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University of Mississippi student Sierra Mannie caused a raucous debate among many white gay bloggers and readers in early July 2014 with an opinion piece posted on the Daily Mississippian online, later posted on Time.com, titled “Dear White Gays: Stop Stealing Black Female Culture” (Mannie 2014). In the piece, Mannie argues white gay men often appropriate the stereotyped culture of black women by adopting racist dialectical, physical, and affectational characteristics of black women. Mannie contends:

I need some of you to cut it the hell out. Maybe, for some of you, it’s a presumed similar appreciation for Beyoncé and weave that has you thinking that I’m going to be amused by you approaching me in your best “Shanequa from around the way” voice. I don’t know. What I do know is that I don’t care how well you can quote Madea, who told you that your booty was getting bigger than hers, how cute you think it is to call yourself a strong black woman, who taught you to twerk, how funny you think it is to call yourself Quita or Keisha or for which black male you’ve been bottoming—you are not a black woman, and you do not get to claim either blackness or womanhood. It is not yours. It is not for you.

Mannie tells readers to check their privilege and be part of the solution rather than continuing the “foolery” of acting the part of a “strong black woman . . . or a ghetto girl.” However adept many of Mannie’s observations and arguments may have been, several white gay bloggers responded, in many instances with vitriol and condemnation.

One commenter claimed gay, white men are not afforded white privilege and, thus, are not complicit in perpetuating white dominance and oppression over racial and gender minorities. Another blogger, published on Huffington Post more than a week after Mannie’s commentary first appeared, appropriately notes that Mannie’s argument, while correct in the way of racial appropriation, ventures into transphobic territory by privileging cisgender identity (D’Agostino 2014). D’Agostino contends Mannie’s piece works to legitimize “gender normative rhetoric that de-legitimizes gay men and trans-women.” D’Agostino argues:

Some men are as authentically feminine as some women. And some feminine men who are white grow up around black people who are feminine, so, yeah, their femininity might seem a little “black” to you. Really not their fault. Really none
of your business. This is to say, your heterodominant feminist fantasy of owning “womanhood” is not the reality of queer people or feminine men. Femininity is theirs also and it is not for you to allow or deny their gender expression.

However, D’Agostino’s argument does not fully adhere to his earlier admission that appropriation of black culture is damaging and the product of white privilege. Instead, D’Agostino provides an escape plan for those white gay men who do not fully adhere to gender norms from their privilege, thus legitimizing white gay racial appropriation and sexism via exclusion from the heterodominant culture. By excluding white gay men from the broader scope of white privilege, he allows a space for them within black womanhood—supporting the argument made by Mannie.

The exclusion of white gay men from white male privilege is not a new concept. For decades, white gay men have operated from the assumption that their sexual minority status excludes them from dominant forms of oppression and privilege; however, previous researchers have pointed to the dangers of viewing sexual minority status as an exclusionary factor in racism and sexism (Johnson 2003; King 2009; Nero 2005; Shugart 2003; Stone and Ward 2011; Ward 1999; Ward 2008; Yep and Elia 2012). In this chapter, I will discuss how white gay men are often given a pass, in the media, from white male privilege. This pass comes not only by way of their sexual minority status but also through the symbolic annihilation of people at the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality. White gay men then stand in as a representation for all queer people despite race and/or gender identity, which works to further privilege white men and subordinate people of color. First, I provide a brief discussion of white male privilege before discussing previous literature on race and sexuality and symbolic annihilation of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Queer) people of color. Finally, I provide a contemporary example of the representations of race and sexuality that illustrates these concepts.

**White Gay Male Privilege**

Any discussion of white male privilege should include a discussion of the invisible and imbalanced nature of privilege. Carbado (2005) concludes there are two categories of male privilege about which men should develop awareness. First, the invisible advantages that men can count on each day without ever having to work to earn them. The other, he argues, “includes a series of disadvantages that men do not experience precisely because they are men” (195). Men, Carbado maintains, do not have to envision themselves as engendered because “a white heterosexual man lives on the white side of race, the male side of gender, and the straight side of sexual orientation. He is, in this sense, the norm. Mankind. The baseline. He is our reference. We are all defined with him in mind. We are the same as or different from him” (192). However, Carbado argues, not all men experience and enjoy the same advantages to an equal level.

Men at the intersection of race, gender identity, and sexual orientation must contend with other factors that negatively affect their privilege because those men must “simultaneously contend with and respond to negative identity signification. That is, we simultaneously live with and contest our nonnormativity. We are ‘different,’ and our identities have negative social meanings” (193). Thus, he contends, listing all male privileges is problematic because a universal manhood does not exist, and constructing such a universal would obscure or trivialize those men outside the white, middle-class, heterosexual
construction of manhood. Further, he argues that class, race, and sexual orientation impact male identities and may either limit or expand their privilege.

Race, Sexuality, and Privilege

Despite the limitations of nonnormative gender, racial, and sexual identities, much of the rhetoric of the gay rights movement works to eliminate difference and relies on a narrative of sameness whereby sexuality trumps other identities. Yep and Elia (2012) argue the “new homonormativity” relies on the hegemonic view of racism as a thing of the past, and reduces any instance of oppression or discrimination as a product of homophobia, not a combination of sexuality, race, gender performance, and class. By focusing solely on homophobia, only the concerns of white queers are reflected. They contend, “Queers of color cannot afford to ignore how their ‘other’ differences interplay with their sexuality” (899) because those differences are salient in day-to-day life.

Stone and Ward (2011) argue that “Blackness” has been used by whites on both sides of the “modern gay rights discourse” to help forward their own causes and arguments (606), especially for white pro-gay rights activists during much of the movement’s history. They claim these activists have “relied on Blackness as the dominant metaphor for difference, victimization, and resistance, or as a rhetorical device to achieve specific political ends, such as mobilizing voters, coalition building, or discrediting their opposition” (606). Stone and Ward (2011) also claim the vernacular of the gay rights movement reflects white privilege. For example, they argue, concepts such as “the closet,” “coming out,” “lifestyle,” and “sexual identity” are “rooted in white, middle-class, and American conceptualizations of the relationship between self, sexuality, and community, thereby rendering the same-sex desires and queer subjectivities of people of color unintelligible or invisible within U.S. queer politics” (606–7). In other words, most people of color are eliminated from the discourse of the gay rights movement via privileged language that embodies whiteness.

Teunis (2007) argues the “gay community” in the United States is predominantly a white community regardless of the claims that it is more inclusive. He contends, “It projects whiteness through a projection of an image of normalcy which is inherently a white image” (268). By aligning the movement with a broader normalized society (i.e., white, middle class, and heterosexual), gay rights activists and members of the white gay community are able to gain access to social institutions and spaces not previously available to them because of their sexuality. For example, the movement’s push for marriage equality is generally led by white men and women, according to Teunis, “who display little or no concern for critical political issues that face gays and lesbians of color” (269). He argues the issues do not cause the promotion of whiteness inherently. Whiteness, he claims, is given dominance by the way the issues are promoted, which overshadows other issues within the larger LGBTQ community.

Coopting Blackness

In general, race has been used in the modern gay rights movement as a model for gaining particular rights and privileges that, more than anything, benefit white gay and lesbian members. The discussion of race is subordinated by the discussion of sexuality and gay identity. However, racial issues have often served as a talking point for anti-gay and lesbian rhetoric since the beginning of the modern gay rights movement. Stone and
Ward (2011) claim the anti-gay campaigns resemble white segregationist movements during the 1960s black Civil Rights Movement. Principally white religious conservatives, who traditionally opposed racial justice causes, led the groups. In recent years, they have attempted to build a coalition with blacks by pitting gay rights versus black rights. Stone and Ward (2011) argue that while the gay rights focus has shifted in the 2000s to military service and marriage rights, gay rights activists “have taken up direct analogies between gayness and blackness that have fuelled white racism in the movement, and reinforced the white construction of homosexuality” (608). Further, white anti-gay conservatives, during this same period, framed their cause as a fight to protect children against sexual immorality and/or sexual assault, which “prompted gay activists to work at humanizing LGBT people by drawing parallels to other historically maligned and oppressed groups (Jews, interned Japanese Americans, ‘Third World People,’ women and working class people)” (608).

In contrast, anti-gay white leaders, according to Stone and Ward, work to demonstrate their solidarity with black voters by dismantling connections or comparisons between the black rights movement and the gay rights movement even though this connection works to obscure queer people of color, enfeeble arguments for affirmative action, and coopt black civil rights as a rhetorical weapon for causes and groups with no interests in furthering black civil rights. They argue that the deployment of race by the religious right and gay and lesbian activists suggests that both are similar in their willingness to cite race in troublesome ways. Gay rights activists, as a result of coopting black civil rights rhetoric, exclude LGBTQ people of color from the gay rights narrative. This marginalization translates to symbolic annihilation in the mass media, a process by which the mass media ignore, exclude, marginalize, or trivialize a group of people via exclusion from its products (Klein and Shiffman 2009). In other words, exclusion from the work of the “gay community” leads to exclusion from media portrayals of the “gay community,” and, thus, exclusion from the dominant culture, which, in turn, leads to further marginalization and trivialization.

**Symbolically Annihilating LGBTQ People of Color**

Filmmaker Marlon Riggs (1991) wrote in a poem published in the anthology *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men*, which was also used in the production of Riggs’ 1989 PBS documentary *Tongues Untied*, about the invisibility of black gay men or men of color in the “gay community” and media aimed at gay men. Riggs conveys his internal struggle regarding the absence of black images in the gay community—an absence that inevitably has an intractable effect on the black gay male psyche. In the poem titled “Tongues untied,” he wrote:

> Maybe from time to time
> a brother glanced my way.
> I never noticed.
> I was immersed in vanilla.
> I savored this single flavor,
> one deliberately not my own.
> I avoided the question, why?
> Pretended not to notice
the absence of black images
in this new gay life,
in bookstores
poster shops
film festivals,
my own fantasies.
Tried not to notice
the few images of blacks
that were most popular:
  joke
  fetish
  cartoon caricature
  or disco diva adored
  from a distance.

(Riggs’ observations are grounded in a nearly complete absence of the black body or body of color from the gay rights movement and gay culture, which in many ways in the 1970s and early 1980s included the images of the sexual revolution and early political movements.

The prevalence of whiteness in the “gay community” has been the topic of discussion for several scholars. Teunis (2007) argues that whiteness in the gay community “is visible, palpable, if for no other reason than that images of men of color are absent” (269). He references a study in which he examines all issues of Out magazine from 2002. He claims men of color are only featured in one of two sections. Teunis writes, “First, Latino gay men are represented only as musicians, whose work is reviewed in the appropriate pages. Second, black men model the peak of health in advertisements for HIV treatment drugs” (269–70). He further argues the “gay community” has benefited from symbolically annihilating LGBTQ people of color in several ways. First, he concludes that the portrayal of whiteness has been used to lend to the gay community an air of respectability, and that the portrayal of whiteness lends to the myth of the affluent gay male, which is a created market to attract advertisers to gay and lesbian media outlets (Sender 2001).

Nero (2005) argues that racism and homophobia keep black gay men invisible or marginal in American film and television. He contends that the dual dominant ideological beliefs that African-American males are hyper-masculine and that white masculinity produces same-sex attraction eliminate black gay men from the dominant gay community and movement. Therefore, he argues, black gay men “cannot exist” (235). Black gay men are positioned then as imposters. Nero adds,

Like the controlling images of black women as mammy, jezebel, and welfare queen, the ubiquitous image of the black gay male as an impostor or a fraud naturalizes and normalizes the exclusion of black gay men from sites of territorial economies where wealth is created.

By casting black gay men as imposters or frauds in television programming, Nero contends, black gay men are then excluded from participation in queer cultures, which “reveals white hostility toward black gay men” (240). This exclusion, he argues, is participation in
an “unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom,” a concept introduced by Bell (1992) in *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. Bell argues, “Americans achieve a measure of social stability through their unspoken pact to keep blacks on the bottom—an aspect of social functioning that more than any other has retained its viability and its value to general stability from the very beginning of the American experience down to the present day” (152).

**Reifying White Supremacist Patriarchy in *Noah’s Arc***

The unspoken pact referenced by Nero could be a possible accounting of perceived homophobia from the African-American community directed toward white gay men. Teunis (2007) maintains the resistance by the white gay community to integrate race into the discussion of sexuality makes White gay men blind to the possibility that the perceived homophobia in African American communities is very race specific. If a gay identity is a white identity, which it is in the eyes of many though certainly not all African Americans, then homophobia is also directed towards white gay men, who are perceived to be wealthy, and therefore part of the problem rather than part of the solution of racial inequality.

Riggs’ (1989) critique of gay life and media images from the 1970s and 1980s remains accurate in terms of contemporary media representations of people of color. GLADD, a nonprofit organization that monitors the media for LGBTQ representations, reported in its 2015 television programming report, “Where We Are on TV,” that only 11 percent of the LGBTQ characters on broadcast television programming were black, 10 percent of the LGBTQ characters on cable were black, and 11 percent of broadcast and cable LGBTQ characters were Latino(a). The percentages of characters of Asian heritage were even smaller at 3 percent for broadcast and 5 percent for cable (Townsend 2015). While many of these percentages have increased in the last several years, the numbers still reflect significant discrepancies from actual population data.

One of the few, if not only, television shows centered around black gay men, *Noah’s Arc*, presented a homonormative, depoliticized representation for audiences in the mid-2000s. The show, though groundbreaking in some respects, worked to reify gay, white supremacy through sanitized representations of race, gender, and class—ultimately creating black replicas of white gay respectability (Yep and Elia 2012). While the show’s central characters were all black and race is “hypervisible” (899), racism is rendered invisible. In essence, the characters’ sexuality is given eminence over race as if to say racism is a thing of the past and homophobia is the most pressing concern for gay men of color.

Furthermore, Yep and Elia (2012) argue that *Noah’s Arc* worked to commodify blackness through the ever-present buff black bodies of the characters. The hypersexualized black body is not new to media representations of black bodies (hooks 2003; McBride 2005; Orbe, Warren, and Cornwell 2000; Yep and Elia 2012). The hypersexual black body is comfortable for white audiences to the point of allying with preconceived notions of the primitive black man with “mythically proportioned manhood” (Perez 2005: 185). Further, the show works to reify the gender binary by privileging the masculine and subverting the feminine, and presents monogamy (a dominant, middle-class, white relational norm) as the only “appropriate relational arrangement for gay men” (Yep and Elia 2012: 905).
Conclusions

In general, media representations of LGBTQ people often work to reify a white supremacist patriarchy that privileges white gay men above all others. LGBTQ people of color are further marginalized via media representations through (1) coopted black civil rights rhetoric that positions sexual identity as equivalent to ethnic and racial identity, (2) colorblind racist assumptions that give sexual identity prominence over race, (3) commodified blackness that emasculates and fetishizes black men, and (4) reinforced gender roles through a reification of the gender binary. The whitewashed queer body is more palatable to a white audience, and by adhering to representations that position people of color in familiar roles, media producers avoid instilling fear in white consumers of their products. Thus, the heteronormative and homonormative constructions of race, gender, sexuality, and class work not to transgress or change existing power structures, but only work to bolster the status quo, leaving LGBTQ people of color pushed further to the margins of society.

What does this mean for LGBTQ people of color? LGBTQ people of color are more likely to live below the poverty line, experience food insecurities, or experience homelessness than their white counterparts (Gates 2014). Unfortunately, another critical point in American history—a time when change was a real possibility—has again (thus far) been squandered by neoliberal assimilationists. By forgoing the initial radical goals of the gay and lesbian movement of the early 1970s, goals of equality through difference, the movement has now instead worked to fortify a model that reifies white supremacy and makes real change more elusive than ever for LGBTQ people of color. Media representations, or lack of representations, of LGBTQ people of color reflect this phenomenon in the LGBTQ rights movement where gay bodies are presented via either white representation or whitewashed representations of color. An authentic representation of the intersection of sexuality and race is rarely ever presented or discussed in a way that challenges the existing power structures. A few bright spots in media exist in the mid-2010s, like the Netflix original program Orange Is the New Black, but the bigger story of intersectionality eludes even shows where LGBTQ characters of color appear or news stories that involve newsmakers at the intersection of LGBTQ and racial minority status.

References

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Further Reading