

# An analysis of the intersections between race and class in representations of Black and white gay men in *QueerLife*

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## ABSTRACT

This article seeks to critically analyse how intersections of race and class shape representations of Black and white gay men in *QueerLife*, a South African online magazine. It focuses on *QueerLife*'s '4men' section and how its content represents classed and raced gay identities. My argument is that *QueerLife* forwards racialised and classed representations of the gay lifestyle, which reinforce homonormalisation within what is known as the "Pink Economy". Using Critical Diversity Literacy (CDL) to read the underlying meanings in texts and images, the article concludes that *QueerLife* is complicit in the construction of gay identity categories that seek to appeal to urban, white, middle-class gay-identifying communities in South Africa. The article also demonstrates how, when Black bodies are represented in *QueerLife*, exceptionalism mediates their visibility in this online magazine. Overall, the findings demonstrate how Black and white gay bodies are mediated online and how their different racial visibilities are negotiated within the system of structural racism.

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# Introduction

Paradoxical as it may seem, it remains – to this day – unclear whether the increase in gay representation in magazines is a good thing, considering the race and class politics that lurk in the South African landscape. There is, as such, a need for researchers to pursue this inquiry, particularly in an era where the emergence of online magazines has led to a greater distribution of gay representations. South African magazines that represent gay men include *Exit*, *Gay Pages*, *Black Mamba*, *The Advocate* and *QueerLife*. *QueerLife* is a magazine that hosts several contributors under its “4men” and “4women” web sections, and the other aforementioned magazines are important spaces because they expose the myth of the rainbow nation and the difficulties of the pursuit of race and class equality within the already excluded gay community, as well as the persistence of structural racism. In apartheid South Africa, race was divided along four categories, namely white, coloured, Indian and African/Black (Posel 2001). I however use "Black" in this article to broadly refer to people of colour, that is, "African", "Coloured" and "Indian" persons. “White” in this article is used to refer to persons whose skin colour, nose shape and hair type have historically been used as a means of telling them apart from the former, giving them access to privileged spaces and resources. Meanwhile the term “class” is used to refer to an economic group with economically distinct features that are shared among its perceived members.

Along with the gradual ascent of gay magazines both in print and online, there is now a greater appreciation for sexual diversity in South Africa (Beetar 2012). However, this sexual diversity is heavily loaded with the continued dehumanisation of gay people by homophobic persons, layered with the exclusion of Black and/or poor gay men by upper-middle-class and/or white gay men. The argument presented in this article is that *QueerLife* exhibits racialised and classed representations of the gay lifestyle that feed into stereotypes that are functional for the Pink Economy. According to Katlego Disemelo (2015:6), the Pink Economy can be understood as ‘a hyperreal world of leisure and luxury goods and services which supposedly signify individuated upward mobility within the context of late capitalism’. The Pink Economy thrives on the construction of affluent gay and lesbian culture. The article concludes that *QueerLife* is complicit in the construction of gay identity categories that seek to appeal to these affluent, urban, white, middle-class, gay-identifying individuals and communities in South Africa. It also demonstrates that when Black bodies are represented in *QueerLife*, class and exceptionalism are used as ways of mediating their visibility; that is, making them conform to rubrics of whiteness.

These assertions are informed by existing literature examining the intersections of race and class in gay politics by Gustav Visser (2008), Samantha King (2009) Disemelo (2015), Tommaso Milani (2015), Finn Reygan, (2016) and Zethu Matebeni (2018) among others. Similar to the arguments made by these researchers, I hold that the representation of gay men in *QueerLife* adds to the racialised and classed aesthetics that inform the imagery of the ideal South African gay man. This is in a context where the post-apartheid rights-based dispensation has tended to benefit white upper-middle-class homosexuals (Milani 2015). This article's contribution to existing knowledge lies in its exposure of how race and class act as factors that mediate one's position as an "ideal" gay person online. This is more so in South Africa – a country whose legacy of apartheid saw to it that racial classification informed social status (Posel 2013), creating a race and class divide. This article also concurs with Milani's (2015:443) analysis of the Joburg Pride 2012, where he observes how One in Nine's critique of the Pride was evidence of how 'class inequalities are seen as structural divides on par with the racial divisions that characterised the South African past'. Formed in 2006, the One in Nine Campaign is a feminist South African collective of organisations that supports survivors of sexual violence. One in Nine (cited by Milani 2015:443) writes that, '[t]he de-politicisation of most prides has allowed the old, racial apartheid to be translated into a new, economic apartheid' that excludes Black and/or poor gays. These developments are central to the arguments made in this article.

South African social identities are rooted in the historical discourse of race and apartheid (Moolman 2013). The earliest forms of gay organisation in South Africa were primarily fronted by white, middle-class gay men, hence the impediments created for Black gay people are still present in the ways in which the local gay press represents a 'particularised' (white) version of gay masculinity (Reddy 1998:68). That, along with the historical inequities of apartheid, assures gay white men with financial resources the ability to render themselves widely visible in the media, which accounts for why gayness is equated with whiteness in the popular consciousness (Hoad 1999). This is not particular to South Africa. According to Jasbir Puar (2002) and Visser (2008), while North American and European gay spaces disrupt heterosexual norms, they keep racial, gender and class disparities in place. Hence, this article shows how mainstream homosexual cultures in South Africa's preoccupation with west-centric, hetero-masculine images that exclude Black and poor folk (Chappell 2015) ties with homonormalisation and the whitewashing of the global Pink Economy (Disemelo 2015).

According to Posel (2001), race is among the many paradoxes of South Africa's transition from apartheid. Without conflating race with class, this article shows how class, like race, produces an economy of gay men online that either marginalises

Black and poor gay men or, alternatively, conforms Black gay men to rubrics of whiteness (in the way they are styled, dressed, presented, and so forth). Anne McClintock (1995) argues that no social category exists in isolation, but that each category is brought to life in relation to another and that this could be in contradictory ways. Therefore, race and class both influence the politics of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary gay communities. According to Reygan (2016:86), 'in the post-apartheid context, ongoing structural inequalities and racial tensions persist in gay "communities"'. In Reygan's (2016) study of De Waterkant, a gay village in Cape Town, he observes class and race divisions. Reygan (2016:87) opines that although Cape Town and its "gay village" are not located in the west, gay men there exhibit a white, Amero/Eurocentric culture that shows the ongoing wave of 'gay globalisation' and does not reflect an African reality. Such spaces are exclusionary towards poor and/or Black gay men and such exclusion extends to the way Black and poor gay men are invisibilised within popular physical and online gay spaces in what constitutes the 'formation of a minority within a minority (or the "other" other)' (Sonnekus & Van Eeden 2009:81). In their research on the othering of Black men on *Gay Pages*, Theo Sonnekus and Jeanne Van Eeden (2009) found that not only was there an overrepresentation of white homomascularity, but also, and more significantly, an underrepresentation of Black homomascularity. This article therefore seeks to contribute to this existing body of knowledge by adding the criterion of "class" to establish the nuances of gay visibility politics. The article works with the intersections of race and class and how they both inform inclusion and exclusion in *QueerLife*.

Although the rhetoric in post-apartheid South Africa is that of freedom and equality, the legacy of apartheid and forms of racial and economic division it enforced still informs South Africans' daily lives (Swarr 2004), as it has not changed dramatically in terms of its *structural* application. This division, which is further entrenched by neoliberalism via the commodification of identities, results in "neat" and "consumable" categories into which gay identities are made to fit. Ashley Tellis (2012) posits that the neo-liberal economy has turned gay people into consumers who play by the rules of the market. These consumption practices, which follow those of the corporate world, means that a certain kind of gay man is reproduced and "colonised" by the market in his role as investor and consumer (Brown 2009). This is not limited to South Africa alone. Pushpesh Kumar (2018) also found that in India, the modern gay identity class is imbricated in the formation of gay media consumerism(s). Gay online magazines thus conform to stereotypes that reinforce a culture promoting a desirability informed by exceptional taste. The modern gay identity becomes conflated with class, affluence and access to resources (Reygan 2016). Katherine Sender (2001), in a study of *The Advocate* magazine, found that gayness in images, discourses and practices, more

often than not, becomes a signifier of consumption. This article concurs with these ideas, suggesting an intersectional analysis of the dynamic relationship between class and race.

In the next section, I give a brief description of *QueerLife*, followed by an outline of the methodology. The section thereafter provides an analysis of findings. Findings are divided into two themes, namely the exclusion of Black men through seemingly inclusive narratives, and the construction of the ideal gay man through a lense of exceptionalism. These are followed by some concluding remarks.

## Brief background of *QueerLife*

*QueerLife* is an online magazine that offers writers a space to share their stories. While *QueerLife* has a 4men and a 4women section, this article focuses on the representation of gay men in the 4men section, which has the subsections “Man Fun”, “Man Health”, “Man Opinions”, “Man Relationships” and “Man Style”. *QueerLife* claims to be ‘South Africa’s leading LGBTI destination’,<sup>1</sup> hence it is an ideal space to purposively select texts with which to study representations of gay identities. “Gay” is used in this article to refer to men who are sexually attracted to other men, meaning that this article does not focus on lesbian, bisexual, trans and intersex persons. *QueerLife*’s 4men section is an interesting site of such analysis because, besides earlier research by myself (Vanyoro 2020), no other research of this nature related to this specific website has been carried out. While my earlier research deals with the gendered nature of representations of GBTI men in *QueerLife*, this article examines the intersecting racialised and classed representations of only gay men in the 4men section. This undertaking exposes other hidden dynamics, such as the objectification and hypersexualisation of Black gay men online.

*QueerLife* has many tabs and sections. To submit a post for publication on *QueerLife*, one has to liaise through the “Contact us at *QueerLife*” submission tab. *QueerLife* also has regular authors evidenced by a subscription portal which shows that weekly stories and opinions are written by their ‘award-winning authors’.<sup>2</sup> Their reference to the authors as “award-winning” makes them appear as authorities or experts in gay stories and cultural narratives. Author names on posts are anonymised. However, the reader can see how many views a post has by looking at the number underneath the image of an eye to the left side of the web page. *QueerLife* seems to target white and upper-middle-class readers, as its aesthetic is dominated by clean white images and a luxurious lifestyle narrative.

## Methodological issues

Although a number of other online magazines also represent gay men in South Africa, I was drawn to *QueerLife* because of the sub-categorisations it has in its 4men section, which include contributor articles under 'Man Fun', 'Man Health', 'Man Opinion', 'Man Relationships' and 'Man Style'. These sections act as agenda-setting tools that are guided by conventional lifestyle assumptions of what standard gay men's niches are and, as such, functions to further entrench a homonormalised Pink Economy. This article purposively sampled and analysed a corpus of 19 full magazine articles published between 1 January 2016 and 1 February 2020 in *QueerLife*'s 4men section. While more articles could have been added to the analysis, they were omitted owing to the word count limitations associated with the guidelines of this special issue. These 19 articles, however, proved to hold thick data from which two broad themes for this paper were drawn.

The corpus of data was analysed using a Critical Diversity Literacy (CDL) framework. CDL, a tradition propounded by Melissa Steyn (2015), brings our attention to the complex nature of power and its establishment within diverse societies. While Steyn (2015) states that one can use CDL to read through prevailing social relations as one would a text, in this article, CDL is used to read online media texts as testaments of prevailing social relations in the gay community. The online media texts are drawn and analysed to demonstrate how articles in gay magazines subtly exclude poor and/or Black gay men.

The three criteria of CDL used in this analysis include, first, an understanding of the role of power in constructing differences that make a difference (Steyn 2015). This speaks to how texts that construct categories of people are complicit in creating the illusion that difference is natural. This is despite the fact that '[a]ll of our categories of thinking about difference are socially constructed within unequal power relations' (Steyn 2015:381). This means that while gay people may have different skin colours, tastes or classes, an author's use of these differences to create different types of people, styles and fetishes is political and bears testimony to unequal power relations that determine who has the power to re-present themselves and the "Other." Using CDL, the social construction of gay identity through different texts on gay men was read as complicity in the construction of 'differences that make a difference' (Hall 1997; Steyn 2015:381). This also includes an endorsement of certain gays', characteristics or behaviours that create a false binary where the one who possesses them has more social currency.

Another CDL criterion is a recognition of the unequal symbolic and material value of different social locations. This includes acknowledging hegemonic positionalities

and concomitant identities, such as whiteness, masculinity, middle-classness, and so forth, and how these dominant orders position those in non-hegemonic spaces (Steyn 2015:382). This CDL criterion facilitates an analysis of the promotion of a certain category of gay, which then dispossesses of another category of gay through representation, as powerful forms of centred positionalities have the ability to define the outside “Other” so that they retain their own psychological and material comfort (Steyn 2015). Hence, this article shows how the construction of a particular kind of white homomascularity informs the enduring objectification of Black homomascularity. Last, the article employs a CDL analysis of how systems of oppression intersect, interlock, co-construct and constitute each other, and how they are reproduced, resisted and reframed (Steyn 2015). This criterion houses the theory of intersectionality, in which Patricia Hill Collins (1993) argues that dominant formations are not experienced singly in peoples’ lives. The analysis therefore acknowledges the intersections that exist between race, class, gender, sexuality and nation-building.

## The exclusion of Black men through seemingly inclusive narratives

This section and the next carries out a thematic analysis of the findings. Race is an important theme that came out particularly because of the predominance of white images in *QueerLife*. I found that Black men were excluded through seemingly inclusive narratives. In one of the few instances where a Black person was featured, an article titled ‘The lowdown on bad boys’,<sup>3</sup> has an image of two shirtless men. The man on the right is white while the one on the left is Black, and both of them are staring directly into each other’s eyes with the tips of their noses rubbing against each other. The white man’s hand can be seen touching his Black partner’s back as they stare intimately at each other. The word ‘low down’, as captured in the heading, refers to the disclosure of important information about a person’s dishonesty and unfairness by a speaker. Using CDL, it can be argued that while this article seems innocent, it is by no coincidence that, in one of the few instances that a Black person is featured, there is a discourse of “bad boys”. The idea of good versus bad reasserts a binary that has historically been used to entrench the white/Black dualism. Owing to South Africa’s history of apartheid, not to mention the present exclusion of Black gay men, suspicion towards who the bad boy is in the article is apt. Carla Monroe (2010) submits a similar inquiry in the context of negative representations of Black American boys in American schools through posing the question ‘why are “bad boys” always black?’. The image of the Black man as a bad boy in the media was also fuelled by the *Bad Boys* (Bay 1995) movie sequel in which Martin Lawrence and Will Smith act as cops who fit the Black stereotype of dangerous and unpredictable. Inversely, in South Africa, a place where Black people continue to be associated with negative aspects of society such as crime, poverty and disease, Black is indeed conflated with the

bad. On the other hand, being white in South Africa, has, and continues to, mean the 'repudiation of the sexual desire with [sexual] "others"' (Ratele 2009:170). Black sexuality has always been constructed as the other, evidenced through the policing of miscegenation through the Immorality Act of 1927. The act criminalised sex between a Black and a white person. As the meaning of a text does not reside in the text itself only, but in the context in which the text is produced and decoded (Gill & Gill 2007), this depiction and its headline matters. The context of this text is that of a post-apartheid South African nation that is still confronted by politics of good versus bad sexual citizenship within the gay community (Milani 2015). Further down, the anonymous author of the article writes that '[b]ad boys usually lack mental and emotional security; which is why they try to seek out others to fill in for them. They're not men yet, hence the word boys'.

Using CDL, this conflation of particular groups of gay men with boyhood is also read as historically informed by power. Malose Langa, Adele Kirsten, Brett Bowman, Gill Eagle and Peace Kiguwa (2018) posit that, during apartheid, Black men were positioned as "boys" and Black masculinity was rendered inferior to white masculinity. During the conquest of Africa, white men positioned themselves as the greatest standard of the human, while '[w]omen and children became the point of reference to describe the inferiority of non-Europeans' (Mignolo 2008:16). Blackness was constructed as infancy, savagery, deceitfulness, aggression, hypersexuality and danger (Moolman 2013; Makoni 2016). I argue, then, that the bad boys will 'pull you [the ideal gay man] in a stream of bad circumstances and they call it "adventure"; they might put you and your body in danger while making you feel guilty if you didn't meet his expectations' as the article states. This statement can be read as advise to a *QueerLife* reader who is most likely to be white or upper-middle-class – something that has been established through the aforementioned descriptions of *QueerLife*'s potential target audiences. This passage links well with Amanda Lock Swarr's (2004) description of Black sexuality as simultaneously desirable and immoral. Therefore, while the bad boy's sexuality represents a potential adventure for the reader, the warning here is that it is also a dangerous sexuality.

It may be argued that these stereotypes form part of a wider economy of imageries that sustain consumption in the Pink Economy. Rather than seeing them as singular mishaps, this article argues that the representation of Black men as bad boys serves to maintain the enduring imagery of the Black man's role in the media. Cornel West (2017) illustrates the historic relationship of Black bodies with the status of "bad" and how Black people reclaim these negative stereotypes by reproducing them in the media. He argues that '[t]his young Black male style is a form of self-identification and resistance in a hostile culture; it also is an instance of machismo identity ready for violent encounters' (West 1994:128). That is, images of Black men as "bad" form

part of popular culture and hold currency in the Pink Economy because the images form part of gay culture's attempt to assign roles that match fears and desires associated with historically racialised sexualities. In the end, stereotypes built around historical systems of oppression become legitimised as "the way things are". Perceptions of these Black stereotypes as "part of their culture" normalises stereotypes of Black deviance.

In the same article, the author goes on to warn the reader to end relationships with bad boys, emphasising the recommended course of action with capital letters,

I never understood why young gay men tend to continuously fall for the bad guy ... because ... they think they can change him. Newsflash: if that's one of the main reasons why you fell in love with him, BREAK IT OFF NOW.

Later in the article, the state of these bad boys is rendered even worse than that of animals, as the author advises the readers to '[b]uy a f\*cking cat!' instead of being in such a relationship. In South Africa it is a common joke among Black people that white people treat cats like their children or siblings. Therefore, by advising the gay man in love with a bad boy to replace him with a cat, the author seems to be suggesting that the bad boy can be replaced by an animal. This comparison underscores the association of Black bodies with 'animalism' (Makoni 2016:51). I need to clarify here that the author might not have consciously sought to state that bad boys are Black and are like animals but, through CDL, subtle undertones of exclusion can be picked up through analysing how silence can be used to mask racism. This means that if an author has chosen to remain silent about who an actor associated with the "bad" is, their text can still exhibit a "loud silence" loaded with stereotypes that make use of dominant aesthetics of racism. For example, George Yancy (2016:19) posits that the Black monster, through epistemic racism, is constituted as an 'indistinguishable, amorphous, black seething mass, a token of danger, a threat, a criminal, a burden, a rapacious animal incapable of delayed gratification'. Filling the silent gaps in the text with pre-existing evidence of how racist stereotypes function helps one recognise that while racism is constitutionally regarded as a thing of the past in South Africa, it continues to function structurally within gay narratives in online magazines such as *QueerLife*.

Black gay men are not only represented as bad boys, but also as athletic and well-built men. In the article titled 'The secret to a sexy butt',<sup>4</sup> there is a photo of a Black man exercising, with his buttocks in the air. The man's arms are in a press-up position, making his entire upper body appear firmer, as if chiseled, and thus more appealing. The second paragraph of the article reads, '[w]hich better body part to start off with than the second thing most of us notice on the beach. Yes ... You too can have a sexy butt'. The text endorses the 'secret butt' by giving readers some tips on exercises

to carry out in order to get one themselves. Through the way the author uses the Black man's body as an example of a sexy butt, the exhibited Black man becomes the epitome of sexiness and athleticism. While this article seems innocuous at face value, it may be argued that it has undertones of objectification and sexual racism because the Black man in the image becomes the figure of sexy and an object in the moment. Defined by Mary Dianne Plummer (2007) as non-blatant or non-violent, but more subtle, sexual racism takes the form of unconscious biases in attractions, racial fetishization, and reproductions of ethnosexual stereotypes in pornography. For Disemelo (2015:48), 'Black masculinities and black bodies only hold a minimal (and downright derogatory) place within the Pink Economy as commodified sexual objects whose sole purpose is to sate the desires of white gay men'. Plummer (2007) refers to these as ethnosexual stereotypes, which reflect the historical, political and socio-political frameworks in which they are rooted. This means that even when Black masculinities appear to be innocently exercising, the messages to readers might be communicating sexual innuendos.

The image of this Black man exercising also fulfils racial stereotypes of Black athletic exceptionalism. The role of these stereotypes is to hold the Pink Economy together by assigning fixed roles to races in order to establish fixed ways of understanding racialised bodies. This is also evident in another article, titled '[w]hy you need a gym buddy'.<sup>5</sup> The article has an image of a white man with his hand around a Black man's shoulder while staring at and having a conversation with him (Figure 1).



FIGURE N<sup>o</sup> 1



Header image of the article '[w]hy you need a gym buddy' (QueerLife 2017a).

The author states, 'I woke one Sunday morning with a beer-to-blood ratio that was not conducive to running. It was -2 outside with sideways-flying bullet rain, but I knew I was supposed to meet Peter, one of my more masochistic friends, for a run'. The author's reference to Peter as a "masochistic friend" suggests that he wants us to know that his athletic ability is an important subject in the article. While it is hard to determine who Peter is in the article image, it can still be argued that it is not a coincidence that in one of the few images where a Black man is featured in *QueerLife*, there is a yet again a discourse of physicality and athleticism. CDL alerts us to the fact that some of these social fault lines established along axes of difference are enduring (Steyn 2015). The recurring association of Black men with fitness-related articles is not innocuous. Laura Azzarito and Louis Harrison's (2008:347) article 'White men can't jump' found that 'White boys complied with the notion of blacks' "natural" physical superiority, and black boys occupied an ambiguous position within dominant discourses of race and natural athleticism'. This all has to do with the dominant construction of Black men as (more) athletic in the media. The inclusion of Black gay men in athletic- and fitness-related articles reinforces eugenics discourses, as Black athletic exceptionalism discourses are also used to push Black intellectual inferiority discourses (Azzarito & Harrison 2008). These discourses normalise the naturalisation of the Black/white dichotomy.

In an article titled 'Give and take',<sup>6</sup> there is a transactional discourse associated with Black desirability. The article has a header image of a Black man lying on the grass with half his buttocks out (Figure 2). The Black man appears vulnerable as he stares into the reader's eyes.



FIGURE N° 2



Image header of the article 'Give and take' (QueerLife 2016).

The article's second paragraph associates this Black man with receptivity by outlining the pros of receiving. It goes on to advise the receiver (of sex),

[t]ry to remember some of the most memorable sex you've had, the horny highlights that stick in your mind. Those experiences probably stand out because you were able to fully receive pleasure and give yourself 100 per cent to those sensations. You weren't trying to give and receive at the same time. Instead, you were able to completely accept what was offered, and in doing so, the experience became much more pleasurable and intense.

The author's reference to how the receiver was able to 'fully receive pleasure' and 'accept what was offered' speaks to bottoming in gay male sex (Vanyoro 2020). It may be argued here that the posting of a Black man who assumes a vulnerable posture in an article about receiving, sexualises and objectifies the man. Collins (1986) posits that domination has to do with objectifying the dominated, and this devalues the subjectivity of the oppressed. In this visual moment, the Black man is idealised for consumption by *QueerLife* readers. These power dynamics are framed as teamwork by the author who writes, '[w]ork together so you can experience pure giving and receiving. Then you can surrender totally – and enjoy true freedom and fulfilment in your sex life'. The author's promise of freedom to the receiver is meant to conceal power while at the same time reifying Michel Foucault's (2005:183) assertion that in capitalism, the moments of so-called sexual freedoms are the moments in which the sexually 'free subject' is the most commodified (also see Cornell & Seely 2014:2). Consequently, an orientalist moment is disguised as a moment of freedom to conceal the fact that the Black man appears for the amusement of white readers. The image of the Black man lying on the grass is a recreation of oriental discourses that construct both women and Black people as closer to nature. Chong-suk Han (2007:53) posits that 'Gay men of colour, whether found within western borders or conveniently waiting for white arrival in the far-off corners of the globe, are nothing more than commodities for consumption'. Their representation in sexual narratives obfuscates the way through which racist power operates because, in any given context, power does not name itself as such (Steyn 2015). It is only after assuming a critical reading of texts that these racist undertones become clear.

In an article titled '[i]t's all about the mouth'<sup>7</sup> there is an image header of a Black man staring directly into the camera (Figure 3). The headline of the article infers that the mouth is all-important for the topic the writer is about to discuss. The article then describes ideal oral sex between men. The author of the article also offers the following warning, '[t]here can be issues of control, or of the feeling of loss of control, with which the man on the receiving end needs to be comfortable'. By referring to a discourse of "control" and the "loss of control" that takes place during oral sex, the author is

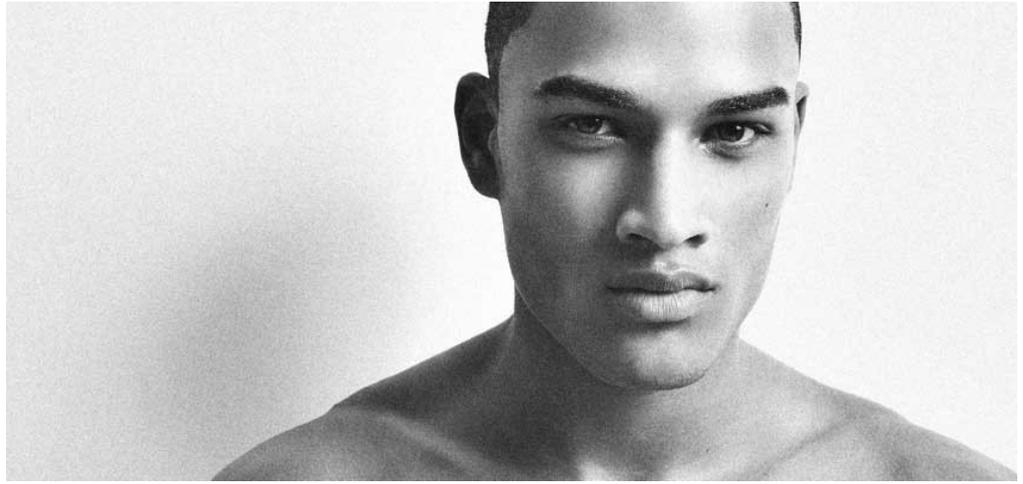


FIGURE **N° 3**



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The image header of the article '[i]t's all about the mouth' (QueerLife 2017b).

suggesting a dichotomy of domination. The other partner, who can be understood as the dominant one, is unknown, unstated, but through his invisibility, assumes a dominant role over the other subject. Owing to the history of Black domination and objectification by white people, the attempt to invisibilise or ignore racial categories or identities of both actors in this text plays into power relations of racial domination through ignorance and silence.

This text about the mouth can also be interpreted as a text about a system of a racialised gay pornographic culture that creates neat categories of gay sexual performativity. This is more so in a context where it has been observed that pornography is one of the few spaces in which Black gay men's images are featured as erotic (Mercer & Julien 1995). In other words, the appearance of a Black man in an article with erotic discourse is not innocuous. Rather, it informs a wider sexual politics that associates Black people with sexual adventure. At the same time, the article assumes a seemingly innocent narrative that is written as an everyday account to feed into the depoliticised culture of the mainstream gay scene (Mercer & Julien 1995). Its silence on issues of race and how it is associated with particular sexual roles and positions confirms Steyn's (2015) observation that blindness and distortions tend to infuse the spaces of racial privilege. In other words, narratives that exist in racially charged spaces attempt to be silent on the racial undertones found in such forms of representation.

Of course, these analyses are incomplete without addressing the question of how do these representations compare to the representation of white men? It can be argued that where white men are featured in *QueerLife*, their representations seem to promote a white homomascularity that aligns with Afrikaner nationalism and a whitewashed economic vision of the nation. In an article, '[r]ugby fetish and gay men',<sup>8</sup> the author mobilises a discourse of sport, nation and class to suggest what a desirable gay man in South Africa looks like. In the header image of this article, there are eight men and one woman playing rugby at the seaside. The men in the picture are portrayed as ideal gay men, because, as the author writes, '[t]here is that lingering, irrational notion ingrained in South Africa's traditionally sports orientated psyche that the rugby guy is better in bed than his nerdy friends'. Besides being associated with desirable masculinity and sexuality, in South Africa, rugby also mobilises race and class politics. Rugby has been a medium for national identity formation in Wales, New Zealand and South Africa, where it is a central element in the shaping of middle-class, male-dominated hegemony (Nauright & Chandler 1996). The sport has also been a lucrative site for the demonstration of white superiority. In South Africa, rugby has historically been exclusive in terms of gender, class and race (Bolsmann & Parker 2007). It can therefore be argued that the "rugby guy", who is considered "better in bed", is a symbol of a white and/or affluent gay man. This is also evident in the assertion the author makes that,

... if you doubt the lingering presence of sporting attitudes and sporting aspirations, not to mention stereotypes, try hitting the nearest gay bar and open your ears to the fake accents there. Gay identities remain very strongly marked by stereotyping views of class and sport, of which rugby in South Africa seems to be no 1.

In other words, since the rugby-playing man is more appealing by virtue of how he represents the ideal South African gay man, other gay men who are not associated with the sport do not possess the right kind of masculinity. This article thus endorses a form of gay masculinity associated with whiteness and middle-to upper-class belonging.

## The construction of the ideal gay man through a lens of exceptionalism

*QueerLife* articles also construct the category of the ideal gay man through reference to different forms of exceptionalism. There were also engagements with class and exceptionalism in the article '[h]ow to dress that butt'.<sup>9</sup> The article recommends types of underwear that are sexy for a gay man to wear. The article has an image of a white man lying stomach-down on a bed wearing white underwear (Figure 4).



FIGURE N<sup>o</sup> 4



The header image for the article '[h]ow to dress that butt' (QueerLife 2018).

The author states that '[t]he more exclusively labelled [underwear] will, of course, shout money, which is certainly sexy (house labels are clearly out – especially Pep stores and Mr Price ones)'. The author suggests here that more expensive underwear demonstrates "good taste" and increases the attraction of a gay man, while the ones from Pep stores and Mr Price are seen as cheap, non-desirable underwear. Innocent as the categories of "bad" and "good" might seem at face value, they confer or withhold rewards such as inclusion, belonging and acceptance, resulting in eventual exclusion and censure of others (Steyn 2012). Clothing brands and stores form an important part of identity politics in South Africa. For example, Mr Price and Edgars are associated with the Black consumer (Lewis 2012). This article thus polarises underwear associated with Black clothing stores and brands as undesirable. This feeds into consumerism patterns that urge gay men to be associated with upper-middle-class brands, such as Calvin Klein, which the article author endorses by stating that 'CKs (Calvin Kleins) are ubiquitous, though that might seem perilously close to being common'. CKs are therefore considered a good starting point when it comes to desirable gay underwear by the author. Overall, this sexualised gay man who wears a specific classy underwear brand is associated with desirable exceptionalism. This is in contrast to the representation of the naked Black man in the '[g]ive and Take' article, who is objectified through the language of receiving.

In an article titled '[a]m I, Mr Right',<sup>10</sup> Mr Right is presented as a state of perfect gayness. The Mr Right article has an image header of a white man staring directly into the camera as he stands against a grey background. The author of the article

contends that '[t]he Law of Attraction states that like attracts like'. This is followed by tips stating that a single gay man should invest in themselves so that they can also become like Mr Right. In the article, Mr Right is represented as someone who has to meet some form of criteria encapsulated in a list of traits such as physical health and attractive appearance; emotional well-being; some sense of spirituality; healthy relationships with family; friendships and a strong support system; suitable household environment and living arrangements; good education and viable work/career; virile sex life; comfort with being gay and level of 'outness'; comfort with masculinity and gender identity; stable financial situation; high self-esteem; access to resources; and social and dating skills.

While this checklist provides a guide to well-being, some of the items on it speak to a classed and racialised gay subjectivity, as not all gay people are able to meet these requirements, such as access to resources and/or stable career, because they are not linked to structural and other privilege. It can be argued that this text does not disrupt what Glen Elder (2005:583) refers to as 'consuming patterns of white masculine metropolitan privilege'. Rather, it reinforces class and race disparities. Samantha King (2009:276), for example, mentions that the 'closet' and 'coming out' are racially and economically inflected discourses that have different consequences for queer politics. Therefore, a "Mr Right" category constructed without an acknowledgement of how gay men in different contexts, such as rural spaces, experience challenges coming out, invokes both class and race privilege. Moreover, an article that commodifies coming out without acknowledging that people do not have the same access to the economic and cultural safety nets that exist for many white or middle-class lesbians and gays, is irresponsible (King 2017). This article, through its suggestion that "Mr Right" is one who has comfort with masculinity, also reinforces hegemonic masculinity. It makes it sound as if a gay person who presents as feminine cannot be a "Mr Right". The downside of this discourse is that it is complicit with hetero/cis/normative ideas that expect lesbians to be feminine and gays to be masculine. This shapes gay desirability in *QueerLife* in a way that suggests that masculine presenting gay men are more desirable than their feminine presenting counterparts (see Vanyoro 2020).

Despite the dominance of white images on *QueerLife*, an article titled '[q]ueer South African celebrities'<sup>11</sup> in the 4men section is an exception, as it contains the most number of Blacks in one photo (at the time of the study); namely Somizi, Sade, Toya, Thandiswa and Bujy, all of whom are upper-middle class and famously gay-identified Black people in South African popular culture. The entrance of these Black bodies into *QueerLife* bears testimony to Benita Moolman's (2013) argument that categories of Black masculinity are contested and renegotiated, as a considerable number of Black men enter elite status based on wealth and capital accumulation. While not

only Black men are featured in this article – women are too – I argue that the representation of Black men here follows norms that assimilate them into the Pink Economy. Moreover, the article is structured into five subheadings, each dedicated to profiling the five celebrities. Note how the author introduces each of them with a reference to their body of work as a take-off point (emphasis added):

Somizi

*Idols SA Judge and choreographer*, Somizi Mhlongo, is out and proud and not afraid to speak his mind ...

Toya De Lazy

*Singer* Toya De Lazy is known to push boundaries and challenge people's way of thinking, especially when it comes to hating someone because of their sexuality ...

Sade Giliberti

*The former Yo. TV presenter* is openly lesbian and has supported causes aimed at putting an end to bullying of any kind, and for whatever reason ...

Thandiswa Mazwai

While *singer* Thandiswa Mazwai do (sic) not excessively flaunt her private life on social media she does show she cares on the odd occasion ...

Bujy

*Bikwa's larger-than life personality*, Bujy, has seen him gain scores of fans over the years ...

First, the article assumes a strategic sentence ordering, meant to position the Black figures as classed and affluent in order to inspire reading. Owing to the consistency of this ordering (which starts with a person's achievements before dropping their actual name) it can be argued that, in order for predominantly invisible Black gay lives to be visible, they need to be associated with success – a worthwhile reference of pride. This ordering has the psychological effects of flagging these as important for obtaining the reader's interest. Consequently, the ideas of merit and Black exceptionalism are emphasised as criteria for the inclusion of Black gay men. Nevertheless, most of the lesbians and gays in South Africa are poor and remain marginalised from the country's political, social and economic mainstream (Croucher 2002). By starting sentences with phrases such as 'Idols SA Judge and choreographer, Somizi Mhlongo', the writer is justifying the validity of Somizi's appearance in this space as subject to his influence and affluence. These dynamics confirm previous and ongoing work (see Posel 2001) that rethinks the meaning of race and class in South Africa and how apartheid's close coupling of race and class is being dislodged or, alternatively, reinforced. With a number of Black people assuming positions of economic privilege, spaces that were once confined to white men have to assimilate upper-middle-class Black gay men.

## Conclusion

This article has demonstrated how race and class generally construct one another in the representation of gay men in *QueerLife*. It showed how Black people are represented as sexual objects, athletic or well-built. These racial stereotypes lubricate the machinery of the Pink Economy that thrives on the consumption of races. Representation of white people in *QueerLife* constructs them as the epitome of gay masculinity. This subtly sustains hegemonic white masculinity as a figure of normalcy in South Africa. The article showed how race is not the singular identity marker that influences the representation of gay men, but that it intersects with other identity markers, such as class. Overall, the analysis in this article shows the importance of holding race and class together, and analysis. It also shows that there is a need to examine seemingly innocent online texts and the underlying aesthetics of power that they have. While such research has been carried out on online magazines such as *The Advocate*, *Gay Pages* and *QueerLife*, there is also a need for research that investigates identity markers such as disability, age and ethnicity. Overall, *QueerLife* is simply an online carnival for the exhibition of how Black and white gay lives negotiate power relations that were primarily created through the whitewashing of the gay identity offline.

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## Notes

1. See <https://queerlife.co.za/>
2. See <https://queerlife.co.za/contact-us/>
3. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/low-bad-boys/>
4. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/secret-sexy-butt-2/>
5. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/need-gym-buddy-2/>
6. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/give-and-take/>
7. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/its-all-about-the-mouth/>
8. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/rugby-fetish-gay-men/>

9. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/how-to-dress-that-butt/>
10. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/am-i-mr-right/>
11. The article is available online at <https://queerlife.co.za/queer-south-african-celebs/>

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