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Seeing Me: Influential Queer Black Men in Entertainment

For a long time, I only had white gay men and white gay male characters in movies and TV shows as a reference for what gay men should be. I spent many summers as a preteen watching soap operas and TV shows with gay storylines like *Days of Our Lives* and *Queer As Folk* and any gay short film that I could find. However, I had a hard time seeing myself within them because first and foremost they were white men, living or playing a role in white culture, surrounded by white characters or counterparts. Unfortunately without me being aware of it, I began to fetishize white men and think black gay men were not the kind of men I should aspire to be in a romantic relationship with or surround myself with. In elementary school, I attended a majority-black school and was bullied for being gay and more effeminate by black boys and girls. And from 5th-12th grade, I attended majority-white schools. The rejection of those who looked like me and the admiration of white people (especially white males) in my new environment only made my fetishization worse. I was not only surrounded by mostly white kids but I was also one of very few students who was openly gay, black or white. My feelings and mindset continued as I transitioned to community college and then university when I started using dating apps like Grindr and Tinder. “According to Susan Sontag, there is a pattern of preference for white men, even among gay men of color, that hides the larger structures of power

that places a premium value on whiteness. And in a recent study by Rafalow, Feliciano, and Robnett (2017) find that gay men of color and lesbians of color are more likely to exclude members of their own race as sexual partners than gay white men or white lesbians” (Chong-Suk, and Kyung-Hee, *Very Few People Say "No Whites": Gay Men of Color and The Racial Politics of Desire*). It wasn't until last summer (2022) after going on a less-than-pleasant date with a white man that I wasn't going to put them on a pedestal anymore and focus on embracing black gay men and black gay culture. I started off by pursuing black queer men to become friends with, exploring the ballroom culture of St. Louis (which are events in which LGBTQ+ individuals and others perform in different categories in front of judges and compete against each other for trophies) and now doing this research project for the Undergraduate Research Symposium. I did this project for me to gain even more appreciation for the group I belong to and improve my self-worth and for young black queer men like me who don't have representation and don't even know that they need it. There is a need to showcase a variety of black gay men in entertainment because this allows different types of gay black men to find examples of themselves in this field or just in general. Entertainment is one of the most accessible and affordable avenues for us to use to help see ourselves out in the world. And learning about these different men can help fill the void of not having a black gay male figure to look up to if a young gay black male doesn't have this in their personal life. It is important for straight people of any race who don't know that these men exist and need to read about them to expand their scope of knowledge and help those around them who happen to be black gay men. Equally important, this is for black parents who oftentimes don't have the examples, knowledge, or tools to help their children who may be queer grow up to love themselves and those like them.

Homosexuality has been an ignored or deplorable subject within the black community for many years. This outlook often stems from the religious and conservative beliefs that are ingrained within black culture (Davis, Hilton, Outten, Underserved populations at Historically Black Colleges and Universities: The Pathway to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion). This has resulted in many black queer men experiencing shame and the need to hide who they really are around loved ones and many others within the community (Clarke, DeMarquis, Growing Up Gay in Black America: An Exploration of the coming out process of Queer African American Youth) . On top of this, there has been a lack of representation of queer black men in entertainment for many years. Part of this has been due to a lack of storylines that feature and are written for them (Anderson, Tre'Veil, Niche casting and Hollywood's lingering reluctance to feature gay black actors). However, movies like *Black Panther* which was the highest-grossing movie of 2018, and artists like Saucy Santana and Lil Was X, prove that taking a chance on a movie or artist that isn't the norm can pay off and be widely successful.

People want to see themselves outside of themselves and often, our perceptions of certain minorities might change if we see them in a positive way in the media. Recently, there have been some queer black men who have gained the attention and recognition that they deserve but there needs to be more representation in all areas, especially people behind the scenes who are making decisions for what is presented to the public. More black queer men in entertainment matters for a number of reasons. First, as someone who is queer and black when I see and hear someone like me in the media, I feel seen and less alone in an environment dominated by straight people. And I think many other queer black men feel the same way, even if they don't realize it. Two, it fosters awareness and inclusivity, if someone who doesn't know any queer black men listens to

an artist or see's a queer black male character on TV this could dissolve homophobic attitudes, and racism and open up conversations. And prevent a young black boy who might be gay from going through the same trauma I went through. As I have recently started to appreciate my black queer identity, I wanted to put a spotlight on several influential queer black men in entertainment who have made an impact on me.

The first person I will highlight is a rapper named Saucy Santana. Saucy Santana was born in Bridgeport Connecticut but relocated to Florida at age 10. Before he began his rap career as an adult, he started doing makeup for the popular Miami rap girl group The City Girls. He started rapping in 2019 and that same year he released "Walk'em Like A Dog" which did extremely well on the streaming website SoundCloud and on other platforms like Spotify. In 2020 he released "Material Girl" and "Walk," both streamed very well and went viral on TikTok with "Walk" inspiring the challenge and hashtag "WalkChallenge." In 2022 he released a remix of "Material Girl" with Madonna who released a hit song by the same name in 1985. His music and personality are bold, raunchy, and unapologetic which is something many can't help but respect and be intrigued by. The way he embraces his femininity and masculinity at the same time or sometimes one or the other is something I try to do. The male side of hip-hop is dominated by straight men with hyper-masculine personalities, lyrics, and appearances. Someone like Saucy Santana helps gay men like me who embrace their feminine side feel included in the genre. Also, the rapper frequently references men in his lyrics which is something I can relate to more as many straight rappers mention their attraction to women in their songs. Most importantly, his presence and commercial popularity will open the door for other black gay rappers in the future to be recognized and gain commercial success.

The second individual I am featuring is a TV Character named, Uncle Clifford. Uncle Clifford is played by the actor Nicco Annan in the Television show *P-Valley*. Nicco was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, and has been playing the character of Uncle Clifford for over ten years. Uncle Clifford is a non-binary person and their pronouns are she/her. Because she has made an impact on my life and on the LGBTQ community as a whole, it felt right to include her. In the show, Uncle Clifford is the owner of the gentlemen's club, The Pynk, located in fictional Chucalissa, Mississippi. Because of her confidence, demand for respect, and the club's popularity amongst the town's citizens, she is held in high regard. The character is mostly known for her witty and bold personality and her flamboyant and over-the-top style, hair, makeup, and nails. She oversees all operations that have to do with the club, especially the dancers and often acts as a mother figure to them. The show is watched by many people and therefore has probably exposed many of them to a non-binary person within the LGBTQ community, especially one who is black. This has sparked some backlash, but the character has received a tremendous amount of support and recognition from many. For example, Annan has been featured in *Essence* magazine online, *The Hollywood Reporter*, and *Vanity Fair* for his role as the character. Annan has also received an NAACP Image Award for Best Actor in a Drama Series for the role. Although I am not non-binary and usually do not dress like Uncle Clifford, her vibrant personality and how she treats every room she walks in like a stage reminds me of myself.

Watching this show was the first time I have seen a non-binary queer black character like her on TV. People who identify and present themselves like Uncle Clifford, especially black people, have an example of themselves in a current mainstream TV series. The character is a win for the

black queer community as a whole because when one of us is represented it creates room for other people and characters who are like Uncle Clifford or similar to be exposed to larger audiences. And the more people see Uncle Clifford and others like her she won't be looked at like this “special creature” and just a human being.

The third person I am highlighting is an Actor named, Colman Domingo. Domingo was born and raised in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and originally wanted to become a photojournalist. But eventually, he found his way to acting and ended up on Broadway. He has been acting since the 90s and has been a theatre director for 30 years. He has appeared in movies and T.V Shows such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, and most notably, the hit HBO Drama, *Euphoria*. In 2022, he won a Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Guest Actor in a Drama, a Hollywood Critics Association Award for Best Actor in a Limited Series/Anthology, and an NAACP Image Award for Best Supporting Actor in a Drama for his role as Ali in *Euphoria* (colmandomingo.com).

I felt it necessary to include Domingo as someone who represents the LGBTQ+ community because he is one of very few black male actors who is openly gay that has starred in major motion pictures and has been recognized by prestigious organizations such as the Emmys and Critics Choice Association. I also included him because of how multifaceted he is. In *Euphoria*, he plays a former addict and a gentle yet stern mentor/ father figure to the main character Rue who is addicted to drugs. But in the movie, *Zola*, he plays a pimp to two women. Along with acting and being a Theatre Director he is also a producer and owns his own production company,

Edith Productions. Aside from his art and accomplishments, personally, he has a very warm and kind spirit, is very determined in continuing his purpose, and enjoys a lot of the same things I do, such as the sun, nature, and enjoying the company of people. Lastly and most importantly, he is an older more seasoned gay black man, and I think his presence is important for gay black men within his age group (50s and 60s) that don't have much representation in mainstream entertainment.

The fourth individual is a TV Personality, Actor, Author, and former Social Worker Karamo Brown. Brown grew up in a household in which his mother was abused by his father. This eventually caused him to develop anger issues and use drugs. In his early adult years, he became the first black openly gay man on reality TV when he starred in The MTV series, *The Real World: Philadelphia*. However, at the time he didn't know he was the first. Although this was a great achievement, it only made his relationship with drugs worse as he was surrounded by drugs, alcohol, and social pressure while filming the show. Years after the *Real World*, he found out that he had a 10-year-old son named Jason Brown by his only girlfriend he had when he was 15. After traveling to meet his son in Texas, he decided to move there and become a full-time dad. And with the permission of his son's mother, he gained full custody. In 2011 he decided to adopt his son's half-brother Christian. Faced with the responsibilities of fatherhood, he decided to get clean and enter anger management classes. Because of this process, he was inspired to pursue a bachelor's in social work. Fast forward to today, he is the "Culture Expert" for the international hit show, *Queer Eye* which is about helping people become their best selves. He also has a self-titled talk show. For the show he uses his background in social work where he learned to explore and appreciate his different identities of being black, openly gay, and a son of immigrant parents

(Jamaican and Cuban descent) to name a few to help everyday people get to the root of their issues. And achieve success through appreciating and utilizing their different identities. Due to his work, he received the 2018 Human Rights Campaign Visibility Award. I am naturally a conversationalist and people often tell me I am easy to open up to. Karamo also has these qualities and a career path similar to the one I would like to go down. Seeing a gay black man like Karamo who is eloquent, cultured, and serving others on large platforms like Netflix and cable TV gives gay black men like me an example to look up to.

The last group of individuals I will mention are the hosts of the podcast, Surface Level. The cast consists of three black queer best friends named Damon, Tony, and Jordan who have known each other for over ten years and went to Howard University together. On the show, they discuss issues pertaining to queer black people, in particular queer black men, and frequently invite guests who are experts in their fields to enrich the conversation. Some of them have included, celebrity makeup artist, Sir John (who was Beyonce's makeup artist for many years) and Nicco Annan who plays Uncle Clifford in *P-Valley*.

The purpose of the podcast is to “create a community where black and queer folks are fearless in thought and curious at heart” (Surface Level, Spotify). Some topics they have touched on are fatphobia within the gay community and society as a whole, domestic violence in queer relationships, and the acceptance of queerness amongst straight black men. The topics they discuss shed light on many experiences and issues that queer black men face and black people, in general, go through. Since launching the show in 2020, they have gained a devoted following on Spotify, almost 6,000 followers on Instagram, and almost 2,000 subscribers on YouTube. Saint

Louis has a small gay community and an even smaller black queer community, and since I live in Florissant I am far away from gay-friendly hubs like the Grove and Tower Grove Park. For this reason, I have very few black male queer friends and the podcast and the hosts have been helping to fill that void. Tony is very extroverted, Damon is deep and inquisitive, and Jordan is more reserved. All three of them are intelligent, very well-spoken, handsome, and accomplished individuals. All of these characteristics are a part of my identity and until listening to this podcast, I had never seen or listened to a group of gay black men who align so closely to who I am. They make me feel less alone, seen, and heard in an environment where I often don't feel understood on topics that have to do with queer black men. I usually listen to the podcast on my way to school and often chime in the conversation as if I am actually there (That's how I really know it's good). Based on the many encouraging reviews they have received, there are other black queer men who feel similarly.

I don't see myself completely in all of these men, but that's ok. What matters is that I see gay black men making an impact in a positive way. From Saucy Santana and his flamboyant personality to how gentle and kind Coleman Domingo is, each of these men embodies characteristics that are a part of me and I don't have to find this all in one person. This is one of the most important aspects that black queer men and others reading this should take with them. I hope we can get to a point in society where black gay men will be regularly seen in entertainment and that we will continue to see positive examples so that more queer black men and boys will appreciate who they are earlier in life.

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