Cheat Sheet

How—and why—the “down low” became an enduring, race-specific cultural myth of HIV and infidelity.

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On a 2005 episode of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, best-selling African-American author Terry McMillan confronted her ex-husband, Jonathan Plummer, alleging that he was on the “down low”—a scenario in which men profess to be having monogamous, heterosexual sex while secretly having sex with other men on the side. As Winfrey looked on and the audience applauded, McMillan suggested that if she’d tested HIV positive as a result of his extramarital actions, she “would be in jail right now,” presumably for injuring him. And, indeed, Plummer acknowledged on the program that he had had sex with other men.

Then, this past summer, former New Jersey First Lady Dina Matos McGreevey began hawking *Silent Partner: A Memoir of My Marriage*, which details her outrage over her own supposed sexual humiliation—delivered, she says, at the hands of her husband, former Governor Jim McGreevey, who came out publicly as gay in August 2004.

The media have bombarded Dina with questions: “Didn’t you know he was gay?” “How could you still sleep in the same bed with him after you found out?” Yet in the popular analysis of Governor McGreevey’s alleged deceit, the words “down low” and “HIV” have been kept on the QT. They were also curiously absent in another prominent case of a white man having gay sex on the sidelines of his marriage: the evangelical leader Rev. Ted Haggard. He acknowledged, in his words, “sexual immorality” with a male prostitute and having bought crystal methamphetamine (a drug that has helped the fuel a spike in gay HIV infections) from him. No one, at least among the most prominent media accounts and interviews, asked Haggard’s wife, Gayle, if she had subsequently gotten tested for HIV or feared having contracted it.

The fact that there is no slick pop-culture terminology (like “down low”) for white married men who have sex with other men—and the fact that these white men seem to escape cultural demonization for the HIV-infection risk of such behavior—prompts the question: Is there a double standard here?

“Society has perpetuated unhealthy perceptions that blacks are pathological,” says Chandra Ford, PhD, of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health. Adds Rod McCullom, African-American political and pop culture journalist: “Historically, black men and women have been

portrayed in the
media as promiscuous; it is easier for us to believe it [for fact].” The DL has become, in essence, the millennium’s version of the plantation bodice-ripper *Mandingo* and the stereotype of the brutal black buck, itching to bed a “pure” white woman.

A new report in the March 2007 issue of *Annals of Epidemiology*, “Black Sexuality, Social Construction and Research Targeting ‘The Down Low’” reviewed epidemiological studies from 1998 to 2004. Its conclusion: The DL phenomenon is not the principal cause of disproportionately high rates of HIV infection among African-American women. Nor, the report says, is being on the down low unique to the black community. Columbia’s Chandra Ford, the study’s leader, tells *POZ*, “By focusing on the DL, we are creating divisions within the community, which are very counterproductive in terms of HIV prevention.”

For the average American, these findings counter what the mainstream media—outlets ranging from the *New York Times* to *Law and Order: SVU*—have served up for at least the past six to seven years. To delink the DL from HIV, gay black filmmakers Quincy LeNear and Deondray Gossett created a tele-vision series, *The DL Chronicles*, for the HERE cable network. “Being on the [down] low is not always about deceiving a woman,” Gossett says. “For us it is about being in the closet [as opposed to sinisterly spreading HIV], which is not unique to black people. We are just trying to redefine it.”

Ford, meanwhile, hopes that her study will soon usher in a more nuanced understanding of how social and racial inequality plays a pivotal role in the spread of the AIDS epidemic. “Studies have shown that although black women have disproportionate rates of HIV, they engage in fewer risk factors,” Ford says. “This speaks to something structural like incarceration, racism and poverty, but only a few people have done work around this.” Let it begin.

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