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The Anti-Black Hero: Black Masculinity Media Representation as Seen in Netflix Series Luke Cage and Fox Series Empire

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THE ANTI-BLACK HERO: BLACK MASCULINITY MEDIA REPRESENTATION AS SEEN IN NETFLIX SERIES LUKE CAGE AND FOX SERIES EMPIRE

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Current television often reinforces negative portrayals of Black men. The reoccurrence of the Black Brute, the Thug, and the modern day Coon stereotypical images on current television narrowly defines Black masculinity as a monolithic experience. Young Black boys are often unable to see themselves as those who are portrayed on television. The images they see on screen are sometimes not realistic. Unfortunately, for some young Black boys, these stereotypical images may heavily influence their own behavior. Society often criminalizes and demonizes young Black men as angry, violent, and dangerous. They pose as a supposed threat to society and are thought to be even more problematic as they age. Currently, there is a need for alternative representations of Black youth and masculinity, which will allow for young Black men to define themselves and not allow society to define them. More updated research is needed in order to both combat society's assumptions of Black masculinity and challenge current Black male television representations.

In the Netflix series, *Luke Cage,* the main character, Luke Cage, is given the power of super strength by a science experiment gone wrong in a prison lab. Wrongly accused of murder, he escapes prison and goes to Harlem as an undercover superhero. The Fox series, *Empire* is about protagonist Lucious Lyon, ex-husband of Cookie, hip-hop mogul, founder, and CEO of a successful record label called Empire who due to a diagnosis of Amyotrophic Laterals Sclerosis (ALS) must choose a successor among his three sons to run the multi-million dollar company. In this project I explore the following black male leads: Lucious Lyon in *Empire* and Luke Cage in *Luke Cage.* In addition, I explore the complexity of their characters and how their worldview of Black masculinity ultimately shapes their masculinity as Black men. While both were created as innovative representations of Black masculinity, they are mirrored images of historical

stereotypes of Black men: the Thug as portrayed by Lucious Lyon in *Empire* and the Black Brute as portrayed by Luke Cage. This project is significant because there are few analyses on *Empire* and *Luke Cage* that address the subject of how the Black male leads in these shows embody stereotypes while simultaneously challenging existing stereotypes.

My project offers a counter deconstruction of Black male stereotypes such as the Black Brute, Black Thug, and the modern day Coon as they relate to Black male leads in *Empire* and *Luke Cage.* Questions guiding my analysis include how do the Black male leads in *Empire* and *Luke Cage* embody stereotypical imagery? What are the tropes of Blackness, Black love, and Black male gender performance/worldview in *Empire* and *Luke Cage* as represented by the Black male leads? I will move forward with these research questions in my project through the interdisciplinary methodology of historical and visual analysis. My research builds on the work of Herman Gray, bell hooks, and Stuart Hall and analyzes the shift in current Black male representations in popular culture through a Black feminist lens. Themes addressed in this research project include Blackness, Black love, and Black male gender performance and worldview. With these themes this research will achieve a broader perspective and highlight the limitations of Black male representation in current television.

Justification for the Project

In the last two years, the rising popularity of the Fox series, *Empire*, and the Netflix Original series, *Luke Cage*, has brought attention to the paradigm shift that Black male representation has undergone on current television. This project is significant because there are very few analyses on this subject and Black male representation on television is worthy of deeper historical and visual content analysis. This project offers a counter deconstruction of Black male stereotypes and tropes as demonstrated in *Empire* and *Luke Cage* and this original project will

benefit the research canon of American Studies. My thesis has three focus areas.

First, I explore the similarities and differences of contemporary Black male leads in *Empire* and *Luke Cage*, as they compare to historical media Black male representations. Second, I explore how Black male leads in *Empire* and *Luke Cage* embody, yet challenge stereotypical imagery. Lastly, I explore the tropes of Black love in each show as represented by the Black male leads and their love interests. Additionally, the significance of place and its impact on each character's Black masculinity will offer a new lens for conceptualizing how Black masculinity operates in various ways that are not depicted on television, but are reflective in Black male realities.

Part One, "The Theme of Blackness," explores the history of the harmful stereotypes of the Black Brute, the modern day Coon, and the Thug as they have been represented through the media platform. Primarily, my analysis demonstrates through the use of visual discourse analysis, how the shift in historical stereotypes continues to impact how Black men define and recognize themselves based on these harmful images. The significance of the shift in these stereotypes also points to how they are seemingly masked as new Black images as seen in *Empire* and *Luke Cage*, yet with a closer look much of the same harmful stereotypes are present in both of these present day shows. Finally, I discuss the power of images and why an examination of Black cultural imagery is essential to understanding how Black masculinity is impacted by Black male representation in both past and present television shows.

Part Two, "The Theme of Black Love," begins a dialogue about how Black male leads in *Empire* and *Luke Cage* navigate their romantic and familial relationships as Black men. In the section "No Homo: The Rise of Homophobia and Its Effect on Black Masculinity," the discussion about how Lucious and his father-son relationship with his same-sex attracted and

second oldest son, Jamal Lyon, highlights the taboo topic of Black gay love in the Black community and how Black gay love can cause tension between father and son.

In the second section of Part Two, in "Twenty-First Century Mandingo: The Hyper-Sexualization of Black Heroism and Masked Emotional Vulnerability as seen in Luke Cage" I explain the reoccurring trend of the hyper-sexualization of Black superheroes through Luke Cage's character. In comparison to other Netflix Original Marvel Series white male superheroes, Luke Cage's character purely focuses on his physicality rather than his mentality, which continues the revamping of the exoticism and hyper-sexualization of Black male bodies that has occurred since slavery. The overemphasis of his super strength and sexual prowess leads female character counterparts to view him as tall, dark, and handsome rather than focus on his intellectualism, which the show fails to emphasize. As a consequence of his hyper-sexualization, he is emotionally available to the women he is involved with and therefore characterized as emotionally stoic.

The final section, Part Three, "The Theme of Black Male Gender Performance and Worldview," explores how Black male gender performance and worldview is shaped by place. Where Lucious and Luke Cage grew up impacted their way of thinking and acting around others. In "The Impact of Place: Black Cultural Symbols and Imagery in Harlem and New York City," I discuss the significance of boyhood, the Black church, and the influence of father figures and/or male friends on their perception of what a Black masculine image was meant to look like. I then offer a visual content analysis on Black cultural symbols and imagery in both *Empire* and *Luke Cage* in which I explore the shows' attempts to illustrate culturally relevant symbols in the Black community and their importance in Black cultural discourse.

Research Methods

I utilize two interdisciplinary methods of historical and visual content analysis. Utilizing historical methodology, I compare and contrast Black male leads from both *Empire* and *Luke Cage* to Black male leads in two past television series, *The A-Team* (1983-87) and *Martin* (1992-1997) to further conceptualize the paradigm shift from infamous Black antihero in the 1980s to comedic Coon in the 1990s and back to infamous black antihero as seen in the 2000s. In addition to including a content analysis of contemporary Black male leads, I include how government policy changes shaped the sociocultural environment in the age of Reaganism and how this impacted the ways in which Blackness was represented from the 1980s-1990s to now. I will explain in my analysis the significance of the historical period of the 1990s and the resurgence of Black leads in stereotypical Coon roles similar to what occurred in the early 1950s-1960s. This is seen in my analysis of *Martin* (1992) where I discuss his goofy demeanor and appearance, cross dressing, and degradation of women.

Literature Review

Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding is useful in the analysis of the representation of black male characters as seen in the television series' *Luke Cage* and *Empire*. His argument contributes to the understanding of the interpretation of mass media texts. He asserts that encoding is the framework of knowledge and decoding is the process in which audience members are exposed to televised messages that, as Hall argues, have a complex structure of dominance.[1] The sign is not fixed or determined by the sender, the message is not transparent, and the audience is not a passive recipient of meaning.[2] Building on Hall's work, Gray defines the sign of blackness as:

   a sign of this otherness, blackness was constructed along a continuum ranging from

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[1] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), 90.
[2] Stuart Hall, *The Cultural Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 1993), 91.

menace on one end to immorality on the other, with irresponsibility located somewhere in the middle. Only through such appeals to menace and irresponsibility, framed and presented in television news through figures of black male gang members, black male criminality, crumbling black families, black welfare cheats, black female crack users, and black teen pregnancy, could such claims on America (and its image of middle –class, heterosexual, masculine whiteness) find resonance within the discourse of traditional values.[3]

Also influenced by Hall, John Fiske in "Television: Polysemy and Popularity," demonstrates that media text must be polysemic.[4] The audience relationship to hegemonic ideology is symbolic of the social struggle for power. The concept of encoding and decoding, according to Hall, allows audience members ways in which they are able to interpret and relate to the concept of Blackness as it is presented on television. The culture industry in regards to current television represents different niches of the Black media experience. Television media embodies how Blackness is not a monolithic experience, yet the media conceptualizes Blackness as performance instead of an intersectional experience. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, "Unending sameness also governs the relationship to the past. What is new in the face of mass culture compared to that of late liberalism is the exclusion of the new."[5]

Current television reinforces stereotypes as enacted by Black male characters with the illusion of these stereotypes that are seemingly new. Newness is rejected in favor of innovations based on established traditions. Despite current television embodying Blackness and Black culture, I suggest that the shows are meant to appeal to a white audience as much as they do Black audiences. Luke Cage is an innovative spin on the Black brute stereotype as he is bulletproof and invincible. His outside appearance masks him as bulletproof, which also serves

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[3] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 17.

[4] John Fiske, "Television: Polyysemy and Popularity," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 4 (1986): 392.

[5] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*, 1944, 106.

as a metaphor to show his emotional being is masked as well. That is, Luke Cage's incarnation of the Black brute does not expose or deconstruct white guilt because his seemingly bulletproof nature signifies that society is incapable of hurting him, and the audience cannot hurt him either. White audience members are unable to be empathetic due to his bulletproof nature despite his physical, emotional, and mental pain caused by systemic racism made visible by his prison experience.

Lucious Lyon's character appeals to white audience members because he embodies the Black Thug stereotype with his indifferent demeanor that represents Richard Majors and Janet Billson's "cool pose."[6] Cool pose as defined by Majors and Billson is a coping mechanism for black men to navigate through oppression and manage their feelings of self-doubt and low self-esteem under a mask.[7] Firmly entrenched in the Black male psyche, cool pose acts as a mask that from the outside suggests confidence, control, and strength.[8] Yet, what it does is mask the fear and inner turmoil that haunts the Black male.[9] The theme of hip-hop and Lucious' thug behavior in *Empire* allows white audience members to interact with Blackness and Black culture from a distance. This is problematic because it promotes a false knowledge of Blackness and Black culture because Lucious' character is deeply flawed and stereotyped as a Black thug to fulfill the desires of white audience members. Lucious reinforces the idea that Black men are incapable of measuring up against white male patriarchal standards of masculinity despite the amount of money or accolades they achieve because they are Black.

In Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness, Herman Gray explores the shift in historical Black sitcoms beginning with the era of the 1950s and ending with the 1990s.

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[6] Richard Majors and Janet Mancini Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America* (New York: Lexington Books, 1992).
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.

The few representations that did exist of blacks that appeared on network television in the 1950s and throughout the 1960s were not explicitly stereotypical, yet the "fact of blackness"[10] was not a central theme. Network television programs of that time, such as *The Nat "King" Cole Show* (1956-7), *I Spy* (1965-68), and *Julia* (1968-71), contained representations of blackness as they sought to gain acceptance of white viewers.[11] A shift in 1970s black television representations operated within the historical context of the social rebellions and protest of the previous decade.[12] According to Gray, "Against this discursive backdrop as well as the social rebellions of the 1960s, the presentations of black Americans that appeared throughout the 1970s were a direct response to social protests against American society in general and a collective outcry of the general absence of black representations on television.[13] Despite the increase in black representations, shows, such as *Good Times* (1974-79), *Sanford & Son* (1972-7), and *What's Happening!* (1976-9), largely enforced the theme of urban poor blacks who were either unemployed or underemployed in the ghetto. Underneath this inauthentic representation of Black people was the mask of heteronormative white middle class construction of normalcy.[14] In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the humor continued to exist, but a shift in representation occurred as more black, upward social mobility and middle-class affluence took center stage in sitcoms such as: *The Jeffersons, Diff'rent Strokes*, and *Gimme a Break*.[15]

According to Gray, *The Cosby Show's* debut in the 1980s is pivotal to understanding the cultural significance of how Blackness in contemporary television representations continues to succumb to the trope of the heteronormative Black middle class. Although *The Cosby Show*

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[10] Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 76.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 77.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 79.

failed to comment on the socioeconomic disparities and constraints that structurally violate the rights of millions of black individuals, current television utilizes the platform of television to highlight contemporary structural injustices that impact the Black community. This is the shift that occurs in contemporary black television representations circa 2015-2016. Shows such as *Sanford & Son* created commentary on social injustices that occurred in the 1970s, and current television continues a dialogue about social injustices and trauma that have occurred in the past decade. These injustices include topics such as police brutality, Black on Black crime, Black financial disenfranchisement and gentrification.

Black feminist scholar, hooks, in her works *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies, Black Looks: Race and Representation,* and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* explores the tropes of black love in the black community. Specifically, in *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love,* hooks argues, "The first act of violence that patriarchy demands of males is not violence toward women. Instead patriarchy demands of all males that they engage in acts of psychic self-mutilation, that they kill off the emotional parts of themselves."[16] According to hooks, "Sex, then, becomes for most men a way of self-solacing. It is not about connecting to someone else but rather about releasing their own pain."[17] Through their sexual encounters and relationships, Black men exude on the outside strong patriarchal identity, but at the expense of a successful romantic relationship. Thus, the trope of unromantic love continues to exist for Black men, as a result of their disconnection and dissociation from their own personal traumas. Through the act of sex, "they claim the body of the colored Other instrumentally, as unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier that will be fertile ground for their reconstruction of the masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring

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[16] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 66.
[17] Ibid., 82.

subjects."[18] In *Black Looks: Race and Representation,* hooks describes this as "imperialist nostalgia."[19] That is, the power and desire of sex with the Other is the ultimate way to prove one's masculinity especially when the sexual encounter is an interracial one or with a lighter complexioned woman/man. hooks offers a critique of the portrait of black masculinity as it oftentimes stereotypes or rather "constructs black men as "failures" who are psychologically "fucked up," dangerous, violent, sex maniacs whose insanity is informed by their inability to fulfill their phallocentric masculine destiny in a racist context."[20] Both Gray and hooks agree that the shift in the 19th and 20th centuries from the stereotypical lazy, caricature representations to that of Black male identity that continues to exist in the shadow of white male supremacist notions of patriarchy has only made black masculine identity much more complex and fragile. Majors and Billson argue that cool pose is paradoxical as it awards Black men the social acceptance and control, but ultimately causes their relationships with Black women to fail.[21]

In Perry *et. al's* article "You Ain't No Denzel": African American Men's Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships," we see how modern characterizations of Black masculinity in media have contributed to increases in Black male fragility and complexity. The article takes a look at how hip-hop has emerged as a defining force in how many Black men conduct themselves in love and relationships. According to Perry *et. al*,

> "in making meaning of their relationships, several participants made reference to media and popular culture. Many of the participants invoked the names and work of hip-hop and rhythm and blues artists to explain the ways in which their relationships had evolved over time. For some, this meant making a public display of their commitment by proposing marriage and "putting a ring on it," while for others, these references were linked to the unique characteristics the men ascribed to their loyal romantic partners."[22]

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[18] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 24.
[19] Ibid., 25.
[20] Ibid., 89.
[21] Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, 42.
[22] Armon Perry, Siobhan Smith, and Derrick Brooms, "'You Ain't No Denzel': African American Men's Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships," *Journal of African American*

Consequently, many media portrayals of Black males' romantic relationships have been stereotyped as hypersexual, unfaithful, and prone to violence.[23] In contrast, Patricia Hill Collins argues that the idea of protecting the Black woman constitutes the measure of black manhood as a harmful notion that "for many men, became harnessed to ideologies of Black masculinity in such a way that Black manhood became dependent on Black women's willingness to accept protection."[24] This can only lead to what she describes as a "slippery slope"[25] as it breeds a strong male/weak female patriarchal paradigm as well as supports the idea of racial loyalty. Collins then asserts, "If society ascribes roles to black men which they are not allowed to fulfill, is it black women who must bend and alter our lives to compensate, or is it society that needs changing."[26] Historically, the black male ego has been under duress because of hegemonic discourse of white male patriarchal standards of masculinity. Rather than challenge the stereotype that Black men are incapable of successful and loving relationships with Black women and are not prone to violence, with few exceptions television continues to create characters that embody the stereotype that Black men are incapable of love as seen in the genre of drama. Yet, in several of popular comedies such as *Good Times* (1974), though working class—the Evans family was just one of many families who were fully in touch with hard working and caring fathers who were often struggling with systemic racism.

Furthermore, Black community symbols such as the Black barbershop equalize Black men. It transforms them into customers where one either pays for a haircut, or they come to enjoy the community. The Black barbershop erases the need to put on airs because their

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Studies 18, no. 4 (2014): 495.

[23] Ibid., 486.

[24] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 170.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid., 165.

Blackness is an authentic experience whereas as soon as they leave the shop they are forced back into Blackness as a performance against the expectations of mainstream America. Scholar Terry Sinclair Bozeman in "The Good Cut: The Barbershop in the African American Literary Tradition" demonstrates how the Black barbershop operates as a formative meditating space that aides the formation of Black male identity.[27] Bozeman's research begins to answer the question of the significance of the Black barbershop in the Black literary tradition, but also how it serves as the center of Black male gender performance and worldview.

In a similar way to the barbershop, hip-hop allows Black people, specifically Black men, the sense of freedom to express themselves and resist against the challenges of mainstream society. This is a shared Black community symbol often present in contemporary Black television shows. That is, hip-hop does not actively endorse the safe space to be fully emotionally vulnerable, but rather Black male artists must mask their emotional expression as anger and bravado. Hip-hop symbolizes the resistance that Luke Cage and Lucious symbolize. Their Black male gendered performances are acts of resistance that shift historical perceptions of Black masculinity in media. That is, Luke Cage as a bulletproof man in a modern white controlled police state fits the definition of Gray's and hooks' form of resistance. Also, Lucious Lyon's character in *Empire* serves to resist against the one percent that controls the music industry through his role as the CEO of Empire Entertainment, a powerful role not typically associated with Blackness. How Lucious achieves success is attributed to his ability to achieve the performance of hustling. As Majors and Billson argue, "the art of hustling, expressed in various forms of deceptive and manipulative activities is the cool cat's greatest weapon against

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[27] Terry Sinclair Bozeman, "The Good Cut: The Barbershop in the African American Literary Tradition" (Georgia State University, 2009).

poverty and social inequality."[28] Yet, while their gendered performances are meant to be resistant and may symbolize positive representations of Blackness and Black masculinity, their characters can also be problematic. One of the limitations of their characters is they are unable to showcase all ways of Black male gendered performance and Blackness. As it stands, there is no monolithic definition of Black masculinity. Thus, it is important not to see Luke Cage and Lucious as the defining voices for how society can rethink Black masculinity and Blackness.

Gray argues that the pivotal role of television is what emphasizes the power of these social constructions in viewers' everyday lives. hooks takes a similar approach, but looks at Black representations and texts in film. This provides a differing commentary due to the large scale of theatrical productions as well as the differing censors and limits of the art form. Moreover, both hooks and Collins provide a feminist reading of Black representations as well as products created by the hegemony and their relation to masculine and feminine characteristics of blackness.[29] Gray analyzes Black cultural television representations. He looks at them and their creation from the eyes of the most superior, the individuals that exercise the most power in U.S. society. He describes this as no other than the white controlled gaze. Gray also explores how Black productions are impacted by this imposed structural violence and racism through the influence of hegemony.

Although dated, Gray's work is nevertheless significant for the discussion of *Luke Cage* and *Empire* as each show operates in a white controlled space that mirrors Black realities through television. hooks analyzes film as cultural critic and focused primarily on the representation of the intersections of race, sex, and class encouraging readers to enhance their cultural gaze and view popular film through a new lens. hooks' work is useful to analyze *Luke*

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[28] Majors and Billson, *Cool Pose: The Dilemmas of Black Manhood in America*, 87.
[29] bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (Routledge, 2008), 6.

Cage and *Empire* as she deconstructs stereotypical images of both Black men and women. hooks argues, "Significantly, contemporary critiques of racial essentialism completely disrupt the notion that anything a black artist creates is inherently radical, progressive, or more likely to reflect a break with white supremacist representations."[30] She demonstrates that in order for Black artists to pursue crossover success, the representations they create mirror dominant stereotypical images.

The impact of how television impacts Black artists themselves is lacking in Herman Gray's work as he only focuses on the politics of television representation and how this contributes to society's cultural imagination of Blackness. hooks asserts that "Until both colonizer and colonized decolonize their minds, audiences in white supremacist cultures will have difficulty "seeing" and understanding images of blackness that do not conform to the stereotype."[31] Gray and hooks both support the idea that the viewers have the ability to exercise their autonomy. That is, each individual viewer's own personal experience and gaze is political. In an effort to challenge the colonial gaze, Gray and hooks emphasize the importance of deconstructing the production of stereotypical tropes and images, breaking away from this aesthetic to broaden viewers' cultural imaginations. The study of Blackness in television, the emergence of Black cultural studies and the numerous Black television innovations create the need for an updated study in the field. How does Gray feel about modern television tropes? Have things progressed since his last study? The burdens of Black male sexuality and homophobia are rampant concerns for the Black man. There is a lot of victim blaming towards Black men present in his work. Where Gray is lacking, is where hook's work is the strongest as her Black feminist lens works to deconstruct homophobia and is a more updated study of the cultural

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[30] Ibid., 58.
[31] Ibid., 72.

representations and politics of Blackness as they occur in film. Her views on homophobia in this work prove helpful, as it will serve as a commentary on the character Lucious' homophobia in *Empire*.

As demonstrated in the literature, representations of Black men have continued to show that current television is hampered by Black stereotypes. Although television series' *Luke Cage* and *Empire* have challenged Black stereotypes, they are plagued by the stereotypical images of the Black brute as seen in *Luke Cage* and the Black thug in *Empire.* Both series challenge Black stereotypes by highlighting social injustices that impact the Black community. Moreover, rather than primarily focus on their emotional stoicism, both television series demonstrate each character's emotional vulnerability. However, despite having high ratings by including and then challenging Black stereotypes they create a complex new other. The complexities of Black masculinity and the Black experience cannot be confined to a season for both these popular television series, yet these shows highlight the dynamism of the Black experience, which in turn invites future scholarship and media representation on Blackness.

Part One: The Theme of Blackness

Black and Boujee: The Imposition of Black Masculinity, Money, Power, and Fame as seen in Empire

Empire. *noun* |em.pire | \ˈem-ˌpī(-ə)r\ a(1): a major musical unit having a major influence on hip-hop, rap, and R&B fans across a vast number of territories under the single sovereign authority of hip-hop music mogul and creator, Lucious Lyon.[32]

However, it is not long before this sovereign ruler's empire is threatened. Thus, he must

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[32] Lee Daniels and Danny Strong, "Pilot," *Empire* (Fox, 2015).

act both viciously and quickly through acts of retaliation whether through blackmail or murder in an effort to retain his power. The significance of the word empire as it applies to the Fox drama series *Empire* represents a hip-hop enterprise under the single domination and control of antagonist, Lucius Lyon. The hip-hop music and entertainment company, Empire Entertainment based in New York portrays the founders' family drama as they each fight for their chance at the empire. Making its debut on January 7, 2015, directors Lee Daniels and Danny Strong exposes the callousness of the music industry.[33] With the support of a predominately Black cast and the powerful performances of two Oscar nominees, Taraji P. Henson and Terrence Howard, the show unapologetically makes visible Black cultural imagery with its fictional world of music, power, and drama. There have been very few successful Black family themed shows that could top *The Cosby Show*, but in just a few short weeks of its debut *Empire* managed to draw 9.8 million viewers. Viewership steadily increased every week to 14.9 million viewers and growing in the following months.[34]

Much of *Empire's* success can be attributed to the show's continuation of the resurfacing of the successful Black family anecdote, but this time with a twist of family drama. The Black cultural imagery in *Empire* reflects masculine realities as well. The show allows its audience to begin a dialogue on current political and social issues happening in society, particularly those that impact Black men as seen through Lucious and his three sons: Andre Lyon, Jamal Lyon, and Hakeem Lyon. His three sons are meant to represent today's generation of young Black men that are impacted the most by current political and social issues such as police brutality, mass incarceration, and violence (to name a few) that are included in the show's plot. The use of

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[33] "IMDb," *Empire*, n.d., http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3228904/.
[34] Eric Deggans, "Does Fox's 'Empire' Break or Bolster Black Stereotypes?," *Npr*, March 2015, http://www.npr.org/sections/monkeysee/2015/03/18/393785570/does-foxs-empire-break-or-bolster-black-stereotypes.

Empire utilizes its platform to broadcast how these issues impact young Black men's sense of reality, their self-esteem, and their sense of self. Much of what they hear in hip-hop and rap music is a mixture of reality and illusion. While the Lyon brothers have much to be thankful for as the sons of a hip-hop and rap music mogul, the music has also contributed to their downfall. Much like reality, the influence of hip-hop and rap music can warp a young Black boy's sense of reality and sense of self as he strives to be someone that does not exist. To clarify, the ways in which Lucious Lyon and his family obtained their success was through the means of being involved in crime and drug money, not through the means of the typical obtainment of the American Dream. Yet, it is important to recognize that most empires are a result of pillage, human exploitation, and/or crime; *Empire* fits this criterion.

Furthermore, Terrence Howard is Lucious Lyon, the former drug dealer turned hip-hop mogul and CEO of Empire Entertainment. All is well within the empire until Lucious' ex-wife; Cookie Lyon as played by Henson is released from prison and comes back with a vengeance. To make matters worse Lucious is diagnosed with a terminal illness which takes its toll on him. Overcome with concern with what will become of his empire, Lucious reveals to his sons: Andre (Trai Byers), Jamal (Jussie Smollett), and Hakeem (Bryshere Y. Gray) that one of them will become the head of the family music company, Empire Entertainment.

Driven by power, money, and greed the three sons are pitted against each other. *Empire* highlights the patriarchal aspect of the show through each of the sons' need to prove their masculinity. Overcome with the need to obtain money and power, the consequences of such greed are evident through the love/hate relationship between the three brothers and their father, Lucious. Their tumultuous familial relationship is the cause of trying to create a fragile Black masculine image from money and power. For instance, Andre Lyon, the eldest son, is the only

son to not be musically talented, but is the most educated as he graduated from Wharton Business School. He feels his expression of masculinity qualifies him to run Empire Entertainment as he is the most experienced with the business aspect of running the company, yet his masculinity is also represented as fragile due to his bipolar disorder that causes him to think and behave irrationally. The middle child, Jamal Lyon, is musically talented in the genre of R&B, but his masculinity is pinned as fragile as he is a self-identifying same-sex attracted Black man and is the most despised by his father. Lastly, the youngest Lyon, Hakeem, is musically talented in the genre of hip-hop/rap just like his father, yet is the most boisterous and irresponsible, and thus least qualified of the three to run Empire Entertainment. The downfall of his masculinity is that he overcompensates with his lust for women, alcoholism, and his need to create a fake rap mogul persona although he lives a cushioned lifestyle and not the street lifestyle he boasts about in his music.

The intersections of how each son's identity impacts the perception of masculinity is significant to how they interact with one another, their romantic relationships, as well as how they interact with their father—who himself suffers from a fragile masculinity. Lastly, although the Lyon brothers share the common experience of being male, they differ in their perception of their Blackness and sexuality/sexual experiences. It appears that the cycle is never-ending for the Lyon men as they all suffer from the need to demonstrate patriarchal notions of being even at the expense of being truly happy. The audience follows the Lyon family as each family member works to achieve sovereign rule of the empire. In addition, the family drama occurs against the backdrop of hip-hop and R&B music and dance performances that serve to interrupt serious scenes with lighthearted comedic relief and entertainment.

A Historical Analysis on the Black Brute and Coon Trope from the 1980s, 1990s, and The

Shift to Anti-Black Hero in the Now

On September 30, 2016, Netflix released the first season of *Luke Cage*, which is based on

the original Marvel Comics superhero, Luke Cage, for which the Netflix Original series is named

after. Making his debut in 1972, Luke Cage arrived on the scene during the rise of the

Blaxploitation films. Blaxploitation films are a genre of films that capitalized and continue to

capitalize on Black stereotypes. Marvel Comics jumped on the Blaxploitation bandwagon with

the creation of Luke Cage to exist along with Blaxploitation heroes such as Shaft, Super Fly, and

Sweetback. Arriving on the Marvel Comics scene, there were several things that made Luke

Cage stand out from other superheroes. Besides him being Black, he broke the trend of having

his name have Black in it as his predecessors Black Lightning, Black Panther, and Black Goliath

did.[35] He also charged for his services and worked for hire unlike many Marvel Comics

superheroes. Yet, this did not change readers' adoration of him; it only strengthened it. Luke

Cage filled a gap that Black America was looking for. According to Keith DeCandido, "Over the

years, Cage's appeal was the same as that of most of Marvel's heroes: he was, at heart, a regular

guy. A completely different type of regular guy from, say, Peter Parker [Spiderman], but the

Black community deserved their own workday hero who kept an eye on the little people."[36]

It seems that Cheo Hodari Coker, writer of the Netflix Original Series, *Luke Cage*,

wanted to preserve this image, but revamp it for young Black viewers in 2016. This reincarnation

of Luke Cage focuses on social issues that currently impact the Black community such as police

brutality, gentrification, as well as crime and violence. Taking place against the backdrop of the

unique atmosphere and culture of Black Harlem, Coker emphasizes the significance of Black

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[35] Keith DeCandido, "A Brief History of Luke Cage in the Comics," *Tor.com: Science Fiction. Fantasy. The Universe. And Related Subjects.*, 2016, http://www.tor.com/2016/09/29/a-brief-history-of-luke-cage-in-the-comics/.
[36] Ibid.

culture and music as each episode is named after songs of the hip-hop duo, Gang Starr. But this is not Cheo Hodari Coker's first successful film project as he known for *Notorious* (2009), a biopic based on the life of late rapper Notorious B.I.G., and *Southland* (2009), a drama series that focuses on the uncanny pair: veteran cop, John Cooper, and rookie Ben Sherman. His identity as a Black man is significant to *Luke Cage* just as Lee Daniels' identity as a Black man is significant to the making of *Empire.* In this way, both men have regained agency in the creation of their shows rather than have white directors and producers have control as past Black television series have had.

Yet, Cheo Hodari Coker stayed true to the character of Luke Cage while still evoking his vision of Luke Cage. *Luke Cage* follows titular character Luke Cage's experiences in Harlem as he attempts to recreate a life for himself after an unlawful imprisonment. Fleeing Seagate Prison, after involuntarily undergoing a science experiment that goes wrong, Luke Cage gains superhuman strength and unbreakable skin. Finding his way into Harlem, he keeps a low profile working as a sweeper at ex-gangster, Henry "Pop" Hunter's barbershop, located on Malcolm X Boulevard.[37] After he finishes his shifts at Pop's Barbershop, he clocks in at his second job as a dishwasher at crime boss, Cornell "Cottonmouth" Stoke's nightclub, Harlem's Paradise. Luke Cage uses his physicality to resist white America and the notion of state-sanctioned violence in New York City and Georgia. Cage serves as a conduit for the wishes of black people in modern America. Cage resists the state's attempts to frame him as public enemy number one in addition to the fear of black physicality that is multiplied tenfold by his status as a super human.

Yet, this fear comes from a complex misunderstanding as well as lusting for Cage's physical being. He is feared for his ability to be bulletproof and resistant to state-violence. On the other hand, Cage is lusted after for his ability to be like water and navigate through conflict

[37] Michelle Young, "Netflix's Latest Marvel Show Set in Harlem," *Untapped Cities*, 2016.

and sexual encounters without anything sticking to him like Teflon. According to Jonathan

Gayles,

> there is important scholarship considering the black male body as a symbol in itself From
> an explanatory standpoint, the "thematization" of race must be considered. This is
> consistent with continued "consumption" of the black male body in which "the black
> male body is most readily and easily consumed by the American public when it is posed
> with its muscles flexed, when his voice, if heard at all, con- firms the subject's nihilism-
> that nothing can be known or communicated except the body itself.[38]

This article lends credence to the phenomena of Luke Cage and the series' fascination

with the title character's physicality. Despite being a super-powered human, Cage is continually

admired and even lusted after for his prominent physical attributes by both men and woman.

The women in the series want to get Cage into bed with them. The men both fear and respect his

physical attributes as a sort of testament to what it means to be a true display of a man. Yet,

black men who are continually pitted against Cage as adversaries are also utilized at various

points to demonstrate how black men want to have the power that Cage has. On one hand, Cage

breaks the Black Brute trope, but Cage being his surname symbolizes his caged persona in the

face of white/ mainstream America.

The utilization of discourse analysis as a visual methodology in analyzing Luke Cage's

re-characterization of the historical stereotypical Black Brute trope will demonstrate a pattern

associated of this theme occurring in other television series/films. According to Gillian Rose,

discourse "refers to groups of statements which structure the way a thing is thought, and the way

we act on the basis of that thinking."[39] The discourse of historical stereotypical images, in this

case the Black brute influence our perception of Black men can sometimes influence the

behavior of young Black boys. In the 1960s and 1970s, Blaxploitation films have reintroduced

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[38] Jonathan Gayles, "Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman Redux: Masculinity and Misogyny in Blade," *Journal of Popular Culture* 45, no. 2 (2012): 286.

[39] Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), 190.

the aggressive, physically menacing in build and stature, as well as anti-white Black males

onscreen. For example, Melvin Van Peeble's character in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssssss Song*

(1971), Sweetback, the main protagonist, is falsely accused of a crime. Filled with violence, rape,

and the killing of corrupt police officers, this film serves as a 1970s re-characterization of the

Black brute who challenges white authority.

By the 1980s and 1990s the Black brute stereotype continued to exist but occurred less

and less. Black brutes on television series such as *Law and Order*, *ER,* and *NYPD Blue* were

nameless stock characters.[40] However, NBC television series, *The A-Team* (1983), existed as an

anomaly as there was a name for their Black brute and Anti-Black Hero character: B.A. Baracus,

played by actor, Mr. T. *The A-Team* is a group of ex-United States Army Special Forces wrongly

convicted of a crime during the Vietnam War. They managed to escape from the military police

and band together to fight crime and injustice. The A-Team uses their skills of military training

to fight crime and injustice. B.A. Baracus, B.A. short for Bad Attitude, is a mechanical genius

famously known for his impressive skills with hand-to-hand combat and his confrontational

attitude that prompted him to exact violent means of getting into physical and verbal

confrontations. The significance of B.A. Baracus' embodiment of the Black Brute trope is how

his character is introduced during the historical backdrop of Reaganism.

As a result, stereotypical representations as they occur within the backdrop of Reaganism

existed as a sign of otherness. According to Gray, "Resurrecting the nativist language of reverse

discrimination, traditional values, and anti-immigration, whiteness in the discourse of Reaganism

no longer operated as a sign of victimizer, but was repositioned as a sign of victim."[41]

Reaganism allowed a sense of political entitlement to white individuals as blackness was often

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[40] David Pilgrim, "The Brute Caricature," *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, 2000,
http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/brute/.
[41] Ibid., 17.

demonized and black bodies were oversexed and largely discriminated against. Gray argues, "the struggles to define and control the image and "representation" of blackness in popular culture were important ways in which black urban youth, lesbians, Afrocentric nationalists, neo-conservatives, liberal democrats, middle-class professionals, and gay men came to press claims, name themselves, and give voice to the hurts, pains, injustices, and brutalities of their experiences."[42]

The characterization of the Black Brute as portrayed by Sweetback in *Sweet Sweetback's Baadassssss Song* (1971), B.A. Baracus in *The A-Team* (1983), and Luke Cage in *Luke Cage* (2016) although from different periods of time all occur within the same discourse of the stereotypical Black Brute trope. While it could be argued that the Black male actors that play these characters regain some agency as the Black Brute, they seem to embrace the stereotype actively bringing it to life through their role of acting. The depiction of the Black Brute continues to be an open wound that cannot be healed as it continuously finds its way onscreen.

Similarly, the shift from the predominant depiction of the Black Brute trope onscreen during the 1970s-1980s to the Modern Day Coon trope in the 1990s also adds to the wound of harmful stereotypes of the Black community. Short for raccoon, the Coon predates to times of slavery. He became one of the stock characters for minstrel performances. According to Donald Bogle, "Before its death, the coon developed into the most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes. The pure coons emerged as no-account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language."[43] The historical image of the Coon was portrayed as a tall and skinny, clean shaven and misshaped head, baggy clothes, wide grin, wide eyes, very

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[42] Ibid., 42.
[43] Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, 4th ed. (University of Michigan: Continuum, 2001), 8.

large feet, and slow demeanor in his speech and walk. Black actor, Stepin Fetchit who arrived on the film scene in the 1920s, is the pro-typical Coon in film.[44] While his legacy includes his accomplishment to become the first Black actor to receive top billing in movies, and one of the first millionaire Black actors, it came with a huge cost. Herman Gray's investigation of the relationship between race and television contributes to the construction and reproduction of Blackness. He frames his argument on the complex issues of the politics of representation as it applies to the intersections of race, class, and gender. Herman Gray's primary focus on the influence of stereotypical representations of Blackness and their impact on the cultural imagination of society. He argues that the pivotal role of television is what emphasizes the power of these social constructions in viewers' everyday lives.[45]

As a consequence, the Coon trope continued to make its way onscreen. For instance, in the American sitcom, *Martin* (1992), named after Black male stand-up comedian, Martin, who is the series main protagonist, is an example of the Modern Day Coon as he reappears in the 1990s. Martin works as a wisecracking radio host that implements what could be considered sexist and offensive comments into his radio show broadcasts. His girlfriend, Gina, who at the series end becomes his wife, often finds herself having to put up with his shenanigans. Martin along with his two friends, Tommy and Cole, find themselves in compromising, yet comedic situations. While Martin's character is seemingly goofy in appearance and demeanor, thin with baggy clothes, and hardly ever has a serious moment he also perpetuates the Coon stereotype in other ways. That is, Martin capitalizes on the Modern Day Coon trope through his act of cross-dressing for his role, Shenaenae, the neighbor of Martin and Gina. His role of cross-dressing demonstrates the breakdown of a Black man as he reduces the Black male image to that of a

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44 Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*.
45 Herman Gray, *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for Blackness* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), xvii.

Coon. His character of Shenaenae is also telling in his worldview of Black women as Shenaenae

is loud, unattractive with poked out lips and crossed eyes, and has slow speech and demeanor.

This is problematic in that it supports the idea that Black women are dehumanized and meant to

be the brunt of a running joke. We see this perpetuation of cross-dressing Black male comedians

characterized as Black women with Tyler Perry's characterization of Madea in his plays and

films in the 2000s.

It can be argued that the Black Brute appeared onscreen as an effort to combat the racism

that Black men endured from white society. This may also be the case for the Modern Day Coon

making its reappearance in Black comedy sitcoms of the 1990s. The resurgence of the Modern

Day Coon may have occurred as a result of giving Black viewers a chance to engage in a

cathartic and comedic experience inside their homes, giving them the chance to escape what had

just occurred in the 1980s outside of their homes. The historical significance of *Martin* (1992), is

that it appears on the scene at the tail end of Reagan's presidency which continued Nixon's

campaign on the War on Drugs.[46] It has Black audiences laughing during the presidency of Bill

Clinton in the 1990s, which is largely responsible for funding more prisons, increase in the mass

incarceration of Black men, and the militarization of the police force.[47]

Hence, Clinton's presidency proved more harmful than his predecessors. It became more

apparent to Black people that their world was becoming more bleak. Thus, it can be understood

that Black America was in need of an outlet, but again, this came with a cost. The resurgence of

the Modern Day Coon in Black comedy sitcoms such as *Martin* (1992), *The Wayans Bros.*

(1995), and *Kenan & Kel* (1996) only gave more leverage to white society to berate and

disrespect Black men. These harmful stereotypical characters, may serve as a form of

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[46] Ava DuVernay, *13th*, Crime Film/Documentary, (2016).
[47] Ibid.

justification for white America to have moral apathy towards Black people. While creating a

cathartic experience for Black viewers the onscreen depictions of these stereotypes act as a

double-edged sword. Presently, the resurgence of the Black Brute and Anti-Black Hero made its

appearance in 2016, with the debut of *Netflix Original Series Luke Cage.* I define the Anti-Black

Hero as someone who is not the conventional hero. Society makes us believe that a hero is

typically white and male. In this case, the Anti-Black Hero is not only Black, but does not

forsake his Blackness. He is a Black physical force of good. Yet he is unapologetically Black as

he wrestles with the injustices and structural violence society imposes on Black people despite

his superpowers. He is Luke Cage.

Part Two: The Theme of Black Love

No Homo: The Rise of Homophobia and Its Effect on Black Masculinity

As the pilot episode begins, a young Black female artist, Veronika Bozeman is seen

singing her heart out in the studio. The camera then pans over to Lucious Lyon, whose body

language and facial expressions are both stoic and pensive. He is literally at the edge of his seat

and then the audience witnesses him come out of his stoic state and give the young artist,

Veronika, his notes. Lucious exclaims, "I need you to sing like you are going to die tomorrow,

like this is the last song you will ever sing, you hear me? Show me your soul in this music."[48]

Shortly after Lucious gives his notes, the young artist begins singing again and the scene is

interrupted by a scene of Lucious in the hospital room, with cacophonous beeping, and then back

to Veronika singing. Still dissatisfied with the outcome he rises up from his seat, enters the

studio with Veronika and asks her to reimagine how she felt when she first heard the news of her

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[48] Daniels and Strong, "Pilot."

brother's murder. Brought to tears, Veronika belts out with even more passion this time:

> What is love if you're not here with me?
> What is love if it's not guaranteed?
> What is love if it just ups and leaves?
> What is love if you're not really sure?
> What is love? What is love?[49]

The significance of the pilot episode's opening with this particular song foreshadows Lucious' inability to freely express himself emotionally as Black man. Lucious represents how Black men experience the conflict to exist as emotional beings while simultaneously projecting a stoic self. According to bell hooks, "Patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel, but by chance they should feel and the feelings hurt, the manly response is to stuff them down, to forget about them, to hope they go away."[50] One could argue that Lucious difficulty in openly expressing love for another person is masked by Veronika's performance of "What is Love." Her presence is needed in this opening scene because she serves as the conduit between Lucious' emotional stoicism and the passion he has for music. It appears that music serves as his emotional outlet throughout his life. He makes it clear at a business meeting to his colleagues how important music is to him. He states:

> I started selling drugs when I was 9 years old Philadelphia. I did it to feed myself. But it was the music that played in my head that kept me alive when I thought I was going to get shot. And it was the melodies that I dreamt about that kept me warm when I was sleeping in the streets. Music saved my life."[51]

By revealing that Empire Entertainment will become a publicly traded company, Lucious demonstrates his faith in music. Yet, this display of male dominance leaves less room for his faith in anyone else. But he must choose one of his sons to be the successor to Empire Entertainment and thus tension brews between the three Lyons brothers. Lucious asserts, "One of

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49 Veronika Bozeman, *What Is Love*, Empire Season 1 Soundtrack, n.d.
50 bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 5–6.
51 Daniels and Strong, "Pilot."

you negroes needs to man up and lead it."[52] Andre Lyon, the eldest son, believes he is the most qualified to run the company. He is the only educated person in the family, with a master's degree from the prestigious Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, and an astute executive in Empire Entertainment. Despite all these credentials, he has no musical talents like his younger brothers.

It is later revealed that his biggest flaw and shortcoming is his bipolar disorder. His wife, Rhonda uses his mental illness to control and emasculate him by constantly telling him to take his medicine and reminding him that he is hers. She is the only white female character in the series, but this assertion of ownership and dominance she has over Andre is very much a part of their relationship. It almost supports the notion that the absence of his mother has caused his masculinity to be just as fragile as his father. Jamal, the middle son, is a same sex attracted musician and R&B/pop artist who has not yet made his debut in the music industry. His fear of homophobia stops him from appearing on the music scene as a conversation with his boyfriend, Michael reveals as they discuss the possibility of him leading the company. Jamal: "He wouldn't pick me anyway. Way too much homophobia in the black community." And Michael recants "But its 2015. Football players are coming out."[53] While Michael's recant is meant to showcase how American society is supposed to be more progressive towards same sex love in 2015, in Jamal's case being a Black same sex attracted man is a stark reality to white same sex attracted football players as he is doubly marginalized by his race and sexuality. His awareness of this challenges the notion of American society being as progressive as Michael tries to convince him.

Just as Lucious is coming to terms with releasing his company to one of one of his sons, ex-wife, Cookie Lyon is released from prison after a 17-year sentence. Shortly after the scene

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[52] Ibid.
[53] "IMDb."

with Jamal and his boyfriend Michael, there is a flashback of young Jamal with his father, in a prison waiting room. Lucious tells young Jamal, "Go in there and tell your mother I love her and don't come back crying."[54] Lucious' shame is what disallows him to visit Cookie. In *Sister Citizen*, Harris-Perry maintains that shame is marked as both a structural and psychological barrier that Black people must overcome while countering psychological barriers.[55] According to Harris-Perry, "…shame is implicated in a response known as humiliated fury. Rage helps ward off shame by protecting the self from further exposure. Shame is first directed toward the self, but if the experience is too painful, it can be turned outward."[56] Lucious unable to deal with his shame targets, his sons displacing the shame onto them. As young Jamal enters the room, he sits down and picks up the phone to talk to her face to face with a glass wall separating them. After Cookie questions where his father, is she tries her best to comfort Jamal after he opens up about being bullied at school. She says, "Listen to me. You're different. It's something mama only knows and life's going to be hard. But I got you."[57] Jamal was unable to receive such nurturing support from his father, and could only receive it from his mother from behind a glass wall during visits. Thus, out of her three sons, Jamal is the closest to Cookie and seemingly the most misunderstood because of his sexuality.

Hakeem Lyon is also musically talented hip-hop and rap artist, but his downfall is that he performs in his father's shadow. He is the least connected to his mother because she was imprisoned when he was a baby. Cookie tries to reach out to him as she says, "I just want to you to know everything I did for you was for you and your brothers. I ended up where I ended up for

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[54] Daniels and Strong, "Pilot."
[55] Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 122.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Daniels and Strong, "Pilot."

you and your brothers."[58] Hakeem replies, "You want a medal bitch?"[59] There is a pause and Cookie replies, "What I want is some respect."[60] The absence of his mother has caused an emotional rift between his mother and him. It has taken its toll on him as he struggles with having healthy relationships with women. For instance, he finds himself in a love triangle with another young artist, Tiana, under Empire Entertainment, and Camille, a woman twice his age who fills the void his mother, left.

The most impactful scene in this episode is the interaction between Lucious and his middle son, Jamal. The relationship between the two is met with tension, as Lucious is unaccepting of his son's sexuality. While visiting his son he says, "This sexuality that's a choice son. You can choose to sleep with women if you want. I'm saying this to help you because you'll release an album. There's people in this country that don't appreciate that."[61] And Jamal retorts, "Why don't you get to know me?"[62] At this moment, a flashback occurs and again the audience sees young Jamal. This time he is dressed in red heels and a long scarf wrapped around his head to give the allusion of long hair. He walks out in front of his parents and their friends and everyone freezes in their tracks. The camera pans to Lucious and as the audience saw him before at the beginning of the episode in a stoic state he suddenly becomes very animated and angry. He says, "Are you out of your damn mind walking in here like a little bitch?" Lucious quickly picks up young Jamal, runs outside, and dumps him in a metal trashcan and puts the lid over him. As Melissa Harris-Perry argues, "Shame-prone individuals appear generally disposed to blame others for negative events, perhaps as a way of defending against the overwhelming global

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58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.

experience of shame."[63] In this case, Lucious has both literally and figuratively thrown away the child who has shamed him in the heat of the moment. In an effort to self-protect, Lucious uses anger as a coping mechanism, which also provides effective way for him to dispose of his shame. Unfortunately, it was also the most destructive in that it victimizes and traumatizes young Jamal. According to bell hooks, "Adolescent sexual socialization is the vulnerable moment in a boy's life when he is required to identify his selfhood and his sexuality with patriarchal masculinity; it is the meeting place of theory and practice."[64] Thus, Jamal learns at an early age from this traumatizing event that he must divide himself because he cannot be openly gay and his father's son.

This impactful scene was inspired by Lee Daniels own personal experience growing up Black and gay in Philadelphia. The scene was very much real for him as it was a reenactment of the tumultuous relationship he had with his late father. Daniels' father, a police officer killed on the job in the 1970s reacted similarly to the televised version with Lucious. Lee Daniels reflects on the traumatic event as he responds,

> When I was 5, my earliest memory was walking down the stairs in my mother's red high heel shoes, and my dad—he's a cop—is down playing card with the boys and it was not pretty—at all. He put me in a trashcan and he said that I would never be nothing. He said, You already have it bad, boy, cause you're Black—now you're a faggot too.[65]

This traumatic event for him solidified the notion that being Black was bad enough, but being Black and gay was suicide. The confrontation of the scene was painful, but stuck with Lee Daniels throughout his adult life and thus inspired him to shed light on the psychological damage that shame can bring on both victim and victimizer.

Significant to note is that Lucious' club is named Leviticus. The significance of the

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[63] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 122–23.
[64] hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 80.
[65] Justin Wm. Moyer, "The Tragedy Behind Fox's 'Empire': Lee Daniels' Father Beat Him for Being Gay," *The Washington Post*, January 22, 2015, 2.

club's name is connected to the biblical book of Leviticus. Often times people will reference

Leviticus as evidence of God's condemnation of homosexuality 18:22 "Thou shall not lie with

mankind, as with womankind: it *is* abomination."[66] The second verse is Leviticus 20:13 "If a

man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an

abomination."[67] The name of the club is not a coincidence, as Lucious does not want his son,

Jamal to perform alongside his brother Hakeem in fear that it will be labeled a homosexual club.

Although it does not appear that Lucious Lyon is a religious man, it does appear that his idea of

Black masculinity and relationships is heavily influenced by Judeo-Christian values.

The idea of Lucious struggle to accept Jamal's sexual orientation is meant to expose the

issue of homophobia in the Black community, particularly in predominantly Black male circles.

In a *Washington Post* interview, Lee Daniels opens up about his thoughts about the scene as he

says, "I'm glad that I can show the African-American community that this is what you're doing

to your son, this is what you're doing to your nephew, this is what you're doing to the kid down

the street."[68] For Lee Daniels, he believes that much work is left to be done as he believes

homophobia is rampant in the Black community as homosexuality is very much stigmatized

because as Harris-Perry argues, "We develop our sense of worthy self by proving recognition

and experiencing positive reflections of ourselves in the eyes of the adults we depend on."[69] As a

result, adults are dependent on their social worlds around them to have both positive mirroring to

reinforce positive recognition of themselves. Unfortunately for Lee Daniels and many other

young Black gay men, "the social world is not a positive mirror but a carnival mirror, with

images of self stretched or shrunken by a distorting surface that cannot produce an accurate

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[66] *Holy Bible*, King James Version (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1987), 113.
[67] Ibid., 115.
[68] Moywer, "The Tragedy Behind Fox's 'Empire': Lee Daniels' Father Beat Him for Being Gay," 1.
[69] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 132.

image. If individual shame is constitutive of the human experience, so, too, is collective shame constitutive to the experience of stigmatized groups."[70] This is reflective of the collective shame the Black community endure because society has often marked Black people as second-class citizens.

Lee Daniels first had to recognize the source of his father's shame. As a way to come to terms with his late father, Daniels sums it up as "[My father] was embarrassed, I think. And I didn't understand why he was so hard on me about being gay…I didn't realize until after I did *The Butler* that at the time he was a second-class citizen. He wasn't a man. And so when he saw that I was gay he thought that was even—'Oh my God, this kid, what is this kid going to encounter."[71] Daniels in an effort to forgive his father has accepted that his father's only way to show concern was through the physical act of throwing him in the trash before society had the chance to. Men are particularly uncomfortable with humiliation, and as a result they react with violence and anger in an attempt to mask the shame of racism, poverty, homophobia, amongst other structural violence they endure from society.[72]

During a conversation between Lucious and his middle son, Jamal, it is revealed just how fragile Lucious' masculinity is. Still unable to accept his son's sexuality he believes that the only way to reconfigure Jamal's sexuality is to berate him and question his masculinity. The last five minutes of this episode are significant in that it highlights the damage Lucious fragile masculinity has imposed on his sons, but specifically how it has impacted and traumatized Jamal's sense of masculinity. The conversation goes as follows:

> Lucious: "I tried to tell you since you were a baby that its not about black eyes or bloody noses. Its life and death and if you don't toughen up these streets will eat your ass alive."

[70] Ibid., 132–33.
[71] Moyer, "The Tragedy Behind Fox's 'Empire': Lee Daniels' Father Beat Him for Being Gay," 2.
[72] Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen: Shame, Stereotypes, and Black Women in America*, 123.

Jamal: "Since I was a baby, you beat me. You told me that was to toughen me up. That was a lie. You beat me because you hate me and you always will because I'm always going to be who I am."

Lucious: I don't hate you. I don't know you. I didn't bring any women into this world and to see my son become somebody's bitch. I don't understand you!" (Lucious voice becomes elevated).

Jamal: "You don't have to understand me or have anything to do with me. I'm a man! I'm a man! (snarled expression and beating of the chest). You can keep that stupid ass song and your money and whatever else Lucious Lyon thinks that he owns. My obedience is no longer for sale."

Lucious then responds by reminding Jamal that he is the true man as he is the breadwinner and provides financially everything for Jamal. The breadwinner archetype is one of the many male characteristics that allow an exertion of power and dominance to those dependent on them. Lucious' experience growing up in poverty pressured him to emulate the breadwinner archetype that white males typically embody. Lucious has had to endure a fight or flight response to cope with his lifetime trauma. Thus, his role as a breadwinner outweighs his ability to be a nurturing father. Jamal realizing this packs up his things and leaves with his boyfriend, Michael. Leaving in a haste he does not have a backup plan, but tells his boyfriend that he will go after Lucious' empire and take it as a form of retaliation for the trouble his father has caused him.

Twenty-First Century Mandingo: The Hyper-Sexualization of Black Heroism and Masked Emotional Vulnerability as seen in *Luke Cage*

The sexual debasement of Black bodies, in this case Black male bodies, has continued to be maintained through stereotypes, pseudo-science, and fear of the Black body. With a long history of the hyper-sexualization of Black male bodies, it is not surprising that this harmful stereotype found its way onscreen. Even superheroes are not absent from this harmful stereotype as Luke Cage serves as a prime example of the hypersexualization of the Black male superhero

circa 2016. The Black male body has been the subject of fascination, exoticism, and even fear as far back as slavery. According to Perry *et. al*, "Historical and contemporary images and representations of Black men in media often portray them negatively and pathologically."[73] Moreover, due to the undivided attention to the Black male body, society neglects to recognize the emotional and mental state of Black men. This also begs to question why Black men are portrayed onscreen as having failed romantic relationships rather than successful ones.

Within the first ten minutes of the pilot episode of *Luke Cage*, he has an encounter with a young, attractive, and professionally dressed Black woman by the name of Patty who enters the barbershop to pick up her son. As he's sweeping she tries to engage in small talk with Luke, asking if he would go out for coffee sometime and proceeds to give him her number. He does not react much at all upon receiving her number as viewers may expect him too. He is emotionally stoic, has a calm demeanor, and is seemingly focused at his job. Later, after the barbershop is closed he opens up to the barbershop owner, Pop.

> Pop: "There you go again. I shook everything when I got out. Cigarettes, paranoia, but the pacing? I do it, too. Reva again?"
> Luke: "Reva always"
> Pop: "It's been long enough. Give Patty a call. She's a good woman."
> Luke: [scoffs] "I don't drink coffee much. I don't think she does either."
> Pop: [chuckles] "Like she said "Ain't nothing wrong with that."
> Luke: "When I'm ready, I'm ready."
> Pop: "But you'll want a cup of something hot and dark sooner or later, Mr. Bulletproof."

Moreover, the dialogue between Luke Cage and Pop, who fulfills the role as his mentor reveals that although he is emotionally stoic especially in the company of women, he is able to be emotionally vulnerable and flawed even as a superhero. He shares his deepest secrets, worries, and doubts with Pop during this scene. Even as he is being emotionally vulnerable, the

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[73] Armon Perry, Siobhan Smith, and Derrick Brooms, "'You Ain't No Denzel': African American Men's Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships," *Journal of African American Studies* 18, no. 4 (2014): 496.

conversation still takes a turn about sex. Even Pop's insinuation that Luke Cage will want

something "hot and dark sooner or later" is meant to point to coffee as a metaphor for sex. Luke

Cage does not give a reaction to Pop with that statement, but they continue to talk as Luke lifts

the washing machine with one hand and retrieves the piece of paper with Patty's number on it

that he purposely dropped under there.

> Pop:"I love it when you do stuff like that .You should be out there helping people, like them fellas downtown."
> Luke: "Reva used to say the same thing."
> Pop: "Well, she was right. You don't think about all the people you could help? You should be more ambitious."
> Luke: "What if my ambition is to sweep hair, wash dishes, and be left the hell alone?"
> Pop: "Well that would be a waste."
> Luke: "You think I asked for any of this? I was framed, beaten…and put in some tank like an exotic fish. Came out with abilities."
> Pop: "Saved your life."
> Luke: "More like ruined it. Reva's dead. I'm a fugitive." [sighs]

The rest of their conversation reveals that Luke Cage may be emotionally stoic due to the

death of his wife, Reva. His inability to feel connected to another woman, let alone create a

trusting and loving friendship with anyone else outside of Pop is revealed during this scene. It

seems to cause him much emotional turmoil and sadness that is not exhibited on the outside that

he is a loner and at times feels like a freak because of his superpowers. This scene is significant

in that it contrasts with his next encounter with another young, attractive, nicely dressed Black

woman by the name of Misty Knight. He meets her after he leaves his job at the barbershop that

night to his second job as a dishwasher. His boss tells him that he must fill in as a bartender for

the night because the usual bartender is out sick. The bar is where Misty Knight and Luke Cage

first meet. They engage in flirty banter while he's making drinks behind the bar.

This is a different side of Luke Cage than the first part of the episode. After he gets off

work, he runs into Misty Knight again outside. She then asks if he wants to get coffee later. As

mentioned before, coffee serves as a metaphor for sex. Following her question, they end up at

Luke Cage's apartment where they engage in hurried, lustful, yet tasteful sex. Viewers can feel

the sense of urgency between the two as the sex scene does not last long. This sense of urgency

could point to Luke Cage's want for intimacy that he longs for after the death of his wife, Reva.

It is too soon to tell if he is urgent enough for love, but the need for intimacy is made apparent

through his one nightstand with Misty Knight. Once the pair wakes up, Misty Knight gets

dressed and says that she has to be on her way to work. In an attempt to continue a relationship

with Misty Knight, he asks for her number to which she declines and tells him that she will find

him at his workplace. Once again, Luke Cage is faced with another failed attempt at a successful

relationship. Despite this incident, the flirting between him and Misty Knight becomes

heightened to sexual tension and cat and mouse antics. Unfortunately, he and Misty Knight will

not continue their relationship. Instead, he meets a Latina nurse named Claire and begins a

platonic relationship with her. On the other hand, it appears that the writer of *Luke Cage*, Coker,

attempts to emphasize Luke Cage's physical attributes, his physical attraction to women, their

attraction to him, and his sexual encounters with women rather than his intellect or emotional

demeanor. It may be a stretch to define Luke Cage's character as the Black Buck as he does not

have constant sexual encounters or sexually assaults women. However, he is objectified with the

focus on his body and women, as they attempt to engage in platonic sexual relations with him.

His representation is markedly heterosexual and thus is problematic because it alienates the

narrative of queer Black men.

The findings in Perry *et. al's* study suggests, "The [Black male] participants explained

that particular images of Black men in the media, including some of Black males in positions of

political power, represented the idea. Particular attention was paid to Bill Cosby and the

Huxtable family which concurrently inspired some participants and disillusioned others based on their image of a perfect family."[74] They also suggest that the ways in which Black men utilize media texts to understand and communicate with women is significant to understanding their attitudes towards marriage and romantic relationships.

Part Three

The Theme of Black Male Gender Performance and Worldview

The Impact of the Male Gaze in *Empire*

Interestingly, *Empire* is directed by an openly same-sex attracted Black male director and a white director. There are two male gazes at work that impact the characterization of both male and female characters in the show. The significance of each director's personal experiences and inspirations is key in understanding how the male gaze operates in this Black drama series. Also important, is to understand how the male gaze can perpetuate harmful and stereotypical images of women. For instance, the relationship the Lyon brothers have with their mother, Cookie Lyon, after her release from prison is one that impacts how they perceive other women. Specifically, Hakeem Lyon, the youngest brother, lusts after women and has promiscuous sexual encounters with them, yet has the most turbulent relationship with his mother. He suffers from feelings of abandonment, as he was only an infant when his mother was incarcerated. Also, his preference for dating older Black women is telling in his need to have a mother figure fill the role his mother was unable to due to her incarceration.

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[74] Ibid.

Hence, it is not surprising that both men exercise male privilege in the dominant culture as male directors. For instance, Lee Daniels' who identifies as an openly same-sex attracted Black male, was nominated for Best Director for his film *Precious* (2009) and directed *The Butler* (2013). With him gaining more recognition in the mainstream cinematic circle in addition to *Monster's Ball* (2001)*, The Woodsman* (2001) and *Shadowboxer* (2005) it is not surprising that he was able to find success with his most recent production, *Empire*. The difference between his film projects and his television project is that Daniels depicted Black people in impoverished and painful situations. As it stands, the shift in *Empire* is Black people overcome with greed, money, and power. The concept of *Empire* largely encompasses the concept of hegemony. Lee Daniels and co-director, Danny Strong, were largely inspired by predominately white patriarchal television shows and texts. In an interview with Strong he reveals what inspired *Empire:* "We talked about the *Sopranos*. We talked about *The Godfather* which is a movie, but the original genesis of the idea was very much inspired by *King Lear* and *The Lion Winter* were inspiring for the show as well."[75] With the show being based on William Shakespeare's *King Lear* one could draw parallels between the tragedy and *Empire* as Lucious' character is largely inspired by King Lear's character. Both men are depicted as they descend into madness shortly after their empire is to be bequeathed to their offspring. Unfortunately, the passing down of their empires is not met without tragic consequences. The Black dynasty Daniels and Strong envisioned is overcome with greed for money and power.

The relationship between hegemony, patriarchy, masculinity and how it correlates with the greed of money and power is how they all contribute to toxic notions of masculinity and patriarchy. It causes many men to become both fragile and toxic in their pursuit of money and

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[75] *Interview with Danny Strong*, Festival de La Television de Monte-Carlo, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-dUEinLoa0.

power. Their means to attribute money and power causes the structural violence women of color experience as a result of the hegemonic structures created by the greed of men. This is purely a Western notion of masculinity that Black men emulate as demonstrated in the documentary film, *Hip-Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*. Filmmaker, Byron Hurt's documentary sparks a dialogue about the issues of Black masculinity, sexism, violence, and homophobia that permeates the musical genre.[76] Specifically, his documentary highlights the issue of Black men emulating white wealth and power as seen through hip-hop. Lucious Lyon, in the Fox television series *Empire*, mirrors this reality. *Empire* is one of the first television series that creates a Black male protagonist with the same kind of money and power audience members see with white male protagonists.

Hip-hop is a modern example of Black male gender performance. Yet, an issue arises when a white male worldview merges with Black male gender performance. For example, Danny Strong's outlook on the genre of hip-hop and its incorporation in the show is problematic. Admitting to having no prior knowledge of hip-hop he states naively, "I love music. I love hip-hop. Hip-hop's the coolest. Hip-hop is this really dynamic charismatic world."[77] It seems that hip-hop is a temporary trend and only serves the purpose of making *Empire* more exotic and edgy for white viewers, which contributes to the notion that Black bodies are only good to meet the means of entertainment. This would mean the characterization of Lucious and his sons Jamal and Hakeem are meant to fulfill the notion that their music signifies their charisma and sense of cool rather than the intricacies and intersections of their full humanity. This would not only be the perception of Strong as indicated above, but also by white viewers. Reminiscent of bell hooks argument about eating the other in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Danny Strong

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[76] Byron Hurt, *Hip-Hop:Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, Documentary, Music, (2006).
[77] *Interview with Danny Strong*.

is enamored by the Other, which in this case is hip-hop. As she states, "[Danny Strong] [can]

leave behind white "innocence" and enter the world of experience. As is often the case in this

society, they were confident that non-white people had more life experience, were more worldly,

sensual, and sexual because they were different."[78] Nothing about hip-hop is charismatic. It

seems that Strong has missed the point of hip-hop. Similar to Steven Spielberg with his film

adaptation of *The Color Purple*, unbeknownst to him prior to filming he believed the Black

repertory was lacking.[79] Contrary to how enamored Strong is with how Hakeem and Lucious

characters bring hip-hop to life on the show, this was not the case for Spielberg's adaptation of

The Color Purple. Some Black men were displeased and angered with the lack of agency seen in

the Black male figures, and this was compounded by their characterization in comparison to the

strength of the film's Black female characters.

Both Strong and Spielberg believed with their names attached to their projects that they

could make the Black repertory not only more visible, but more popular. Contrary to his belief

that the music on the show highlights social injustices, he is most concerned about how it appeals

to a white audience as they make up the largest amount of viewership to television media. Hip-

hop is more than just an asset to *Empire* it is the very backbone of the dynamics between the

Black male characters and how they are defined in the television series. It is cathartic for Black

men especially, but can be a double-edged sword as it can be empowering for some and

oppressive to others, especially women. Strong seems to miss the point as he views hip-hop as an

unexplored terrain, a symbolic frontier with fertile land waiting to be used for "reconstruction of

the masculine norm, for asserting themselves as transgressive desiring subjects."[80] The danger in

eating the Other is that it produces imperialist nostalgia of the insubordination of Black people

[78] hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation.*
[79] Jaqueline Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).
[80] hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, 24.

and their artistry. It supports the notion that Black culture is only acceptable under the terms of a white male director interest. Otherwise, Black cultural imagery shall lack visibility to the general public.

The Impact of Place: Black Cultural Symbols and Imagery in Harlem and New York City

The impact of place as it pertains to Lucious and Luke Cage is significant because their hometowns shape their worldview on Blackness and masculinity. Lucious Lyon, originally from Philadelphia or what is colloquially known as Philly, grows up surrounded by crime, violence, and eventually ends up homeless and on the streets. Lacking parental figures, it was hip-hop that ultimately shaped his worldview on Blackness and masculinity. As he embarked on the hip-hop scene, it was hip-hop that led to him to move to New York City in which the setting of *Empire* takes place. With New York being one of the innovators of hip-hop, it is crucial for Lucious to be a part of this scene as it legitimizes his black gender male performance.

Secondly, Luke Cage flees rural Georgia to find asylum in Harlem after his escape from prison. Harlem acts as a place of camouflage for Luke Cage, as it is considered a Black space that allowed him to blend in and create a new life. In the Netflix Original Series opening credits, there is a montage of landmarks from the city of Harlem projected across the back of protagonist, Luke Cage. Other Harlem landmarks such as Malcolm X Boulevard, The Apollo, and University Heights Bridge can be found in the opening credits.[81] As Blair Marnell points out, "The way that it places the neighborhood squarely on Cage's shoulders is an apt visual metaphor for the show."[82] The burden to keep Harlem safe is the price that he had to pay in order to build his new

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[81] Young, "Netflix's Latest Marvel Show Set in Harlem."
[82] Blair Marnell, "The Luke Cage Opening Credits Are a Tribute to Harlem," *Nerdist*, 2016, http://nerdist.com/the-

life. Towards the end of *Luke Cage*'s pilot episode, a news anchor interviews Madam

Councilwoman who is also known as Mariah who speaks about Harlem. She shares:

> Now, Harlem is a community that welcomes everyone. All people. About at the same time, since the days of Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Zora Neale Hurston, Duke Ellington, Harlem, has been the jewel of Black America. It's a perpetual symbol of…of hope and prosperity and excellence. For Black lives to matter, Black history and Black ownership must also matter. Now my multifaceted plan for the Crispus Attucks Complex is just another way to bring hope to a new generation, to incubate the kind of innovation and creativity and progress that Harlem's famous for.[83]

Just from this short monologue, Mariah reveals how deep Black roots and Black culture

runs in the city of Harlem. Black artists, activists, and innovators are largely responsible for the

Harlem that writer, Coker is trying to emulate in *Luke Cage's* fictional depiction of the city of

Harlem. There are more instances of Blackness throughout the series, but specifically in the first

episode alone. For example, while walking down the street Luke Cage runs into a Black street

vendor that hands him one of Mariah's flyers for the new Crispus Attucks complex she plans to

have built. As he is handing it to Luke Cage he says, "Stay Harlem. Stay Black"[84] while holding

up a clenched fist as a sign of Black power.

Furthermore, *Luke Cage* demonstrates how despite differences in socio-economic

backgrounds, the barbershop is considered Switzerland which is the series' equivalent to neutral

ground. Despite his experiences, the barbershop is what makes Luke Cage superhuman. This is

where he is taught to be a man, and where his worth in the community begins and ends. This is

where he becomes a member of the Harlem masculine experience. The significance of the Black

barbershop in Black American communities is that it acts as a safe space. It allows Black men

and young Black boys to communicate freely, not be scrutinized, and barbershops often become

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luke-cage-opening-credits-are-a-tribute-to-harlem/.
[83] Cheo Hodari Coker, "Moment of Truth," *Luke Cage* (New York City, New York, USA: Netflix, September 30, 2016).
[84] Ibid.

a central location for mentoring in the Black community. For example, in the pilot episode of

Luke Cage, "Moment of Truth," Pop learns about the murder of one of his young Black male

customers. He shares with Luke Cage,

> That's how you get them on your side. Sweepin' up hair. Runnin' errands. [chuckling]
> Lettin' 'em hang out, play video games. Anything is better than what's waiting for them
> out there on the street. They want a way out, but they have too much pride to ask for help.
> Luke Cage replies, Everyone has a gun. [sighs] No one has a father.
> Pop agrees with him as he says, "Ain't that the truth."

In this case, it appears that Luke Cage is providing commentary on the importance of

Black mentorship to steer young Black men away from the streets. But for Dante, the young man

who was murdered, it is too late. In addition, Bozeman discusses how Black men utilize Black

vernacular within a hush harbor rhetorical tradition in order to preserve Black male culture.[85]

That is, the hush harbor's significance is used as a constructive tool in the Black barbershop as a

defense against the outside world.[86] Bozeman continues his argument by stating, "Looking

inside the African American barbershop as hush harbor not only provides a means to witness and

quite possibly *participate* in the African American male discourse practice, it also allows one to

gain a sense of appreciation for the multiple layers in the complexity of this discourse."[87] The

concept of the hush harbor means young Black boys and Black men are allowed entry without

judgment or reprisal that they otherwise would need outside the barbershop. Due to the Black

barbershop acting as hush harbor and safe space, the Black barbershop is increasingly becoming

a source of innovation as well as much of how Black culture is created is in a space such as this.

For instance, in the pilot episode of *Luke Cage*, "Moment of Truth," the opening scene

pans to Pop's barbershop where viewers are immediately thrust into Black barbershop culture. It

looks like a typical barbershop with checkered floors, barber booths, and the additional swear jar.

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[85] Bozeman, "The Good Cut: The Barbershop in the African American Literary Tradition," 92.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid.

It's a tin jar that sits on the owner, Pop's booth that he expects people to pay up when using profanity. Accordingly, there are four Black men, one young Black boy, and one Latino man having a conversation about basketball. Two of these people are customers, one being the young Black boy. Two of the Black men are barbers and Luke Cage is the sweeper. There is an older Black gentleman that's near the door playing chess by himself. There is a mix of multigenerational men in Pop's barbershop. Eventually, Luke Cage joins the conversation and replies with bullcrap about who's the better basketball player. He is asked to pay up and add his money to the swear jar to which he replies: "Bullcrap ain't a curse, man. I don't curse." To which one of the customers, Shameek decides to imitate him in a condescending tone followed by a laugh: "I don't curse." The dialogue continues like so:

> Shameek: You don't cut hair either, Negro. Like, really, what do you do up in here, bruh?"

> Luke Cage: "I sweep hair, Shameek. I also mop, I wash the towels, and I make sure that t hat plate glass window stays spotless. Its called work. Something you would never understand."

> Shameek: [scoffs] "Stylin' and profilin' that's my work."

> Luke Cage: "For real? You can't even afford a haircut."[88]

To which the other men in the barbershop erupt in laughter. There may be moments of tension and disagreement in the Black barbershop space, but oftentimes it ends in laughter as the dialogue between Luke Cage and Shameek indicates. As their conversation comes to a close, a young professionally dressed Black woman by the name of Patty arrives at the barbershop to pick up her son. It is not long before she passes through that Shameek glances at her butt. Once Patty gives Luke Cage her number and leaves with her son, Shameek states, "How's a woman that fine with a briefcase gonna throw it at a brother with a broom?" To which the older

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[88] Coker, "Moment of Truth."

gentleman playing chess by himself retorts in defense of Luke Cage, "That's what you don't get youngin. Either you have it or you don't." This particular moment where Shameek ogles Patty's butt showcases another aspect of the Black barbershop acting as a contradictory space—as women are objectified here. Yet, for Black men it serves the purpose of a safe space to freely express sexual attraction and interest. This is important to acknowledge his behavior as it indicates how the attitude and the aura of the space changes when a woman, particularly a Black woman, enters a predominantly Black male space.

Shameek does not exude Black macho behavior when she walks in, only after she leaves the shop. Both are authentic portions of Shameek's character, but only one is shown at a time pending the situation. This is almost like an internalized form of code-switching that has permeated the Black barbershop space. The older gentlemen in the barbershop have mastered this game while Shameek still exudes his naiveté with it. Shameek felt slighted because he was younger than Luke Cage and felt he was more deserving of receiving Patty's number. Due to the fact that Shameek viewed Luke Cage as less than deserving of Patty's attention simply because he is a sweeper. Shameek views himself as he says 'stylin' and profilin' because of his youth, looks, and money. He believes he is the better suitor for Patty. He looks down on Luke Cage because of his circumstances (working two jobs), but does not account for why Patty would be attracted to him as a person.

On the other hand, the contrast between Lucious' childhood up North and Luke Cage's childhood in rural Georgia differ in Luke Cage's experience of overt racism and discrimination. The significance of Luke Cage's roots in rural Georgia as revealed in his flashbacks can best be explained with Riche Richardson's analysis of rural geography. In *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From the Uncle Tom U.S. Southern Gangsta*, Richardson argues, "*Invisible Man*

clarifies the levels on which ideologies of inferiority and otherness that are grounded in geography, and particularly ones that alienate and exclude southern identities, become even more intense and complex in relation to the rural." Thus, the rural identity in the historical context of the Jim Crow South meant Black men were largely subjected to spectatorship, scrutiny, hyper-embodiment and, potentially forms of abuse and exploitation in science and medicine. [89] This is significant in understanding how Luke Cage was chosen in the prison's social experiment. It also is key to understanding the political significance of Luke Cage holding a copy of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in his hands. He sits on the edge of his bed reminiscing on how he received this book during his time in prison. This piece of literature also shapes his worldview on what it means to be an imprisoned Black man in the South.

To continue with Richardson's argument of exploitation, the sport of boxing in *Luke Cage* is representative of the reinforcement of white supremacist patriarchal values and how the white correctional officers have a racially charged passion for it. In hooks' chapter, "doing it for daddy: black masculinity in the mainstream," she argues "Traditionally, boxing was a sport wherein notions of racial superiority were played out in the physical realm, to see if white men were physically superior. Though established to reinforce white prowess, boxing became an arena in which black males triumphed over white patriarchy, using the same standards to measure superiority that the system had put in place. In contrast, Lucious' violent behavior operates outside the conventions of boxing as he learns early on from his father that physical street fighting and murder are the only ways in which Black men are to prove their manhood and exert dominance. Boxing is a sport that allows Luke Cage to be redeemed through mainstream society, which is why his character is most relatable.

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[89] Riché Richardson, *Black Masculinity and the U.S. South: From Uncle Tom to Gangsta* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 154.

While Lucious' reliance on guns and physical violence allows audience members to praise him as they are unable to legally and morally act this way. Yet, Lucious' character also serves to justify the discrimination that young urban Black men endure on an everyday basis. It only allows the acceptance of the thug stereotype, rather than the challenge of it. For instance, the fragility of Lucious' masculinity begins early on in his childhood as he witnesses his absent father partake in criminal behavior. This was his earliest example of what cool pose is. The trauma he experiences in his childhood then spans transgenerationally as it is reflected in his relationship with his three sons: Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem Lyon. As a result, the Lyon men exude emotions of anger, stoicism, and at times act violently. While *Empire* marks the source of fragile black masculinity through transgenerational ties, Luke Cage's fragile masculinity is impacted by society, as he attempts to prove his innocence and worth in the face of white male authority.

The difference is that hip-hop music in *Luke Cage* signifies violent scenes and is the only time hip-hop is present throughout the series. Luke Cage is not rapping himself, but the utilization of hip-hop as a means to highlight violent scenes is enough to prove his proximity to Blackness, whereas in *Empire,* hip-hop is the center of Lucious' life. Typically, where it would be unacceptable for Lucious to be emotional, his ability to rap and be active in the hip-hop scene allows him to be emotionally expressive within hip-hop's limitations. It also allows him the ability to exert his masculinity through money and the power he gains from it. This is nothing new since hip-hop as the primary means of representations of Black men has been prevalent since the 1980s.[90] Perry *et. al* argues, "Although hip hop culture continues to provide a significant number of media portrayals of African American men, contemporary representations

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[90] Perry, Smith, and Brooms, "'You Ain't No Denzel': African American Men's Use of Popular Culture to Narrate and Understand Marriage and Romantic Relationships," 2014, 487.

are more varied and diverse than in years past."[91] This is true concerning *Empire* as new age hip

hop is characterized through Lucious Lyon's youngest song Hakeem Lyon and Lucious Lyon's

own music is considered old school hip-hop/rap with a heavy Philadelphia and New York

influence. Also, other fictional hip hop artists featured on the show, as well as celebrity hip hop

artists that serve as guest stars, offers a diverse range of hip hop music. Lastly, if one is familiar

with famous hip-hop album covers it can be discerned that Lucious Lyon's album covers are

largely influenced by hip-hop artists such as Nas, Jay-Z, Method Man, just to name a few.

Method Man appeared on an episode of *Luke Cage* as a cameo and performed his song

"Bulletproof Love" in homage to police brutality. Hip-hop is very significant for both of these

shows as New York serves as the birthplace of hip-hop and is one of the Black community's

cultural symbols.

Conclusion

The Era of A New Black Man: Healing from Harmful Black Masculinity

On its surface, both *Luke Cage* and *Empire* appear to be new and innovative in the Black

discourse, but looking deeper it appears that it mirrors the realities of a "white supremacist

patriarchy" as coined by bell hooks. To clarify, it is not only white men that are solely

responsible for their role in the dominant culture. It is possible for marginalized groups such as

the Black community to take part in the dominant culture as well. According to Catherine R.

Squires, "A system of domination infiltrates all levels of society and relationships, making it

inevitable that all of us will, in some way, have our perception tainted by it, or be rewarded for

going along with the status quo, even if it means we hurt others intentionally or

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[91] Ibid.

unintentionally."[92] Thus, Lucious Lyon's empire did more harm than good. In comparison, Luke Cage's quest to carry Harlem on his back also caused more harm than good as he had to resort to means of physical fighting, the city was vandalized, and many people were injured or killed in the process of his quest to keep Harlem safe from drugs, crime, and violence. In an effort to minimize these issues, Luke Cage only exacerbates them.

Meanwhile, *Empire* paints the Black family unit as one that is destined to fall apart, yet they band together to protect their empire: their family. The fragility of Black masculinity endangers all those who are involved as Lucious Lyon's character demonstrates. In *Luke Cage,* it seems that his character supports the idea that it would take a Black man to have super strength and bulletproof skin to earn any sense of respect in U.S. society. At the expense of his Black body, Luke Cage's character continues the trend that Black male bodies in regards to their strength, athleticism, and agility are more valuable than the intellect of a Black man. Black fragile masculinity comes at the expense of the insubordination of Black femininity and this could be due to the predominantly male perspective of Lee Daniels and Danny Strong as seen in *Empire*. There are subtle nuances of insubordination of Black femininity in Coker's *Luke Cage,* but nonetheless they are still present. *Luke Cage* also marks instances of Black fragile masculinity as his emotional stoicism causes him to internalize his emotions. Thus, rather than talk to someone about them he finds emotional release through physical means of violence.

As a result, his physically violent outlet disallows this particular Black discourse to stand alone on its own. Yet, the reception of *Empire* was readily received well by Black viewers. "Although [*Empire*] is a patriarchal text, its black viewers found ways to empower themselves

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[92] Catherine R. Squires, *bell hooks: A Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory*, vol. 8, A Critical Introduction to Media and Communication Theory (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2013), 40.

through their negotiated reception of it."[93] Black viewers are willing to accept this discourse as they have learned to internalize the notion of negotiating their true selves and all Black cultural imagery. Thus, Black viewers are willing to cling tight to Lucious and Luke Cage as a means to have any visible representation of Blackness. Whether this has harmful or successful implications for Black viewers it is too early to tell. The significance of Luke Cage in the Netflix Original Series *Luke Cage* and *Empire's* Lucious Lyon is how they fit within the paradigm of black studies and media studies. As a result, these popular black television shows serve as cultural products that contribute to the commentary on modern race and the representation of blackness.[94] Specifically, Gray and hooks engage a dialogue that black cultural production, as a form of resistance is relevant to the realities of the black community.

While *Luke Cage* and *Empire* exist as resistant forms of Black media discourse that offer a new way of being Black and male, there is still much work to be done in the healing of fragile Black masculinity. Mark Anthony Neal offers a new radical vision of Black masculinity. His solution involves Black men being active in this new wave of feminism. Although he recognizes that there is no blueprint for young Black men to embark on their feminist journey of valuing the different realities of women, especially Black women, he still believes there is opportunity in feminism for Black men.[95] Neal shares how he became a Black male feminist and who his Black male feminist heroes are. Even though his initials sense of what feminism was involved more skepticism than belief he recognized how influenced he was at neo-Black Nationalism rhetoric by people such as Louis Farrakhan during the 1980s period.

The skepticism that young Black men may feel today about feminism lingers even today. Black feminism offers an opportunity for young Black men to be more consciously aware of how

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93 Bobo, *Black Women as Cultural Readers*, 100.
94 Ibid., 98.
95 Mark Anthony Neal, *New Black Man* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 31.

white male patriarchy and privilege is not only harmful to women, particularly Black women, but is a disservice to their Black masculine identity. Also, important in the healing of the fragile Black masculinity is that femininity and queerness is not the absence of their own masculinity. Neal makes a point to critique the field of Black studies. He states, "And the field of Black Studies itself seems invested in maintain the classroom as a space for the reproduction of normative black sexual and gender relations."[96]

Thus, it is important for young Black men embarking on their Black feminist journey to be leery of heteronormative rhetoric and embrace the many intersectional identities that exist in the Black community. Embarking on a Black feminist journey is just one of the many ways that Black men can heal from the harmful stereotypical tropes that haunt them onscreen even in seemingly innovative shows as *Luke Cage* and *Empire*. There still exists a masked form of stereotypical tropes underneath the innovativeness of the Black male leads, Lucious Lyon and Luke Cage. While they both do have instances of emotional vulnerability and flaws throughout their respective series, Luke Cage and Lucious Lyon also create a dialogue about issues that impact the Black community without having to compromise their Black masculinity. There is much work left to combat harmful and fragile Black masculinity, as it appears onscreen. As onscreen Black masculinity has much more influence on young Black men today. In contemporary society, televised Black masculinity has much more influence on young Black men today. If there is more effort by writers and directors to create healthier forms of Black masculinity then this will ultimately mirror a different reality for young Black men. This will mark the era of a new Black man.

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[96] Ibid., 72.

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