcare is a major part of the potential benefits that legal married unions might offer LGBT partners. But even so, in the future, we may have to face the fact that our notions of family structure

may not look as neat as the idealized and mythologized husband, wife and 2.5 kids. This film advocates for a more expansive understanding of family by positioning Magnus and Sebastian within the context of one of the most important areas of one's personal life: his health. He clearly feels more comfortable with Magnus in the room, and with Magnus's insistence, decides to take PREP² in order to prevent the possible infection of HIV. The scene that follows shows how the lack of familial support can be linked to health issues within some queer of color communities.

Eventually, Kyle finds out what happened to Sebastian. The next night while at the club, he runs across the men who raped Sebastian and threatens to hurt them if they do not get tested for HIV in a nearby testing van. Kyle begins conversing with the doctor, whom he rightly assumes is not gay. When asked why he is in this line of work, the doctor responds,

My baby brother came out, when he was in high school...He couldn't talk to our parents about it, he couldn't talk to our teachers about it. So. . .when I started reading the statistics about black, gay men and HIV infection rates, I figured I had to do something...Doing this kind of work, makes me familiar with the lifestyle. Now [my brother] has someone to talk to.

The doctor's explanation is a crucial component to understanding the relationship between kinship, survival and resources. The doctor says that his brother was actually forced out of the closet when his mom confronted him about some weblink she found on his computer. The traditional family was a hostile space for his brother. He could neither

² Pre-exposure prophylaxis used to prevent the growth of the HIV virus once it has infected someone. Usually used within a few days of exposure to the HIV virus.

turn to his teachers nor other adults. Even though his brother had a biological family, he was essentially all alone because he struggled with an oppression that those around him did not understand. He also did not have access to resources to help him. That was the motivator for the doctor to enter into this field—so that his brother would have someone to talk to, not only to assuage any mental anxiety, but to address his physical health concerns. The doctor cites the HIV rate among black men and directly links it with the standard family being hostile and unequipped to take care of queer members. This is why self-made communities are integral to the survival of LGBT people. The type of mentorship that Sebastian receives is the result of these chosen communities. The doctor too represents an aspect of the process of deconstructing the strictly heteronormative family. He symbolizes the progress and inclusion that comes from accepting queer people into traditionally heteronormative spaces. The doctor also benefits from being in queer spaces because he gets a deeper understanding of LGBT communities, which allows him to empathize with the plight of queer communities. Polk is implying that heterosexual people and advocates can be a part of the reconstruction of family. In fact, Polk asserts that it is vitally important for heterosexual people to play a part in deconstructing traditional notions of family units.

Overall, community is a big theme in this film, and it bonds this group in a unique way. Gay Pride weekend is a macrocosm of the sort of community building represented by Magnus's friend group. Already we have seen the numerous ways in which queer people have had to create spaces of their own. Whether it be gay dating apps or having to talk to each other openly about gay sex, LGBT people progress and build community through these spaces. Gay Pride weekend provides the perfect backdrop for the events of

the film. The entire event is the culmination of LGBT people refusing to hide away. They can be out in public, and thus, connect with each other more openly. The mutual oppression they feel pushes these communities closer together. However, those relationships may not look the same as heterosexual relationships. When LGBT people have been denied access to mainstream routes of social connection, it is no surprise that kinship looks different than heterosexual relationships.

The Happy Sad

Rodney Evans's film 2013 *The Happy Sad* speaks to the way that kinship and relationships are constantly being redefined. He has directed other films that explore the lives of gay black men, such as *Brother to Brother*, which also speaks to the varied aesthetic and formation of black male relations. In *The Happy Sad*, Evans pushes the boundaries of traditional relationship structure by exploring two couple's attempts to participate in open relationships and sexual exploration. Aaron and Marcus are two gay black men who have been together for six years. Annie, a schoolteacher, and Stan, a musician, both white/ white passing and initially "straight" presenting, have been dating for six months and discover there is more to their sexuality than they have realized.

The beginning of the film opens with Stan practicing a solemn song with lyrics such as, "Darling, will you marry me, I'll love you till my dying day." The song, presumably about a heterosexual man asking his fiancé to marry him, foreshadows many conflicts to come, such as Stan's burgeoning bisexuality and the pressure that Annie feels to get married and have a family. Ironically, the film begins with Annie breaking up with Stan. Though she blames their breakup on Stan's suitability as a mate, we soon find out that is a lie. Unbeknownst to Mandy, Annie's female colleague and confidant, Annie lies

and tells Stan that she is breaking up with him because she is seeing Mandy. Annie's early interactions with her friend Mandy imply that she has some feelings towards her. Annie even asks if Mandy has ever watched lesbian porn. Mandy replies that she has, to which Annie says, "I feel like it changed something in my brain... like the chemicals made my brain different." Mandy admits to having had sex with other girls while she was at Vassar. Annie's probing is a sign that she is exploring her queer identity. Meanwhile, Stan is also discovering his interest in men. After the breakup, Stan signs up to a hookup site to meet other men, where he meets Marcus. Both Annie and Stan seem opportunistic in their turn towards same-sex intimacy. In other words, the quickness with which they begin to explore their same-sex attractions imply that those feelings have always been there. However, instead of allowing their feelings to determine their relationship dynamics, they have previously allowed socially constructed relationship forms (like the boyfriend/girlfriend dichotomy) to dictate how they express themselves sexually.

Rosemary Hennessy speaks to this phenomena in her work *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. She writes,

Reification is a process whereby the history of social relationships underlying identities becomes occluded or made invisible, and identities come to be seen as natural things in themselves. In the process of reifying consciousness into forms of identity, whole areas of human affective potential are effectively outlawed. (203)

Hennessy is pointing out the ways in which, in our attempt to define and categorize people, we end up restricting them. As soon as someone is defined as gay or lesbian, the entirety of their being, their sexuality, and their desires is assumed to be known. In this

way, the very process of sexual self-identification is carried out two-fold: The first is the claiming of who the “I” is. The second, and most ignored, is claiming who the “I” is not. According to Hennessy, by producing that dichotomy, society limits people’s potential to wholly fulfill their capacity for intimacy, sexual or otherwise. In order for them to escape the pressures of the heteropatriarchy, Annie and Stan must break up. That is why their separation at the beginning of the film is so important—it serves as a catalyst for their exploration, and latter acceptance of their queer sexuality.

Straight Anxieties/Queer Desires

The intersection of these couples reveals the anxieties questioning and queer identifying couples have towards heteronormative family structures. Marcus’s and Aaron’s relationship is of particular importance as they struggle to resist the staid pathologizing narrative of homosexual black men. One of the first times we see Marcus and Aaron together is while they are walking in the park. Though their voices can be heard making small talk, the movie shifts from a previous scene to a frame with a completely empty foreground and a blurred background. This technique might produce some productive discomfort for the viewer. I believe this decision was made for a number of reasons. For one this camera angle could represent the viewer’s uneasiness regarding the content of the film because the plot disrupts mainstream sensibilities. The portrayal of a gay black relationship is enough to throw some people off, but the idea of them being in an open relationship is certainly radical, as far as movie depictions go. Secondly, the empty space symbolizes the director’s attempt to remove any pre-conceived notions about Marcus and Aaron’s relationship that the viewer may have, creating a sort of *tabula rasa*. In this way, Evans is working against the stereotypical portrayals of gay black men.

Some may think that the open relationship that Marcus and Aaron are about to embark on fits within the narrative of oversexualized gay men. However, throughout the movie Evans is pushing back against the ideology that conflates an active pleasurable sex life with immorality.

The first step Marcus and Aaron take to ensure that their decision to pursue sexual relationships with other people does not interfere with their relationship is to implement rules. After suggesting a few, they settle on one comprehensive rule: “Don’t fall in love.” The act of coming up with rules is critical because it shows that relationships that appear aberrant from heteronormative ones can still have structure. This process also shows that love and sex are not mutually exclusive. Conversely, this arrangement shows that sex without love is ok too and that queer relationships need not adopt a standard of acceptability—homonormativity, if you will. Though they want to explore their sexual desires with other men, love is still at the center of their relationship. Furthermore, Evans is refuting the necessity for queer relationships to mimic heteronormative monogamous intimacy. In other words, even if Marcus and Aaron’s relationship seems messy and too liberal to mainstream audiences, that does not delegitimize their bond. He is essentially negating the heteronormative gaze by taking away its power to judge. The off-kilter camera angles work to accomplish this as well. By constantly keeping the viewers unsettled, Evans’ film encourages audiences to focus less on morality or sexual politics, but rather on accepting the story as it plays out. The movie in some ways fulfills the objectives of queer theory. According to Hennessy, “Queer theory and politics have been inspired by this effort in that ‘queer’ing sexual identity has meant refusing the presumed difference between hetero- and homo-sexuality as a place to begin” (212). By

disorienting viewers through various camera techniques, Evans is questioning our assumptions about these characters. He is not allowing viewers to root themselves in preconceived notions about sexual expression. But just as the audience struggles to abandon their prejudices, Stan and Annie experience trepidation regarding their new sexual awakening.

Both Stan and Annie are noticeably happier after engaging in their respective queer encounters. A song Stan was once struggling to write flourishes. Annie, too, is excited to have fulfilled her fantasy with Mandy. However, both of them are hesitant to fully embrace their queer identities because the shadow of heteronormativity and the pressures thereof still reside within them. The following day after they have sex Mandy and Annie go out to Manhattan. Mandy is more comfortable with public displays of affection like holding hands, but when she does so, Annie pulls back asking, “Are we...a thing? I thought we were just...” Stan, too, struggles with expanding his sexual identity. During his first encounter with Marcus, he makes it clear that he does not want to kiss, though he does ask Marcus to “hold him.” While Stan does express anxiety about being with another guy, the pressure seems to become exacerbated only when he and Annie get back together. While their hesitation is most likely rooted in the fear of going against traditional concepts of relationships, Evans is purposely showing how queerness is not defined by full engagement of all activities with the “opposite” sex.

Essentially, both Stan’s and Mandy’s fear of their queerness stems from the idea that because they enjoy homosexual sex, then they are now beholden to homosexual relationships. That is why Stan is so ashamed when he is with Annie—because he cannot reconcile being romantically attracted to Annie, but sexually attracted to Marcus and

other men, as if these feelings are mutually exclusive. At one point in the film, Marcus tells Stan that he loves him (Ultimately breaking the one rule the couple agreed upon). Stan does not reciprocate those feelings and when Marcus persists, Stan punches him in the face. This act is a denial of his same-sex desires, as well as a sign of his internalized homophobia. His actions are also the climax of the conflict between society's expectations from him (as a result of his queer identity) and his desires for how to perform his sexuality. His frustration derives from the monolithic way in which society has conflated homosexual acts and homosexuality. We see this later on when Stan adamantly denies being gay. Evans represents a possibility that sexual attraction to the same sex can simply be all about sex. You do not have to get married or enter into a romantic relationship with your lovers. Evans' depiction of queer kinship is that it is not monolithic; queerness is varied in the way that it is exercised, but all its forms are legitimate. Evans does, however, question the sustainability of the terms of conditions that Marcus and Aaron have agreed to.

Initially, Marcus does not tell Aaron that he has met Stan, or anybody else for that matter. It is only after he accidentally runs into them at his apartment that Aaron realizes Marcus has taken advantage of their "situation." At first Marcus does lie about being with Stan, even though Aaron was honest that he'd been with a couple of guys. At this point, we can see the development of what might be a conflict later on. As a result of the number of guys he has been with, Aaron begins to worry that he might have an STI or HIV. He gets Marcus to investigate his genitals for what he believes might be an infection. When he discovers that it is jock itch, he is relieved, but also concerned about the possibility that he might eventually get HIV. The way that Evans explores this

possibility speaks to his attempt to change the stigma regarding HIV positive LGBT people.

Arguably the most powerful scene in this film is when Aaron asks Marcus what he would do if Aaron were diagnosed with HIV. The mise-en-scene is crucial to the emotional aspects of the scene. The room is lit only by a single lamp, leaving barely enough light to see the men's faces. They are seated on the couch, faced towards each other. When Aaron asks his question, the camera angle is two-shot, looking down on both Aaron and Marcus. In response to Aaron, Marcus says, "I would cry. Then I would tell you that I love you. Then we would go to my room. I would slowly take your pants off. Then your briefs. And suck your cock. Then we would have the best, safest sex ever." The scene ends with the two men kissing each other. Again, we see Evans responding to the stereotypical portrayals of gay black men. In Bill Duke's *Cover*, most of the gay black men contract HIV by the end of the film. It is the downfall of the men and their families and businesses. However, Evans reimagines the disease that has haunted the LGBT community as a force that could bring two people together. Traditionally, the contraction of HIV (at least cinematically) would spell the end of both the romantic and sexual relationship. But Evans does not fall into that trope. He does not predict an apocalyptic future for someone who contracts the virus. This is even more important considering the strides made to treat and prevent HIV. No longer is it the unknown, untreatable disease it was thirty years ago. So instead of feeding into that fear, Evan offers redemption for HIV positive gay black men. Having HIV used to mean further exclusion from familial relationships, but Evans makes it clear that it is possible to be HIV positive and still enjoy the love and kinship of other people. Evans' film

deconstructs mainstream notions of stability by allowing for more diverse relationship constructs. He achieves this diversity by showing that heteronormative relationships are not as stable as they seem.

Annie's confrontation with Stan over his interactions with Marcus reveals the benefits of having a relationship unrestricted by heteronormative, monogamous understandings of relationships. When Annie gets back together with Stan, she discovers the gay hookup sites he has been on. He quickly denies it, saying that it's work-related. Annie, of course, does not believe him. But much to Stan's surprise, Annie is completely okay with his sexual pursuits. In fact, she encourages it. She suggests that they can maintain their relationship without denying their sexual feelings for other people. We also discover that both Annie's and Stan's parents are divorced: "Dad screwed the assistant, Mom blew the plumber." Though she is still not sure how her sexuality can fit into the life that she wants long-term, she realizes that she cannot reject those feelings. Instead, she finds a way to incorporate a similar "arrangement" to the one that Marcus and Aaron have.

Evans' representation of relationships can be summed up with one idea: Heterosexual/ heteronormative monogamy does not equal stability, and vice versa. In fact, he alludes to what can happen when people enter into relationships that do not allow for a full expression of their sexuality when Annie says, "I don't want to be one of those wives that is shocked that men do things like that." Part of Stan's apprehension also stems from having to identify as either bisexual or gay. Annie respond, "Bi, gay, whatever you are, it doesn't matter." Again, Evans is shunning the heteronormative gaze by refuting the necessity of static labels. Gendered and sexual designations have

historically been used not only to categorize but restrict. For example, for most of our legal history, marriage has been defined as union between a man and a woman. Therefore, those who do not fit within those categories have been restricted from marriage. But throughout the movie Evans' directorial choices have been ones that do not fit into white, male, heterosexual cinematic conventions. The unbalanced camera angles, the odd coincidences and awkward encounters-- everything seems like a complicated mess, but that is exactly what Evans is pointing out: relationships, queer or non-queer, are complicated and messy, but that does not make them inferior. Naming the type of relationship one is involved in or defining one's sexuality is oftentimes unnecessary. In a lot of ways, this places the audiences in the position of a disoriented spectator and renders us somewhat powerless. For instance, when the couples find each other at the train station, and later when Annie and Marcus end up at the same bar, the actions and conversations that are triggered do not allow us to rely on our mainstream beliefs about social identities. We might find it difficult to cast judgment on the decisions of the characters because they go against how we conceive romantic or sexual relationships; we are disallowed the dominant terms or vocabulary to define these couples. Evans is implying that the parameters of a relationship can only be placed by the people within that intimate group.

He does not, however, degrade the possibility of queer relationships also exploring more conventional trajectories. At one point in the film, Marcus idealizes a future with Aaron that involves moving to the Midwest, adopting a bunch of Filipino kids, and having a white picket fence. What Marcus is describing (aside from maybe the Filipino kids) is the depiction of the standard American family. The image of a wife and

husband with 2.5 kids is promoted as the stereotypical household unit. This construct has carried with it damaging ideals put forth by heteronormative ideology. So this idealized form has historically excluded anybody who did not identify as heterosexual. Ultimately, the structure itself is not bad--the ideology that backs it up is what has given it the power to be oppressive. Roderick Ferguson argues, "...African Americans' fitness for citizenship was measured in terms of how much their sexual, familial and gender relations deviated from a bourgeois nuclear family model" (20). Evans normalizes not only the inclusion of black gay men into this familial model, but also the desire to fit within the idea of "normal." Queer couples do not have to be completely radical in the way their relationships are formed. In fact, by making it possible for gay black men to achieve the conventional family, he extends the possibility for the way queer kinship is performed.

Evans's bigger commentary is a criticism of the oppressive nature of the standard family. When Aaron finds out that Marcus truly does have feelings for Stan, he moves out in order to think about where he wants to take their relationship. Marcus ends up meeting Annie at a bar after she and Stan have a similar fight. At this point, they know about each other and speak freely about their respective situations. As the conversation proceeds, the film highlights a critical point about the pressures of mimicking heteropatriarchal relationships. Annie says, "At some point, I'm gonna have to get married and cook...I mean don't I want that?" and Marcus responds with a simple question: "Do you?" He continues, "Straight people have it tough. All the fucking pressure to conform." Annie's statement, which is more like a question, shows the trepidation she has towards upholding the standard pathway towards love and marriage.

At the beginning of the movie she talks a lot about wanting stability and comfort, but she is really disguising her anxiety towards the hegemonic forces of heteronormative definitions of relationships. When she says, “Don’t I want that” she really means, “Shouldn’t I want that?” Marcus’s question is powerful because it moves Annie from being a passive agent, onto which the heteronormative patriarchy can impose its rule, to an active agent where a more feminist Annie gets to decide and define how her relationships will be structured. Stan and Annie decide to embark on this arrangement without the weight of other people’s expectations. Likewise, the end of the film offers a sympathetic view of the turbulent, but loving relationship between Marcus and Aaron.

Throughout the film, the camera’s eye has been used to subvert the hegemonic heteronormative gaze. The directorial choices have rebelled against stereotypical narratives of intimacy and depictions of black gay men and their relationships, in particular. Towards the end of the movie, the trajectory of Marcus and Aaron’s relationship would indicate their permanent separation. But Evans allows for a more complex understanding of how queer relationships function. Aaron tells Marcus that he had already invited people over to his apartment to celebrate his (Marcus’) birthday, and despite the fact that they are separated, he is free to come. Before Marcus arrives, Aaron is discussing the situation with one of his friends and he expresses how he has been hurt. Sympathetically, the friend replies, “It’s been six years...it’s bound to happen.” Even Aaron is taken aback at the possibility that he can still forgive Marcus despite his numerous transgressions. In the same way that Polk resists wholly demonizing Ryan in *The Skinny*, Evans complicates the black and white view of Marcus’s actions. Instead of dismissing the legitimacy of their relationship and/or the “transgressor’s” character,

Evans claims that their bond can overcome whatever anger or tension arises between them. Again, Evans is offering redemption for someone who might have otherwise been seen as immoral. Because the audience is influenced to adopt the attitude of the director, Evans could have easily made Aaron break up with Marcus, but in re-writing stereotypical narratives, Evans shows a couple that triumphs. During his earlier conversation with Annie, Marcus says, “So it’s life with all its complications or life without?” (referring to his relationship with Aaron). Initially Evans tells us that they have been together for 6 years, so naturally the audience would want them to maintain that relationship. The hardships that they endure are meant to strengthen the audience’s desire for them to be together.

Conclusion

Unlike films like *Cover* and *For Colored Girls* in which gay black men’s conflicts have been the result of the pathologized betrayal of their partners, *The Happy Sad*, highlights the struggle and redemption of gay black men attempting to find balance in their relationships. The other difference between the aforementioned movies and this one is that this film establishes that Marcus and Aaron clearly love each other, and this love makes their relationship worth fighting for. The same feeling that audiences get when watching *The Notebook* or *P.S. I Love You*, the longing and desire to see a couple succeed, is what Evans is trying to re-create, albeit less sentimentally. By approaching these topics in a serious manner, he raises the stakes of the outcome of Marcus’s and Aaron’s relationship. In other words, the audience feels that there is something to be gained by the resolution of their conflict.

These stakes are fulfilled during one of the final scenes of the movie. A reoccurring technique that Evans utilizes is the use of negative space of certain frames to show the open-endedness of Marcus's and Aaron's future. For instance, while sleeping next to Aaron, Marcus goes into the living room to message Stan online. The camera floats above the bed and maintains its position as Marcus leaves, emphasizing the empty space next to Aaron. This unevenness elicits doubt from the audience as we suspect that their relationship may not last. But at the very end, when Aaron decides to forgive Marcus, Evans uses the same camera technique to symbolize their unity. While at the birthday party, Marcus and Aaron are occupying the extreme halves of the frame, but return to the center when they kiss and make up. This is such a powerful scene because it portrays gay black men who are on the verge of breaking up, and come to an understanding and resolve their issues. Ironically, the arrangement that they set up does not work out for them, but proves beneficial for Stan and Annie. Regardless, Evans does not condemn Marcus and Aaron, but rather, he allows him and Aaron to learn and grow through hardships.

What *The Happy Sad* ultimately shows is that gay black men can have a way of relating to each other that both fits into mainstream ideas about relationships, but also complicates the structure of these relationships. Annie and Stan, who ideally would represent the stable heterosexual couple, experience just as much turbulence in their attempt to find balance as Marcus and Aaron. No one escapes the grip of Evans' criticism of normativity. The juxtaposition of these couples exposes the fallacy behind the construct of a stable, nuclear family. Neither the white "heterosexual" nor the black "homosexual" couple coast through their respective relationships with ease. The way they

perform queerness complicates both queerness and heterosexuality by blending the lines between the two. This complex depiction of gay black romance creates the possibility for understanding and legitimizing gay black kinship. Evans' film departs from the stagnant images of gay black men in film, and part of this is undoubtedly influenced by the fact that Evans himself is a gay black man.

When minorities are equipped with the power to create art that reflects their lived experiences, the result oftentimes looks differently than if someone outside of a particular community chooses to represent that space and its people. In this case, *Cover* and *For Colored Girls* are two films that fuel the well-established stereotypes about gay black men and their ability to relate to one another. The kinship that is portrayed in *The Skinny* comes out of the group's deep love for one another, as well as their acceptance of each other's differences. People like Magnus and Kyle, who, in most respects, are complete opposites in terms of their habits and personalities, are still able to bond because of their love of one another. This bond lasts throughout college and into their adulthood; and though their entire group is spread across the country, the events during Pride weekend show that they can depend on each other when the situation necessitates it. Polk is also pushing back against the lack of complex gay black men's representation in film. In *The Skinny* almost every single speaking character is queer. Polk is creating a space where gay black men can be open and out, not hidden away. This presence also means that gay black men have the opportunity to form the types of relationships that Magnus and his friends form. Had he not been out in college, Magnus might not have met Langston, Joey, Kyle and Sebastian. This film redefines the narrative of the ashamed downlow gay black men, afraid to embrace his sexuality and purposefully deviant or misleading. One of the

reasons this story has persisted for so long is because, in reality, gay black men have not had the support group that offers the freedom to express one's sexuality without fear of being ostracized or harmed. Both Polk's and Evans' films combat mainstream notions of gay black men's relationships. However, these efforts are not isolated to just film. Platforms such as social media allow laymen to create images that reflect more accurate portraits of black gay men.

In an age where social media allows for micro-documenting one's experiences, digital technology has the potential to influence our perception of minority groups. If marginalized groups have access to social media then they can be on the forefront of shaping the images and narratives that impact their individual communities. The Supreme Court's majority opinion underscores the necessity for changing the legal code regarding same-sex partners and their families. Part of the text of the opinion reads,

[DOMA] imposes a disability on the class by refusing to acknowledge a status the State finds to be dignified and proper. DOMA instructs all federal officials, and indeed all persons with whom same-sex couples interact, including their own children, that their marriage is less worthy than the marriages of others (Edwards).

To ensure that LGBT people are given the full rights and access of the legal and political system, our culture cannot limit the social spaces in which queer people can interact. Kaleb's and Kordell's picture symbolizes the extent to which queerness and family can be carried out. What directors like Polk and Evans are arguing against is the mutual exclusivity of queerness and blackness from which the DL phenomena is born and that in fact, queerness and blackness can be the grounds for, as opposed to the antithesis of,

family making. Additionally, these films show that family building is a process that can occur in varied forms and result in diverse relationship structures. Applications like Instagram and Facebook have improved their narrative functions. Features like hashtags and other archiving options allows for users to collect and disseminate videos and photos. Along with the world of queer of color independent filmmaking, these platforms have the capacity to usher in a new wave of minority storytelling—a form that empowers the voices of queer people of color.

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Vita

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