



***Connection the Dots: A Podcast series by the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD)***

**Podcast #1: Black Gay Men's Sexuality, Part 2**

The first installment of NASTAD's 2009 podcast series, *Connecting the Dots*, focuses on Black gay men's sexuality. Because of the complexity of this topic, our first installment will be divided into four parts:

Part one explored the influences of identity, masculinity and femininity and sexual objectification and mystique. Part one was released February, 5, 2009 and is available at [www.nastad.org](http://www.nastad.org).

Part two explores racism, gender identity and sexual roles.

Part three will explore pop culture and media.

Part four will explore self-value and power and privilege and will discuss how all issues covered in this installment work directly and indirectly to influence the health and wellness of black gay men.

**Patrick Wilson** and **Terrance Moore** lead this conversation. Patrick is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Medical Sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. His research focuses on ethnic, minority men who have sex with men, sexuality and HIV prevention. Terrance is an Associate Director at NASTAD who leads NASTAD's work around ethnic and racial health disparities, which includes a focus on African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asians and Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians. The moderator for this conversation is **Dave Kern**, NASTAD's Director of Strategic Initiatives.

NASTAD's Podcast series, ***Connecting the Dots***, explores the complexities that shape our understanding of the HIV/AIDS, STD and viral hepatitis epidemics in the United States. The podcasts in this series examine topics through multiple lenses, including the behavioral, social, political and structural contexts in which behaviors occur, in which programs and services are delivered and in which policies are made. Through structured interviews with experts, each podcast in the *Connecting the Dots* series will help listeners identify and better understand the key influences that converge around a particular topic. The interviews will help build connections between these influences to create a clearer and more meaningful picture of the world we work in. By connecting the dots between issues, both profound and superficial, we gain new insights and ideas, renew our commitment to asking difficult questions and seek to better address the complex realities we face.

*Dave Kern:* Let's turn the conversation now to racism and I'd like to get some of your thoughts about that. Terrance, first how would you say racism is manifested in America?

*Terrance Moore:* I think that this is probably the most difficult question because I think that, you know we've had a myriad of conversations about this piece, but I certainly think that racism in 2008 is very different from racism circa 1968. And racism circa 1968 was far more in your face. There were water hoses. There were people spitting on each other. There were, you know, separate venues for a variety of things. Racism circa 2008 is far more granular. And I think that in terms of how we deal with it now, I think that's gonna be one of the greatest questions of the twenty-first century, is how we deal with racism in modern society. I think that, you know, we cannot continue to deal with racism the way we dealt with racism 40 years ago. We have to be much more sophisticated. We have to have a sophisticated mouth. We have to have a sophisticated ear and we really need to be careful about wielding the "R" word like acid the way we did in 1968. We need to be looking at racism in its much more fine, granular, nuanced ways and really attacking those things that I believe to be far more corrosive now in modern society than the kind of obvious, you know, hosing down of individuals on a bridge in Alabama. And so those are the things that I think are, uh, I think that's the great question of the twenty-first century.

*Dave Kern:* Patrick, some folks that we're in a post-racial America. Is that true?

*Patrick Wilson:* That is absolutely not true. And I say that with conviction because I really would want anyone listening to this to understand that there's no such thing in 2008, and I'll dare to say in 2009, of a post-racial America. I think that we are celebrating the achievements that we've made and they deserve to be celebrated, as Terrance just referred to the America of 2008 is insanely different from the America of 1968. Our parents went through things that I will never be able to understand in some ways. But it really frightens me to think about this idea of a post-racial society when we still have the disparities that exist within our society, and, this is, we're talking about HIV within this conversation but poverty, incarcerations, healthcare access, you name it. Those disparities exist not because of individual deficits, and this is where science has shown us this but society may not want to accept this, not because of individual deficits but because of social phenomena, because of race, because of class, because of gender, and if we assume that we've gone beyond those distinctions that we make among people of different groups and backgrounds and that those distinctions don't inform the disparities that exist, then we are going to plummet, I believe, into a society where we truly are one of "haves" and

"have-nots" and the "have-nots" will be disproportionately represented by Black people, Latino people, immigrants, women, impoverished persons. You asked if we are in a post-racial society, and I've just gone and told you that we're not in a post-racial, a post-immigrant, a post-gender society, and I just think that it's important that we do understand that. That we've made a lot of progress but much of what makes us not a post-racial society is exactly what Terrance mentioned. We don't have flagrant racism as much as we did 20, 30, 40 years ago. Certainly within this century we've made leaps and bounds in flagrant racism. The Civil Rights Act [of 1964] did enormous things to prevent that, but we have a history of racism in this country which is invisible to many but it is felt none-the-less. We have institutionalized racism which really has to do with policies that affect who gets where, who has the opportunity to go where. And we still do have interpersonal racism, it's just, as Terrance mentioned in the conversation we had earlier, a lot more nuanced than it used to be. So, I may not be called the same names that I was called, or people of my color were called, 40, 50 years ago but, in some ways, that makes it even more difficult because now you need to identify the ways in which people don't even know that their projecting or perpetuating racism. Because it is invisible to many, yet it's still very much alive. And I think all you have to do, in this office right now we are in Washington, D.C., in a beautiful office building, but if we walked, I would imagine, ten blocks away to Southeast Washington, D.C., where almost one in every two people is infected with HIV, we would see a different society. And I would beg anyone to say that we live in a post-racial America to take a walk in their own nation's Capitol to get a better idea of the answer to that question.

*Dave:* Alright, so we've talked about gender roles and sexual identity, so let's overlay now race and racism. Terrance, talk about how the three elements conspire to negatively influence Black gay men, particularly around Black gay men's sexuality.

*Terrance:* We have essentially forgotten our history, and I think many of us can only think about what has occurred in the twentieth and the twenty-first century. And I think, in order to answer this question, we have to go back several hundred years and really do, not just sort of glance over history, but really kind of dig deep into history. We don't know a whole lot before the seventeenth century spectrum. Many of us don't know that the kind of evolution of human beings as we know it comes from Sub-Saharan Africa. How powerful is that? We don't know that. We don't know our history. We don't know that there were once African dynasties that, essentially, usurped modern Greece. We don't know what it was like to kind of live in that society, and we also don't recognize as a broader society the fact that there are so many things that have led us to today in terms of, you know, Blacks

being brought to America or the Americas and being bred as animals. How does that really allow you to...how can you transform that or transcend that, shall I say? How can you transcend knowing that at one point in history, not too long ago, you were bred? You went from however-many thousands in the population to four million, because we could no longer as countries bring slaves to the United States. So, what's the answer to that? We breed you. That's a simple answer. I think that to think we can transcend that, even within the twenty-first century, is bordering on preposterous. It's going to take us hundreds of years to kind of, kind of get that out of our systems. And I think that that has a catastrophic effect on how we view each other, our broken trust among each other. And, it's interesting, I was walking down the street yesterday, and there was a woman four doors down, White woman, baby carriage, two kids. She was trying to lift a baby carriage up 15, 20 stairs. I stopped, turned to her and said, 'Oh, I can help you.' And there was this moment in time where there was trepidation in her voice and in her actions that was, in my eyes, in my mind, firmly in that kind of realm of 'maybe if you were a White man.' That's the reality of many Black men on a day-to-day basis. And I think that we can't just look at modern society as kind of our blueprint. Our blueprint is much larger than what's going on today. And I think in terms of what you're seeing and the excitement in this country and around the world around the, kind of, election of the first Black president is really firmly rooted in, in just that concept: Our ability as a nation to, kind of, self-correct. And I think that this is an enormous opportunity as a country for us to really not look at just kind of the easy stuff to look at because we sometimes just look at the really easy stuff. It's easy for us to identify something that, on its surface, is pink, when really we should be looking at the various shades or the various colors that make up the color pink. And I think that this is an opportunity in society now for us to really delve a little bit deeper in figuring out why we act and respond the way we respond to each other.

*Dave:* So, if, Patrick, racism and race really is the primary factor with which Black gay men view themselves or are viewed by others, are their lives hidden? Hidden from themselves? Hidden from White America?

*Patrick:* I like that you asked that question in multiple dimensions. Are they hidden from themselves? Are they hidden from their communities? Are they hidden from White America? There has been very little work, I'm a researcher, as you know, there's been very little work looking at Black gay men generally, but there is one really fantastic ethnography of Black gay men in Harlem, which, actually, a young man who passed away before his ethnography was published, wrote, but I wish more people read it. His name is Hawkswood. But he did an ethnography where he looked at Black gay men in Harlem, as I said, and really found that there was a vibrant culture

within Harlem among Black gay men. But that culture was largely hidden to the wider society, wider, White society. It was that way purposefully, in some ways, in that I think Black gay men form very tight networks that they don't always want to be inclusive of White gay men. I do think though the anthropological book I refer to, this work took place in the late '90's, I believe, and as someone who just moved from Harlem and know it quite well would actually say that things have changed a little bit since then, in that, there is more hiding. There is less exposure, less publicity around the reality of Black gay men within Black culture. I hesitate to say that there are families, Black families, in the United States that don't know they have Black gay men within their families, yet do they ever announce that? Do they even ever label it that? I don't know how many gay uncles I've heard of, and I just used my fingers to say 'quotes' around gay uncles, because they're never said to be gay. They just never get married. They never have kids. They move away from home a lot of times, often to places like New York or Chicago or San Francisco or Washington or Miami, and they lead separate lives, and this is, of course, if they have the means to do so, because, of course, there are a large number of men who stay within their family networks and who live lives as men who have sex with men and maybe even as lives as men who identify as gay but who publically, and even within their own more tighter social networks, are only assumed as such, but, in many ways, asked not to come out. And that's an important distinction, I think, that also has to also be looked at. When we think of White gay men and the politics of White gay men versus Black gay men and the emerging, because I do think they are emerging, politics of Black gay men. Terrance talked about Proposition 8 [in part one of this Podcast]. Coming out is not always top priority for Black gay men. In many ways it cannot be for them to maintain the bonds that are crucial to their existence. I'm not just talking about 'Oh I need to keep my friends,' I'm talking about 'I need to keep my source of income, I need to keep my parents around in my life so that I have some support, I need my peers to not disown me maybe they'll think things but I can't be openly and outwardly gay.' This is not the case everywhere and again I think that we should always try to think positively when we can and be hopeful about the future, but I do think right now in 2008 racism really creates a difficult situation for Black gay men to be open about their sexuality and that exists from within their community and again in the broader society.

*Terrance:* Can I just, I want to add to that for a second on just, you know, the issue *du'jour* really is right now Proposition 8. And I think that it's important to recognize that, you know, I don't think that it means that Black people, from a macro level, or Black gay men would never support that and making sure that comes into fruition, if you will. I think it means that there needs to be a meeting of the minds. I think that there are two populations,

and I'm going to say two, because I think going back to my whole paradigm of Black before you're gay and gay culture in general, in which for a lot of people means White gay culture, I don't think there needs to necessarily be kind of we go to our separate corners, and we never engage this issue. I think it's around meeting, trying to figure out what the other side is really thinking and what the other side truly needs. And really trying to have that conversation in order to move forward in this spirit of tearing down barriers, whether it's racial barriers or, in this case, barriers around civil rights, which essentially go hand-in-hand. And I think that that's what is so disturbing, going back to modern society, that we are so far more advanced and so far along in terms of our level of sophistication around issues, but, yet, we do it in a box. We do it in separate boxes, separate silos and there are never these cross discussions. There's never kind of this opportunity other than your, you know, extremely liberal places in the country to have that type of discourse where both sides come out of the discourse feeling full, feeling like they've been nourished, feeling like they understand what's going on with the other side.

*Dave:* Let me read you another quote the [NASTAD Black Gay Men's Issue Brief #3](#).

*Again, the vernacular is different. The religious context is different. The history of sexuality is different in the community. I think that needs to be paid attention to. The ways that male sexuality gets constructed in a White versus Black context really has to be wrestled with.*

*Dave:* Is that true Patrick?

*Patrick:* That's definitely true. And that is I think one of the more profound quotes in our Issue Brief ([NASTAD Black Gay Men's Issue Brief #3](#)). I particularly like the language that's used there around sexuality as a social construction, and this becomes an issue when it comes, we don't use that kind of language a lot. We think you're gay, that's just what it is. You're a man, that's just what it is. And all the things we tie to being a man or tie to being gay are, just, that's the reality. There are social constructions in that we created it. It's informed by history. It's informed by our social networks, our families. It's informed by media and, even more so, it's informed by the greater power structures that exist that are very insidious and invisible to us, but that we know, nonetheless, shape the way we view ourselves and the way we view others. And I do think that Black sexuality and Black gay men's sexuality does need to be understood and explored in a way that is distinct from other men's sexuality, other types of sexuality. And I think, not to belabor the point, but, Terrance, in talking about Proposition 8, and the need to bringing people together sort of speaks to this. Black gay men and

women have had families and raised children together within the Black community for a long period of time. So I don't think that Black, or marriage, excuse me, gay marriage is not an issue for Black gay men, but is it the top issue? I have a strong feeling no. I could even speak personally for myself and, as someone who has a great deal of opportunity, I just have to say, it is not the top issue. What's the top issue for me is seeing, honestly, my brothers and sisters in poverty lifted out of poverty, to see rights that have been not granted to individuals for decades now that have and should have been decades earlier, that's priority. And I think that becomes priority for many, many Black people in general.

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This podcast is part of NASTAD's 2009 series, *Connecting the Dots*. We hope you enjoyed this podcast and encourage you to visit NASTAD's blog ([www.nastad.wordpress.com](http://www.nastad.wordpress.com)) to offer us your comments, questions or ideas. We also invite you to explore other NASTAD tools and documents by visiting us on the web at [www.nastad.org](http://www.nastad.org).

NASTAD, the National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD), represents the nation's chief state health agency staff who have programmatic responsibility for administering HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis programs funded by state and federal governments. NASTAD is dedicated to reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS and viral hepatitis infection in the U.S. and its territories.