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Amy M. Green, editor-in-chief

Special Issue:
Black Popular Culture in America

Editor's Note
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Greetings, readers! I'm so thrilled to share this Special Issue with you! It is the hope of all of us who work on *Popular Culture Review* that the journal can be a leader in diverse scholarship considering all areas of popular culture. This issue, focused on Black popular culture in America, comes at a time when racism has taken an appalling center stage. The scholarship here presents the work of a number of Black scholars and demonstrates the diversity of scholarship around Black popular culture.

Our first article, "Blackening the Frame: Kerry James Marshall's *Rythm Mastr*" by Austin Anderson, explores how the *Rythm Mastr* comic book series challenges Western historiography. He further considers how the series has been a call to action for a "Black popular culture insurgency."

Justin Martin considers the importance of Luke Cage in "Harlem's Superhero: Social Interaction, Heterogeneity of Thought, and the Superhero Mission in Marvel's *Luke Cage.*" Martin's article focuses especially on the recent television series, but also on Cage's larger comic book history and legacy.

"The Discourse of Memes: Regressive Politics and Internet Culture" by Shahbaz Khayambashi provides a powerful analysis of meme culture and its role in perpetuating racism and far right-wing ideology. Khayambashi also considers how the left utilizes memes, including the different types of memes centered on the Black Lives Matter movement.

Julia Mollenthiel's "Candyman and the Afterlives of Slavery" considers both the original 1992 film and the 2021 sequel. Mollenthiel posits that the films explore Black trauma in significant ways, and that the character Candyman "sits at the intersection of the afterlives of slavery and the supernatural."

Our final article, "'I Had a Weird Dream': *Atlanta* and Afro-Surrealism as Alternative Narrativization" by Emily Scroggins, analyzes the television series *Atlanta* as a storytelling outlet that upholds, and speaks to, marginalized people. Scroggins also provides a powerful and considered analysis of Afro-Surrealism, both in general and how it relates to *Atlanta.*

We feature two book reviews in this issue: *For the Culture: Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice*, edited by Lakeyta Bonnette-Bailey and Adolphus Belk and reviewed by Lavar Pope, and *Straight Shooter: A Memoir of Second Chances and First Takes* by Stephen A. Smith, reviewed by Louie Galvan. These selections represent the journal's goal in bringing you reviews of different types of books related to popular culture. The first review is of an academic book, while the second is a memoir. We'll continue to feature book reviews that consider popular culture from a variety of angles.

Finally, this issue introduces a new feature that you will see from time to time going forward! Our publisher, Westphalia Press, strongly advocates for the role that academic journals like *Popular Culture Review* can play in serving as an archive for historical information. To that end, we are publishing a brief piece with archival information and links about cook-books. Cooking and cookbooks are certainly a part of pop-ular culture study, so I hope you will enjoy looking through these resources.

Thanks, as always, for reading!
Amy M. Green, Editor-in-Chief

Blackening the Frame:
Kerry James Marshall's *Rythm Mastr*

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By Austin Anderson, Howard University

ABSTRACT

This essay argues Marshall is "blackening the frame" with his African-centric comic series *Rythm Mastr*. The series is a corrective to the overwhelming whiteness of canonical comics and the silencing and erasure of Black people in American popular culture and fine art. Through the incorporation of Yoruba figures within the superhero genre, Marshall explores Black history and *reframes* American popular culture towards an African-oriented future as part of a broader insurgence among Black comic creators.

Keywords: Africana Studies, Comics, Black Studies, Kerry James Marshall, Black Popular Culture, *Black Panther*

Ennegreciendo el marco: *Rythm Master* de Kerry James Marshall

RESUMEN

Este ensayo argumenta que Marshall está "ennegreciendo el marco" con su serie de historietas centrada en África *Rythm Mastr*. La serie es un correctivo a la abrumadora blancura de los cómics canónicos y el silenciamiento y eliminación de los negros en la cultura popular y las bellas artes estadounidenses. A través de la incorporación de figuras yoruba dentro del género de los superhéroes, Marshall explora la historia negra y replantea la cultura popular estadounidense hacia un futuro de orientación africana como parte de una insurgencia más amplia entre los creadores de cómics negros.

Palabras clave: Estudios Africanos, Historietas, Estudios Negros, Kerry James Marshall, Cultura Popular Negra, *Black Panther*

文章标题：黑化框架：克里·詹姆斯·马歇尔的漫画系列"Rythm Mastr"

摘要

摘要：本文认为，马歇尔正使用以非洲人为中心的漫画系列"Rythm Mastr"来"黑化框架"（blackening the frame）。该漫画系列纠正了经典漫画中以白人为主的特征以及美国大众文化和美术中对黑人身份的压制和抹除。通过将约鲁巴人物融入超级英雄类型，马歇尔探索了黑人历史，并重新建构美国大众文化，使其导向非洲未来，以作为诸多黑人漫画创作者表达的抗议（白人主导文化）的一部分。

关键词：非洲研究，漫画，黑人研究，克里·詹姆斯·马歇尔，黑人大众文化，《黑豹》

Kerry James Marshall interrogates the central problem of art history, museum practices, historiography, and modernity in his understated painting of contemporary middle-class Black life entitled *Sob, Sob*. A young Black woman—painted in Marshall's characteristic deep blue-black tones—sits on the floor in front of a bookshelf filled with books about African and African American history. In front of the woman is an open book entitled *Africa Since 1413*, a reference to Portugal's first colonial landing on the African continent. The woman looks despondently away

Image 1: Marshall, Kerry James. *Sob, Sob.* 2003, Smithsonian American Art Museum Washington D.C., https://americanart.si.edu/art work/sob-sob-78744.

from the bookshelf, and two nearly opaque thought-bubbles float above her head, saying: "SOB... SOB..." Despite living in a home filled with books about the history of African diasporic people, the woman looks away from the texts and seems to long for something different—something more. Marshall describes the young woman's sob as a "powerful rebuke of some of the things you might have come to learn in history" (*Smithsonian*), and the painting encapsulates the central question of the contemporary moment: how can scholars and the general public understand African history without reducing cultures that date back to the earliest moments of civilization to Western European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade? It is a question that raises other considerations that Marshall has contended with throughout his career. How has Western historiography created false narratives about Africa and African-descended peoples? What roles do cultural production, museum practices, and the education system play in upholding anti-Black hegemonic structures? What does a Black insurgent artistic practice look like, and can this insurgency challenge the general climate of anti-Blackness?[1]

These questions are particularly important for the realm of fine art and visual culture where African artistic practices have been simultaneously marginalized and mined as a source of cultural inspiration for white American and European artists. Marshall's entire oeuvre—what he calls a "counter-archive" (Roslstraete 28)—is aimed at correcting the systematic erasure of Africans and African Americans within art history, and his paintings are imbued with an un-

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apologetically and emphatic Black aesthetic, in both content and color. Marshall's Black-centered cultural insurgency goes beyond the realm of fine art. His Yoruba-inspired superhero comic series *Rythm Mastr* is an example of his similarly corrective engagement with American popular culture, and the series is spiritually aligned with Africana Studies because it follows Greg Carr and Dana A. Williams's recognition that "the period of enslavement and colonialism is a very recent and very temporary set of moments" in African history (302). If Marshall has a singular career-long project, it is *Rythm Mastr*, an ongoing endeavor since 1999 that has been prominently featured in several exhibitions and retrospectives throughout his career. Marshall insists the series "is both a straight art project and a comic book" ("A Thousand Words," 229), yet art critics rarely engage with *Rythm Mastr* as anything other than a "comic book-style" art exhibition (Wilkin 62). Unlike these critics, this essay takes Marshall at his word when he says that he is creating a comic book with *Rythm Mastr*, albeit mostly publishing the series in the highly unusual medium of exhibitions in fine art museums. Understanding the work as a comic is key because comics are a quintessentially popular culture genre. Comic scholar Sean Guynes notes, "comics have long been considered *lowbrow*, belonging to a cultural status denoting intellectual or aesthetic inferiority in comparison to the supposedly more accomplished 'art' of *highbrow* culture" (144). *Rythm Mastr* is a fusion of so-called high and low art, and Marshall crafts a crucial engagement with popular culture, which Stuart Hall describes as "an arena that is *profoundly* mythic" (262). These cultural myths can either support or dismantle the historical narratives that a society tells about itself. Marshall's decision to steep his comic in Yoruba mythology is an important part of his corrective artistry centering African history, and the

series gestures towards his larger aims to center and celebrate African diasporic peoples within fine art and popular culture.

Marshall is "blackening the frame" with his African-centric, Yoruba-influenced comic series. *Rythm Mastr*—like much of his artistic work—is "blackening" because the series is Marshall's corrective to the overwhelming whiteness of canonical comics and the silencing and erasure of Africans in Western popular culture writ large. It is a "blackening" of white Eurocentric political hegemony, which in the words of Hall, "is these days waged as much in popular culture as anywhere else" (257). "The frame" invokes three referents: the "frame" around a singular scene in a comic, the "frame" of paintings in an art museum, and the way that Black subjects have been historically "framed" by non-Black artists and writers. By "blackening the frame," Marshall uses the medium of comics within the art museum to explore Black history and *reframe* American popular culture towards an African-oriented future. Marshall's incorporation of Yoruba figures within the superhero genre allows him to base his story within African mythology rather than European cultural icons. "Blackening the frame" is part of a larger discourse where Black cartoonists respond to "muted blackness," which Qiana Whitted suggests is "transnational racial discourses" in canonical non-Black authored comics that "have historically marked and muted blackness" (79). Marshall, like the Black cartoonists that Whitted considers, responds to and rejects "muted blackness" to restore the agency of the Black subject. The decidedly African-influenced *Rythm Mastr* is part of a broader insurgence among Black comic creators like Kwanza Osajyefo that are unapologetically demanding a central place within comics while refusing to capitulate to market demands to include Western, i.e., white, referents.

Marshall is widely considered one of the best living artists, and his work—especially the *Souvenir* series, the *Garden House* series, and *Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*—has received substantial attention from art historians and academics. Unfortunately, *Rythm Mastr* has received comparatively little critical notice, especially from comics scholars. Major journals of the discipline like *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics*, *Inks*, and *The Comics Grid* do not include a single mention of *Rythm Mastr* in their online databases. Part of this critical neglect can be attributed to the relative obscurity of *Rythm Mastr* since the series has been almost exclusively published in fine art museums. Additionally, *Rythm Mastr* is a superhero comic, which until recently have been comparatively marginalized within comics studies.[2] Finally, Marshall is explicitly critical of the comic industry and critiques stalwarts like *Black Panther*. In *Breaking the Frame*, Marc Singer aptly notes contemporary comics studies scholars often "slip all too easily into a common posture of unquestioning praise that celebrate their preferred comics artists" (29), and it is unsurprising that scholars invested in what Singer calls the "populist turn" in comics are uninterested in a series that is explicitly critical of the popular practices and characters of the medium. Each of these factors contributes to the neglect of *Rythm Mastr* in comics studies.

Despite the overall critical neglect of the series from literary critics and comics scholars, *Rythm Mastr* has received some critical notice from art historians, journalists, and artists.

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2 In the introduction to the 2013 collection *The Superhero Reader*, the editors write, "the most compelling contributions to comics scholarship focused on historical, political, autobiographical, avant-garde, and other 'serious minded' comics" as opposed to the superhero genre (xi). The preference among critics for 'serious minded' comics is still apparent when one looks at recent issues of major comics studies journals.

Marshall's comic is commonly framed as a modernist art installation with art historian Petra Frank-Witt reading the comic as "pop art [...] comparable to Lichtenstein's pictures of air and sea combat" (396). Curiously, Frank-Witt and most other art historians neglect to read the series as a comic and instead emphasize the "high art" sensibility of Marshall's work. Journalist Logan Lockner helpfully places Marshall's work in conversation with Charles Williams's *The Amazing Spectacular Captain Soul*, yet he too neglects to read *Rythm Mastr* as a comic and instead suggests the artwork features iconographic reference to graphic narratives. Graphic novelist Frank Santoro helpfully recognizes the series as a comic, suggesting *Rythm Mastr* is a historically corrective work offering "an origin story for black superheroes in a museum context" (6). However, Santoro's essay is written for the general public and is more of a consideration of Black representation in comics rather than an attempt to critically engage or interpret Marshall's series. Artist Dan S. Wang offers a more sustained interpretation of the series by drawing attention to Marshall's use of Black American dialectic within *Rythm Mastr* and arguing the series is an apocalyptic story filled "with lots of fine and popular art-historical references and a hip-hop sensibility" (313). While these previous readings of *Rythm Mastr* have brought wider attention to Marshall's pivotal work, nearly all these works fail to read the series *as a comic* despite Marshall's repeated insistence that *Rythm Mastr* is and always has been a comic. Previous scholars' critical apparatuses completely neglect comics studies, and you are unlikely to find any reference to a frame or gutter in any of the criticism. It is necessary to engage with *Rythm Mastr* as a comic, especially considering this is how Marshall himself conceives of the project.

Marshall first released *Rythm Mastr* in 1999 with the explic-

it goal of creating an epic superhero story rooted in African folklore, and the comic's plot, setting, and art all support Marshall's mission to explore, in his words, "the legendary struggle for the souls of Black folks, to borrow a phrase from W.E.B. Du Bois" ("A Thousand Words," 229). For instance, the name "Rythm Mastr" is both the title of the series and the name of the central hero who brings African sculptures to life with the Yoruba talking drum. The comic's title is spelled in non-standard English, and Marshall explains that the spelling of "master" as "mastr" was done "to undercut the implications of control of other peoples' bodies that's associated with the term 'master' but preserve a certain idea of self-control, and the ability of somebody to implement a regime of power on their own behalf" (Doreen St. Felix). The spelling of "rhythm" as "rythm" also invokes Black vernacular English where constant dropping is a consistent feature. By naming his comics the non-standard spelling of *Rythm Mastr*, Marshall calls our attention to the racial dynamics that certain words are associated with and demands that Black vernacular English is given the same prominence and respect as standard American English. This is an intervention that continues with the plot of the series.

The overarching plot of *Rythm Mastr* is sprawling and often non-linear. The series has been published out of sequence, breaking with traditional narrative practices of a medium Will Eisner famously dubbed "sequential art." Scott McCloud notes comics are designed in a "deliberate sequence" (8), and Eisner argues, "The rendering of the elements within the frame, the arrangement of the images therein and their relation to and association with the other images in the sequent are the basic 'grammar' from which the narrative is constructed" (39). While Marshall is far from the first comic artist to experiment with non-linearity, his deliberate disre-

gard for the "grammar" of comics reconfigures the traditional narrative practices of the medium and is central to understanding how Marshall "Blackens the frame" of comics. Marshall crafts a nonsequential story that breaks from the traditionally ordered Western temporality privileged in American popular culture. This breaking of the "deliberate sequence" of comics engages with African concepts of time and more accurately mirrors the lived experience of human beings.[3] While the passage of time is universal, the way time is perceived is culturally contingent. In his seminal work *African Religions and Philosophy*, John Mbiti writes, "The question of time is of little or no academic concern to African peoples in their traditional life" because African time is instead organized around events or moments (16). Scholars like Ulfried Reichardt and Joseph K. Adjaye have argued African diasporic communities have retained the African concept of time. Marshall's temporal structure recovers and privileges African time while simultaneously breaking from traditional comic practices.

Most of the series is set in the Bronzeville neighborhood of Chicago that Marshall has called home since 1987. During the Great Migration, Bronzeville was known as the "Black Metropolis" because of the rapidly expanding African Amer-

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3   Ulfried Reichardt notes, "pre-modern [African] temporalities are close to contemporary theories of time" (471), and scientists are increasingly suggesting that pre-colonial Africans' conception of time more accurately mirrors the ways humans perceive time. Nonetheless, African time has been cited as an example of African cultural primitivism by colonialists and some modern Africans, and there has been a large push for Africans to adopt Western time throughout the continent, particularly in areas that rely on Western tourism for economic growth. The widespread adoption of Enlightenment understandings of time is an example of the "worlding" process that Black Studies seeks to critique and, hopefully, dismantle.

ican population in the area. Bronzeville was a key Black cultural center and important Black figures like Richard Wright, Gwendolyn Brooks, Louis Armstrong, and Bessie Coleman called the neighborhood home in the 1930s and 40s. However, Ellen Tani notes the "Black Metropolis" moniker "faded when a plethora of large-scale, problematic housing projects went up there in the '50s and '60s." Today, Bronzeville is a mostly middle-class residential area whose roots as a Black cultural center have been obscured. Marshall's decision to set *Rythm Mastr* in the "Black Metropolis" allows him to spotlight a key historically Black area while also raising an association with *Superman*'s "Metropolis"—a connotation that is undoubtedly intentional given Marshall's deep familiarity with comics. *Superman* takes place in a fictional New York-like Northeastern city named Metropolis, and this location is nearly as iconic as Superman himself. Both Superman and Metropolis have been framed as apolitical. Umberto Eco's 1962 essay "Il mito di 'Superman' e la dissoluzione del tempo" is one of the most important essays in comic studies, and Eco argues Superman is a mythic archetype stuck in a paradoxical timeless stasis that "reinforces an equally stagnant ideological structure in which large-scale political action is neither possible nor necessary" (Singer 36). In his 1972 revision of this essay, Eco describes Superman as "a perfect example of civic consciousness, completely split from political consciousness" (22). While Siegel and Shuster featured numerous political commentaries in the early Superman comics and recent political interpretations of the character like Gene Luen Yang's *Superman Smashes the Clan* have revitalized the orginary political intentions of the Jewish-created hero, Superman is commonly framed in the popular imagination as an apolitical advocate of justice.[4] Marshall's *Rythm*

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4   Marc Singer has written extensively on Eco's essay and how he overlooks the more political moments in the *Superman* series. Singer notes,

Mastr is anything but apolitical, and Marshall's titular hero uses his powers to advocate for Black liberation. Marshall sets up Black Metropolis as a counterpoint to Superman's fictional New York, which sets up the titular Rythm Mastr as a countermyth to Superman.

Set in the Black Metropolis, the *Rythm Mastr* story begins when a young Black couple, Farell and Stasha, are separated after being caught in the crossfire of a gang shootout. Stasha is shot, and she crafts an elaborate plan for revenge by applying her knowledge of robotics and computer engineering to create an army of remote-controlled cars for retaliatory drive-bys. She also teams up with "a posse of wheelchair-bound tech wizards" who were victims of drive-by shootings (Tomkins 20). Meanwhile, as Farell is trying to escape the shooting, he runs inside the Ancient Egyptian Museum and encounters an elderly man named Rythm Mastr who uses traditional African drumming to bring Yoruba African and ancient Egyptian statues to life and infuse them with mythical superpowers. The elderly Rythm Mastr shares his secrets with Farell and teaches him how to harness these mythical powers of African drumming. When the elderly man dies, Farell becomes the new Rythm Mastr. Throughout the series, Farell and his team of Yoruba warriors clash with Stasha and her robotic army over the proper future of the Black Metropolis. Marshall describes the project as grappling with the African diasporic past, present, and future:

"The Superman that Eco describes is the Superman of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, after publishers stifled the political commentary in response to a moral panic over comic books and to Superman's increasing value as a commodity" (38). Singer is undoubtedly correct, and Superman comics have a long history of political engagement. However, this reality does not change the fact that Superman is typically conceived as an apolitical and almost empty heroic vessel.

> To tell the story, I had to develop a conflict in which the past/present/future transitions could unfold. The Rythm Mastr and the African sculptures he brings to life represent the past from which a lot of people think we've been severed. My project is a critique of how that past is treated both by the dominant culture and by Afrocentrists. Gang violence presents a perfect backdrop for the present; and for the future, the computer, the Internet, robotics: I wanted to use all of those familiar sci-fi tropes. Technology is not all bad, and the past is not all good, but here they meet head-on in conflict. It's a love story, a story about vengeance, redemption, and internal cultural conflict. ("A Thousand Words," 229)

Rythm Mastr is an exploration of African American identity and the potential futures for African diasporic peoples. Marshall refuses to romanticize the past or imagine a utopic future. Instead, Marshall's cultural intervention is an extended interrogation of the history of African American communities, and the principal plot thread investigates how contemporary Black culture is continually influenced by an African past.

Rythm Mastr is inspired by the Seven African Powers of Yoruba. The incorporation of Yoruba mythology within the comic creates continuity between African religious practices and contemporary African American life. Five Yoruba-inspired heroes are brought to life by Rythm Mastr: Boli, Senufo, Ibeji, Oba, and Nkisi. Each of these characters corresponds to a different aspect of Yoruba culture or mythology. Boli is a mysterious stone-like character with no discernable features

Image 2: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Every Beat of My Heart.* 1999–2000, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington D.C., https://nmaahc.si.edu/object/nmaahc_2020.57.3.1ab.

and is a reference to the Boli Figure, a sacred artifact used by the Kono society in Mali. The Boli Figure is an abstract artifact that "is believed to be the embodiment of the spiritual powers of the society" ("Boli Figure, for the Kono Society"). Senufo wears a cloth mask over its face and has four feathers sticking out of its head. The Senufo are an ethnic group of West Africans, and they use a mask like the one the character Senufo wears to indicate when a woman is ready for marriage. The characters Ibeji are a pair of identical twins who wear a metal warrior helmet. In the Yoruba religion, Ibeji is the Orisha that represents twins, and twins are protected by Shango, the supreme Orisha of thunder and lighting. Oba wears an elaborate headdress with a coiled necklace. According to Yoruba religion, Oba is the Orisha of the river Oba, and she is the senior wife of Shango. The character Nkisi is made of stone and wears a solemn expression on his face. In Yoruba culture, Nkisi refers to an object that has a spirit inhabiting it, and these artifacts are often used by Yoruba people to commune with their ancestors. As the Rythm Mastr, Farell's character design is also inspired by Yoruba culture. He plays the talking drum, or the dùndún, to bring African sculptures to life. The talking drum plays an important role in Yoruba performance culture, and Amalyah Hart notes, "the drums really can be used to convey speech, a phenomenon known as 'speech surrogacy.'" Like all his artistic endeavors, Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* is a culturally corrective text aimed at centering the African presence in American artistic and popular culture. Of his comic, Marshall writes, "I'm trying to find a way to make our knowledge of African history, our knowledge of mythology, and our love of fantasy and superheroes and things like that all come together in a vital and exciting way, by connecting it to a story that is meaningful, historically and culturally, and that says something about the way in
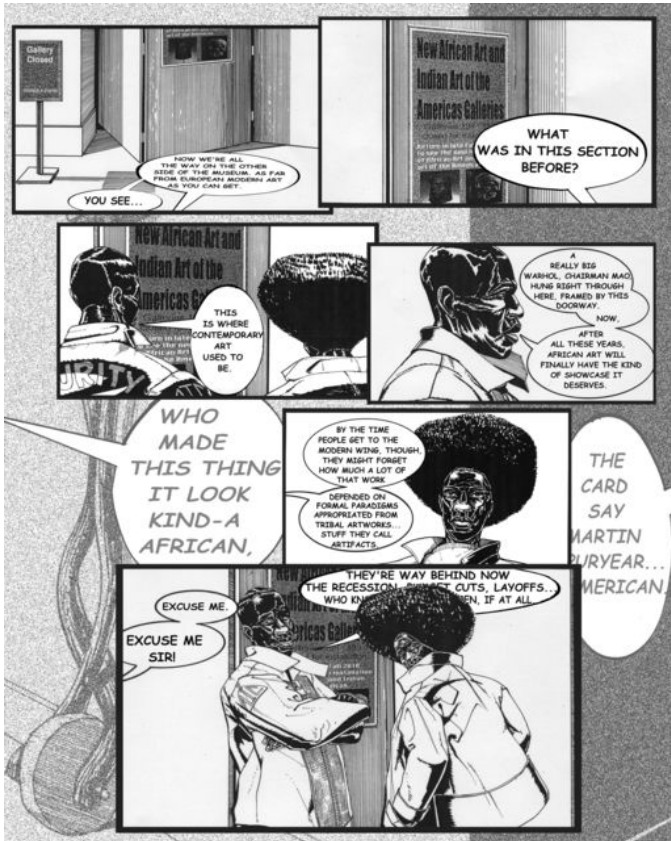
Image 3: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Art Museum.* 1999–2000, MCA Chicago, Chicago, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kerry-james-marshall-rythm-mastr-1.

which we can carry these traditions into the future, so that they don't have to dissipate and die" (Interview by Art21). By designing his heroes in the Yoruba tradition and insisting on the cultural retention of African practices in contemporary African American life, Marshall blackens the frame of comics and the art museum.

While the Yoruba-inspired heroes play a vital role in the overarching world of the series, much of *Rythm Mastr* is concerned with the day-to-day lives of the Black citizens living in the Black Metropolis. In *Mastry*, Marshall selected a few exemplary panels from *Rythm Mastr* that spoke "directly to socioeconomic issues and the history of Chicago" (280). One example is a two-page excerpt that features Farell and an unnamed Black security guard walking around an art museum. In the first panel, there is a "gallery closed" sign on the lefthand side of the panel and text bubbles at the bottom that say: "You see … Now we're all the way on the other side of the museum. As far from European Modern art as you can get." The men arrive at an exhibition entitled, "New African Art and Indian Art of the Americas Galleries," and this gallery is currently closed for renovation. With one line of dialogue and a few well-placed images, Marshall has described the layout of the art museum without ever showing the schematics of the location. Within this museum, Marshall places African art "far from European Modern art," and he implies that African art is materially and spiritually removed from European art. In the third panel, Marshall finally reveals the speaking subjects: Farell and the unnamed Black security guard. The two Black men continue to discuss the upcoming "New African Art and Indian Art of the Americas Galleries," and the security guard tells Farell, "This is where contemporary art used to be. A really big Warhol. *Chairman Mao*. Hung right there here, framed by this doorway. Now, after all these years

African art will finally have the showcase it deserves" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Here, Marshall positions African art as a belated insurgency that is correcting the historical erasure of African art in museums. Within this imagined museum, Marshall "Blackens the frame" by replacing contemporary art with African and American Indian art.

Additionally, the panel considers the position of the security guard. He is drawn as a middle-aged Black man, and his dialogue indicates that he has been working at the museum for a considerable amount of time. His persistent proximity to the art museum ensures that he is an expert in fine art. What has a middle-aged Black security guard who works for a fine art museum seen? More importantly, what has he not seen? Marshall asks his viewer to inhabit the perspective of the security guard and see the art museum through his eyes, a powerful reversal of the white gaze that so often defines Black-exclusionary. In celebrated creative spaces, the white gaze "has long determined whose stories are told […] enforcing a seemingly immovable standard by which Black artists and other artists of color are nearly always cast in supporting roles to the mostly white stars of the Western canon" (Noor Brara). Marshall's security guard has undoubtedly seen thousands of artistic works and exhibitions by and about white artists, and his face displays significant weariness as he tells Farell, "after all these years African art will finally have the showcase it deserves" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). This statement comes from a man whose Black gaze has watched the predominantly white space of the art museum work to marginalize and ignore African and Black art while aesthetically mining these traditions for their own gains. By having the viewer inhabit the Black gaze, Marshall works to challenge the white gaze that has traditionally structured the museum space.

The panel also serves an educational function. The security guard is talking to the much younger Farell, and the security guard becomes a figure much like Marshall the artist—an older Black man educating a young Black viewer about the long and impressive history of African art. The security guard tells Farell, "By the time people get to the modern wing, though, they might forget how much a lot of that work depended on formal paradigms appropriated from tribal artworks … stuff they call artifacts" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Here is a clear example of Marshall's attempt to "Blacken the frame" of the art museum. Through the security guard, Marshall educates his audience about the inspiration white modernist European and American artists took from African art. Helen Molesworth argues Marshall's oeuvre participates in an "institutional critique" of the art museum that "demonstrates how the museum, along with its attending academic discipline, art history, has played a key role in the invention of racism and now must play a role in its dismantling" (32; 38). Part of this dismantling is a historical correction of art history. African and African diasporic people have made art since antiquity, and many of the most celebrated white American and European artists took direct inspiration from African artistic forms. Yet as the security guard notes, African art has often been reduced to "artifacts" by art historians. Marshall "Blackens the frame" to correct the historical record and highlight the seismic role that African art has played throughout art history.

In this excerpt, Marshall's use of the gutter departs from traditional comic practices. The gutter is the space between panels in a work of sequential art, and it is typically a blank white space that gives the page structure. McCloud argues the gutter has a profound impact on the reader's imagination, and he writes, "the gutter plays host to much of the magic and

mystery at the very heart of comics" (66). For McCloud and comic scholars of his ilk, the gutter allows the reader to fill in gaps in the narrative and create meaning from a sequence of panels. As such, the whiteness of most gutters must not be ignored. The traditional gutter is white because it allows a publisher to save on ink and not print anything in the margins of a comic. Yet whiteness as the default transforms the gutter into a generative site of racial inquiry in Marshall's deft hands. In this excerpt, Marshall's gutter is gray and features a simultaneous scene that is happening in the background. Unseen Black art patrons are discussing the work of the abstractionist African American artist Martin Puryear. Puryear famously rarely discusses his racial identity, and his abstract artforms elude a singular interpretation. One of the patrons asks, "Who made this thing? It look kind-a African." The other person responds, "The card says, Martin Puryear ... American" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). The ellipsis is particularly important because it suggests a hesitant pause at Puryear's identarian mark "American," as if the Black patrons are skeptical of this descriptor. In a refusal to simply use the gutter as uninterrogated blank space, Marshall's gutter offers a critique of Puryear's reluctance to identify himself as a Black artist.

Additionally, the ellipsis that Marshall places in the gutter might also serve as a critique of Puryear's commitment to abstraction. Abstraction is a particularly fraught subject in African American art. When Marshall began producing his early celebrated work like "A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self" (1980) in the early 1980s, realism had allegedly sounded its death rattle with Jean Baudrillard declaring "the death of the real." Realism was pastiche amidst "the all-encompassing embrace of postmodernism and its concomitant culture of parody and programmatic suspicion of all belief systems and epistemologies based on realist truth

claims" (Roelstraete 49). Arts museums began celebrating many Black abstraction artists like Norman Lewis, Ed Clark, and Puryear. While Marshall produced some abstract art early in his career, he famously turned away from abstraction a few years into his career, and he says, "I stopped making abstract work—because white figures in pictures representative of ideal beauty and humanity are ubiquitous" (qtd. in Roelstraete 49). Marshall believed that the embrace of abstraction was a rejection of Black representation. As such, his reject of abstraction was an embrace of unmitigated Black representation in art. With his commitment to abstraction and hesitancy towards racial categorizations, Puryear is in many ways Marshall artistic opposite, and it seems clear that Marshall is engaging in a critique of Puryear when the Black patrons in the *Rythm Mastr* excerpt voice skepticism towards Puryear's non-association with Blackness. Marshall stages a critique of Black abstraction within the gutter, and he transforms the white gutter into a space of Black racial inquiry.

The museum storyline continues on the next page. The top panel features a Black woman standing with her hands on her hips, and she asks the security guard about the African art exhibition, "Excuse me… This still not open?" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). The woman is standing in front of two young children who are almost out of frame and begging their mom to leave the museum and go home. The security guard tells the woman that the exhibition remains closed, but he notes the museum promised the exhibit will "be open for Black History Month." Marshall is highlighting how Black and African artists have often been relegated to Black History Month or other diversity-focused initiatives rather than being an enmeshed part of the museum space. The viewer naturally identifies with the unnamed woman who says, "Are you serious?" as a crowd of Black museum visitors form behind
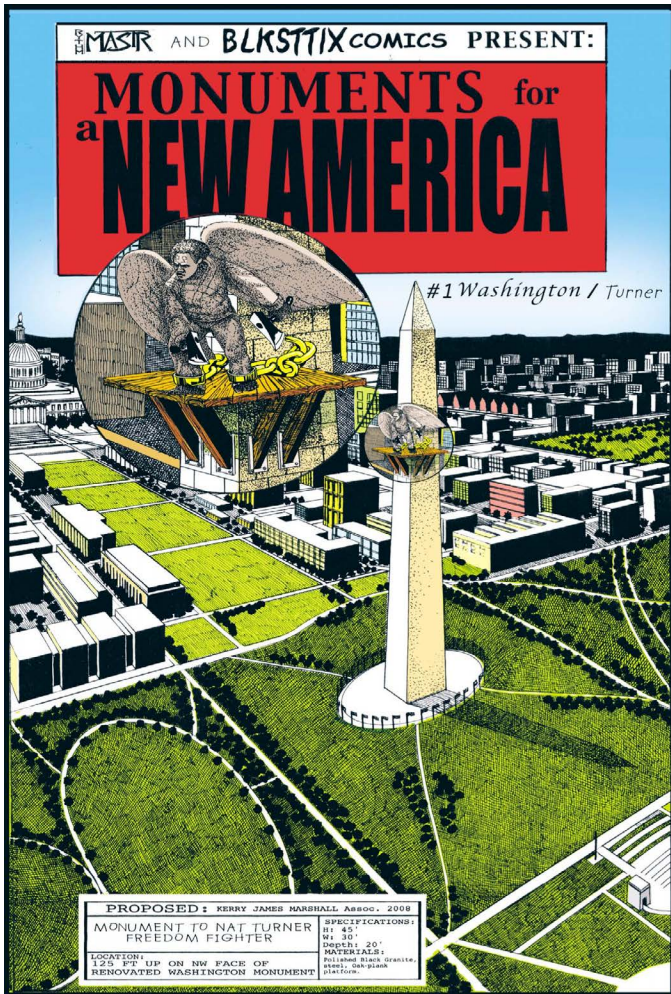
Image 4: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: Monuments for a New America.* 2003, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York, https://www.artsy.net/artwork/kerry-james-marshall-dailies-from-rythm-mastr.

her and complain about this injustice. Rather than exploring other parts of the museum, they all leave while someone in the crowd exclaims, "That's the last twenty dollars of mind they get!" The security guard turns to Farell and sighs, "See … now that's another group might never come to the museum again" (*Rythm Mastr: Art Museum*). Marshall has often critiqued the lack of representation within art museums, and he writes, "It would not be a stretch to suggest that low 'African American' attendance correlates with their low visibility in the art" ("Just Because" 242).

As the series progresses, the United States of America is remade as Rythm Mastr and his team of Yoruba-inspired Black superheroes change the national culture, including national monuments. For example, the Washington Monument has been augmented with the "Monument for Nat Turner: Freedom Fighter." While the Washington Monument still stands, there is now a platform added to the middle of it where a marble statue of a winged-Turner sits. Gold chains wrap around his feet—indicating Turner's escape from bondage and perhaps a reference to the pivotal role that West African gold played in the birth of modernity. The Turner statue peers out from the edge of the platform, ready to jump away from the chains and fly to freedom. Marshall has recast the famous monument to America's first president—and owner of 123 enslaved African Americans at the time of his death—into an acknowledgement of the most famous slave rebellion in American history. The panel that features the "Washington/Turner" Monument is presented as if it is included in a pamphlet about numerous monuments for "New America." At the bottom of the page, Marshall writes, "next issue: Jefferson / Prosser," referencing Thomas Jefferson and Gabriel Prosser. Jefferson was the fourth president of the United States, the principal author of the U.S. Constitution, and one

of the most famous slave owners in American history. Prosser was born into slavery in 1776 and the leader of Gabriel's Rebellion, a slave rebellion that directly confronted the hypocrisy of the U.S. Constitution. These dual monuments reveal that Rythm Mastr and his team of heroes have remade the United States into a more liberatory nation for African diasporic communities.

In interviews, Marshall has argued that augmenting these real monuments "dedicated to slave-holders [...] with statues of slave rebels" would undermine "the tendency to idealize history" ("Kerry James Marshall"), and *Rythm Mastr* allows Marshall to speculatively imagine an American future where history is acknowledged. Throughout the series, Marshall suggests the incorporation of African-inspired superheroes into the American body politic will create a total reimagining of the nation. Through the historical correction of important American landmarks, Marshall suggests that the incorporation of Black culture within cultural sites that Black people have been denied access to will lead to a reimagining of American culture writ large. Art is not neutral, and it is reflective of a culture's values. Public art like the Washington Monument is used to uphold white supremacist hegemonic power structures by silencing the Black presence and labor that these "Great Men" the monuments honor were dependent on. Elsewhere, Marshall has said, "It is a problem to recognize the greatness of Washington and Jefferson without also acknowledging that as they fought for freedom they were denying it, not only to African Americans but also—in the process of consolidating the country—to Native Americans through genocide" ("Kerry James Marshall Discusses his Exhibition at SF MoMA"). The *Rythm Mastr* project challenges traditional artistic historiographic practices by highlighting how art, especially in the form of

public monuments, is used to uphold the power systems of a racist regime.

Marshall continues his interest in a corrective history throughout the *Rythm Mastr* run. One of the excerpts of *Rythm Mastr* was published in the magazine *Esopus* Issue 14. The selection begins by introducing the reader to the Black Metropolis with the opening image of an all-black highway sign that reads, "exit 1619 A: Black Metropolis." The exit number is an obvious reference to the arrival of the first Africans in the United States on 20 August 1619, when 20 Angolans, taken by the Portuguese, were brought to Jamestown and sold to the British colonists. Works like *Before the Mayflower* by Lerone Bennett Jr. and *The 1619 Project* by Nikole Hannah-Jones have compellingly argued that the arrival of these 20 Africans signals the twin beginnings of the American project and the exploitation of Black people and their labor. As Hannah-Jones writes, "No aspect of the country that would be formed here has been untouched by the years of slavery that followed" (17). By making the Black Metropolis exit "1619," Marshall demands that readers recognize this date as the important starting point for American history and African American identity. The next page of the *Esopus* run is another highway exit for the Black Metropolis, but this exit is listed as "1865 B." This date is a reference to the end of the American Civil War. After this date, the Southern plantocracy system of slavery legally ended— though, of course, the institution of slavery still exists in the form of legalized prison slavery. By framing, the entrance to the Black metropolis around these important dates in Black history, Marshall centers the importance of Black history within his imagined Black Metropolis.

The medium that Marshall chooses to showcase his comic is worth further consideration. Other than an 8-week run

where the comic was published in *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*'s magazine every Tuesday and occasional features in art magazines like *Esopus*, *Rythm Mastr* has been exclusively featured in museums where it is typically shown out of narrative order, which invites the reader to physically move their body throughout the art museum to uncover the narrative. By forcing his audience to struggle to locate the plot, *Rythm Mastr* mirrors the barriers that have been erected to obscure the African presence throughout history. Additionally. Marshall has typically featured *Rythm Mastr* in massive visually striking and grandiose exhibitions. For example, the original exhibition of the series was released during the 1999 Carnegie International, and the panels were placed behind glass paned windows and organized akin to a comic book. Each individual panel is the size of a newspaper. When the individual comics are taken together, the exhibition morphs into a visually arresting image. The exhibition at the 2018 Carnegie International was similarly overpowering but organized in an entirely different fashion than the 1999 showcase. The 2018 *Rythm Mastr* was presented as a singular seventy-foot-long comic strip that once again asked his reader to move their body to uncover the plot and appreciate the comic. Marshall designs showcases of *Rythm Mastr* to be visually overpowering. The massive scale of Marshall's work is a complete breaking of the frame of traditional comic publication, which often seeks to control and limit Black comic creators. Speaking of the scale of his paintings, Marshall says, "If you have things that we're [only] used to seeing in a really small format, if you double that size or increase it exponentially, then all of sudden it assumes a lot more importance" ("Meet Kerry James Marshall" 3:16-3:24). It seems clear he has similar aims with the publication practice of *Rythm Mastr*, and the choice of medium is foundational

to Marshall's desire to "Blacken the frame" of both popular culture and the art museum.

In 1999, an eight-part limited-run comic strip was published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* as part of the overarching *Rythm Mastr* project. These strips were designed to look like old, distressed newspaper clippings, establishing a fictionalized genealogy of the series. Throughout his career, Marshall has addressed the alleged belatedness of African American art, lamenting how art allegedly "ended" as soon as Black artists gained admission into the fine art community after decades of fighting for that access. The fine art world engaged in a variety of "end of narratives" between the 1970s and 1990s, and art critics like Arthur Danto suggested, in Hegelian terms, the contemporary period was the "end of art" because art was entering a "post-historical phase" (181). Danto argues, "once art-makers are freed from the task of finding the essence of art, thrust upon them at the inception of modernism, they are liberated also from history, and have entered the era of freedom" (180-81). Post-Blackness and certain Black abstractionist movements seemingly resonate with the idea that the "end of art" will offer a certain kind of liberation. Paul C. Taylor makes the connection between post-Blackness and Danto's "end of art" argument, and he writes, "the sense that the history of blackness or of raciality has made a decisive turn, enshrined in the determination to identify a post-black, post-civil rights, or post-soul condition, suggests that something more is available, and perhaps necessary" (639), Marshall has never found these types of arguments convincing. Regarding his rejection of abstraction as a liberatory framework for African American art, Marshall says, "What I wish to show is that abandoning black figure representation was not really a move toward true freedom but instead another box within which black artists encountered other issues,

chiefly the idea of belatedness, that prevented them from being recognized as significant contributors to the art historical record" (qtd. in Brehmer n.p.). Marshall's paintings have attempted to correct the "art historical record" and avoid the "belatedness" issue. The stylized distress of the comic strip allows Marshall to engage in a similar critique of the comic form—a space where Black artists also deal with the issue of a belated arrival, particularly in the superhero comic genre.

Sequential art has been around since antiquity, but the modern comic strip is today often understood as beginning with *The Glasgow Looking Glass*, published in 1826. The American superhero comic genre was solidified with the publication of *Action Comic #1* on 18 April 1938, featuring the introduction of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Superman and ushering in the Golden Age (1938–1956) of comics. The Golden Age also introduced the world to Batman, Captain America, Wonder Woman, and several other heroes who remain popular to this day. The Silver Age (1956–1970) was defined by the restrictive Comics Codes, but the era also introduced superheroes like the Flash, Spider-Man, Aquaman, Iron Man, and the X-Men. While the subsequent Bronze (1970–1985) and Modern (1985–present) Ages of comics have continued to introduce new characters and artists, these early days of comics still hold significant sway within popular culture—as evidenced by the massive success of the Marvel movie franchise. Black characters and Black artists are not well represented among so-called "classic comics." To be clear, Black representation in American comics began almost immediately, and while some of this representation was racial or racist caricatures by white artists, Black artists were establishing their presence in American comics from the outset. For instance, E. Simms Campbell's cartoons were published in almost every issue of *Esquire* between 1933–1958, and the

All-Negro Comics—a single-issue run of comic strips by exclusively Black creators—was published in 1947. *Fantastic Four #52* was released in 1965 and introduced the world to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's Black Panther. Though Black Panther was created by two white artists, his introduction signaled an ideological and representational shift within superhero comics, and other Black characters like Storm, Luke Cage, and the Falcon followed in his wake. Benjamin Saunders writes, "as the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, the (always) white and (almost always) male ranks of the superhero also slowly began to diversify, while the boundaries between superhero fantasy and the 'real world' continued to erode in stories exploring themes of racial intolerance, political corruption, and social inequality" (203). In 1993, four African American comics—Dwayne McDuffie, Denys Cowan, Michael Davis, and Derek T. Dingle—created *Milestone Media*, and published Black superheroes like Static, Icon, and Hardware. Today, there are numerous Black comic creators such as Barbara Brandon, John Jennings, and Brian Stelfreeze as well as literary writers who have come to the medium as comic writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates and Victor LaValle. Despite increasing racial representation within comics, the Black presence remains marginalized within the medium today, and Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson write, "comics are still only peppered with representations of the multifaceted Black experience by Black artists" (15). Part of the issue is the comic industry's obsession with self-referential works, what Singer calls "recirculations" (70). Singer argues, "The traditionalism isn't limited to the comic's self-conscious allusions or its preferred moral code; its nostalgia and its investment in the logic of decline also reinforce some of the genre's less palatable traditions" (91-92). This self-nostalgic imaginary reinscribes the historical marginalization of Black comic creators. As

such, Marshall's decision to stylize his comic strip as a distressed and aged artifact is crafting an imagined past for African American art and offers a key example of his attempt to "Blacken the frame" of comics.

From a popular culture perspective, it is fair to ask if *Rythm Mastr* really *matters*. There is no doubt that *Rythm Mastr* is an exceptional sequence of fine art, and Marshall's artistic mastery is evident throughout each iteration of the series. However, Marshall's vision for *Rythm Mastr* goes far beyond the realm of fine art. Marshall hopes to turn the series into a graphic novel and a cinematic blockbuster that can rival any Marvel property. Marshall says, "My goal [with *Rythm Mastr*] is to match the iconic level of 'Star Wars'" (qtd. in Tomkins n.p.), and Marshall imagines *Rythm Mastr* as an insurgent Black presence within popular culture and comics that will provide Black audiences with iconic African-inspired superheroes. Yet the 2010s and 2020s are the age of Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*. The 2018 film adaptation of *Black Panther* is the 14th highest-grossing film of all time, and the 2022 sequel *Wakanda Forever* has earned over 800 million dollars at the box office. Iconic Black superheroes are available for Black audiences. And while no one, outside of vitriolic racists, would complain about more Black representation within popular culture and comics, it is fair to ask if the sometimes polemic and often narratively obscure *Rythm Mastr* has the same urgency in the contemporary moment. Black comic scholars like Rebecca Wanzo and Jonathan W. Gray find utility in *Black Panther*. While Wanzo notes that Black Panther is a "post-racist caricature" (*Content of Our Caricature* 211) and her work has illustrated the "epic struggle to make a 'real' Black character out of something that was a white fantasy of blackness" ("And All Our Past Decades Have Seen Revolutions" n.p.), she also recognizes significant utility in the

character. Wanzo argues, "The rehabilitation of black representations is foundational to African American cultural production," and as such, rehabilitating *Black Panther* becomes part of a "liberatory black aesthetic practice [...] responding to negative representations" (*Content of Our Caricature* 211; 212).[5] Similarly, Gray praises Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* by writing, "This is a movie whose political theory matches its stunning special effects" ("The Liberating Visions of *Black Panther*" n.p.).[6] Gray also suggests the original comic iteration of *Black Panther* "deliberately positions the 'Negro' as intellectually equal to his white counterparts, establishing the competence of African peoples in the face of Western scientific dominance" ("Black Panther and Cold War Colonialism in the Marvel Universe" n.p.). If *Black Panther* is a viable Black popular culture icon, shouldn't comic artists interested in a liberatory Black cultural production work to expand the *Black Panther* cinematic universe and create similar decolonial efforts with already-canonical Black superheroes like Luke Cage, Black Adam, and Falcon?

Marshall rejects the notion that Black creators should work to rehabilitate a Black hero created in a white imaginary, and

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5   It is important to note that part of Wanzo's argument about *Black Panther* is a practical engagement with the realities of a market-driven popular culture. In her 2016 article "Why the Stakes are so High for the Black Panther," Wanzo argues it is necessary for the *Black Panther* film to monetarily succeed for more Black comic films to be made. Wanzo writes, "Unfortunately, when it comes to underrepresented populations, the success or failure of these texts always ends up being about more than the specific text in itself. It becomes a referendum on whether or not stories about people who are not straight, white men are valuable, and whether or not people who tell such stories should be given the resources to do so."

6   This is not to say that Gray was only laudatory of the film. He notes, for instance, "the movie didn't sufficiently explore the complicated relationships that bind and bond" Shuri and Ramonda.

he argues *Black Panther* simply cannot achieve the emancipatory work that he is aiming for with *Rythm Mastr*. Marshall suggests traditional canonical, i.e., white-authored, superhero comics are insufficient icons for African American and African diasporic peoples. Regarding Ta-Nehisi Coates's renditions of *Black Panther*, Marshall says, "If all you can do is take characters that already exist, it's a failure to me" (qtd. in Tomkins n.p.). For Marshall, an adaptation of *Black Panther* is inherently limiting, and he argues, "The trouble with revivals, though, is that the new authors must preserve enough of the original for a series to remain recognizable to die-hard fans while simultaneously opening it outward to more universal experiences" ("Marvel's Black Panther" n.p.). While Marshall's writings[7] reveal that he is a fan of *Black Panther* and has a deep familiarity with the source material, he recognizes that being a fan of an established comic character created by a canonical and white author, even if that character is Black, is not the same thing as a Black writer crafting a mythic Black superhero inspired by Yoruba religious practices. The latter is potentially liberatory while the former is simply diversity. For this reason, *Rythm Mastr* remains urgent, and Marshall's "Blackening the frame" is imperative for the type of liberation that Black and Africana Studies strives to achieve.

Marshall's *Rythm Mastr* has demanded a Black popular culture insurgency since the comic first arrived on the scene in 1999, and that insurgency seems to be happening at this very moment. In recent years, there has been a growing collection

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7 For instance, Marshall corrects the misreporting that the Coates-Stelfreeze run on *Black Panther* was the first Black comic and Black writer team leading the series and points out "That distinction goes to Hudlin and Ken Lashley on the fabulous Dark Reign series in 2009 [with] probably the best-executed Panther story arc since artist Billy Graham drew the Don McGregor–scripted stories in the mid-'70s" ("Marvel's Black Panther").

of Black comics who are creating space for themselves in the industry while producing original African-centric stories. The husband-wife duo Manuel and Geiszel Godoy created *Black Sands Entertainment* in 2016 with the express intention of creating "indie comics by Black artists, written for Black families about Black people, with a focus on tales of Africa before slavery" (Pineda). The Godoy's flagship comic is *Black Sands: The Seven Kingdoms* and features several Afrofuturistic Black heroes. Similarly, *Black* was written by Kwanza Osajyefo, co-created by John Smith 3, and drawn by Jamal Igle, and these three Black men created a comic series that imagines a world where only Black people have superpowers. *Black* is filled with references to African American culture as well as symbols from the Akan religion. These emerging Black artists and writers are unapologetically demanding a central place within comics while refusing to capitulate to market demands to simply reskin already establish characters like *Spiderman: Miles Morales*. Like *Rythm Mastr*, these works are steeped in African mythology, and these artists are creating original intellectual property specifically for Black audiences. One of the most famous panels from *Rythm Mastr* features several animate African artworks escaping from their display cases in a museum. Two Black security guards stand in the middle of the museum, and one says to the other, "Wha…? Did you hear that noise?" The other security guard responds, "Let's go! I didn't hear shit!" In the middle of the page, large bold letters say: "The Time Has Come" (*Rythm Mastr: So it Begins*). Thanks in no small part to creators like Marshall who have spent their careers "Blackening the frame" of the art museum and comics, it seems the time *has* come for greater recognition of unapologetically Black and African-inspired comics that seek a liberatory future for African diasporic peoples. Rythm Mastr will undoubtedly be beating his drum to welcome this future.
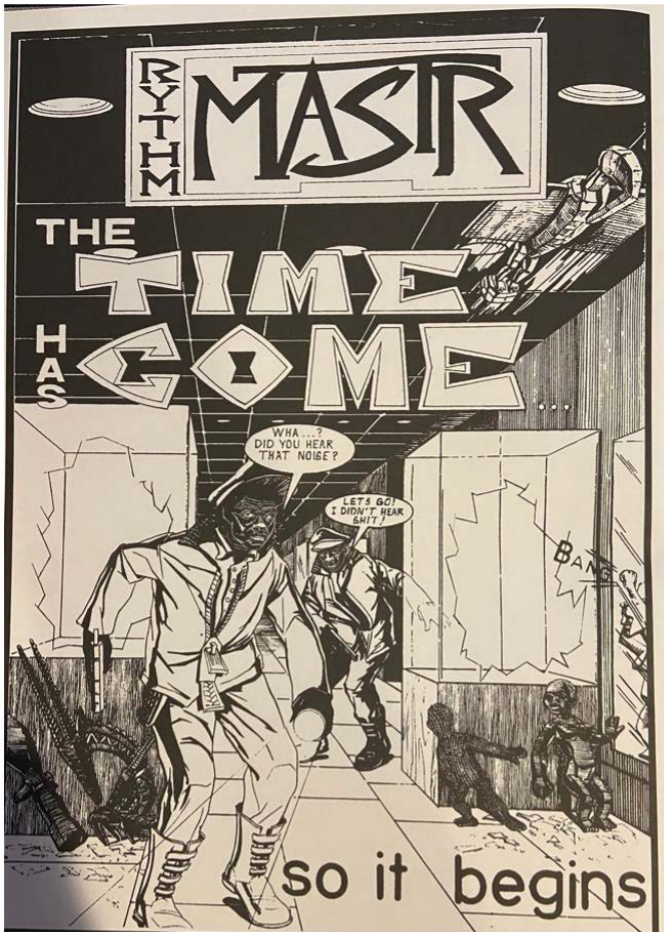
Image 5: Marshall, Kerry James. *Rythm Mastr: So it Begins. 1999–2000, Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, edited by Madeleine Grynsztejn, pp. 1. Skira Rizzoli, 2016.

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Harlem's Superhero: Social Interaction, Heterogeneity of Thought, and the Superhero Mission in Marvel's *Luke Cage*

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ABSTRACT

The essay extends previous Luke Cage scholarship by analyzing him through a discipline rarely utilized in superhero scholarship: developmental psychology. Using the *Luke Cage* television series, the author centers Luke Cage's relationship to Harlem. In doing so, the author explores how the relationship can elucidate both the conceptual foundations of morally-relevant decision-making and the ways these concepts may be applied in varied and complex social interactions–features of social life relevant to everyday persons as well as superheroes working within a fictionalized neighborhood.

Keywords: Luke Cage, Superheroes, Marvel, Development, Morality, Society, Popular Culture

El héroe de Harlem: interacción social, heterogeneidad de pensamiento y la misión del superhéroe en Marvel

RESUMEN

El ensayo amplía la erudición anterior de Luke Cage al analizarlo a través de una disciplina rara vez utilizada en la erudición de superhéroes: la psicología del desarrollo. Utilizando la serie de televisión Luke Cage, el autor centra la relación de Luke Cage con Harlem. Al hacerlo, el autor explora cómo

la relación puede dilucidar tanto los fundamentos conceptuales de la toma de decisiones moralmente relevantes como las formas en que estos conceptos pueden aplicarse en interacciones sociales variadas y complejas: características de la vida social relevantes tanto para las personas comunes como para los superhéroes. trabajando dentro de un vecindario ficticio.

Palabras clave: Luke Cage, Superhéroes, Marvel, Desarrollo, Moralidad, Sociedad, Cultura Popular

哈莱姆区的英雄：社会互动、思想异质性以及漫威《卢克·凯奇》中的超级英雄使命

摘要

本文使用发展心理学分析卢克·凯奇，对关于他的以往研究进行了扩展。发展心理学很少用于超级英雄研究。作者将《卢克·凯奇》电视剧作为研究对象，聚焦于卢克·凯奇与哈莱姆区的关系。为此，作者探究了这种关系如何阐明道德相关决策的概念基础，以及这些概念如何应用于各种复杂的社会互动，即与"在虚构社区内工作的普通人和超级英雄"相关的社会生活特征。

关键词：卢克·凯奇，超级英雄，漫威，发展，道德，社会，大众文化

Premiering in the comic *Hero for Hire* (1972-1973) and recently popularized in the Marvel series *Luke Cage* (2016-2018), Luke Cage is one of the most socio-polit-

ically significant black superheroes ever created (Nama 53-54). The comic introduces Carl Lucas, an African American man who was imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. While imprisoned, he is subjected to abuse and manipulation at the hands of a white corrections officer, Albert Rackham. Scientists at the prison are conducting cell-regeneration experiments on prisoners, and, under the belief that volunteering would increase his chances of an early release, Carl agrees to do so. Rackham, however, sabotages the experiment, resulting in two consequences, eventually "placing" him in Harlem, a neighborhood in upper Manhattan. Not only is the initial goal of the experiment achieved; his skin is now effectively bulletproof. Moreover, he uses these new abilities to escape from prison. Now donning the name Luke Cage and struggling to make it economically, he decides to become a hero for hire to make ends meet.

He is also a popular superhero, as evidenced by (1) multiple comic book runs, (2) being a frequent team member partnering with other New York heroes such as Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Iron Fist, and Spider-Man, (3) joining superhero groups such as New Avengers and Defenders, (4) appearing in multiple animated series, and (5) being one of the few superheroes to be adapted for a prose crime novel in 2025 (Drum). Scholars also note the significance of a superhero who identifies with working class concerns, is well-read, reluctant to use violence, and experiences a range of emotions and relational strategies (Fawaz 191-193; McMillen 462-465; Toliver 623-624). As a street-level superhero whose mission often revolves around the issues and concerns of everyday people, he is viewed as a man of the people. There is a belief that his upcoming mini-series, in which he is the mayor of New York, has the potential to portray the superhero mission from a different perspective, and thus justify a longer

series (Donohoo). Scholars suggest that another important aspect of his appeal is that he also functions as a "cultural ethnographer" (Fawaz 191) such that understanding his superhero mission requires an understanding of the sociocultural context in which it emerges and evolves (Fawaz 128, 191-193; Nama 65). For Luke Cage, this context is Harlem, and *Luke Cage*'s portrayal of this dynamic relationship results in a grounded, multifaceted superhero narrative. A narrative that sees Luke Cage altering and being altered by the community he commits to protecting.

A RELATIONAL SUPERHERO

Although to-date scholarship on Luke Cage focuses, understandably, on more macro level implications of his constitutive features and narrative arcs, the author argues that he is just as relevant when analyzed at the micro level. The acknowledgment these levels often interact notwithstanding, the paper focuses on the latter's value for scholarly analyses of superheroes like Luke as portrayed in Marvel's *Luke Cage* television series. Specifically, through examining his social interactions and the community in which these interactions take place, the paper argues that in addition to fulfilling an important social function of the superhero–which is to preserve the public sphere (Miczo 3)–he is frequently and significantly influenced by the people occupying and animating said sphere. The contours of these mutual influences are largely characterized by the actions, arguments, and beliefs of various Harlemites. These interactions are sometimes based in agreement with his superhero mission and during other times based in disagreement with his mission. The paper also argues that by and large, these interactions concern the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations more broadly and between moral and legal considerations more specifically.

Before proceeding, it is important to consider, albeit briefly, the ways macro analyses of *Luke Cage* can relate to micro analyses. In "Take It Personal" (1.10), for instance, Luke is framed for killing a white cop, and the police department engages in a massive campaign of racial profiling and roughing up citizens to obtain information on Luke's whereabouts. Events reach a crescendo when, amid interrogating a minor without a legal guardian present, a black cop proceeds to beat the young boy to a pulp to obtain some information on Luke.

And with a street war brewing in season two instigated by the Stylers, a Jamaican gang in Brooklyn led by John McIver (Bushmaster) preparing to take over Harlem, detective Mercedes (Misty) Knight–a frequent interlocutor who oscillates between Luke Cage critic and collaborator–voices her concerns about the government's potential response to her boss, captain Thomas Ridenhour. She worries about the potential civil and human rights violations Jamaicans in Brooklyn and Harlem will likely experience if the National Guard and Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) step in under the belief that local law enforcement cannot get a handle on the violence ("The Basement"; 2.6).

Phenomena related to racial profiling and immigration status, while operating at a group level, can also be understood in the context of dynamic and multifaceted social interactions between individuals. Consistent with the suggestion that the significance of Luke Cage and T'Challa is tied to the sociocultural contexts in which they live with and serve others (McMillen 470; Nama 66), previous work has employed a developmental psychology perspective to understanding *Black Panther* and the nation he often rules, Wakanda. This work also explores implications for viewpoint diversity more broadly (Martin 2019 24-30) and civics education more

specifically (Martin 2021a 28-32; Martin Killian and Letizia 214-215, 221-222). Martin views Wakanda as a central character in Black Panther narratives, exploring the myriad ways its citizens–although bound together through national ties–frequently disagree on matters pertaining to Wakandan law, policy, leadership, and tradition. These relational conflicts and differing perspectives help reveal, to some degree, the relationship between moral and nonmoral concepts common within Black Panther narratives (Martin 2019 22-30; Martin 2021a 27-28; Martin Killian and Letizia 209-214). The paper contends that such a relationship has similar implications for understanding Luke Cage as both defender and "product" of Harlem–with the latter term loosely construed.

Additionally, the paper explores how Luke Cage's relationship with Harlem can elucidate the varied relationships between moral and nonmoral concepts. Like nations, neighborhoods can be construed as social ecologies, consisting of varied mixtures of individuals attempting to do life together–regardless of differences due to race, gender, social class, religious belief, cultural belief, age, political affiliation, etc. They also include a public sphere, which according to Miczo (13) is a context where a diversity of viewpoints is encouraged through communicative praxis. As such, there are myriad opportunities for individuals within neighborhoods–that, like nations, bind together individuals in some communal sense–to disagree on matters of social and moral significance. Luke Cage is not just saving lives; he's preserving the opportunities for these lives to discuss and debate aspects of their communal existence. Considering the (1) growing body of evidence suggesting that our early human ancestors frequently negotiated between and practiced alternative forms of sociomoral organization (Graeber and Wengrow 118-119), (2) tendency for individuals within societies to eventually try to alter

social arrangements they deem unjust (Turiel 2002 288), and (3) suggestion that a person's character is best understood through an accounting of the ways they interact and talk with others (Nucci 76), the paper highlights the potential for *Luke Cage* to encourage reflection on and discussions concerning the nature of Luke's relationship to Harlem, the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations more broadly, and the relationship between morality and the law more specifically.

The emphasis on the social interactional nature of Luke Cage's superhero mission connects to previous scholarship in multiple ways. First, it is in line with Miczo's definition of a superhero: an ethical agent whose actions are based on an empathic concern for others and take place in the public sphere characterized by plurality (3). Second, it is consistent with Morrow's analysis of the nuanced portrayal of Luke in season two, evident in his shifting orientations towards anger and violence, and how he appears to view the connection between his past and the present/future experiences when it comes to his relationships with his father and Harlem (89-90, 99). Third, the attempt to connect the analysis to larger implications concerning the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations parallels Toliver's use of season one's depictions of various characters' literary practices to offer suggestions for how educators can use events from the series to encourage students to think about the relationship between the events, the texts referenced in the series, social norms, and understandings of Luke the person (627-628). Like Toliver, the paper suggests that Luke's superhero mission in *Luke Cage* has the potential to go beyond mere entertainment and engender critical reflection and discussion concerning matters of social importance.

Lastly, the focus on the meaning of everyday social interactions against the backdrop of macro level phenomena within a fictional Harlem is consistent with urban anthropologist John Jackson's approach to examining how broader forces such as deindustrialization and globalization inform black Harlemites' social interactions. Specifically, he explores the relationship between social interactions, behavioral criteria, and judgments bearing on one's social identity, arguing that the behavioral criteria people bring to bear when making these judgments are flexibly applied and take on different meanings depending on surrounding contextual features (3-5, 148). For instance, when analyzing the criteria Harlemites use to judge themselves and others along the lines of class (126, 158) and race (171-172, 180), Jackson found both objective or quasi-objective criteria such as occupation, phenotype, or the occurrence of racial discrimination existed alongside more subjective or interpretive criteria focused on people's behaviors toward and interpersonal relationships with others. The paper extends this notion of flexibility of thought in the realm of race and class-based judgments in the real Harlem to the realm of moral and nonmoral judgments in fictional Harlem. Specifically, *Luke Cage* is analyzed as a context for exploring heterogeneity of thought when it comes to matters of law and morality–matters frequently articulated and debated by its residents. In demonstrating and responding to this flexibility through his interactions with various Harlemites, Luke Cage serves as an embodiment of Miczo's conception of the superhero whose morally relevant actions take place within the public sphere.

Centering flexibility of thought suggests the presence of constructive processes at work within the psychology of individuals. Processes that, according to social psychologist Solomon Asch, involve the *interpenetration* of actions and

viewpoints among individuals; without which there would be no such thing as "society." And it is through living in a society with others that individuals form a diversified understanding of human character, including both moral and immoral actions (6, 161-163). The paper's anchoring theory, social cognitive domain theory (SCDT), takes a similar approach, elucidating the myriad ways people's interactions with others can inform their meaning-making processes. By attributing these or similar processes to the events of *Luke Cage*, the paper elucidates the potential interrogatory affordances of Luke Cage's superhero mission when it comes to thinking about the role of others–regardless of the nature of our relationship to them–in our understandings of self, society, and our place in it.

A SUPERHERO'S HARLEM

With a history that includes (1) the Industrial Revolution, (2) racial covenants, (3) market forces driving the selling of houses to black Americans in mass, (4) the Great Migration of black Americans from the south to the north, (5) subsequent white flight, (6) the Harlem Renaissance, (7) the civil rights and black power movements, and (8) deindustrialization, many black people living within and outside of Harlem are aware of and draw meaning from the neighborhood's racial significance. For many, its legacy symbolizes the best of the black community intellectually, artistically, and politically (Jackson 17-28). In his study of Harlemites, Jackson found that this symbolism plays a significant role in residents' beliefs about and assessments of the behaviors of others, drawing on various criteria to distinguish between (1) who belongs and does not belong in Harlem and (2) living *in* Harlem versus being *of* Harlem (29-32, 37-38). This symbolic legacy, and the vigorous nature in which residents articulate and defend

its relevance for present-day social interactions, is also on display throughout the series.

In "Moment of Truth" (1.1.), for instance, Mariah Dillard (Stokes), a main antagonist in both seasons, is a politician who works with her cousin Darnell Stokes (Cottonmouth) to run a criminal enterprise specializing in weapons dealing. During an event to promote her major initiative–one that plays a prominent role throughout the first season–she describes Harlem as a "jewel of black America," referencing important figures such as Langston Hughes, Malcolm X, Zora Neal Hurston, and Duke Ellington as evidence. Her plan is for her housing initiative, which includes the Crispus Attucks Complex, to serve as an incubator for the innovative and creative thinking of Harlem's residents. The endgame for her initiative is revealed in "Who's Gonna Take the Weight?" (1.3), where she tells Cottonmouth that collectively, the housing communities through her initiative, named after Crispus Attucks, Madam C.J. Walker, Adam Clayton Powell, and Shirley Chisholm, will "keep Harlem black."

When Luke Cage is standing across the street from and observing the building soon to be the Crispus Attucks Complex, he has a gun drawn on him from presumably one of Cottonmouth's men ("Code of the Streets"; 1.2). When he questions the young man for pulling a gun on him right across the street from a building named after one of their great heroes, the young man responds by noting that he's a dead hero. Luke Cage then tells him about the sacrifice Crispus Attucks made for what would later become America, before drawing a parallel between this sacrifice and that of Henry (Pop) Hunter, a pillar in the community who recently died trying to save a Harlem youth. In "Just to Get a Rep" (1.5), Cottonmouth and Luke, in their eulogies for

Pop, both appeal to Harlem's significance but from different perspectives. Cottonmouth emphasizes the importance of people like Pop for appreciating and cultivating the potential of famous Harlemites like Billy Strayhorn, Teddy Riley, Big L., and A$AP Rocky, characterizing Harlem as a place with the power to change people for the better. Luke Cage also appeals to the value of Harlemites caring for each other but focuses more on the role of community members to protect each other from those who wish to threaten their way of life. He concludes his speech by distinguishing Harlem from the people who constitute it, stating that he believes in the latter but not the former.

Lastly, in the season one finale ("You Know My Steez,"; 1.13), Luke Cage justifies his superhero-vigilante actions to the police department by appealing to what he believes to be an ethos concerning what it means to live in Harlem. As the pinnacle of black art, innovation, and politics, and a representation of hope and aspirations, Harlem's place in the world is supposed to be one of shining light. Therefore, amid a burden too big for himself and the police–the epidemic of crime threatening Harlemites' way of life and the fear residents have as a result–those with the ability to change things such as himself and the police have a responsibility to do more for the community. As he speaks, there is a shot of a mural of famous figures during the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights era.

Collectively, there are two features of the above-mentioned examples that contribute to the understanding of Harlem as an essential character within *Luke Cage* and the titular hero's superhero mission. First, consistent with Jackson's analysis of Harlemites (20-21, 29), invoking names and places is important to residents' sense of what makes Harlem special

for black Americans. The intergenerational importance of names for Harlemites' understanding of Harlem is further underscored when comparing the names Mariah references to those Cottonmouth references. Whereas most of the individuals Mariah names were prominent during the Harlem Renaissance and civil rights movement, most of the individuals Cottonmouth names were prominent in the post-civil rights era. The second feature is that whether the focus is on Harlem as a community or the selfless acts of some of its residents, there is an underlying theme amongst their beliefs about Harlem that is relational. In other words, there is a shared belief that Harlem is synonymous with the potential for a better future, which suggests better social arrangements for current and/or future generations of Harlemites. Scholars suggest that imagining different forms of social arrangements is a feature and not a bug of humanity (Graeber and Wengrow 118-119), and that people are particularly motivated to alter those arrangements construed to be unjust (Turiel 2002 288). In some ways, these features overlap, as in the case of Mariah who believes that honoring those who came before has implications for a host of new opportunities for Harlemites who, for whatever reason, may currently struggle to obtain or see those possibilities in the present. They also overlap when considering Luke Cage's emphasis on what Harlem can be when its members care for each other in more robust ways.

HARLEM'S SUPERHERO

For Fawaz, superheroes' ambiguous status concerning the tension between individual agency and public life, indicated by the lack of clarity of the "range" of their morally relevant actions affords them unique opportunities to preserve the dignity and welfare of those individuals who do not feel ad-

equately served by American democracy and its associated institutions. Examples of this lack of clarity include questions about whether their actions should be bound by law, nation, planet, or galaxy (7). Similarly, Miczo contends that a definitional feature of superheroes includes their motivation or obligation to protect and preserve the public sphere, a "place" within communities for people to both pursue their interests individually and debate and deliberate matters of significance interpersonally or collectively (14). Urban folktale superheroes of the 1970s like Luke Cage represent a more socio-culturally grounded approach to the superhero mission, with their thoughts, emotions, and actions intimately informed by the locations and contexts in which they operate (Fawaz 128, 191-193; Nama 65). Thus, it is reasonable to view Harlem as an important character in Luke Cage's superhero narrative, with his relationship to Harlem taking a symbiotic or reciprocal form.

Whether focused on comics, the television series, or both, scholars examine both Luke Cage and the social ecology in which he operates as a superhero. One area of scholarship pertains to his sociocultural and sociopolitical significance. Nama (53-55, 65-66) contends Luke's popular culture relevance largely stems from his stylistic and narrative ties to Blaxploitation films of the 70s and the black power politics of the same era. An important aspect of these politics is a distrust of law enforcement and institutional authority.

In addition to racial politics, scholars note the character's significance within the context of people's everyday economic realities. Fawaz suggests that this significance, indicated by early comic book depictions of him frequently considering the final burden of superhero work and making decisions with financial implications in mind, has at least three fea-

tures or dimensions. The first concerns his symbolism via the plights of the working class more broadly. The other two concern his symbolism for the black and creative working classes respectively–the latter referring to those writers and artists creating Luke Cage comic books (191-193). For Martinez, the television series portrays a superhero morality narrative in the context of a gentrified neighborhood where everyday discourses around race and class inform and animate diverse perspectives on the issue. The show thus serves as an allegory for the opportunities and choices, both real and false, that underlie race and class considerations brought to bear on gentrification discourses (164-168). For Fawaz and Martinez, a significant reason for Luke's popularity lies in the sociopolitical implications of his narratives; implications that, in many ways, center macro or group-level phenomena such as class and race.

Class and race differences and disparities comprise most of Jackson's analysis of black Harlemites' understanding of their social identity and that of others. In both instances–their frequent interrelations notwithstanding–residents draw on a host of criteria to understand what it means to belong and not belong to a specific social category. Some of the features of social interactions residents drew on when discussing different classes include having a responsibility to help black Americans who are less well-off economically, participating in illicit activities, displaying a nasty or elitist attitude or disposition, and the nature in which one walks and talks (129-131, 133-141). Concerning racial identity, black Harlemites often discuss race in the context of black-white differences. Examples of criteria include understanding race as tied to (1) biological considerations such as phenotype and ancestry; (2) more macro social criteria such as between-group discrimination, institutions benefitting from using race to

distract people, the between-group differences in cultural production; and (3) more interpersonal or micro social criteria such as the presence or absence of "flavor," how whites perceive blacks in Harlem, and how one walks and talks (160, 166-178). Despite the obvious differences between an urban anthropological examination of real Harlemites and a developmental psychological examination of a superhero operating in a fictional Harlem, Harlemites in both contexts express an array of views on matters of social and moral import and draw on a host of criteria they deem important in social interactions when doing so. In the context of *Luke Cage*, this viewpoint diversity is a key feature of Luke Cage's superhero mission, informing both his more straightforward decisions to help others as well as the more contentious or controversial ones.

LUKE CAGE (2016-2018)

Adapting Luke Cage to the screen comes with technical affordances, in the form of both creative freedoms such as grittier depictions of social life, and medium specific features such as motion, sound, and music. These affordances result in a narrative that fuses core elements of blaxploitation films, which play a significant role in earlier iterations of the character (Nama 53-55; McMillen 455-456), and the superhero genre (McMillen 461). While making some changes, the series generally remains true to his origin in the comics as far as being framed, abused in prison, agreeing to participate in an experiment that ultimately gives him his abilities, and escaping. In the series, however, he comes to Harlem from Georgia.

In many ways, the Harlem of the series is depicted in ways consistent with Jackson's analysis. That is, Harlemites in *Luke*

Cage conceive of their community in ways that underscore its intellectual, artistic, and political legacy, and frequently discuss and debate what certain behaviors "mean" in the context of honoring and building upon that legacy. Given that superhero narratives commonly examine themes concerning the relationship between morality and the law (Martin 2021b 4), these considerations are often at the center of Harlemites' disagreements when it comes to what's best for Harlem. Unlike less socially grounded superhero narratives, however, Luke Cage is simultaneously the subject and object of these discussions in ways that, as mentioned above, make him a man of the people. Therefore, the series is as much about what Harlem means in the life of a superhero as it is about what having a superhero means to Harlem.

The first season centers around Luke Cage's efforts to protect Harlem from multiple threats: mainly cousins Cottonmouth and Mariah, and Willis Stryker (Diamondback). These efforts occur against the backdrop of a strained relationship with law enforcement, embodied most clearly in his interactions with Misty Knight in the first 75% of the series. Initially reluctant to use his powers to help others, he eventually gets involved after one of his mentors, Pop, is gunned down trying to help a young man get out of some trouble.

In season two, in some ways Luke Cage and Harlem are at different "places." For Luke, he is trying to balance his (1) growing fame and popularity, (2) previous success protecting Harlem, (3) economic instability in terms of personal finances and whether to monetize his brand to pay bills, and (4) newfound invulnerability to season one's judas bullets, special bullets infused with alien technology that could harm him. In terms of Harlem, viewers are introduced to the range of crime families and organizations operating in and around

Harlem, from the Jamaicans, Italians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Koreans, Chinese, and of course, Mariah's enterprise. Most are mentioned in season one, but they are important to season two's narrative. It is within this social ecology that one of the season's main antagonists, Bushmaster, comes to New York from Jamaica–first to Brooklyn then to Harlem– to settle an old family score with Mariah. Trying to keep the peace, first between Mariah and Bushmaster and eventually between all the crime organizations in Harlem, Luke ultimately decides to become Harlem's "king" or "diplomat" instead of its "hero" or "sheriff." In his view, by operating out of Harlem's Paradise, the club and community staple he inherits through Mariah's will, and working more closely with criminal organizations, he can broker peace in ways law enforcement cannot.

For characters with aliases, the aliases are used after first mention. Aside from Luke Cage, Mariah, Bushmaster, and Misty feature prominently in the events referenced throughout the paper. Other notable characters include Pop, Misty's partner in season one, detective Rafael Scarfe, Cottonmouth, Bushmaster's auntie Ingrid and uncle Anansi, and Hernan (Shades) Alvarez.

In line with Luke Cage's grounded nature, it is worth noting that in both seasons, he is not just dealing with solo antagonists. He is also dealing with criminal organizations who are sometimes at war with each other. In the first half of season one the focus was on Cottonmouth's criminal enterprise and, albeit to a lesser extent, Domingo Colon's. The second half, the focus shifts to the criminal conspiracies of Mariah and Diamondback. In season two, the focus is largely on those loyal to Mariah and those loyal to Bushmaster in the first 75% of the season. But once Mariah's in prison and Bushmaster

goes back to Jamaica, he is left to deal with the "control of Harlem's criminal underworld" vacuum created by Mariah's imprisonment, leading him to view his role as Harlem's protector in a more nuanced light. Throughout the series, Luke is constantly negotiating his role as defender and protector with that of a peacemaker, often eliciting the help of a wide array of citizens with parts of his mission. Although the type of cooperative action taken by superheroes to defend the public sphere Miczo (3-4) highlights involves other superheroes as in the case of team-ups and groups, in the case of Luke, the aid and advice he receives from "regular" people is central to what it means for him to be a superhero.

HARLEM, HETEROGENEITY, AND THE SUPERHERO MISSION

The public sphere Luke Cage seeks to uphold by protecting Harlem is characterized by a plurality of diverse viewpoints (Miczo 13). And in the context of social life, one should expect social interactions characterized by a sort of interpenetration of viewpoints, as people influence and are influenced by others (Asch 161-163). If one assumes such viewpoint diversity is a defining feature of communities, then it is necessary to inquiry about some of the conceptual building blocks of such viewpoint diversity. According to SCDT, any analysis of the nature, range, and meaning of relations between persons should start with distinguishing between three broad categories or domains of social interactions: the *psychological*, *societal*, and *moral* (Smetana Jambon and Ball 24-27; Turiel 1983 52-68; Turiel 2002 111; Turiel Killen Helwig 167-182). Considering works of and events depicted within art, entertainment, and therefore popular culture are open to interpretation, the following examples from the series are best understood as *potential* parallels to more typical social

interactions–the latter constituting prototypical domain events according to SCDT (Turiel Killen and Helwig 167, 179, 181). Prototypical events usually include one salient concept or consideration, and thus are events where, on balance, most people can agree on the nature of the act and what it means for social interaction.

It is worth noting that given the limitation inherent in analyzing a television series–namely, that only a relatively small number of events are selected among many–some events, while illustrating a concept or theme in developmental psychology, do not include Luke Cage. It is nevertheless reasonable to view these conversations as constitutive of his dynamic relationship to Harlem, considering (1) he participates in similar conversations throughout the series and (2) at some point, he interacts with most of these individuals in some capacity. Thus, conversations Misty has with others about vigilantism, for instance, could reasonably inform both her subsequent debates with Luke on the matter and his subsequent actions.

The *psychological* domain generally includes concepts bearing on personal autonomy, wants/desires, and rights in the "personal prerogative" sense. Individuals tend to view these acts as being up to the individual to decide, not contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and not generalizable. For instance, the act of choosing to see one movie versus another generally falls within the psychological domain. Examples from the series include Luke's decision to offer his protection services for a fee in "All Souled Out" (2.5) and Misty's decision to work in Harlem versus somewhere else as explained in "DWYCK" (1.9). Although some events from the series discussed below implicate this domain, the purpose of this section is to explore them in the context of Harlemites' views

on the relationship between the law and morality, encompassed by the remaining two domains respectively.

Acts belonging to the *societal* domain are generally social regulatory in nature and include concepts related to laws, rules, norms, customs/tradition, authority, and group expectations. People understand these interactions as not being up to the individual to decide, being contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and not generalizable. Examples include following traffic laws by not parking in spaces with "no parking" signs and wearing formal attire to a wedding. In Pop's barber shop, where Luke works, there is a social norm or rule against swearing ("Moment of Truth"; 1.1) where if you do you have to put money in the swear jar. There is also a social norm or rule against engaging in any criminal activity inside the barber shop ("Code of the Streets"; 1.2) that Cottonmouth and other criminals throughout Harlem abide by.

Lastly, acts constitutive of the *moral* domain are distinguishable from both psychological and societal events. Acts usually involve concepts concerning the inherent worth of persons, such as those related to physical and psychological welfare/harm, justice/fairness, and rights in the "human" or "inalienable" sense. People usually construe these acts as not being up to the individual, not contingent upon laws, rules, or local context, and being generalizable. A Harlemite choosing to hit or steal from someone generally falls within the moral domain despite the existence of laws prohibiting these acts. Some themes throughout the series that are largely related to the moral domain are Luke's decisions to physically harm criminals, Misty's ongoing efforts to achieve justice for crime victims, concerns for civil liberties and human rights, and residents on both sides of the law lamenting and responding to the killing of innocent people.

If the previous features of social interactions provide, in a sense, a conceptual foundation for making sense of those interactions within the context of community, the following helps describe the myriad ways the application of said concepts amongst its members can "play out" in complicated or multifaceted ways. Specifically, SCDT identifies types of interactions that, unlike the prototypical or abstract events described above, are considered non-prototypical or multifaceted. These latter events, referred to as domain combinations, are considered complex or contextualized (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 1983 55, 114-129; Turiel Killen and Helwig 167-168, 179, 181, 187-188). As with the prototypical events described above, these events are illustrated throughout *Luke Cage*'s Harlem.

One complex social interaction includes multiple concepts or considerations within the same domain. These *within-domain* combinations are complex in the sense that individuals can vary considerably on how they evaluate and navigate the event, depending on the weight they give one or more consideration relative to another (or others). Within the moral domain, some examples from the series come from Luke Cage's interactions with Ingrid, Bushmaster's aunt, and Mariah in season two.

Luke tries to convince Ingrid, who survived a shooting at her restaurant, to tell the police what she saw in the hopes of bringing down Mariah ("The Creator"; 2.11). But Ingrid refuses, referencing the psychological harm of reliving the traumatic event. Given Luke Cage's attempts to both bring Mariah to justice and stop the killing, both moral considerations, their discussion could be construed as a within-domain event. In the following episode, "You Can't Front On Me" (2.12), Luke is weighing whether to go to the unity

rally Mariah's hosting at Harlem's Paradise to protect her if Bushmaster shows up, given he tells her earlier in the episode that he is done working for her. On the one hand he feels he should do the right thing and protect her from potential harm but on the other hand acknowledges the near certainty that after he does so she will soon harm someone else.

Another complex social interaction includes two or more domains. *Between-domain* conflicts are suggested through the various debates characters have throughout the series concerning the merits of vigilantism. In support of her initial disproval ("Who's Gonna Take the Weight?"; 1.3), Misty appeals to the importance of social order and formal training, considerations largely suggestive of the societal domain through regulating social behavior within group contexts. Her partner Rafael, in addition to societal considerations such as the bureaucratic inefficiencies of law enforcement and associated paperwork, also justifies his support of certain forms of vigilantism by arguing that it can prevent law enforcement officers from being harmed.

Two episodes later ("Just to Get a Rep"; 1.5), the debate continues, but this time between Misty and Luke Cage. This time, however, Misty supports her anti-vigilante stance appealing to the harm Luke's actions can eventually cause to everyone else in Harlem who are not bulletproof. Luke, like Rafael, refers to the inefficiencies of the legal system, citing prior failures to bring Cottonmouth to justice using legal means and the predictable relationship between arrests, indictments, and plea deals. He is also influenced by Claire Temple, a nurse and superhero sympathizer who eventually becomes his love interest. Although her assessment of law enforcement has a more generous tenor, she, too, appeals to the fact that they are limited in what they can do as a justifi-

cation for why Luke should do more for Harlem ("Manifest"; 1.7).

Unlike within or between-domain combinations, a *second order combination* is one where the act still generally falls within one domain. However, depending on the configuration of features surrounding the act, the implications of the act can fall within a different domain. For instance, take a situation where an individual knowingly carries a highly infectious disease that spreads easily through physical touch. In this context, a decision to wash or not wash one's hands–an act in other contexts can be understood to be up to the individual or a matter of employee policy or social expectation–can have moral implications.

Relating this idea to the series, one of the themes early on in season one–as indicated in Luke Cage's conversations with Pop in "Moment of Truth" (1.1) and "Code of the Streets" (1.2)–revolves around the moral implications of his want or desire to be left alone or not get involved in other people's affairs. Another way to construe these conversations is as reflecting second order considerations of a different sort, in terms of the moral implications of his decision to get involved in ways that operate outside the law. In season two, now clearly Harlem's superhero, a major theme revolves around the moral implications of him acting on his emotions, wants, and or desires given his abilities. As his friend Bobby Fish tells him in "I Get Physical" (2.4), he must be more careful than the average man because if he loses his psychological or emotional control over situations, people can die.

Thus, whether the conversations pertain to the decision to engage in and the merits of vigilantism, or how to balance achieving justice with preventing further harm as a vigilante, *Luke Cage* shows a Harlem grappling with the effects of large-

scale crime and the moral and legal issues embedded in trying to address it. These discussions take place amongst Harlemites who occupy varying positions within the community in terms of profession and side of the law they generally operate on. Moreover, the diverse perspectives represented in these conversations, coupled with the fact that Luke Cage discusses these issues with Pop, Misty, Mariah, and Claire on more than one occasion, suggests a particular social ecology where views are challenged and potentially updated with new information, experiences, and interactions.

NAVIGATING COMPLEX SITUATIONS

When experiencing events with competing considerations, people often engage in processes of coordination. Coordination entails two things: an acknowledgment and weighing of multiple or conflicting considerations relevant to an event on one hand, and a resolution to the event considering this acknowledgement and weighing on the other (Nucci Turiel and Roded 318-320). In general, events requiring coordination can be construed as "dilemmas" as the multiple considerations relevant to understanding the event can make it difficult to determine how to act within, respond to, or evaluate it. At a minimum, *Luke Cage*'s frequent discussions around vigilantism suggest attempts to coordinate different considerations related to matters of law and morality.

Some scholars investigate coordination through three morally relevant social interactions: hitting/physical harm, indirect harm/stealing, and helping. Only hitting and helping are discussed given their general relevance to the superhero mission. Hitting since it involves violence or inflicting harm and helping because it relates to a concern for others' welfare. To examine the extent children and adolescents' thinking

about these situations might be flexible, researchers varied the hypothetical situations along two additional dimensions. One was the precipitating context surrounding the event, described as either *unconflicted*, *conflict-self*, or *conflict-other*. The other was the protagonist's relationship to the target of the act: a generalized other, a vulnerable other, or an antagonist (Turiel and Nucci 100-101; Nucci Turiel and Roded 296). Thus, children and adolescents considered the appropriate course of action in situations that varied according to the (1) social interaction, (2) conflict "embedded" in the interaction, and (3) relationship between the interactants.

Using hitting as an example, the unconflicted situation was one where the moral concept of physical harm was the most salient feature of the situation, and thus this consideration was not competing with any others. The protagonist is in a bad mood and considers hitting another child on the way home. In the conflict-self or conflicted-other interactions, the protagonist considers hitting another person in self-defense as they are being physically assaulted or hitting another person to stop them from physically assaulting another person, respectively. With respect to the relationship, the descriptions of the other person included a general boy or girl, a person who is unable to successfully navigate the situation due to disability or young age, and a person who has physically harmed or teased the protagonist in the past (Turiel and Nucci 100-101; Nucci Turiel and Roded 290-296). Due to relevance and brevity, only some of the results are summarized.

When the protagonist ponders hitting a person without provocation, most participants agree on the wrongness of hitting a person in general and hitting a vulnerable person specifically. They also tend to justify their judgments by appealing to the other person's welfare and the fair treatment of persons.

And when pondering hitting for reasons of self-defense or preventing someone from harming another, participants distinguish vulnerable from non-vulnerable persons, being less likely to judge hitting the former as acceptable (Nucci Turiel and Roded 299; Turiel and Nucci 103). In other words, responses to these events do not tend to include coordination, as it appears children and adolescents do not think there is much to weigh or balance.

When considering hitting an antagonist in unconflicted situations or non-vulnerable persons in conflicted situations, however, responses are more mixed. For the latter, the youngest children still tend to view the situations as straightforward, whereas adolescents tend to view them as more complicated. Specifically, children engage in the least coordination and older adolescents the most. When reasoning about these situations, adolescents, but not children, tend to consider the welfare and fair treatment of the person under attack, including that person's right to self-defense. There is also evidence of coordination in the former situation, as well as appeals to personal choice and reciprocity considerations when justifying the responses (Turiel and Nucci 103-104). In these situations, then, it appears that with age, participants ponder multiple considerations, some moral and others non-moral, when responding to morally relevant events.

The findings for helping are like those involving hitting in many ways. When the protagonist ponders helping someone and there is no competing consideration, children and adolescents' responses tend to be more straightforward and in the direction of helping. Second, for those who view this situation as straightforward, they are more likely to appeal to welfare and fairness considerations, a finding consistent with the justifications for not hitting in the unconflicted context.

Third, children and adolescents are just as likely to view not helping a vulnerable person negatively in the conflicted situations as in the unconflicted situation. Fourth, pondering whether to help in (1) conflicted compared to unconflicted situations and (2) unconflicted situations involving an antagonist elicit higher coordinated reasoning. Fifth, appeals to reciprocity, as with the hitting situation, are more common when thinking about helping an antagonist than when thinking about helping another person. Lastly, responses are more varied in the conflict situations and when the recipient of the help is an antagonist, and this is partly evidenced by accounting for additional considerations such as reciprocity (Nucci Turiel and Roded 301; Turiel and Nucci 105). As with hitting, therefore, all helping situations are not created equal.

Collectively, these findings suggest that by and large, youth try to make sense of multiple features of social interactions and their understandings of these interactions are tied to these meaning making processes. These findings parallel Jackson's findings on Harlemites' beliefs about Harlem, class, race, and their interrelations, as well as the viewpoint diversity concerning matters of morality and legality amongst *Luke Cage*'s Harlemites. Across all contexts, it is suggested that individuals demonstrate an ability to draw up and weigh multiple conceptual understandings when articulating and defending positions of social and moral import.

Moreover, parallels can be drawn between (1) the findings on coordination, (2) Luke Cage's superhero mission, and (3) the Harlemites who support it, when it comes to the distinctions participants make between hitting and helping antagonists and vulnerable persons. Superhero missions are largely defined by the protection of the vulnerable or those who elicit empathic concern (Fawaz 7; Miczo 3), and this protection often comes at the expense of an antagonist or

"villain" succeeding in their plans. Therefore, it is not surprising that throughout the series, both Luke's justification for getting involved and the justifications of the Harlemites supporting and helping him, focus on the nature of the threats to everyday life posed by the antagonists' criminal actions and the amount of physical and psychological harm suffered by the victims. And as noted below, some of the criminals bring similar considerations to bear when refusing to go along with harming innocent people.

Sometimes social interactions are ambiguous and are thus characterized by a lack of domain clarity such that individuals are uncertain as to what conceptual domain(s) is(are) most relevant for evaluating or understanding a particular event (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 1983 55, 114-129; Turiel Killen and Helwig 167-168, 179, 181, 187-188). As a result, individuals tend to vary considerably in their understanding and evaluation of relevant actions pertaining to the event. SCDT scholars assert that part of the reason for such divergent viewpoints is found in what they refer to as informational assumptions, or beliefs about the nature of physical, social, and psychological reality (Smetana Jambon and Ball 26-27; Turiel 2002 143-144; Turiel Killen and Helwig 189-191). Another way to think about informational assumptions is that they are interpretive frameworks contributing to people's understanding of the world, others, and their place in it.

Concerning the relationship between informational assumptions, moral understanding, and moral judgments, Wainryb's (6) summary of general findings from multiple studies–with participants ranging from preschoolers and young adults and topics ranging from unfair treatment or resource distribution to various forms of punishment–includes three themes rele-

vant for thinking about Luke Cage's relationship to Harlem as dynamic and reciprocal. First, moral judgments are applied against a backdrop of what people construe or believe as "factual" concerning the nature of physical, social, and/or psychological reality. Second, insofar individuals apply different moral judgments to the "same" event, the differences can be at least partially understood with respect to these underlying, backdrop beliefs. Third, the frequency and nature of the disagreements notwithstanding, it is important to keep in mind that individuals are usually operating from the same abstract moral understandings. For instance, two people can differ in their views on capital punishment but agree that in general, it is wrong to intentionally harm others. Between individuals occupying the same public sphere or living in the same community in either a real or fictional Harlem, then, abstract agreement on certain matters exists alongside contextual disagreement on other matters.

Developmental research on people's beliefs in another area also bears on narrative themes throughout *Luke Cage*, especially those featuring Luke Cage and others interrogating the relationship between morality and legality: *corruption*. Adolescents and young adults were presented with corruption vignettes of two general types with four conditions. In the *baseline* bribery event, the protagonist bribes a public officer to prevent the cutoff of a public service due to not paying the bill. In the *baseline* nepotism event, the protagonist, who is a friend of the job recruiter, gets the job over better qualified candidates.

Each event included three additional conditions: *illegality*, *institutional illegitimacy*, and *survival*. In the illegality conditions, others are depicted as also engaging in those corrupt acts normatively and without negative consequences. The in-

stitutional illegitimacy conditions included institutional executives engaging in serious corrupt acts. Lastly, protagonists in the survival conditions engage in the corrupt behaviors to fulfill basic needs difficult to achieve legally. For each condition, participants provided moral, severity, tolerance, and acceptability judgments concerning the act, with the moral and tolerance justifications also being accompanied by justifications in response to a "Why?" question. After evaluating that event in the abstract, such as whether they believed bribery was a universal moral issue, they then proceeded to evaluate it across the four conditions (Martinez and Posada 4-5). For brevity, only participants' moral evaluations and justifications are mentioned.

In line with previous findings (Wainryb 6), participants appear to approach these issues from the same abstract notions of morality. Overall, participants view the corrupt acts as morally wrong regardless of if there are no laws prohibiting them or if people commonly engage in such behaviors. They are also more likely to believe there should be a rule against bribery than against nepotism (Martinez and Posada 6). Despite generally construing these corrupt acts as immoral, adolescents and young adults do not view these corrupt acts the same, a finding suggestive of some flexibility even amidst strong moral prohibitions.

Other findings are generally consistent with previous research on the relationship between informational beliefs, moral evaluation, and moral understanding (Martinez and Posada 7-10). In these more contextualized situations, for example, participants are less likely to view bribery and nepotism as morally wrong in the three non-baseline conditions—illegality, institutional illegitimacy, and survival—than in the baseline condition. Further distinctions are made

within the non-baseline conditions. Whereas participants do not appear to distinguish between the moral permissibility of the acts across the illegality and institutional illegitimacy conditions, they are less likely to evaluate the acts negatively in the survival condition compared to both.

As with their moral evaluations, they sometimes vary their evaluation justifications in contextualized situations. For instance, their reasons for their evaluations of the acts in the illegality condition include more references to sociocultural considerations such as local beliefs and customs than reasons for their evaluations of the baseline, institutional illegitimacy, and survival conditions. Sociocultural considerations are also referenced more in the institutional illegitimacy condition compared to the baseline. Lastly, participants' reasons for their evaluations of the acts in the institutional illegitimacy condition more often appeal to mistrust, as in a lack of trust in social institutions or others, compared to the other three conditions. As the social interactions vary in their contextual features, their judgments and justifications of these interactions suggest a sensitivity to the weight and meaning attributed to those features.

As with the findings on coordination, the influences on decision making highlighted in these findings–such as the actor's beliefs, the sociocultural context, and the consequences of the act–may also inform many of the characters' interactions in the series. Insofar Luke Cage and others weigh multiple or competing considerations against each other, as with Luke Cage's apparent consideration of multiple moral and legal considerations related to vigilantism, the potential thought processes underlying their arguments and decisions could be suggestive of coordination. Similarly, his views about Harlem's social reality—including the nature of street-level and

organized crime, its threat to the public sphere, and the limits of law enforcement—reasonably inform his superhero mission and acceptability with breaking the law.

A conversation between Bushmaster—who, on multiple occasions, exchanges views with Luke Cage around the moral implications of seeking revenge—and his uncle Anansi in "The Basement" (2.6) is also relevant. When debating the merits of revenge, they articulate different perspectives on their peoples' relationship to the United States. For Anansi, Bushmaster's actions could make their people, Jamaican immigrants, look bad, resulting in America turning on them. Bushmaster disagrees, arguing that America turned its back on their people years ago. As with Luke Cage and vigilantism, one might argue that different construals of social reality inform their divergent views on the merits of Bushmaster's quest for revenge. And given that Bushmaster, as with other antagonists in *Luke Cage*, do not harm people indiscriminately—a notion explored more below—his conversation with Anansi is also suggestive of the view that within morally relevant social interactions, abstract agreement exists alongside contextual disagreement.

Lastly, a thematic undercurrent throughout both seasons that makes Luke Cage's superhero mission more challenging and nuanced is the distrust of public officials due to corruption. This distrust is palpable and animates the actions of both Luke Cage and various Harlemites. For Nama (53-55, 65-66), this kind of institutional distrust is important to understanding Luke Cage. Mariah is a corrupt politician, Rafael is revealed to be corrupt in season one ("Who's Gonna Take the Weight?"; 1.3), and both a judge ("Straighten It Out"; 2.2) and detective Nandi Tyler ("For Pete's Sake"; 2.9) are revealed as corrupt in season two.

These narrative themes parallel the findings on informational beliefs surrounding corruption in at least two ways. One, findings suggest that adolescents and adults perceive a relationship between sociocultural norms or beliefs and corruption at the social and institutional levels, as well as a relationship between institutional corruption and institutional mistrust. Two, they appear to be more forgiving of corruption in the context of survival. Weaving these threads together helps explain *Luke Cage*'s narrative theme of corruption at the hands of public officials such as police and politicians. Insofar public corruption, crime, and institutional distrust inform many Harlemites' understanding of Harlem and their place in it, Luke Cage's superhero mission needs to be understood as coterminous with Harlemites' experiences, behaviors, and beliefs concerning these matters.

Building on the notions of distinct conceptual domains constituting the foundation by which Harlemites in *Luke Cage* relate to each other, processes related to coordination and informational assumptions elucidate how people apply these conceptual understandings to dilemmas or multifaceted situations. And although the study on coordination did not include adults, the findings are suggestive of adult capabilities. If youth can demonstrate some coordination ability, then it is reasonable to expect the adults in Luke Cage's Harlem to be able to coordinate competing considerations. By weighing multiple, often competing considerations, and drawing on construals of social reality in unclear or complicated situations, Luke Cage and his interlocutors are not only discussing and debating aspects of their communal life together; they are trying to figure out its contours. Contours that, as suggested by SCDT, Jackson, and Asch, are the result of Harlemites influencing and being influenced by each another.

IN SEARCH OF INTERROGATORY CONTEXTS

Based on the preceding analysis, there are specific narrative themes throughout *Luke Cage* that can serve as useful contexts for exploring and interrogating the relationship between moral and societal concepts more broadly and moral and legal considerations more specifically. These include the meaning of the superhero mission, the use of violence, and people's responses to varying social arrangements. Consistent with previous scholarship on other socially grounded superheroes operating within urban communities (Martin Killen and Letizia 222-223), these interrogatory contexts can potentially elucidate how Luke Cage alters and is altered by the (re)actions, arguments, beliefs, and experiences of those whose public sphere he commits to preserving.

One interpretation of the significance of Luke Cage is that his approach to "superheroing" can potentially encourage viewers to reflect on what it means to be a superhero when one is accountable to an entire neighborhood (Martinez 166; Toliver 623) characterized by viewpoint diversity (Miczo 13-14). Illustrating this diversity, "Suckas Need Bodyguards" (1.6) opens with various people calling into a radio station to weigh in on Luke Cage's vigilantism. Unsurprisingly, a range of considerations are brought to bear on their arguments. Relatedly, there are multiple instances of known criminals being released at least once due to legal technicalities or violations, lack of evidence, or lack of ability on behalf of local police. Examples include Cottonmouth, ("Manifest"; 1.7), Shades ("Soliloquy of Chaos"; 1.12), Mariah ("You Know My Steez"; 1.13), Dontrell (Cockroach) Hamilton ("Soul Brother #1"; 2.1), Arturo (El Rey) Gomez III ("Straighten It Out"; 2.2), and Bushmaster ("For Pete's Sake"; 2.9). Given this pattern, and coupled with the examples of corrupt public officials, this debate between legal and extralegal means of

obtaining justice could serve as a useful context for exploring how moral considerations related to harm and justice not only interact with each other, but with nonmoral considerations related to legality, rules, and the (il)legitimacy of institutional authorities.

Consistent with SCDT's assertions about the dynamic and multifaceted nature of social life serving as a backdrop against which abstract, moral judgments are applied (Turiel 2002 285), Luke Cage's superhero mission is neither considered, formed, or reconsidered in a vacuum. To understand his significance as both an individual moral agent and popular culture figure, it is important to understand instances where his morally relevant actions, and the assumptions informing them, align and do not align with those in his social ecology. Such understandings, in turn, may reveal the myriad ways Luke Cage and Harlem mutually influence each other–an outcome expected over time when moral agents dynamically relate to their contexts (Nucci 74). This conception of the relationship between individuals and society shares similarities with Asch's views concerning the importance of living in a society for understanding a person's character and the interpenetration of viewpoints that take place during social interactions (6, 161-163). Put in these terms, it makes sense to view Harlem not just as a character in the larger *Luke Cage* narrative, but as an animating and dynamic influence on his superhero mission.

Along these lines, it is important to consider the various ways Harlem residents go out of their way to assist him with his mission, sometimes at a personal cost. Two notable examples come from "Soliloquy of Chaos" (1.12), which focuses on a police manhunt for Luke Cage after Diamondback frames him for the murder of a white cop. In a series of scenes, view-

ers are shown multiple black men wearing Luke Cage's signature bullet riddled hoodie to throw off the search. In another scene, a police officer corners him in an alley, but decides to let him go because he knows him from Pop's barbershop and believes in what he represents.

In terms of both the meaning of Luke Cage's superhero mission and the mutually influential nature of his relationship to Harlem, his portrayal as reflective and contemplative is also relevant. Two observations made by his prison psychologist and eventual wife Reva Connors are illustrative. The first is that, although he is in prison, he is not a prisoner ("Step in the Arena"; 1.4). The second is that he is always thinking, even when he is not engaged ("Take It Personal"; 1.10). There are times, as in "Can't Front On Me" (2.12), where he is alone, thinking about his next move and its potential implication(s) for those who live in Harlem. Moreover, throughout season one he is often portrayed as reluctant to become a hero, either preferring to be left alone or not considering oneself a hero ("Now You're Mine"; 1.11).

In her analysis of season one, Toliver (623-624) notes how earlier episodes center a range of literary practices involving Luke Cage and other Harlemites. Practices that include reading, discussing, and scenes showing books of various genres. The ubiquity of literacy practices is important, given the practical relationship between reading, thinking, and contemplating. These literacy practices are also important because on multiple occasions, they are depicted as social practices, comprising yet another way his superhero mission is informed by his interactions with others.

Another interrogatory context lies in the realm of violence. *Luke Cage*'s multifaceted and nuanced portrayal of violence intimates a sort of commentary on more extreme physical vi-

olence towards others in at least two respects. As mentioned earlier, Luke Cage is initially reluctant to use his abilities to help others, and despite eventually choosing to do so, rejects, on multiple occasions, that his actions make him a "hero." McMillen (462-465), examining both the comics and the series, notes that he is frequently shown either refusing to fight unless in self-defense or reluctantly doing so to prevent (further) harm from befalling someone he cares about. This reluctance in light of the close relationship between super heroism and violence (Martin 2021b 4-5), and his struggles with and reflections on the implications of his violent actions in season two (e.g., "Wig Out"; 2.3 and "I Get Physical"; 2.4) suggest that for him, the merger between his morally relevant mission and the violent means used to achieve it is at best an uneasy one–with both proximate and potentially distal consequences.

In addition, when encountering people shooting at him, he is frequently shown crushing the guns instead of just knocking them out of the way or using them himself. An important scene in this regard comes from "Just to Get a Rep" (1.5), where he grabs Aisha Axton's purse during Pop's Memorial service to, unbeknownst to her, crush the gun she has tucked in there. When, moments later, she disregards Luke telling her that she does not have to retaliate against Cottonmouth because he found the sentimental ring his men took from her, she reaches for her gun only to realize it is crushed. The importance of the series' commentary on violence is further suggested by the fact that his use of violence in a particular context convinces Claire to live somewhere else for the remainder of season two ("Wig Out"; 2.3). Lastly, at times he is shown either (1) using his abilities to protect others *and* prevent them from killing their attackers ("Can't Front On Me"; 2.12) or (2) being reminded, either indirectly through

people watching him ("Straighten It Out"; 2.2) or directly through people urging him to remember who he is ("Suckas Need Bodyguards"; 1.6 and "Can't Front On Me"; 2.12), to not cross over the line and start killing people.

Luke's Cage's actions are not the only ones relevant to a commentary on violence. Anansi, Bushmaster's uncle, is frequently warning Bushmaster of the dangers of his violent thirst for vengeance, despite understanding and even conceding that some form of retribution against Mariah for her family's crimes against theirs is justified ("The Basement"; 2.6 and "If It Ain't Rough, It Ain't Right"; 2.8). And once kidnapped by Shades, he extends the same warning to Mariah ("The Main Ingredient"; 2.10). As Mariah's violence escalates and innocent people die, Sugar, one of her "employees," reaches out to Luke, and her partner Shades reaches out to both Misty ("The Creator"; 2.11) and Luke ("They Reminisce Over You"; 2.13). In each instance, they express that they are no longer working with Mariah because she has gone too far.

Although Shades explicitly mentions that he defects because of Mariah's harming of innocent people, Sugar's decision in "The Main Ingredient" (2.10) to not go through with walking Anansi to the restaurant–which ended up being shot up resulting in multiple casualties–implies that he too, is not comfortable harming innocent people. And despite the violence perpetrated by Cottonmouth in season one, he was visibly saddened by the death of Pops, an innocent bystander; a sentiment further underscored by his reference to the importance of adherence to presumably "moral" rules of not harming innocent people ("Code of the Streets"; 1.2) and giving a speech during his memorial ("Just to get a Rep"; 1.5). These same "moral" rules were used to justify Shades' defection

from Mariah after shooting up the restaurant ("The Creator"; 2.11) and decision–once apparently out of the gang life–to both help Luke Cage broker peace in response to spikes in gang wars and propose that he work more closely with the crime families and organizations to do so ("They Reminisce Over You"; 2.13).

It is worth noting that, unlike Luke Cage's interactions with Misty or other law-abiding Harlemites, his interactions with Sugar and Shades highlight how across both seasons *Luke Cage* also portrays his relationship with criminals as dynamic and mutually influential. Luke Cage eventually convinces them that he really cares about Harlem, and they eventually convince Luke Cage that his superhero mission needs to be altered to better serve Harlem. This notion of individuals exposed to robust violence–as the case with many of Luke Cage's law-breaking interlocutors throughout the series–nevertheless prohibiting the use of violence against innocent people, is further evidence of the view that social life is characterized by the existence of abstract moral agreement in certain areas and contextual disagreement in others.

As Turiel asserts, abstract moral understandings and judgments are applied against the backdrop of diverse social arrangements and interactions, and people often try to alter these arrangements and interactions if they deem them unjust (2002 285, 288). In line with this view, another theme that can stimulate sociomoral interrogation pertains to the relationship between changing social arrangements and persons' flexibility of thought. When it comes to Luke Cage, for instance, such interrogation or analysis may focus on his response to the disruption to Harlem's social and criminal "ecosystem" caused by Mariah's imprisonment. Different criminal organizations are warring with each other to fill the

vacuum left in her absence. In response to the significant increase in violence overall and towards innocent people, and law enforcement's inability to sufficiently address either, Luke Cage decides that new crimes call for new "laws" ("Can't Front On Me"; 2.12). And after serious contemplation, he decides in "They Reminisce Over You" (2.13) to become more of a "king" or "diplomat" to Harlem instead of a "hero" or "Sheriff"—a move that, as Misty notes, poses the risk of him becoming a dictator and/or a worse criminal than the vigilante he already is.

In analyzing Misty, Luke Cage's most frequent interlocutor throughout the series concerning the merits of vigilantism and the legitimacy of local law enforcement, the focus could be on her constant and complex navigation between legal and illegal means of obtaining justice. In "The Basement" (2.6), for example, she tells her boss Ridenhour that she almost planted evidence in Cockroach's apartment to prevent him from beating his girlfriend, a pattern she believes will eventually lead to her murder. Interestingly, Cockroach is one of the criminals released due to her former partner Rafael's corruption, as he planted the gun that landed him in prison. Understandably, his girlfriend, when urged by Misty to give her some intel on Cockroach so she can arrest him, partly justifies her refusal by stating she does not believe the cops can do anything ("All Souled Out"; 2.5). Misty tells Ridenhour that although law enforcement has been fighting the same war against criminals, the only thing that has changed are the *rules of engagement*. Thus, she is torn between legal means, knowing this approach will not change things, and illegal means. Choosing the latter may change things, but she will then become corrupt like Rafael; an outcome she cannot accept ("The Basement"; 2.6). As with Luke Cage, Misty constantly grapples with the complexities inherent in balancing

moral and legal considerations while serving and protecting *Luke Cage*'s Harlem.

CONCLUSION

Across both seasons, *Luke Cage* presents a superhero narrative against the backdrop of a dynamic and multifaceted relationship between Luke Cage and the neighborhood he learns to care for in a way that spurs him to use his abilities for others. These two characters, Luke Cage and Harlem, in some ways work in concert with his superhero mission and in others question, criticize, and work against it. The result is a superhero narrative suffused with nuance revealed through diverse interactions and flexible thinking in response to varying social arrangements. Throughout the series, Luke Cage emerges as a superhero who not only defends and preserves the public sphere where viewpoint diversity or thought heterogeneity is possible; he frequently engages with and is informed by said sphere through his relationship with Harlemites on both sides of the law.

Insofar as this relationship can be better understood by turning to scholarship on the development and application of social concepts across varying social interactions–especially when these processes inform discussions about the relationship between moral and nonmoral considerations in general and moral and legal issues in particular–the series, at a minimum, has the potential to go beyond mere entertainment. At best, it has the potential to stimulate viewers' reflections and discussions concerning the relationship between individuals and the societies they, as moral agents, help animate, critique, and alter through social interactions. If so, then the contours and substance of Luke Cage's superhero mission may reveal more about real communities than the fictional

community largely responsible for its cultivation and evolution.

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The Discourse of Memes: Regressive Politics and Internet Culture

By Shahbaz Khayambashi

ABSTRACT

A new popular form of political debate has appeared in the meme, a simple, repeatable and ephemeral medium that mixes images and words to pass on information. This form has become extremely helpful for regressive and reactionary politics, as right-leaning groups now use the meme to spread misinformation and disinformation to their supporters. This paper discusses the meme's use in the spread of willful disinformation in online spaces around the Black Lives Matter movement through humor, false information and appropriation of talking points.

Keywords: memes, internet culture, right-wing politics, social media

El discurso de los memes: política regresiva y cultura de Internet

RESUMEN

Una nueva forma popular de debate político ha aparecido en el meme, un medio simple, repetible y efímero que mezcla imágenes y palabras para transmitir información. Esta forma se ha vuelto extremadamente útil para la política regresiva y reaccionaria, ya que los grupos de derecha ahora usan el meme para difundir información errónea y desinformación a sus seguidores. Este artículo analiza el uso del meme en la difusión de desinformación deliberada en espacios en línea en torno al movimiento Black Lives Matter a través del humor, la información falsa y la apropiación de puntos de conversación.

模因话语：倒退的政治与网络文化

摘要

模因是一种简单、可重复且短暂的媒介，它将图像和文字加以混合以传递信息。模因出现了一种新的大众政治辩论形式，这种形式对于倒退和反动的政治非常有帮助，因为右翼集团现在利用模因向他们的支持者传播错误信息和虚假信息。本文探讨了模因在围绕"黑人的命也是命"运动的网络空间中通过幽默、错误信息和挪用谈话要点来故意传

关键词：模因，网络文化，右翼政治，社交媒体

THE ROOTS OF A NEW WEAPON

The meme is a comparatively new social medium, its modern usage going back a few decades at the most, and yet its appeal and political power should not be under-stated. The meme as a concept is an often ill-defined one. Fortunately, there are enough studies on memes that one can use to attempt to reach a consensus on what a meme is and what its purpose is. The term meme goes back to evolutionary biol-ogist Richard Dawkins, who first coined it as a shortening of the ancient Greek word, *mimema*, or "imitated thing" (192). Dawkins took the term meme, shortened similarly to the term gene, to be defined as an idea or behavior or something similar that spreads within a culture from person to person. While originally meant for a genetic purpose, the idea of the meme began to become more common with the concurrent

rise of market consciousness and internet culture, eventually becoming enveloped in what Bill Wasik refers to as viral culture, a culture based on new phenomena becoming relevant through a sudden culture, that is speedy, shameless, ephemeral and, perhaps most importantly, interactive (8). It needs to be pointed out that this analysis is being done around the meme as a phenomenon of internet culture. Even then, there are many different kinds of memes in internet culture, whether one considers viral videos or webcomics or even questions of what constitutes a meme as memes—after all, meme is autological, as the idea of a meme is a meme itself. This study will be mainly focused on a specific object which has in turn come to be referred to as a meme without clarification. This is the object that was once known as an image macro, which went on to colloquially stand in for memes in general. An image macro version of a meme is fairly simple, often taking the form of an image with words written on it. They are designed to be easy to create and easy to spread.

Throughout the 21st century, the meme has transformed from underground internet esoterica to an important ephemeral political tool. In fact, the right-wing employs a variety of different memes in their opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement. These varieties can be differentiated as humorous memes, informative memes and appropriative memes.[1] While these varieties of memes have many things in common, each of them has a series of identifiers and styles that can be used for vastly different reasons. With each covering a particular area, all of them together become an extremely effective weapon in the right's newest self-created attempt at a race war.

The meme introduces an oversimplified version of a topic, verifies said topic through nothing more than its visuality

and disappears before anyone can fact check its claims. Of course, by the time it disappears, its "fact" begins to spread, as a meme does, gaining further veracity the more that it is repeated. While the meme has been weaponized by the right, the left has also begun to use it to its full potential, discovering its power. This is the central tenet of this chapter: the meme's format is an extremely important tool for reactionary politics, owing both to its simplicity, so as to be able to appeal to anyone regardless of education or sociopolitical class, and to its inability to be held accountable. Reactionary politics requires something that is ultimately the opposite of the imagery used for revolutionary means.

The two most important questions from this point on are how is a meme used in a sociopolitical context and why are they so successful? First off, memes have all the abilities of images, with all the trust that comes with them. As WJT Mitchell has insisted, the 21st century's main concern is that of imagery, as our communicative style and rhetoric have moved away from Richard Rorty's linguistic turn into the new pictorial turn (11), an idea also mentioned by Barbie Zelizer as a visual turn (115). It is with this turn that images become so much more important, not only to possess but also to understand. Nicholas Mirzoeff's study of the human right to look discusses the history of visuality, wherein both the objects of looking and the ability to look have been heavily controlled in one way or another. Visuality, as defined by Mirzoeff, refers to the authority behind the ability to look (2). It is important to remember that this visuality has consistently been a part of the state ideology. It is under this visuality that the pictorial turn must operate—when there are a group of people in charge of visuals, the pictorial turn will benefit those people, just as the literate turn benefitted those who could afford higher education.

So, within this pictorial turn with everything that it entails, the image macro-style meme must empower the hegemonic status quo. While the idea of an organized race war is not necessarily part of the hegemonic status quo, it is the final result of many elements of hegemony within American society, specifically white supremacy. Even those in power who disavow fringe white supremacist groups need to embrace white supremacy to hold onto their power. This is done through a powerful two-pronged system of populism and trustworthiness. These are the two running themes through the majority of analysts working on memes as their objects of study. Carl Chen points to the power of memes coming from their inexpensive (15) and contagious (7) nature, pointing to their lack of value, allowing them to be more easily exploited, replicated and shared and to their relatability as a strong point (11). Patrick Davison is more interested in their speed of transmission and fidelity of form, leading to something that is honest despite being so easy to spread (122). He also notes the medium's constant evolution and yet anonymous nature (127). And Ryan Milner notes the meme's reliance on pop culture, remixing the works of others in a multimodal way (2357). This can all be used to define the meme as a valueless—or perhaps even post-value—object whose purpose is to mutate and spread, while still holding a certain fidelity to the original, dependent on a reliable sense of understanding, gained through inside jokes and pop culture.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that memes are a successful form of discourse simply because they place images with words. After all, decades before the internet, Susan Sontag stated that "photos furnish evidence" (5). Despite the fact that photos can lie or misinform, viewers are more likely to assume that images are trustworthy and less likely to question them as inaccurate. In fact, a psychological study by

Eryn Newman et al. found that when individuals were shown statements with nonprobative images, they were ultimately more likely to believe them than when shown statements by themselves (973). This is because the very placement of an image, no matter its relation to the statement, rapidly inflates the sense of perceived truth. This also goes a long way in explaining why a statement with a vaguely related image would be more likely to be believed as truth than questioned, because an image suggests evidence and evidence suggests truth. Another related reason why memes work is because, in the words of Andreu Casas and Nora Williams, images mobilize because they trigger emotions (372). Their study of tweeted images of Black Lives Matter protests found that tweets with imagery tended to be retweeted and interacted with far more frequently than those that were text only, especially when those images evoked feelings of anger, enthusiasm, and fear (372). In other words, imagery leads to more affective reactions and more interaction, ultimately becoming more effective than words ever could.

Heidi Huntington points out that memes are a perfect tool for the spread of subversive ideas, allowing an individual to make their thoughts known to a mass audience without fear of governmental or social retribution, owing to the meme's inherent anonymity (1). And, if enough of these anonymous subversive memes are released at one time, it becomes difficult to stop the rhetoric from being spread. This also allows for a populist notion behind the memes, as they will be spread by the people. Unfortunately, a lot of this populist subversive rhetoric, especially in a post-Trump era, is regressive and right-wing in nature, with the position of the powers that be moving away from just the government and into a failed notion of the "politically correct" or "woke" elites. This leads to far more aggressively bigoted and anti-social justice

ideas being spread on public platforms. Owing both to their speed of production and their facetious presentation, memes are often introduced as objects to not be taken seriously, with any question of their political meaning being dismissed with a simple "it's just a joke." As Helen Lewis suggests, it is this dichotomy between real and joke that causes great societal harm and furthers the political indoctrination of the new alt-right, where racist signs and symbols continue to be dismissed as jokes even though they have been adopted by racists ("The Joke"). This is where the importance of the meme to the political right begins, at the corner of joking and completely serious.[2]

USAGE OF MEMES IN ANTI-BLACK LIVES MATTER RHETORIC

Humorous Memes

Arguably the most common form of anti-Black Lives Matter meme, the humorous meme is what most people think of when they think of memes. These memes place text on an image, that text often taking the form of a joke or a reference. These jokes can be harmless or offensive, but the general idea behind them is to make the viewer laugh without necessarily causing harm. This may seem anti-intuitive with more offensive memes, but that is explained away by the location-specificity of these images, with certain memes having their own communities, separated from others. The reasoning is often portrayed as an attempt to keep people deemed unworthy out, as opposed to keeping the memes in, but there is a certain form of gatekeeping at play. Other offensive memes will often operate under a similar style of gatekeeping. While racist, misogynistic, or otherwise bigoted memes exist, as do the communities that share them, these communities often exist within a bubble of sorts. Whether on mainstream websites

like Reddit or separate forums like 4chan, these memes are essentially contained, acting as warnings for those who do not wish to view them to leave.

The way that the anti-Black Lives Matter humorous memes operate is the exact opposite. Instead of existing within a space where their racist views would be appreciated, they are meant to be uploaded into spaces where Black people and their allies would be more likely to see them, often on very mainstream platforms like Facebook or Twitter, frequently in the comment sections, as responses to people who dare to speak against the murder of Black people. Certain trolls will even forgo any pretense of attempting to have a good faith argument and simply spam dozens of these images in a row, in an attempt to hide the supportive comments and fill up the page with offensive memes.

These memes are not particularly creative either. A general perusal of anti-Black Lives Matter memes shows that the vast majority of the humor in these memes consists of outdated racist jokes, such as jokes about Black people not knowing their fathers, Black people enjoying stereotypical foods, like fried chicken and watermelon, and Black people resembling gorillas or other apes. Often, the alleged humor is simply a thinly veiled attempt to say exactly what they mean without outright saying it—a dog-whistle—like a meme comparing Harambe, a gorilla shot by a zookeeper in 2016, to George Floyd.[3] This example confirms that there is no real purpose to this variety of meme. The meme is not meant to convey emotion or logic; the cruelty of it is the sole point.

Similarly, there are other memes of this variety which at least make an attempt at appealing to emotion or a twisted sense of logic to get their point across. However, again, without a humorous veneer, these points would be rightfully called out

as racist. As such, these memes will take very blatant positions, stating their racist opinion outright, with some sort of meme-based formal decision. For example, these memes may write their statement in a way that references a meme: an image of a Black man holding a white woman at gunpoint is captioned "These the kinds a dudes that be like 'I can't breath!' When police come" [sic], quickly—sloppily, in fact, as if the point was less to make a coherent point and more to be racist—stating their position, their racist beliefs and their denial of the established narrative but doing so with a fake vernacular similar to that of memes created by Black netizens.

Similarly, they may simply replace humor with a reference to something humorous. These memes will simply take on the disguise of joking by using the image of a character who viewers will recognize as humorous. One example of such a meme incorporates an image of Squirrely Dan, a character from the Canadian sitcom *Letterkenny*. This image is captioned "have you ever noticed the police leave you alone if you aren't doing anything illegal?" Nothing about Squirrely Dan suggests any right-wing leanings. In fact, the character is often shown as an unusually progressive man when juxtaposed with his working-class, small-town upbringing. This meme did not even bother to incorporate his distinctive style of speech. One might even assume that the creator of this meme has never watched the show. The only point at hand is to make a reference to a pop culture icon as a way to suggest humor where none exists, in order to create a pretense of racial humor, as opposed to humorless racism. Squirrely Dan is an unusual object for this, but he is not the only pop culture character to fall victim to this phenomenon. He is joined by the likes of the Minions from that eponymous franchise, Sam Elliot, the Dos Equis guy and a variety of other, disparate characters. In cases like these, the mere recognizability of the

individual photographed and their connection to popular humor replaces the telling of a joke.

A lot of this style of humor is also heavily dependent on juxtapositions between strawman arguments, often taking the form of "us" versus "them" images, us, of course, being whatever right-wing cause is being supported at the time. These memes run the gamut of the varieties, often taking on informative or appropriative guises. The most important part of the creation of these memes is a total stripping away of context. For example, a meme was posted onto Facebook with the title "notice the difference," in that classic all-caps, impact font. The top image depicts "how Republicans protest" while the bottom image depicts "how Democrats protest." The top image depicts a series of cars driving down a road, in single file, surrounded by people waving American flags. Not many of the people in the photo are overly visible, but the few that are visible are white. The bottom photo depicts a Black man standing atop a burning car, holding a police shield that has been spray-painted with the letter ACAB—a rallying cry that stands for "All Cops Are Bastards," as a reminder that all police officers are complicit in police violence when they are unwilling to turn against the bad police officers—while surrounded by a large number of other, mainly Black, individuals.

There are several things going on in these photos. For one thing, dog whistles are employed heavily, conflating whiteness with patriotism and Blackness with violence and a proposed sense of criminality. There is also a political game being played, signaling back to the conspiratorial implication that Black Lives Matter are a Democratic organization used by the party for political gain. Even though the group has clearly stated Marxist leanings, the American right wing's belief in the Marxist leanings of the center-right Democratic

party sees this as enough reason to conflate the two. Finally, the rest of the context that is stripped from these images paints a different picture. The bottom photo depicts an event that took place on the 29th of May 2020, in Atlanta, Georgia. The image, distributed by Getty Images, is one of a limited number of images depicting violence by Black individuals— it may even be unfair to characterize it as violence, as that violence is towards an object and not an individual—among a larger collection of images of peaceful protest and police violence, so the choice of image is extremely telling. What is even more telling is the cropping and text placement on the image. The way that this meme is composed hides the fact that the car on fire is a police car. With the clear political placement of the meme's creator, it is difficult to tell why they attempted to hide that, but an image of an unmarked car being destroyed would surely lead to the type of result being sought.

Meanwhile, what is missing from the top image is the fact that it depicts the right-wing protests of anti-lockdown protests, likely those that took place in Lansing, Michigan on the 15th of April 2020. Despite right-wing calls to make it legal to run over protestors who block roads and sloganeering with phrases such as "all lives splatter," Republicans began to travel *en masse* to places like Lansing and block access to hospitals with their cars, in order to call for an end to lockdown measures. In the time since this meme, Republicans have even gone as far as to storm the American Capital building with a stated mission to murder politicians and yet this style of meme has not slowed down. For some, the inability to see their own hypocrisy is what leads to this variety of meme making, while others simply do not care about their own hypocrisy. Specifically, many of those who monetize or turn such activity into an occupation have shown themselves

again and again to be incapable of honesty, but many of those who simply share or make such memes as a hobby appear unaware of their own hypocrisy, especially when questioned in online spaces.

One should also be aware of the large number of online comics that make a career out of anti-Black—and frequently specifically anti-Black Lives Matter—sentiments. Some have made a career out of it—the likes of more enigmatic figures like StoneToss and Shadman and more traditional figures like Ben Garrison and A.F. Branco have an online following and make a variety of right-wing bigoted comics, to varying degrees—but there are also individuals who seem to make one-off strips, because they believe that their beliefs would be best described in such a format. It is important to point out that the medium does not make much difference, as these comics are still made to be easily spread and border on ephemerality. They also allow for a more timely, so to speak, take on issues of the day. This accounts for a lot of anti-Black Lives Matter comics taking the guise of editorials while incorporating imagery that would be at home in a minstrel show. In fact, this editorial aspect is more than likely why the creators of these comics feel they can get away with them.

Of course, this raises the question of why it is that these humorous memes are so popular, and why it is that blatant racists insist on disguising their racism behind a thin veneer of humor. The short answer to this question is that it is an attempt at plausible deniability. Despite the blatant racism that is often displayed by members of right-wing political parties, there is still a realization that it is a negative thing, especially for one's public image, to be a racist. While these individuals will gladly espouse racist beliefs, a large number of them—pretty much anyone to the left of self-avowed

Nazis—will refuse the label of racist, because they recognize it as a negative label. In the last decade or so, a variety of terms have been created to suggest one's racist views without being referred to as a racist—terms like race realist are often used to bypass this dilemma. As such, these people will often suggest that they are not anti-Black racist; they are merely anti-Black Lives Matter, an ultimate BLMization of the Black body. They will further suggest that their issue is with Black Lives Matter, the organization, and not with the slogan.[4] It is with this bit of mental gymnastics that they will be able to repeat their racist beliefs under the guise of anti-organizational rhetoric. However, it does not take much to realize that the jokes being posted against the organization are no different from those that would be posted against the individuals. In fact, they often find themselves without any mention of Black Lives Matter. So, they claim plausible deniability in four simple words: it's just a joke.

The greatest strength of the humorous meme is that thin layer of alleged comedy that surrounds the racist beliefs therein. While the opinions and beliefs are very real, this veneer allows the meme's creator to essentially play victim when called out. Owing to the image's guise as humor, the cry of "can't you take a joke" takes the meme's creator out of the defensive position, replacing them with their critic. It is no longer an issue of racism, but rather an issue of one's right to make an offensive joke. This gives the critic a vast variety of negative labels running the gamut from humorless and easily offended to censorious—both as a condemner and as a censor—and an infringer on the freedom of others. This singular act of criticizing a racist statement will immediately demonize the critic and let the meme's creator off the hook, especially in digital spaces where freedom of speech is given more importance than freedom to criticize. In fact, there

is a whole new vocabulary being built around this style of censure—when the urge to criticize is deemed political correctness, the act of criticism is deemed cancel culture and the point behind the criticism is called critical race theory, and all three are oversimplified to a point where it becomes easier to demonize them, sometimes it is easier to keep out of the dialogue.

This refusal to engage is ultimately what these meme makers are hoping for, because they recognize the absurdity of their claims of being non-racist and they further recognize that they cannot defend themselves against this designation. This is exactly why they insist that it is all just a joke. Of course, it is not just a joke. Even in cases where it is a joke, the addition of *just* is inaccurate, because there is no such thing as "just a joke," especially in a political joke. Numerous studies have found a deep personal connection between racist humor and actual, unquestionable racist beliefs. These studies have been conducted in the United States (Yoon 93), Canada (Baker et al. 103) and Australia (Grigg and Manderson 195) and they all lead to the same results; the fact that racist humor is simply an offshoot of actual racist beliefs, often in countries that claim to be post-racial and color-blind, wherein the only way to respectfully state one's racist beliefs is to disguise them as jokes. Unfortunately, it is this appeal to humor that often brings out comedians in defense of the alleged joke, out of a fear of some slippery slope where not being able to use a racial slur will eventually lead to comedy becoming illegal. This hyperbole makes it difficult to criticize such bad faith humor. And yet, it is this inability to criticize this style of humorous meme, out of fear of being deemed humorless or censorious, that is its greatest strength as a tool for regressive political rhetoric.

Informative Memes

It is necessary in introducing the informative meme to immediately point out that it is an absolute misnomer. In the world of memes, this variety fulfills the role of a tabloid, allowing a medium for the quick and easy distribution of misinformation. It could be occasionally argued that this misinformation is not the primary purpose, that the creator is not attempting to create misinformation, and that is indeed a fair assessment. However, the format of the meme, as a medium, would inherently lead to the creation of misinformation. The meme is not meant for complex information. It is meant to be exclusive on the amount of text, direct to the point and somewhat confrontational. In order for information to be transmitted through a meme, it must be cut down to its most basic elements and exclude any sense of nuance or certain contextual cues. This is not *necessarily* an exclusively right-wing issue, as many issues of importance to all political backgrounds fall victim to a similar loss. However, when speaking of anti-Black Lives Matter memes, it is an almost exclusively right-wing issue.[5]

The issue does not end with misinformation, however. Owing to the meme's baffling ascension to political relevance, many bad faith right-wing commentators also use it to spread disinformation. Where misinformation can be the result of a mistake or of one's unintentional location within an echo chamber, disinformation is intentional and depends on an echo chamber; knowing one's audience is extremely necessary in situations like this and this audience is exactly what is needed for this disinformation to become an ideology and for that ideology to become action. This disinformation does not even necessarily need to be realistic or logical because the meme gives it an air of legitimacy. It is important to remember that the roots of QAnon, possibly the most successful

modern right-wing, regressive political grift, exist in memes on websites like 4chan, Facebook and, to some extent, You-Tube, locations of minimalist, meme-dependent rhetoric.

This meme style is also noteworthy because of its surprising ability to be monetized. While a lot of people do create these memes for nothing more than political gain—often just to "own the libs," as they might say—there are whole organizations based around creating these informative memes, occasionally with a hint of humor, based on the belief or assumption that younger people will be more easily swayed by providing them your rhetoric in a meme format. These groups, with names like Turning Point USA, Liberty Hangout and Prager U, attempt to create a sense of legitimacy for themselves through a variety of signifiers. First, they tend to give themselves educational designations. Prager U takes the guise of a university, while Turning Point advertises their ideology on American college campuses rid higher education of its "liberal bias." Secondly, they push their ideas as revolutionary—despite the right wing being inherently anti-revolutionary—whether they are calling for a turning point or advertising their love of liberty. Finally, these organizations place publicity above even their own message. Ultimately, being seen is more important than what they say, because they recognize that their ideas need to be seen by many for the few who accept them to have any large numbers behind them. This is why they often participate in publicity stunts meant to reframe transgression as reactionary, like the Liberty Hangout founder walking around a campus with a rifle or Turning Point employees wearing diapers to show how modern students are "babies." Once they are seen and accepted, their messages can be spread to their audience who will, in turn, spread it to their own captive social media audience, which will continue the spread.

At this point, the informative meme's power becomes apparent. The point of an informative meme, at its base, is not to spread established, accurate and confirmed information, but rather to create "information" which can be spread to an audience who will refuse to confirm anything that agrees with their sensibilities. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, numerous studies and theories have shown that images realize falsities. In other words, placing an image next to a textual caption is much more likely to convince a viewer that the caption is accurate, even if the photo does not provide visual proof of the statement being made. Creators of this style of meme take advantage of this bias and create memes which incorporate images which often fall into one of three categories, neutral, contextless and photoshopped. The neutral images are unusually the rarest variety. What this means is that they will simply use an image of the person or organization to whom they are referring. The only purpose that this variety of image serves is to essentially remind the viewer of the person to whom they are referring. A meme accusing a politician of a heinous act could simply incorporate an official photograph of said politician to give reality to the accusation through a simple reminder of the politician's face.

The contextless image is far more prevalent and involves using an unflattering image to give credence to the claims being made by making the accusation appear more legitimate. For example, an accusation of violence against Black Lives Matter might use an image of a looter who is not affiliated with Black Lives Matter or an image of someone who has been beaten by protestors without mentioning that they had threatened the protestors with violence first. This variety also depends heavily on images of individuals appearing crazed or sickly. Often, these memes need to push an idea of their opponents as mentally or physically damaged, in order to show

their own superiority. This is done by finding images of their opponents appearing less than presentable. There is a very serious racial and gender-based issue at play here, as white men are far less frequently victims of this visual manipulation. Black and brown racialized men are often darkened and given exaggerated stereotypically racialized characteristics, while women are either made to look older, sicker, or less intelligent than they are. Meanwhile, someone who happens to be a racialized woman is given the worst of both worlds. In these situations, the truth is irrelevant—as long as the text attached to the image seems true, based on the properties of the image. These memes recognize the importance of visual proof to their cause, doing their best to gather proof even if that proof is inaccurate.

Finally, the photoshopped image is fairly self-explanatory. These are images which do not see a need to conform to reality, instead creating their own reality through the modification of images. The photoshopped variety of meme image is an interesting one, because of the various layers of its ability to convince. For example, one can question the realism of the image, whether it was photoshopped by someone who knows how to flawlessly manipulate images or an amateur who leaves too many digital artifacts for the image to be convincing. There is a point where the photoshopped image stops being realistic and finding that point could be a challenge. Finally, there is a question of audience. The meme creator needs to be aware of who they are planning to trick. For example, a younger, more technology-literate audience may be tricked by a particularly well-done photoshop, but a badly done photoshop would only find success on a platform with a less technology-literate audience, where the images are either less likely to be shown to more aware people or where the audience would be less likely to believe the more aware

people when they question the image. As such, this variety is often less successful, but more dangerous when successful.

And, of course, it is when these memes are successful that the real issue begins, because, with informational memes, once a "fact" is stated once, it remains a fact forever. Just as nothing can be removed from the internet, no statement can be forgotten from the internet either. No matter how many times a false statement is refuted, its original existence means that someone will still continue to believe it. The interesting thing about this process of "factification" is that, first, the unsourced nature of these memes makes them more difficult to prove and therefore to disprove—not impossible, but it requires more work than can be done in the attention span of the internet—and second, the facts are designed to outlive the images. When one side has no interest in good faith arguments, it is much easier to get past the criticism. So, while the image is available, the arguments will often revolve around fallacious reasoning around the critic's inability to disprove the facts at play: the more nonsensical the facts, the better this "argument" works. It is when the image disappears, however, that the true power is revealed, as the factification continues, as people will often remember hearing a fact but not where they heard it. As such, these lies become truths upon something as simple as remembrance. A falsity is given legitimacy first by an image, then by memory, never receiving that legitimacy through a legitimate venue.

There are numerous informative memes that cover a vast variety of topics, often going with whatever is in the news at the time. As such, it is important to look at the various subjects that are covered within an anti-Black Lives Matter sphere. Perhaps the most common theme of this variety of meme is the "criminal record" theme. These memes attempt

to absolve the murderous police officers of wrongdoing by pointing out the victims' past criminal records. These memes will occasionally incorporate a mugshot or caricature of the victim, but the text is often the most important part. By pointing out the victim's past criminality—often ignoring the context for why young Black men are criminalized at a young age—the strain of wrongdoing is immediately taken removed from the status quo—often white, often male police officers[6]—and placed back where the right wing believes it belongs, on the backs of Black individuals who refuse to step in line. This criminalization makes these memes easier to create, but a lack of a criminal record does not harm their creations, as "innocent" victims can still be accused by way of the criminalization of Black bodies, prevalent in statements about how a young, Black man looked "crazed" or "dangerous" or "older than he was." The right-wing is reliant on Black bodies being criminalized and white supremacy remaining unquestioned, which makes this theme extremely popular.

This theme can be somewhat extended to two similar themes: memes questioning the innocence of protestors and of Black Lives Matter as a whole. In response to calls for better training for the police, one such meme suggests that "maybe it's the people, not the cops, that need better training." This quote is attributed to Larry Elder and is accompanied by an image of a white woman giving a Black police officer the middle finger. Once again, the police are placed in the role of victim—racialized victim, at that—while all protestors are represented by a singular, (rightfully) enraged woman who let her emotions come out in the form of an "inappropriate" gesture. One of the most frequently used bad faith arguments of the right has to do with civility and public appropriateness. As such, they will pretend to be indignant about something

that they would not look at twice if it was done by one of their own. Even beyond that, the singular middle finger is stripped of all context and presented as an inappropriate response—as if it was not a response to, not just murder, but chemical warfare against protestors.

Another element to take note of is the use of this particular quote. The quote could have been spoken by anyone, but this particular speaker was chosen. Larry Elder is an American conservative talk radio host. He is also a Black man. These individuals may hate Black people, but they love Black people who agree with them. Such individuals are helpful for the cause, as they can be put forth as proof of plausible deniability when the right is accused of racism. These people are also the first to be cast aside when they are no longer useful. This casting aside has historical precedence—Ernst Rohm as the resident gay Nazi being an obvious example—but it has also been seen in online discourse, wherein racialized, gendered or otherwise othered individuals are quickly banished when they go against the party line or are otherwise deemed no longer useful. Another similar meme quotes former Wisconsin sheriff David Clarke, who is quoted as saying that the statement "Black Lives Matter suggests racial superiority." In other words, the meme maker took the statement that their side has been ignorantly saying for years, found a Black man who agreed and used him as their spokesman. This comes from the belief that, if a Black man agrees with them, that means they are not racist.

Black Lives Matter and its founders are also constant victims of attacks by these posts. Firstly, the organization is constantly accused of various crimes through this medium. Images of fires or injured individuals are frequently attributed to Black Lives Matter with no evidence. One such meme depicts som-

eone who attempted to stab rioters outside a bar and received a beating as a result. In this reasoning, Black bodies equal Black Lives Matter and, if Black Lives Matter committed an act of violence, it is inherently intolerable and must be repudiated, even if it was in self-defense—essentially, the exact opposite of the treatment of police officers. Similarly, another such meme depicts an old man bleeding from the face and speaking to a news reporter. This man was later found to have been attempting to shoot protestors with a bow and arrow. However, like the earlier examples of informative memes, the truth travels much more slowly than meme "facts."

Finally, one of the most insidious themes in these memes is the "rich BLM leader" archetype. Black Lives Matter is a decentralized organization which was founded by several queer, Black women, which gives to charities. This is at once the most contemptible organization for a right-wing agitator and something that cannot be outwardly criticized to avoid giving away their prejudicial ideology. As such, it becomes necessary to question their ideology from a perspective to which they do not necessarily subscribe. One of the most common meme narratives that applies to this theme is the frequent attacks on movement co-founder Patrisse Khan-Cullors. Once again, the general way to attack these individuals is through cognitive dissonance, pushing racist and sexist ideas while insisting on their lack of racism and sexism and supporting capitalism while decrying it. The attacks on Khan-Cullors tend to focus on her participation in capitalist society, questioning her possession of several properties and insisting that these properties were bought with stolen donations. Essentially, if she is a Black woman, she must be a thief and if she is part of an organization that holds any Marxist beliefs, she must starve and own nothing. It is important to keep in mind that these individuals only care

because of Khan-Cullors' political leanings, as they would likely celebrate her if she agreed with them.

Another similar situation involves a man by the name of Christopher DeVries. DeVries was arrested in 2020 on child pornography charges. He also happens to be a supporter of Black Lives Matter. In order to disavow the movement, a series of memes were created calling him the founder of Black Lives Matter, making the obvious claim that Black Lives Matter was founded by a pedophile. There are a few things at play here. First, these memes often name the people they are attacking leaders of leaderless organizations. This can be seen in a lot of anti-Antifa memes. Perhaps more importantly, the fact that Black Lives Matter, as a hashtag and fledgling organization, was founded by women is being brought under question by these memes, because of the belief that, if there is a shadowy organization, it must secretly be controlled by a man. These memes, at once, criminalize Black men and diminish Black women. Ultimately, one must question if the individuals behind these memes are making an intentional point of spreading disinformation or if they are simply ignorant.

This question could potentially be answered with one interesting video found during this research. This video was posted to the social media platform TikTok. The video begins with a white man with a thick beard and an American flag hat talking in front of a *New York Post* article. While this is not a meme, it is important because it follows the general rhetoric of an informative meme. The man angrily and smugly discusses the news article, referring to how the "organization"—his finger quotes—Black Lives Matter took in 90 million dollars last year and how none of it went toward helping anybody. This is accompanied with a simply and frankly unnecessary image of several Black individuals in front of a black background and

a caption naming the group, how much money they accrued in 2020 and the line "funds used to help Black communities: $0." This is followed by the person responding to it, whose takedown of the video explains all the issues with this style of rhetoric. First, this man uses a conservative-leaning source in the *New York Post* and still mischaracterizes its argument. A link to the Black Lives Matter impact statement would have disproven his central thesis, but he avoids it. Then, this video is posted by a secondary source whose video is seen by many others. So, despite the primary source being ignorant at best and a malicious liar at worst and the secondary source deleting her account, everybody who saw the original uncited, mischaracterized video—including the secondary source— will believe the original statement and likely not even see its refutation. So, a total lie becomes the truth for many. As the poster states, "[Y]ou guys say that the left uses the word racist too often, but what the fuck else are we meant to call it when you deliberately lie to smear the biggest Black social justice movement in the country?"

And that is ultimately why this variety of meme is so useful for right-wing aggressors. As Stephen Colbert once famously stated "facts have a liberal bias." When the facts do not subscribe to your viewpoint, there are two options: you either change your viewpoints or you create your own facts. One of the most often stated ideas that is used to argue against provided facts in online discussion is that the source being used to refute your claim comes from a leftist source and it is therefore useless. Unfortunately, the shifting of the Overton window means that everything from Snopes to *The Washington Post* is now considered leftist media, with the only valuable sources being the sources that subscribe to right-wing ideology. The informative meme is essentially an attempt at creating a brand new, populist right-wing media platform. If

the right-wing internet can create its own facts, then there will be nothing to stop them from stating anything they wish as fact. And, if they have control over the facts, they have control over the narrative. In other words, this is less about putting their opponents down and more about raising themselves to their opponents' level, even if it is at the sacrifice of reality.

Appropriative Memes

Appropriative memes share a lot in common with informative memes, in that they forgo humor and introduce their idea through historical or political ideas. What separates these memes from the informative ones is that they do not establish their own facts, they merely recontextualize and reappropriate the facts and ideas of others. This variety of meme is slightly rarer, but it is also extremely damaging, as it often takes the form of racist individuals using the words of old, often deceased, anti-racism advocates to attack or question modern anti-racism advocates. This results from the constant evolution of social justice ideals, making the previous iteration seem more palatable in comparison to the more modern version. This is perhaps most blatantly apparent in anti-feminist circles, when anti-feminists suggest that third-wave feminism goes too far in comparison to the second wave, when many of the issues that they have with feminism were introduced in the second wave. Once again, their refusal to commit to research ensures that their ideas are wrong.

When it comes to anti-racism advocacy, there is a very similar process of normalization among racists. What follows is an oversimplified, non-intensive attempt at showing the absurdity at play. Slavery abolitionists were once considered overly radical. Then, with the arrival of the civil rights groups of the 1960s, the anti-slavery advocates would be the ones brought

up as the right way to fight for one's rights and the right goal to have. And yet, the same people who hated the leaders of the civil rights movement will now hold up Martin Luther King, Jr. as an example of how to protest racism, especially when compared to the inappropriate antics of Black Lives Matter. While the goals have always been the same things that the American dream promises every American, it just so happens that the newest person or organization fighting for those rights is doing it incorrectly.

The mention of King is not just a random selection—the vast majority of these memes incorporate his words as a way to speak down to Black people, often using King's speeches to question either the violence of Black people or their refusal to take responsibility of their own lives. One such meme compares King to Black Lives Matter, labelling the meme "liberal logic 101" and labelling the two sides "MLK" and "BLM," respectively. MLK is quoted as saying "hate cannot drive out hate," while BLM is quoted as saying "white lives don't matter! Kill the cops!!" It does not need to be stated, but the first obvious issue is that the second quote is not something that has been spoken by anyone. The multiple exclamation marks are likely there to indicate an uneducated piece of writing, but the fact is that these words were taken directly from the meme creator's brain. That is not important, however. What is important is the suggestion that Black rights and anti-racist advocacy has moved away from anti-hate beliefs and toward the hatred of white people and police officers. This meme says more about its creator than they likely meant by conflating whiteness with law enforcement, as if one cannot exist without the other. It also conflates Black lives matter with the idea that a statement being true makes their vision of its opposing statement—white lives matter, cops' lives matter—false. This meme insists on the idea that equality is a ze-

ro-sum game and that more Black rights means fewer white rights. Again, one cannot truly know if this is what the meme creator actually believes, or if this is being done to feed an ignorant audience.

Furthermore, one of the biggest complaints against this style of meme is just how sanitized King's message becomes in its presence. Many critics of the white appropriation of King have questioned why white people are so obsessed with his "I have a dream" speech or his quotes on non-violence—the last refuge of the colonialist bourgeois when they realize their hold on power is slipping, according to Frantz Fanon—while ignoring his more radical beliefs. The meme mentioned above is captioned "you can't pretend to honor a man while completely ignoring everything he stood for," making this point even more obvious. King's whole legacy—the things that made this meme creator's ancestors hate him in his day as much as they hate Black Lives Matter today—has been distilled to a more modern version of "love thy neighbor" without a hint of necessary context. King preached anti-hate sentiments, but he also preached the right to fight back. On March 10, 1968, King stated in his "The Other America" speech, that despite the fact that he condemns rioting, "a riot is the language of the unheard" ("The Other America"). This does not, however, go far enough in confirming the opinions of racist white people. As such, they need to pretend that such a quote has never existed. This is often the reason behind things such as the modern pushback against concepts such as critical race theory and the 1619 project. If the truth can be ignored, conservative beliefs can continue unquestioned.

This is also why these meme creators will often use these figures as nothing more than mouthpieces to spread their own racist beliefs. Using another example of King, a meme uses

an image of King during his "I have a dream" speech—the only thing some of these people know about King—with the caption "I have a dream that Black people will actually take responsibility for their actions, learn how to speak proper English and stop blaming white people for everything." A small watermark at the bottom designates this as comedy, as it bears the name of a humor website. This meme signifies itself as a humorous meme, but its appropriation of King's speech places it in this category. This meme's creator has taken a speech about unity and used it as a front for a racist attack, attacking not just the usual sense of victimhood that is placed upon the Black American population by racist white people, but also their speech. There is not connection that could possibly be made between the image and the caption, other than the appropriation of those first four words, but the connection to King makes the meme extra insulting with the suggestion that even King would be against the sensibilities of modern Black people.

If King is the most common target for such memes, Rosa Parks is likely a distant second. While other figures are far too controversial for the individuals who make these memes—Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon or any Black Panthers are often deemed as too violent or hateful by the sort of people who make these memes—Parks is still seen as mostly peaceful, even though her actions were criminal and anti-status quo for her time. Honestly, the criminality of her actions is likely one of the biggest reasons as to why she is less represented in these memes, along with the fact that she was a woman, as well as Black. One of these memes uses an image of Parks sitting on a bus with the caption "Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on the bus. But she didn't trash the bus. Big difference." Once again, a revolutionary, criminal act is stripped of all of its transgressive action and diminished to an acceptable act in

a modern sense to contest modern revolutionary acts. Parks' act of staying seated, which would have been admonished in her time, is established as the hegemonically correct way to protest—in other words, given white respectability—while the actions of Black Lives Matter are diminished to the most violent among them and explained away as an incorrect way to protest. Not only that, but these respectability politics come into play once more as the meme creator suggests that, despite Parks' actions being seen as acceptable, violence against the property of those in power is inherently unacceptable, both because property is often seen as more important than Black bodies and lives and because they believe that those in power should have no fear of losing that power.

The reason that these memes work is a bit more complicated. With the previous varieties of meme, the purpose is singular: the meme creator means to either mock Black people or to create misinformation about them. The appropriative meme exists somewhere in between the two: the image mocks, while the text misinforms. As Sontag points out, images are not inherently political: it is the text which gives them their political context (109). While this is not necessarily true within a pictorial turn context, it is definitely true about these memes. The image is meant to humiliate Black Lives Matter as an organization and Black people as a whole. It is meant to remind them of their past with the suggestion that they are devolving. Through this reminder, racist meme creators give themselves the right to decide what is right and what is wrong for people other than themselves.

The text, in turn, is meant to inform the viewer about the correct way to protest—the right way designated by the racist meme creator as dictated by hegemony—by further shaming the protestors. The basic idea behind the text of these me-

mes tends to follow a very basic template: the past, which was ostensibly successful—many people still believe that racism ended in the 1960s—is compared to the present, which is not successful. This lack of success is of course not taking into consideration the general novelty of the Black Lives Matter movement, nor the changes that they have in fact affected, because the meme creators do not believe that there are any changes to be made in the first place. This humiliation is what is being aimed for, but, in a strange way, Black populations are not the intended audience for these memes. Instead, these memes are meant for ignorant white audiences—ignorant meaning uneducated as opposed to unsophisticated—whose understanding of American Black liberation movements is limited to the radical non-violent resistance of the likes of King and Parks. There is a sense of recognition that those who are aware of the more righteously violent-if-need-be side of Black liberation will not be swayed by such arguments, but there is still an important audience available. These three varieties of memes show how important memes can be for regressive causes, but can memes be equally useful for progressive causes?

BLACK LIVES MATTER MEMES

While regressive and reactionary politics have certainly taken over large segments of meme creating communities, there is also a more niche competing leftist meme creating community. While Black Lives Matter is involved in a lot of meme creation—Black Lives Matter, as a slogan and as a hashtag, is itself a meme in a classical sense, after all—their contributions are a mere drop in the bucket when compared to the massive amounts of anti-Black Lives Matter memes. Still, the Black Lives Matter memes fill in certain holes of the online discourse on race relations.

While they are fewer in numbers, Black Lives Matter memes have two distinct qualities: first, the central arguments of their memes are often much more focused on the issues at hand instead of more generalized attacks, and second, they are much more likely to work in media that take more effort than their opponents. Firstly, the majority of the pro-Black Lives Matter memes tend to poke fun at police officers and anti-Black Lives Matter groups. The anti-police memes are fairly uniform—they often incorporate an image of the police committing acts of violence with a comment in form of text or, more rarely, performing an act of support followed by a comment on their hypocrisy. These memes are ultimately just as likely to incorporate pop culture elements, such as one such image of police officers taking a knee in Miami followed by an image of three men saying, "we were bad, but now we're good," an image that would be immediately recognizable to anyone who has seen the viral video "Sex Offender Shuffle." The memes about their opponents are often much more varied while still staying on point, so to speak: these memes often characterize their opponents as uneducated, self-centered or "bootlickers," people who are submissive to police. These memes also often make references to pop culture to get their points across, from *King of the Hill* and *Friends* to children's cartoons and pornography.[7] These are the memes that attempt to fight on similar grounds as their opponents. However, there are also plenty of memes that have had more work put into them whose real purpose is to educate or memorialize.

Like the aforementioned humorous memes, Black Lives Matter also incorporate a lot of comic strips into their meme-based communications, with a large number of them devoted to the ridiculous nature of responding to Black Lives Matter with all lives matter. Perhaps the most viral of all these comics is one that is attributed to the website chainsawsuit.com

which depicts a stick figure stating his belief that all lives matter before also declaring that all houses matter and spraying a house with a hose while another house burns down nearby. This comic is the most often posted and shared of these styles of comics, but it is not the only one. Similar comics include Matt Bors' explicitly political comics. One of these comics depicts an "All lives matter" protestor arguing with a Black Lives Matter protestor before telling a Muslim immigrant seeking help from who she assumes to be an ally "no Muslims allowed. Or can't you read?" Another such comic depicts the same man demanding a Black protestor protest peacefully, quietly, and respectfully, only being satisfied when the protestor dies. These comics are joined by an Adam Zygis comic in which an angry fuming white man steps into a variety of protests and demands that all the causes—including all cancers, all words, and all mammals—should matter, and a Steve Greenberg comic where people in positions of power remind others being victimized that there are a lot of people being similarly victimized. The format is almost a cliché, but it goes a long way in proving the ludicrous nature of this style of argument and seems to mainly serve the purpose of convincing those who hold this viewpoint. As a comic by Joel Pett puts it, we need to remember that we live in a time where the only lives that actually matter are "the obscenely rich, angry white dudes [and] fetuses," situating the right's priorities in simplified terms, namely capitalism, white supremacy, male chauvinism and anti-feminism, in a sort of left-wing dog whistle political style. It is often important for the left to imitate the right's simplification of political thought to both create successful satire and to show the other side how their tactics look.

The other style of meme-like creation is the Black Lives Matter memorial. This style of meme is wholly meant for the supporters. Unlike every other style of meme, these memorials

are not meant to make a point to outsiders and are meant exclusively to be consumed, appreciated, and spread by the inner group. These memorials are also surprisingly successful, often taking the form of a portrait of a victim or the ever popular "say his/her name" variety. These images may not be considered memes by most, but they share many of the characteristics, as they often incorporate images and text, are meant to elicit a response, and are meant to be spread virally on the internet. What differentiates them from other memes is the inherent *pathos* within them, whereas memes are almost meant to be emotionless. This *pathos*, in turn, has a tendency of enraging the opposition as they do not appreciate the connection between their own regressive culture and progressive politics. This also often leads to the opposition attempting to appropriate the memorial memes in a strange full circle process, but that should only be seen as a victory. Black Lives Matter has managed to defeat their racist opponents in their own field of combat without even making an attempt at doing so.

MEMES AS INJURY AND HEALING

Memes are simplistic, amateurish, and frequently offensive. However, they are also a new language, one which is "spoken" heavily by young people. As such, it is important to learn how to both understand it and utilize it. This chapter may appear to suggest that memes are a lost form, that they have been overtaken by the right-wing, but that could not be further from the truth. While Black Lives Matter is less involved in memes, online leftist politics are just as heavily dependent on memes as the right. There are even online communities wholly devoted to the creation and distribution of memes from a leftist standpoint. There is indeed a "political" meme war happening, at least in a modern, online definition of pol-

itics. In this definition, politics is a dirty word; these memes push ideology, but are seen as non-political by their creators, because they are also the ones complaining that everything is too political or insisting that it is a joke and jokes cannot be political. This leads to an unwinnable war fought entirely on their rules.

As such, it is important to recognize the weapons of the right-wing and how they incorporate those weapons in campaigns of humiliation and (mis/dis)information. These memes appear in the forms of humor, information, and appropriative imagery to mock the fight for civil rights and create a new narrative. This narrative must be recognized and combatted because it is this narrative which will sway a young generation of children and older generations of less educated individuals. When these vast swaths of people become convinced that these small, captioned, often crude images speak the truth, then the battle for their hearts and minds will be lost. One way to go about this is to create response memes which promote historical facts and alternative, progressive history. The better way to fight this is through education, fact checking and correction, but, unfortunately, these acts become extremely difficult in an online environment. As such, meme making could be the best option available on a smaller level while more comprehensive race studies and massive changes to the educational system are put into place at a more gradual pace.

END NOTES

1. It is important to note that the first two designations, the humorous and informative, should be read firmly in quotation marks. The humor in the humorous memes is the extremely outdated, punching-down style of humor one would find in a 1950s joke book, while the informative memes are often

full of intentional disinformation, used solely as a weapon to spread fake news.

2. On September 22, 2021, American congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene made a statement against the Green New Deal with the aid of several enlarged copies of memes. While this choice was rightfully lambasted by many, the act itself and the subsequent right-wing response went a long way to show the importance of the meme as a political medium.

3. Owing to their inherent anonymity and ephemerality, it is near impossible to cite these memes, as their origins are often unclear, and they may disappear without a moment's notice. As such, the images will be conveyed in words.

4. Some right wingers have gone so far as to conflate Black Lives Matter with Antifa, an anti-fascist belief system with no organization behind it, which has become a scare tactic in modern parlance. Just like they do with Black Lives Matter, these individuals will ignore the meaning behind the name Antifa and suggest that Antifa is an organization meant to harm and terrorize right-wing or American causes. As such, many have conflated the two groups, with online posts referring to the harm caused to a person or place by "Antifa/BLM."

5. Almost exclusively because Black Lives Matter, as an organization, holds Marxist beliefs, occasionally making them the targets of moderate liberals when they dare question the status quo.

6. Before Derek Chauvin's conviction, the two most high-profile cases of police officers being convicted as a result of murdering a civilian involved a white woman who murdered a Black man and a Black Somali who killed a white woman. While police officer is a highly protected class in the United States, there are still some layers of complexity.

7. In order: the *King of the Hill* meme uses an image of Bobby Hill holding up a piece of paper that reads "Black lives matter" to a classroom full of children and Donald Trump, at which point the school principal responds "if those kids could read,

they'd be very upset;" A scene from *Friends* where Phoebe attempts to teach Joey how to say a sentence is exploited to have her trying to teach him to say Black lives matter with him responding all lives matter; a scene from the 2000s kids show *Rocket Power* is labelled "what people really mean when they say all lives matter" with a character stating "look at the bright side … it's not happening to me"; finally, images for "bootlicker" memes often incorporate highly sexualized images of men licking boots being worn by others.

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Candyman and the Afterlives of Slavery

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ABSTRACT

The near absence of the horror genre in Black Studies scholarship about the afterlives of slavery can be attributed to the fact that scholars are discussing the "afterlives" of slavery in a non-mystical way while the horror genre traditionally presents "afterlives" in supernatural forms. While these connotations of afterlives certainly mean different things, they converge in *Candyman* demonstrating the potential harmony between the two uses of the term. In this paper, I place both versions of *Candyman* in conversation with recent Black Studies scholarship as well as national discourses about racial inequality and white violence in order to argue for *Candyman*'s relevance to contemporary debates about slavery and its afterlives as a conceptual framework. In addition, I zero in on the 2021 remake to demonstrate how Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) clarifies the legend's relationship to the afterlives of slavery and operates as a corrective to Bernard Rose's 1992 film. The intersection of the supernatural afterlife and the afterlives of slavery as understood by Black Studies scholars comes forth in DaCosta's sequel that centralizes the operations of white supremacy and resulting Black trauma.

Keywords: Black horror, afterlives of slavery, lynching

Candyman y el más allá de la esclavitud

RESUMEN

La casi ausencia del género de terror en la erudición de Black Studies sobre las vidas posteriores a la esclavitud se puede

atribuir al hecho de que los académicos están discutiendo las "vidas posteriores" de la esclavitud de una manera no mística, mientras que el género de terror tradicionalmente presenta "vidas posteriores" en formas sobrenaturales. Si bien estas connotaciones de vidas posteriores ciertamente significan cosas diferentes, convergen en Candyman, lo que demuestra la armonía potencial entre los dos usos del término. En este artículo, coloco ambas versiones de Candyman en conversación con estudios académicos afroamericanos recientes, así como con discursos nacionales sobre la desigualdad racial y la violencia blanca, para defender la relevancia de Candyman en los debates contemporáneos sobre la esclavitud y sus vidas futuras como marco conceptual. Además, me concentro en la nueva versión de 2021 para demostrar cómo Candyman (2021) de Nia DaCosta aclara la relación de la leyenda con el más allá de la esclavitud y funciona como un correctivo para la película de 1992 de Bernard Rose. La intersección del más allá sobrenatural y el más allá de la esclavitud tal como lo entienden los estudiosos de Black Studies surge en la secuela de DaCosta que centraliza las operaciones de la supremacía blanca y el trauma negro resultante.

Palabras clave: horror negro, ultratumba de la esclavitud, linchamiento

标题：《糖果人》与奴隶制的来世

摘要

关于黑色恐怖的黑人研究学术几乎从未关注过奴隶制的来世，这可能归因于一个事实，即学者以非神秘的方式讨论奴隶制的"来世"，而恐怖片一般以超自然的方式呈现"来世"。虽然来世的这些含义显然意味着不同的事物，但《糖果人》将这些不同事物汇聚在一起，证明了该术语的两种用法之间的

潜在和谐。本文中，我将两个版本的《糖果人》与近期黑人研究以及有关种族不平等和白人暴力的国家话语进行了分析，以论证《糖果人》（作为一项概念框架）与关于奴隶制及其来世的当代辩论的相关性。此外，我聚焦于2021年的翻拍版，以证明尼娅·达科斯塔(Nia DaCosta)导演的《糖果人》(2021)如何阐明了传说与奴隶制来世的关系，并对伯纳德·罗斯(Bernard Rose)导演的1992年《糖果人》进行了修正。按照黑人研究学者的理解，超自然来世和奴隶制来世的交叉出现在达科斯塔的《糖果人》中，后者聚焦于白人至上的一系列操作和由此产生的黑人创伤。

关键词：黑色恐怖，奴隶制的来世，私刑

BLACK STUDIES AND HORROR

White fears of Black people and African diasporic religions have been overrepresented in horror films since the very beginning of the genre's conception. But what about Black fear? Where are those narratives and where is their validation? And given the history of racial violence and oppression in the United States, who should really be afraid of whom? Even in the twenty-first century, a looming danger characterizes the Black experience in the U.S. where on any given day, Black people are prone to being racially attacked. This vulnerability is also a characteristic of the horror genre. The protagonist of a horror film remains on edge, uncertain about their fate and their capability to defeat the monster. In the horror film of American history, that monster is racism, which creates an atmosphere of ter-

ror for Black people who are steeped in fear. It would appear then that the horror film would be an effective form of Black representation, but the genre's history of racial stereotyping has long prevented horror from being thought of as a viable vehicle through which to engage with issues of racism in a way that actually disrupts the operations of white supremacy. The situation changed when Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) kick-started new Black horror, a critical contribution to Black popular culture that has allowed Black writers and producers to look back at oppressive texts by creating their own distinct horror tradition. This new and burgeoning genre, which includes films such as Gerard Bush's *Antebellum* (2020) as well as television series such as Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* (2020), indicates a need for a theoretical foundation for new Black horror that can fully grasp its critical intervention. In particular, Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021), a sequel to Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992), intervenes in horror discourses, representing white terror as a real and legitimate trauma for Black Americans on the big screen.

The new Black horror aesthetic offers insight into the way in which whiteness appears in the Black imagination and how Black people experience racial fear in the midst of white terror. These frameworks operate as a form of resistance by inverting white hegemonic tropes and allowing the Black perspective to be heard in a space where it was previously silenced. DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) achieves this aim by reversing the gaze in Rose's original film and retelling the story through a Black lens that brings the legend to its fullest potential as a Black studies framework. While audiences might be tempted to see DaCosta's *Candyman*, and Black horror more generally, as mere entertainment, this film engages in serious theoretical work. The film offers modes of understanding the "afterlives" of slavery, which Saidiya Hartman defined in *Lose*

Your Mother (2008) as "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (47). By referring to traces of chattel slavery in contemporary society as "afterlives," Hartman elucidates the uncanny and supernatural nature of the ongoing cycle of racialized violence and oppression. Akin to zombies or ghosts and other forms of the undead, slavery reincarnates in the present, taking on a different form. DaCosta's *Candyman* becomes the perfect metaphor for this fundamental concept in Black studies: the film evokes the historical pattern of white violence in the form of a ghost story that draws a direct line between white violence in the past and present. Moreover, it visualizes the deep-seated pain that this history has left, literally haunting a Black community.

The horror genre's historical omission, marginalization, and caricaturing of Blackness has caused Black studies scholars to overlook horror as a critical terrain of scholarship, even though the language of horror often appears in their work. "Haunting," "monstrous," "afterlives," and "horrors" are keywords that echo within recent Black studies scholarship, increasingly so in the last decade. Notably, Saidiya Hartman, M. NourbeSe Phillip, and Christina Sharpe have all used these terms to describe modern versions of slavery that maintain the tradition of exploiting and persecuting Black Americans.[1] These terms also function as primary characteristics of the horror genre, and yet the horror genre rarely appears in these academic discourses about the hauntings, afterlives, monstrosities, and horrors of slavery. Put simply, Black studies scholars are clearly using the same language as the horror genre to theorize how past racial violence reappears in the

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1   These keywords appear in Saidiya Hartman's *Lose Your Mother* (2008), Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake* (2016) and *Monstrous Intimacies* (2010), and M. NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* (2008).

present, but hardly ever engaging with horror films, due to the genre's infamous reputation.

Many Black studies scholars would agree that Black characters have primarily appeared as props, primitive natives, obsequious servants, seducers, and charmers, and as monsters in and of themselves. Robin R. Means Coleman's foundational work *Horror Noire* (2011) surveys stereotypical representations of Black people that permeated American horror films throughout the twentieth century. Peele's *Get Out* inspired scholars and Black artists alike to revisit Coleman's book, which was turned into a documentary directed by Xavier Burgin in 2019. In the documentary, Black writers, film producers, and actors/actresses express their frustrations with the horror genre and discuss the peculiar evolution of Black casting in film. Before the 1930s, Black roles were played by white actors in blackface, such as Gus from D.W. Griffith's infamous film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), which Coleman and film historian Tananarive Due regard as a horror film for Black viewers.[2] Then, as filmmaker Monica Suriyage explains in Burgin's film, monsters and aliens began to function as "stand-ins" for Black people. Cultural theorist Mark H. Harris also appears in the documentary and explains that when Black people actually began to appear in horror films, they were limited to a few roles including "quiet servant," "tribesmen," or "comedic buffoon." Therefore, from the very beginning of the horror genre, Black characters were either absent, marginalized, or dehumanized through ridiculing stereotypes and monstrous

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2   Griffith's *Birth* popularized the Black Buck, which Donald Bogle, one of the earliest scholars on images of African Americans in film, explains was a racist caricature in the post-Reconstruction era that painted Black men as strong, unruly, and violent creatures with a sexual appetite for white women. According to Bogle and Wil Haygood, who also specializes in Black cinematic history, the infamous film reinstated the Ku Klux Klan.

representations, and this pattern continued well into the early 2000s.[3]

The monsterization of Black people in American popular culture played a major part in keeping representations of Black people as subhuman alive in the national frame of mind. Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992) is no exception. Although seemingly progressive for the time period, Rose's film still proved problematic by perpetuating the Black male rapist myth, executing its vilified Black antagonist, and generally failing to offer a sustained critique of white liberalism. Like the mirror in *Candyman* (1992), cinema in the twentieth century often reflected the terror of whiteness that was projected onto Black characters, similarly to the way white lynch mobs projected monstrosity onto their Black victims before executing them. When white film producers attempt to interrogate whiteness, the films tend to merely reformulate the structures and values of white supremacy. This is why Jordan Peele's contributions to the horror genre, and his decision to participate as a writer for Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021), are so significant. The reboot was necessary given the original film's failure to address issues of race head on. Rose's decision in the original film to make the story less overtly about racism and America's dark history likely stemmed from a reluctance to offend a largely white audience and/or the brewing racial tensions at the time that some feared could evolve into civil unrest.[4] Cinema was still a white-dominated industry in the

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3   For more on this topic, see Coleman's *Horror Noire* (2011), Wil Haygood's *Colorization* (2021), Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, & Bucks* (2001), and Anna Fahraeus's "Historicising Racialised Objects of Horror" (2011).

4   Apparently, "Rose struggled to calm studio anxiety that a black horror villain might stoke racial tensions," and one of the camera trucks was actually struck by a bullet during the filming of *Candyman* (1992) (Dalton).

1990s with even Black-casted films such as Sig Shores's *The Return of Superfly* (1990) being supervised, if not altogether directed, by white filmmakers and screenwriters. Now, in the twenty-first century, Black artists have found themselves less restricted in their portrayals of race. The rise of the Black Lives Matter movement seemingly allowed the new Black horror genre to be born, as the movement encouraged open and honest conversations about race in America. DaCosta and Peele's remake, released in August 2021, targets a largely Black audience, although some critics have noted that the film also caters to non-Black audiences by simplifying complex ideas about race and centuries of exploitation.[5] In contrast to Rose's *Candyman*, DaCosta's *Candyman* directly and explicitly critiques gentrification, Black trauma, and the temporality of white violence. By doing so, the film operates as a form of alternative education for white viewers while validating the experiences of Black people and allowing Black viewers to see their stories and their truths represented in the theater.

DaCosta's *Candyman* is a direct sequel to Rose's *Candyman*. Since the original film's references to issues of race are confined to the margins, a close reading of Rose's film is required in order to draw out the film's subtle engagements with the history of racism. *Candyman* 1992's most valuable element as it relates to Black studies is its nuanced portrayals of how the history of slavery continues to haunt the present. Although *Candyman* (1992) may not have been completely successful at tackling issues of Blackness, it offers an interesting case in point about the compatibility between the idea of the afterlives of slavery explored by Black studies scholars and the supernatural forms of afterlife more commonly associated with the horror genre. Nia DaCosta's *Candyman*

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5   For more on this topic, see Roshanian, Arya. "*Candyman* Is Pretty Scary, but Who Is Its Audience?"

(2021) reifies the legend's relationship to the afterlives of slavery and operates as a corrective to the original film. The intersection of the supernatural afterlife and the afterlives of slavery as understood by Black studies truly comes forth in this sequel, which centralizes the operations of white supremacy and Black trauma resulting from racial violence in the past and present. New Black horror films like *Candyman* (2021) signify that the genre is now being mobilized against its own oppressive history, and analyzing these new films can bring them into conversation with Black studies literature on haunting and the supernatural. The legend of Candyman has become an integral horror motif in Black popular culture that embodies the afterlives of slavery as conceptualized by scholars like Hartman. While "afterlife" in the supernatural sense and "afterlife" in Hartman's theoretical sense have different implications, they converge in both versions of *Candyman*. The intersection of these two theoretical terrains, where the supernatural afterlife converges with the historical/sociopolitical afterlives of slavery, inspires a more complex conversation about recent Black studies scholarship, and *Candymans'* (1992/2021) relevance to contemporary debates about slavery, its afterlives, and the enduring legacy of lynching. While horror films have long been studied in terms of how they are racially oppressive, the critical potential of new Black horror to disrupt racism has yet to be theorized. Revisiting *Candyman* (1992/2021) can illuminate where the horror genre and Black studies intersect, the uncanny nature of the afterlives of slavery, and contemporary discourses about America's historical pattern of white violence.

THE LEGEND OF CANDYMAN

Bernard Rose's *Candyman* (1992) follows Helen Lyle and her partner Bernadette, two graduate students majoring in

anthropology at the University of Illinois, as they seek to demystify the legend of Candyman. Helen, a liberal white woman, voyages through Cabrini-Green, a Chicago public housing project, determined to prove that Candyman is nothing more than a fictitious folktale used as a coping mechanism by the Black community. Candyman, as narrated by a British professor by the name of Philip Purcell, was the son of a slave in the 1890s who was well educated, grew up in "polite society," and happened to be a talented artist (00:30:10). Disaster strikes when Candyman (formerly known as Daniel Robitaille) impregnates the daughter of a wealthy landowner who hired him to capture his daughter's "virginal beauty" (00:30:50). In pursuit of revenge, the father hired "a pack of brutal hooligans" who sawed off Candyman's right hand with a "rusty blade," smeared honey over his naked body before summoning bees to sting him to death, burnt his body on a "giant pyre," and "scattered his ashes over Cabrini-Green" (00:31:33-00:32:15). Candyman, however, does not completely die; he continues to live on as a haunting spirit that sheds "innocent blood" when someone calls his name five times in the mirror, and through a gang leader, who adopts the name Candyman and commits murders and various other crimes in Cabrini-Green (00:45:40). In more ways than one, Candyman continues to reside in Cabrini-Green even though his body has been physically destroyed. He sustains his legacy through a grotesque form of seeking justice that involves killing people who do not believe he existed and who make a mockery of his brutal death.

Nia DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) centers on visual artist Anthony McCoy and his cohabiting girlfriend, art gallery director Brianna Cartwright, as they unravel the legend of Candyman from a Black contemporary viewpoint. Anthony, who is tasked with creating a new art piece for an upcoming

show, turns to Cabrini-Green and the legend of Candyman as his source of inspiration. William Burke, a native of Cabrini-Green, helps Anthony with his investigation by recounting the story of Candyman and its history of violence, which he witnessed as a child. Anthony is enchanted by the legend, and through his art, he attempts to come to terms with all of the cruel injustices that the legend represents. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Anthony is the baby boy that Candyman kidnapped in the original film.[6] William becomes a conduit for Candyman and abducts Anthony in a rather cynical attempt to stop the cycle of gentrification in Cabrini-Green by appointing a new Candyman through a ghastly ritual. Brianna attempts to rescue Anthony, only for him to be prematurely shot down by white police officers who attempt to detain and frame her. Anthony's spirit slaughters the officers as retribution, and he becomes the fifth Candyman, carrying on the centuries-old tradition.

THE HORRORS OF GENTRIFICATION

By choosing to set *Candyman* in Cabrini-Green, a Black Chicagoan neighborhood that has a long history of segregation, poverty, and gentrification, Rose and DaCosta connect horror with the historical terror Black Chicagoans experienced via housing projects. Gentrification—the forced removal and relocation of Black bodies in the interest of white profit—is yet another contemporary manifestation of the legacies of slavery. As Christina Sharpe proclaims, it is an "injury" of the "ethnographic gaze" that is "practice[d] across time and [in] administrative process[es]" along with "segregation, lynching, touristic display, ethnographic display, incarceration, vigilantism" and other "conditions of slavery" (*In the*

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6   Anthony also finds out that he was born in Cabrini-Green, not Brownsville, as his mother told him.

Wake, 44). In other words, the gaze on Black bodies informs all these practices of white supremacy throughout American history, and they confirm that the racial hierarchy is still being enforced centuries after its implementation. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century forms of white violence like the institution of slavery and lynching merely evolved over time, manifesting in different forms of racial oppression that continue to execute Black people today. For this reason, gentrification and other housing-related government intrusions on the Black community cannot fully be considered without taking transatlantic slavery into account. To quote from Jesse A. Goldberg, "separating the two events from each other via a strict periodization that contains the past as discrete from the present ignores the hauntology of circum-Atlantic memory that continues to exert force on the present" (116). Candyman, a lynching victim whose raging spirit continues to haunt Cabrini-Green, represents the "hauntology" of transatlantic slavery that ruptures the present and similarly wreaks havoc on the Black community.

The *Candyman* films draw a correlation between the history of lynching and the housing projects, demonstrating the pattern of white violence that has been used against Black people throughout American history to maintain white dominance. This correlation has even been verified by lynching research scholars such as Robert DeFina and Lance Hannon, who concluded that modern housing segregation served to restore southern lynching as they both have the objective of maintaining the racial caste system by "remind[ing] blacks of their inferior status" and "prevent[ing] the use of their newly acquired freedoms" (168). Ultimately, lynching and housing segregation both served as control mechanisms over Black Americans to prevent their upward mobility, and both versions of *Candyman* suggest that lynching is a necessary

starting point in any discourse about the conditions of Black life in post-emancipation America. After all, it is through the legend of Candyman that viewers are able to piece together the relationship between the reincarnation of lynching victim Daniel Robitaille and the reincarnations of slavery that simultaneously keep Black residents in Cabrini Green terror-stricken and impoverished. Early on in *Candyman* (2021), Anthony McCoy and Brianna Cartwright briefly narrate the bleak history of gentrification and racial oppression in Chicago.[7] Brianna remarks, "white people built the ghetto and then erased it when they realized they built the ghetto" (00:08:30). From the segregation line that denied Black Chicagoans the ability to move outside of Cabrini-Green to the gentrification of the community that they came to call home, white rule persevered, carrying into the present the logic of slavery that gave white people the right to lay claims to any land they desired and to exploit Black people for their own gain. The imagery in *Candyman* (1992) refers to this history of gentrification. The swarm of bees, symbolic of Daniel Robitaille's death, that scatter across the city in the film comes to represent the spreading of the remains of slavery that plague Chicago via segregation and racial inequality.

BLACK CHICAGOANS AND POLICING

Candyman (1992/2021) also depicts the anti-Black climate that Christina Sharpe calls the "weather," through Black characters' futile interactions with law enforcement (102). The "weather," as defined by Sharpe, encapsulates the devaluation of Black life and the normativity of Black death that plagues American society as part of the legacy of slavery. In the orig-

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7   This history is outlined in greater detail in Aaron Modica's article about Cabrini Green, and Ronit Bezalel's documentary *70 Acres in Chicago* (2014).

inal *Candyman* (1992), Anne Marie McCoy, neighbor of victim Ruthie Jean, emphasizes that the police were called two times but did not attend to Ruthie Jean: "I heard her screaming … I dialed 911 [but] nobody came" (00:28:25). The failure of the police to take her concern seriously and come to her aid raises the issue of racial disparities in police deployment. A study conducted by the American Civil Liberties Union of Illinois concluded that African American neighborhoods experience significantly longer wait times after an emergency call (if a police officer is dispatched at all) in comparison to predominantly white neighborhoods.[8] Consequently, Black Chicagoans are made more vulnerable to attack as they cannot rely on the police to respond when they need help and protection.[9]

Even Helen recognizes Chicago's prioritization of white life over Black life when she is beaten by a gang member in the course of her search for Candyman. After she identifies her assailant, who goes by the name of Candyman, at the police station, she inquires about Ruthie Jean and the little boy who was castrated, and she learns that the police department did very little to detain the well-known gang leader before her incident with him.[10] Castration was a common feature of

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8   For example, in Grand Crossing, a minority district, the dispatch time was 4.5 times longer than Jefferson Park, a predominately white district.

9   This data suggests that many Black Chicagoans have been abandoned by the police. Racial biases, like the superpredator myth and the stigmas around public housing developments that characterize these residents as dangerous criminals, likely play a part in this negligence. According to the EJI, the superpredator was characterized as "radically impulsive, brutally remorseless," "elementary school youngsters who pack guns instead of lunches" and "have absolutely no respect for human life." For more on this, see "The Superpredator Myth, 25 Years Later."

10   In the film, a young Black boy by the name of Jake says he can show Helen where Candyman is, so she follows him only to find that the Candyman Jake was referring to is actually a gang member who then proceeds

lynching; a manifestation of anxieties about Black sexuality, including the supposed sexual prowess of Black men.[11] As such, the castrated Black boy evokes the lynching of the real Candyman, Daniel Robitaille, calling attention to the ongoing destruction of Black bodies. Upon her return, Helen protests, "two people get brutally murdered and no one does anything, a white woman gets knocked down and they shut the whole place down" (00:43:05). By comparing herself getting "knocked down" to two Black people getting "brutally murdered," Helen highlights the privileges of white womanhood, and the vast disparity between the level of effort authorities put into cases involving Black versus white residents. This element of the film again comments on a ramification of slavery, one that has been validated by a year-long investigation conducted by The Trace and BuzzFeed News.[12] Law enforcement's lack of willingness or eagerness to go after the murderers of Black people in the United States results in more deaths, and conveys the message that Black Americans are not protected by the law and their lives are disposable. It is the logic of slavery, the apathy for Black lives, that seeps into the present through state failures to come to the aid of suffering Black Americans. *Candyman* (1992) condemns these failures and highlights the fear they engender in Black Chicagoans who are susceptible to attack and have no recourse.

DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) extends this ongoing conversation by demonstrating how Black Americans are not only

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to beat her.

11 For more on this topic, see Tommy J. Curry's *The Man-Not* (2017).

12 The study extracted data from twenty-two major cities in the United States between 2013 and 2016, and it found that when "a black or Hispanic person is fatally shot, the likelihood that local detectives will catch the culprit is 35% — 18 percentage points fewer than when the victim is white," and for gun assaults, "the arrest rate is 21% if the victim is black or Hispanic, versus 37% for white victims" (Ryley).

abandoned by law enforcement, but how law enforcement transforms into an even more threatening culprit than the originally perceived danger. At the end of the film, the police officers prematurely shoot Anthony to death and then threaten Breanna to force her to cooperate with their fabricated story. The scene alludes to a long history of police brutality in Black communities where officers too often adopt a "shoot first then ask" mentality and utilize extreme violence in situations where it is clearly unwarranted. The tragic deaths of Rodney King, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner are just a few high-profile examples of this pattern of injustice. The title of Anthony's painting, *Say My Name*, pays homage to these victims of police brutality, clearly evoking the Black Lives Matter movement. In several of these cases, police officers in question avoided prosecution, which has created a divide and lack of trust between them and the communities they take an oath to serve and protect.[13] This hostile relationship appears inevitable when viewed in light of the origins of law enforcement; racist policing is rooted in a much longer history of racial subjugation. DaCosta's *Candyman* (2021) explores this succession by drawing a direct line from lynching in the 1800s to police brutality in the present.

Several Black studies scholars have examined lynching, police brutality, and mass incarceration as continued chattel slavery. In *The Racial Contract* (1997), Charles W. Mills argues that the nonconsensual Racial Contract is enforced via violence, and when lynch mobs were outlawed, "the state, then-the police, the penal system, the army" became the new "enforcers" (84). In other words, the abolishment of slavery (and later Jim Crow laws) did not nullify the racial contract—lynch

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13 For example, in *State of Florida v. George Zimmerman*, and *State of Missouri v. Darren Wilson*, the defendants were either acquitted or not even charged.

mobs took on the role of slave holders, then law enforcement took on the role of slave patrols, each group working to keep nonwhite people subjugated by detecting and destroying challengers to the old racial order. In *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), Michelle Alexander similarly argues that the racial hierarchy did not die with slavery or Jim Crow, and proponents of the racial hierarchy from each generation actively found new ways to maintain the old racial order. Alexander maps the eerie parallels between slavery, Jim Crow, and mass incarceration, demonstrating how the racial caste system is redesigned over time, merely adapting to changes in the social and political system. DaCosta's *Candyman* also argues that modern day police brutality is a descendent of lynching and other historical forms of white violence and racial oppression but does so through the form of a ghost story. It shows why ideas about the undead in the horror genre work so well to explore how America's past operates in the present—it is a way of articulating the literal reappearance of someone or something that is presumed to have perished—in this case slavery—in different forms here and now. This is brilliantly visualized in the puppetry at the end of the film where the original story of lynching victim Daniel Robitaille is told as a point of origin for the police brutality victims that followed, including, but certainly not limited to, Sherman Fields, who is shown being brutally and wrongfully killed by officers in a flashback early on in the film, and Anthony McCoy. In accordance with the logic of Mills's *Racial Contract*, the lynch mob in the original *Candyman* is merely replaced by police officers in the new *Candyman*. The puppet show suggests that the custom of lynching has an ever-present influence on race relations and engendered later forms of racial violence. The direct lineage between these victims in *Candyman* (2021) personifies the

afterlives of slavery and brings awareness to the influence the legacy of slavery has on modern-day law enforcement.

Both versions of *Candyman* portray the profound impact inequitable policing and police brutality have on the Black family. In *Candyman* (1992), Anne laments, "I'm scared … scared for my child … they ain't never going to get him … Candyman" (00:28:25). Anne is depicted as fending for herself, a Black single mother in a destitute and crime-ridden apartment building where she is not offered any comfort or security. Not only must Anne fear the gun violence in her community, but she must also face the failure of the state to help protect her and her child, one of the most basic promises of the constitution. As Christina Sharpe asks, "what kind of mother/ing is it if one must always be prepared with the knowledge of the possibility of the violent and quotidian death of one's child?" (78). The lack of autonomy Black parents have over their Black children and their inability to protect them in a precarious white world is an afterlife of slavery that can turn mothering into a horror film. In a nation where Skittles and toys are mistaken for weapons, and hashtags memorializing Black youth killed by the police abound, Black mothers like Anne live in perpetual fear for the safety of their Black children who are not allowed to be children.[14] To Sharpe's point, this denies Black mothers and Black children the joy and innocence that typically come with motherhood and childhood respectively, and inequitable policing only serves to exacerbate this condition of Black life post-emancipation.

DaCosta's *Candyman* furthers this discourse by making the adultification of Black children a focal point in the film.[15]

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14 Trayvon Martin was carrying Skittles, and 12-year-old Tamir Rice was carrying a toy gun when he was killed.

15 For more on adultification, see Phillip Goff's "Black Boys Viewed as

In the opening scene of the film, young William Burke acts out a police brutality scene through puppetry before he is called by his mother to do his laundry, which requires him to go to the building next door. William's acting game underscores that he has already been conditioned to fear the police, and it foreshadows the horror that is to come when his fear is validated. The officers in William's puppetry symbolize the officers in real life that terrorize Black residents in Cabrini-Green. On his way to the laundry room, William indeed walks past two white police officers who are looking for Candyman (00:02:45). Moments after doing a load of laundry, a chore that further emphasizes his adultification and the regularity of white terror, William witnesses the brutal beating and killing of Sherman Fields, a traumatic memory of his childhood that stays with him forever. Young William is filled with fear, fear of what they could do to him in that moment and fear of what they could do to him when he gets older and grows into a Black man like Candyman. Early on, Black children like William are made intimately aware of the monster of racism that is constantly out to get them. The irony is that Black children are not allowed to be children because they must tread through the white world carefully so as to avoid the monster of racism that threatens their lives, while also being conscious of the way they are monsterized through adultification, even though they are clearly the victims in these horror stories.

ACADEMIA AND THE ART WORLD

The "weather" can also be seen through *Candyman's* (1992/2021) depiction of academia and the art world, both of which have contributed to racial oppression. In *Candyman* (1992), Helen, a white liberal academic, is dedicated to writ-

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Older, Less Innocent than Whites, Research Finds."

ing a thesis about how "an entire community starts attributing the daily horrors of their lives to a *mythical* figure" (00:17:41, emphasis mine). Her ethnographic gaze prevents her from recognizing what the "mythical" figure of Candyman represents, which is the trauma of lynching and other forms of racial violence that continue to resurface in Cabrini-Green. What she does not understand is that the Black community is not "attributing the daily horrors of their lives to a mythical figure," but to a real event—slavery. As Laura Wyrick similarly observes, Helen is blind to the fact that Candyman's "slave ancestry and death by a lynch mob" directly connects to the "social and economic disenfranchisement of Cabrini-Green's current residents. The 'daily horrors' suffered by these residents are thus inextricably tied to the past horrors of slavery and racialized violence" (103). Cabrini-Green, isolated and poverty stricken, is haunted by the legacy of slavery and the systems of inequality that slavery produced. By not believing in Candyman, Helen denies the history of slavery and American racism necessitating his return. As Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren explain, by way of haunting, a ghost "demands justice, or at least a response" (9). Thus, moments after she receives news about growing interest from a publisher, Candyman finally appears and says to her "you doubted me … you were not content with the stories, so I was obliged to come" (00:45:50). After Helen is imprisoned and accused of murder, he continues "your disbelief destroyed the faith of my congregation … now I must kill you" (00:46:30). Candyman "demands" a "response" from Helen and obstructs the publication of Helen's work because it poses a threat to Candyman's legacy and very existence. By publishing a dissertation that dispels the "myth" of Candyman, Helen would be invalidating Candyman and the hauntings of slavery that so clearly pervade the North Side of Chicago.

Moreover, Helen would be appropriating an "urban legend" that does not belong to her or the university. As a white, middle-class woman, she and Professor Purcell, a white British man, are far removed from these stories, and by way of the ethnographic gaze, impose more violence on the Black people who are at the center. Anne Marie McCoy expresses these qualms in *Candyman* (1992) when she asks Helen regarding her study), "what you gone say … that we're bad … we steal … we gang bang … we all on drugs?" (00:26:30). Anne is aware of the stereotypical narratives about Black people that have historically been produced and perpetuated by academia and related institutions such as archives. In the article "Venus in Two Acts," Saidiya Hartman grapples with the obstacles presented by archives because of their tendency to either misconstrue and disfigure Black subjects or dehumanize them further by their very absence. Hartman points out that sources featuring Black people are often "not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses" (Hartman 2). When Helen tells Anne that she is doing a "study," these are the kinds of reports that come to her mind and arouse apprehension. Candyman, as a narrative, is subject to the same sort of abuse Hartman finds inflicted on Black subjects in the archives. Arguably, Rose's film is an example of white writers narrating stories about Black figures and Black pain in problematic ways that perpetuate cycles of white violence and exploitation. As previously mentioned, the film perpetuates the Black male rapist myth, which had deadly consequences for Black men during the lynching era.[16] In addition, while characters in the

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16 It does this by depicting Candyman as lusting after Helen and desiring her to be his "victim," as in, subject to his will (00:46:30). In a scene similar to Gus's pursuit of Flora in *Griffith*'s *Birth*, Helen is seen standing over a bridge, seemingly contemplating suicide rather than be joined

film question whether Candyman is real, they do not inquire about his character, beliefs, or everyday life. In fact, the only humanizing depiction of Candyman lies in his lair, where a painting of him as the educated, polite, and talented artist that he was before the horrific deed committed against him is imprinted on the wall.

In DaCosta's *Candyman*, white art critics take the place of academics, similarly seeking to profit from stories that are not only not about them, but that are constructed out of the violence that their ancestors have historically inflicted upon Black Americans. Art dealer Clive Privler pushes Anthony to "dig into that history of yours, dude," as in Black history, and when Anthony shares that he is from Brownsville, a middle- to upper-class neighborhood, Clive dismisses the "South Side" as "played" and encourages him instead to look into Cabrini-Green, as an abandoned, impoverished neighborhood in Chicago with a dismal history of white violence and gentrification (00:13:45). Despite Clive's initial question of "who are you, man," he displays very little interest in knowing who Anthony actually is, relying instead on stereotypes about Black people to characterize and judge him, and dismissing Anthony's "hometown" in favor of appropriating the history and culture of the projects (00:12:55). Chicago's renowned Finley Stephens is no different—she chastises Anthony during an art show, calling his piece clichéd. The word "cliché" has a particular connotation, echoing the idea of the art world's preoccupation with the newest trend. Finley goes so far as to accuse Anthony and other Black artists like him as being "the real pioneers of that cycle" of violence

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with Candyman. In the background, Candyman says, "all you have left is my desire for you," which once again paints him as a sexual predator and Helen as the prey whose white femininity needs to be protected (01:18:20).

and "descend[ing] upon disenfranchised neighborhoods" so that they can profit (00:27:14). Finley clearly represents white liberals who refuse to see their own participation in Black oppression. She unsympathetically claims that the subject of racial violence and the gentrification cycle has been exhausted, repeating the post-racial myth that denies slavery's reincarnation in the present. The label beside Anthony's piece explains that "the mirrored doors coldly reflect the viewer's gaze, while indicting the desire to 'open' a work," and it becomes clear that art critics like Finley and Clive impose their white gaze onto Black artists and fail to truly look inside them (00:26:00).

In the film, even Black curators are guilty of capitalizing on Black trauma and pain. Brianna Cartwright is unsettled when Danielle Harrington, a Black female museum curator, suggests "between these tragedies and your father's legacy [an artist who committed suicide], you've got a fascinating story" (01:02:05). This invites the question of whether or not the film is engaging in its own self-critique by acknowledging the fine line between art that thoughtfully and sensitively depicts Black pain in order to confront and expose white racism, and "Black trauma porn" that seems to indulge in excessive violence with little purpose beyond mere entertainment (Okundaye). This has become a criticism of some new Black horror productions such as Lena Waithe's series *Them* (2021).[17] Although DaCosta's *Candyman* focuses on art, the same critique of white appropriation of Black culture and pain can be applied to cinema and television. In art and motion pictures, there remains a history of misrepresentation and dissonance between how white America sees Black people and how Black people see themselves, which creates

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17 For more on this topic, see Jason Okundaye's "'Black Trauma Porn': *Them* and the Danger of Jordan Peele Imitators."

racial tension. The gaze inherent in these visual arts can create a power dynamic between the viewer and the subject, and they are also both very commercialized institutions in American culture. This means that when these forms of representation are used to address issues of race, Black stories can still be vulnerable to exploitation. DaCosta's narrative reflects on this pattern and deliberately works to subvert it.

THE AFTERLIVES OF SLAVERY

Ghosts and other forms of the undead can help to articulate the effects of the past on the present, the afterlives of slavery, because they are both real and ephemeral; they have literal effects on people and the physical world, but they do not follow the rules of physical time and space—they in fact traverse time and space. Candyman, the ghost that haunts each film, represents the afterlives of slavery that remain unburied because of the brutal history that caused them and also cause their constant resurrection. In Rose's film, the scattering of Candyman's ashes over Cabrini-Green symbolizes the planting of racial violence that would continue to grow in the soil of the land where such spectacles of horror took place. Anne Gardulski, professor of geology, reports that "because nutrients cycle through the ocean … the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today" (qtd. in C. Sharpe 40). The same concept applies to soil; research confirms that the blood, sweat, and tears from lynching victims can still be found in the soil of sites where Black people were lynched. Bryan Stevenson, who collects and preserves the soil from lynching sites in jars, maintains that "the soil in these jars represents the lives of countless Americans who never had a proper burial, who met unspeakably violent deaths for 'serious offenses,' like arguing with a white man" (Couric). Here,

Stevenson underscores the triviality of the so-called transgressions that precipitated lynching and the horrifying spectacles of violence that terrorized Black communities, whose memory continues to haunt future generations. Candyman represents all of the countless lynching victims who were denied funerary rights and whose families were denied the opportunity to commemorate their deceased relatives. According to Jenny Sharpe, "slaves believed that their earthly shadows lingered behind unless the appropriate burial rituals were performed" (xi). Following this train of thought, slavery and its sufferers continue to haunt because their bodies and their stories were never properly entombed, literally or metaphorically. In a manner that reflects this, Candyman is unable to rest because of the wickedness of his death and because of the failure to honor his life with a respectable funeral. He is also unable to rest because his death represents broader and historical societal violence that has yet to be entombed and continues to victimize Black men like himself. Candyman's ashes in the film are literal human remains, but they also conceptually represent historical trauma, as do the remains of Black ancestors in American soil and in the ocean, as described by Gardulski and Stevenson.

The attempt to redress such injustice is the intent of the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI), which is geared towards national healing through confrontation with the past. Stevenson, who is also the founder of the EJI, explains that "the law will [continue to] be insufficient to create justice if we don't also create a consciousness about our history and address the burden that so many Americans carry" (qtd. in Pilkington, n.p.). According to him, the instances of racial violence we see today are all symptoms of the same sickness that was created when lynching executors "made their little kids watch human beings be burned or drowned or beaten. That has created a

disease where we have become indifferent to the victimization of black people" (qtd. in Pilkington, n.p.). The violence of lynching and the violence of witnessing the lynching of Black bodies has conditioned many Americans from childhood to be immune to Black suffering and to perceive Black people as less than human. Even Americans who did not personally witness a lynching have been shaped by the il/logic of slavery, which allowed whites to mentally and physically dismember Blacks with unrelenting barbarism.

The consequences of lynching for both Black and white people that are passed from generation to generation through emotions and behavior is the exact kind of thing that the idea of a ghost like Candyman can represent—ghosts are ephemeral but also concrete. In the original film, the "weather" constituted by these consequences surfaces in the newspaper clippings of Ruthie Jean, where her slaughtered bloody body is pictured on the cover with "Life in the Projects" as the headline, in the police department's lack of commitment to finding the murderers of Black citizens, in Helen's careless intrusion into the bathroom where a Black woman died, and in the way the Candyman "myth" is narrated with laughter and amusement throughout the film.[18] By narrating Candyman with such humor, Purcell and other white characters downplay the real terror that was used against a rather outstanding Black man (and many others like him) whose education and stature could not safeguard him from white violence in the late 1800s. In DaCosta's *Candyman*, the lack of empathy for Black people is reflected in characters who remain insensitive to Brianna's as well as Anthony's trauma, wishing to commodify their pain by putting it on display in an art exhibition

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18 Namely by Professor Purcell, who laughs hysterically before and after narrating the horrific tale, and in the opening scene of the film where a young white woman jokingly recites the tale to her boyfriend.

or museum. Clive Privler seeks to appropriate the painful histories of Cabrini-Green; Finley Stephens seeks to appropriate the painful history of Candyman in conjunction with the deaths around Anthony's artwork; and Danielle Harrington, although Black herself, attempts to commodify the tragedy of Brianna's father, who committed suicide right in front of her when she was a child.

DaCosta's film centers on repressed and unresolved traumas that resurface when Candyman is summoned. Anthony's mother attempts to confine Candyman to the past and to safeguard her son by not revealing his connection to him. However, when Candyman is once again summoned, Anthony becomes possessed by the ghostly figure that continues to haunt because of his gruesome death and his unyielding desire for his subjects to remember all. Stevenson contends that in order to treat our nation's "disease," America will have to confront all of its destructive past, even the ugliest chapters. Candyman can be read as forcing a confrontation with history as viewers become participants in a film that, ultimately, is about a lynching sufferer whose soul continues to haunt Chicago. Soon-to-be victims look in the mirror and repeat his name five times as they gaze at their own reflections and await his appearance. The invocation of Candyman in the mirror is the calling forth of the ghost of slavery, who because of the violence of his death, inflicts more violence as he seeks to be remembered. As Hartman contends, "our lives and even those of the dead depend on such acts of remembrance" ("The Time," 758). American history shows that the act of forgetting does not erase the past nor does it help to alleviate its aftereffects. On the contrary, attempting to forget and repress the past only strengthens its influence on the present. In this way, the mirror in both versions of the film symbolizes the need for Americans to face their own reflections and their

own complicity in America's brutal past and the revival of the institution of slavery.

In "The Time of Slavery," Hartman addresses the consequences of dismissing the legacy of slavery when she says that "claims for redress based on this history and its enduring legacy are disqualified and belittled as ridiculous or unintelligible" (771). By refuting slavery's continued influence on the present, propositions to repair the resulting damages can be thwarted. Those who deny the continuing influence of slavery fail to recognize that its past "coexists with the present" and remains "active yet unseen" (J. Sharpe xii). This is powerfully demonstrated through Candyman, who remains invisible, but whose destruction remains vividly apparent and painfully clear. Candyman makes himself visible to the protagonists in each film to counter their disbelief, but since they are the only ones that can actually see him, they are presumed crazy, and in Rose's film, Helen is even accused of murder and confined to an insane asylum. In DaCosta's film, Candyman makes himself visible to Anthony to force him to confront an unknown part of his history, but Anthony similarly loses his mind as his art piece inspired by the legend becomes the thread in a series of unsolved deaths. The decision to make Candyman only visible to Helen, Anthony, and the audience is a compelling illustration of the way slavery's past functions: the slavery institution may not be physically with us today, just as Candyman is not always (if ever) physically present in each film, but the damage caused by its raging spirit is conspicuous.

To summarize, the legend of Candyman offers a conceptual framework that is useful for thinking through the operations of the afterlives of slavery. Through a Black specter, who carries multiple layers of symbolism, the central narrative of

Candyman sits at the intersection of the afterlives of slavery and the supernatural, which elucidates the otherworldly dimensions of Hartman's concept. As the EJI's lynching memorial suggests, the project of dismantling racial inequity is inextricably tied to the project of laying to rest the deceased, or as Toni Morrison would say, exorcising the ghosts of slavery, whose lives were violently robbed from them.[19] *Candyman* conveys a similar argument—Candyman *is* one of those ghosts, one that reincarnates in the 2021 film. Furthermore, in her remake, DaCosta maintains the fundamental components of the legend, but reworks the problematic elements of the original film. Most importantly, her sequel brings the legend of Candyman to its full potential by retelling the story through a Black male protagonist. As cultural critic Noah Berlatsky assesses, "sometimes a story has to circle a while before finding its perfect teller." In DaCosta's film, Candyman has finally found the right voice to say his name. The "right voice" for Candyman is a Black voice that steers clear of condemnation and stereotyping in its storytelling about Black trauma and white racism. While Briefel and Ngai once concluded from the original *Candyman* (1992) that "the horror film ultimately may be an inadequate vehicle for addressing the issues Candyman wants to address," DaCosta shows that horror films are actually pivotal vehicles when the stories are told from the Black perspective (90).

THE NEW *CANDYMAN* (2021)

DaCosta corrects problematic elements of the original *Candyman* in multiple ways, making the afterlives of slavery

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19 This idea is centered in her foundational novel *Beloved* originally published in 1987. Similar to Candyman, Beloved is killed as a ramification of slavery and her spirit comes back to haunt the living. At the end of the novel, Beloved is exorcised, and this frees Sethe and allows her to move forward.

real and visible in the cinematic world. One key factor is that DaCosta humanizes the Black male protagonist from Rose's film by clearly painting Candyman, and all the Candymen that came after him, as innocent victims of white terrorism. While the story of Daniel Robitaille, the "first" Candyman, remains the same, DaCosta extends his story by introducing a contemporary Candyman. Unlike Daniel Robitaille, this Candyman is not a lynching-by-rope victim; instead, he is an innocent victim of police brutality. The new Candyman, also known as Sherman Fields, is wrongfully accused of putting razor blades in candy and passing them out to children. The police respond to a young white girl's grievance by posting wanted signs for Cabrini-Green's Candyman, the assumed-to-be culprit. The young William Burke finds Candyman hiding in the walls of the laundry corridor of an apartment building, and—initially frightened—he screams, unintentionally disclosing Candyman's location. When the police sirens begin, William says that he saw the "true face of fear" emerge on Sherman (00:19:28). The fear in this scene is cleverly displaced; viewers might expect fear to be generated by the ominous Candyman, but that expectation quickly dissipates once William realizes Candyman is harmless, and Black fear of the police takes its place instead. The police officers become the source of horror in this opening scene, and William and Sherman's fear is validated. As William recounts, the officers "swapped" Sherman and "killed him right there on the spot" (00:20:10). The horrific and unjust manner in which Sherman is executed reflects the American history of police brutality that continues to lynch Black Americans. The officers take his life into their own hands without due diligence, let alone a trial for Sherman, who turns out to be innocent of the purported crime.

In DaCosta's *Candyman*, William recalls that Sherman's face

was "beaten so badly it was unrecognizable," clearly alluding to the lynching of Emmett Till.[20] Both Black male victims were wrongfully and brutally put to death on the unfounded grounds that they had offended a white girl/woman. This allusion evokes the fictitious rape charge that was used as an excuse to execute Black men. The mere thought of a Black man violating a white woman sent white men into lynching frenzies even though the actual act of rape was rarely proven. As Jonathan Markovitz explains, the rape charge was "valuable to lynchers because it covered up less honorable motivations for mob violence" like "securing white supremacy" (13). Sherman Fields and Emmett Till are successors of Candyman, and all three are victimized by the glorification of white womanhood. Throughout DaCosta's film, viewers are compelled to view all the Candymen, lynched by rope or lynched by way of police brutality, as inseparable, and this is perhaps the most important part of the film's adaption of the old legend. As previously established, police brutality is a descendant of earlier forms of white violence, such as lynching and slave patrolling, that have been used against Black people throughout the course of American history. Although the last recorded lynching in the United States was Michael Donald in 1981, lynching continues to manifest in contemporary forms of white on Black violence that maintain the tradition of exterminating Black Americans.[21] By casting Sherman, and later Anthony McCoy, who are both victims of police brutality, as Candymen, DaCosta's film calls viewers to reconsider Candyman not as an isolated incident, but as representative

20 Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old Black boy who was brutally murdered, beaten to the point that his face was no longer recognizable, after being accused of offending a white woman at a grocery store in Mississippi in 1955. For more on this topic, see Katie Nodjimbadem's "Emmett Till's Open Casket Funeral."

21 For more on this topic, see Neal Conan's "The 'Last Lynching.'"

of all Black men who have lost their lives to racist violence and the collective Black trauma that these killings have produced.

Candyman *is* the afterlives of slavery, the premature death, impoverishment, and in the words of Christina Sharpe, the "everyday mundane horrors that aren't acknowledged to be horrors" (*Monstrous Intimacies*, 3). As an adult, William Burke explains:

> Candyman ain't a he. Candyman's the whole damn hive. Samuel Evans, run down during the white housing riots of the '50s. William Bell, lynched in the '20s. But the first one, where it all began, the story of Daniel Robitaille … a story like that. Pain like that. Lasts forever. That's Candyman. (00:51:45)

The hive imagery evokes M. NourbeSe Phillip's work on the haunting of the slave ship Zong, which disrupts the living because of the holes in the archive that prevent us from properly burying the dead. It also reflects the collective Black trauma that continues to fester because of the continuation of racial violence. In William's line, Samuel Evans, which is seemingly a fictional name, represents countless Black men who were "run down" and killed during the white housing riots of the 1950s in Chicago. These riots were spearheaded by white supremacists wishing to deter Black Chicagoans from moving out of the increasingly overcrowded and destitute South Side, and into white neighborhoods. In particular, the Cicero riot of 1951 drew worldwide attention as a white mob (reminiscent of a lynch mob) of approximately four thousand white Chicagoans set fires to and destroyed an apartment building housing a single Black family. William Bell, an actual lynching victim in the real world, was a thirty-three-year-old mar-

ried man who had migrated to Chicago from Georgia when a racist mob crushed his skull with a baseball bat in 1924. Bell's brutal murder only recently received recognition as a result of the EJI lynching memorial. The planners for Bell's memorial reassured the public that they will not differentiate Bell's death from the others in the memorial even though he was not lynched by noose, as is typically assumed when the term lynching is used. This approach is in alignment with DaCosta's expanded concept of Candyman. At the end of the film, the original figure of Candyman rises, and then numerous figures of Candymen rise behind him, establishing the idea that Candyman represents an entire lineage of Black men who were victims of racial violence, lynched by noose or otherwise. The film's movement back and forth between film characters and real people emphasizes that the horrors that are presented, although wrapped within a ghost story, are meant to be taken literally and prompt serious critique of America's historical pattern of white terror.

In *Candyman* (2021), when William says that "Candyman is how we deal with the fact that these things happen … That they're still happening," he means that lynching and other forms of racialized killings are still happening all around them and that the Candyman legend is a form of displacement, one that allows the Black community to cope with the pain derived from Black death in the past and present (00:52:45). Although told as a ghost story, one initially disbelieved by Anthony and Brianna, the Candyman legend turns out to be real, and the pain from the lynching of Daniel Robitaille is reignited every time a Black man is wrongfully killed by law enforcement. This excruciating pain "lasts forever," impacting generations and generations of Black Americans. William's lamentation that "a story like that. Pain like that. Lasts forever" furthers the earlier point about the remnants

of slaves from the Middle Passage in the ocean and the rem-
nants of lynching victims in the soil today. The blood, tears,
and flesh of Black bodies literally "lasts forever" in the Earth
and metaphorically "lasts forever" in their constant resurrec-
tion through new Black bodies that are pulverized through
atrocious acts of violence that carry the same logic of slavery,
and in some ways even repeat the same methods of execu-
tion. The fact that Candyman is told as a ghost story clarifies
the relationship between the supernatural afterlife and the
afterlives of slavery. Slavery repeats, resurrects like a ghost
once assumed to be dead. Candyman is the ghost of slavery
that continues to reincarnate and haunt the Black commu-
nity through gentrification, mass incarceration, systemic and
structural racism, and ongoing white violence.

The legend of Candyman, when seen through the lens of ac-
ademic discourses around the afterlives of slavery and Amer-
ican lynching culture, opens up critical lines of inquiry that
relate to the intersection of the horror genre's depiction of
afterlives and that of Black studies. Black studies and the hor-
ror genre have a shared interest in the return of some sort of
monster—whether it be a serial killer, an evil spirit, or the
slavery system—horror films and Black studies scholarship
have both interrogated vicious cycles of brutality. DaCosta's
Candyman makes this connection explicit by amplifying the
ghost and using the supernatural to represent generations of
injustice. She also brings the central narrative of Rose's film
full circle and improves it by shifting perspectives, humaniz-
ing the Black male protagonist, avoiding white redemption,
and centering the afterlives of slavery. In these ways, DaCos-
ta's *Candyman* demonstrates that horror can be used to inflict
an "oppositional gaze," a term used by bell hooks to mean a
rebellious look or a look back at white oppressors who have
always been in possession of the gaze (115). The legend of

Candyman that Rose's film introduces is a powerful metaphor for the uncanny nature of cycles of racial oppression and Black trauma, but by telling the tale through a white female protagonist and a white filmmaker, its potential to do critical work was undermined. DaCosta reclaims Candyman and allows Black people the opportunity to take control over a narrative that was always, at its core, a horror story about Black death and Black pain. As Elizabeth Alexander has argued, a "white-authored national narrative deliberately contradicts the histories our [Black] bodies know" (80). Black-authored stories like DaCosta's *Candyman* grant Black people the power to control the narrative and tell their own stories, which liberate rather than traumatize the Black community. The genre of Black horror is a form of storytelling that powerfully demonstrates how the supernatural can operate as a key theoretical framework for the legacies of slavery and racial trauma.

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"I Had A Weird Dream:" *Atlanta* and Afro-Surrealism as Alternative Narrativization

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By Emily Scroggins

ABSTRACT

Characterized by a feeling of unease, weirdness, or outright absurdity, the television show *Atlanta* utilizes Afro-Surrealist storytelling to depict everyday experiences of minoritized individuals. By relying on the extraordinary, Afro-Surrealism emphasizes the unusualness of Black lives in the United States and highlights the limitations of narrative in representing the voices and stories of marginalized individuals. These limitations have pushed media makers to adopt alternative narratives for those who cannot identify with traditional televisual narratives.

Keywords: Television, Narrative, Afro-Surrealism, Alternative Storytelling

"Tuve un sueño extraño:" Atlanta y el afrosurrealismo como narrativa alternativa

RESUMEN

Caracterizado por una sensación de inquietud, rareza o absurdo absoluto, el programa de televisión Atlanta utiliza la narración afrosurrealista para representar las experiencias cotidianas de las personas minoritarias. Al basarse en lo extraordinario, el afrosurrealismo enfatiza lo inusual de la vida de los negros en los Estados Unidos y destaca las limitaciones de la narrativa para representar las voces y las historias de las

personas marginadas. Estas limitaciones han empujado a los creadores de medios a adoptar narrativas alternativas para aquellos que no pueden identificarse con las narrativas televisivas tradicionales.

Palabras clave: Televisión, Narrativa, Afro-Surrealismo, Narrativa Alternativa

文章标题："我做了一个奇怪的梦"：《亚特兰大》与作为另类叙事化的非洲超现实主义

摘要

电视节目《亚特兰大》以一种不安、怪异或彻头彻尾的荒谬感为特征，利用非洲超现实主义的叙事法来描述少数群体的日常经历。通过依靠非凡事物，非洲超现实主义强调了美国黑人生活的不寻常性，并强调了叙事在代表边缘化个体的言论和故事方面的局限性。这些限制促使媒体制作者采用另类叙事来描述那些无法认同传统电视叙事的群体。

关键词：电视，叙事，非洲超现实主义，另类叙事

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, hip-hop artist Childish Gambino (also known as Donald Glover) released a mixtape titled *STN MTN*, whose title comes from a devoweled version of his hometown in Stone Mountain, Georgia. In the opening track, he states, "I had a dream I ran Atlanta" and continues with a discussion on the changes he would make to the city including reopening an infamous club, firing all the cops in the county,

and bringing back music staples that the town was built upon (Gambino, "Dream/Southern Hospitality/Partna Dem"). Two years later, the premiere of Glover's television show *Atlanta* (FX; 2016–2022) begins with his character stating that he "had a weird dream" ("The Big Bang" 2:45). Often characterized by a feeling of unease, weirdness, or outright absurdity, *Atlanta* has garnered much interest from critics and audiences over its four seasons. Dreams and dream-like surrealism run throughout the show, altering the narrative to represent and explain the absurdity of everyday experiences of being Black in America. The program utilizes Afro-Surrealist storytelling to depict these experiences and provide an alternative narrative style for marginalized individuals who cannot identify with traditional televisual narratives.

While the term "Afro-Surreal Expressionism" was initially applied to literature by Amiri Baraka, it has spread to reference art, music, film, and television. Given the current social climate surrounding racial violence in the United States, the utilization of Afro-Surrealism in film and television seems to be growing. The rise of Afro-Surrealist media like *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), *Random Acts of Flyness* (HBO; 2018), and *Us* (2019) prompts a need for understanding how this narrative form is utilized in visual media and to what ends. Audience members, critics, and scholars alike have turned to Afro-Surrealism to explain the unexpected universality of the messages of these shows and films in representing Black experiences. The television show *Atlanta* utilizes Afro-Surrealism as an alternative narrative structure to represent the everyday experiences of its Black characters and further comment on the absurdity of racism and classism in the United States. Utilizing *Atlanta* as an example of Afro-Surrealism emphasizes the limitations of narrative in representing the voices and stories of marginalized individuals. These limita-

tions have pushed media makers to adopt alternative means of narrativization which, in turn, have proven that television is the most promising and effective medium to explore and articulate those alternative narrative structures. What follows is a brief overview of the relevant literature of television form and narrative. It is also necessary to define and characterize Afro-Surrealism and contextualize it within the current popular culture and television programming landscape.

NARRATIVE AND AFRO-SURREALISM

Television itself provides specific allowances for a heavy utilization of narrative and promotes alternative narrativization. Aspects such as the routine nature of the programming, the longer time allotted to cover various topics more in depth, and the direct link to audiences within their homes are unique to the medium itself and contribute to the power of television in representing the everyday. Television's power lies in the fact that it utilizes those aspects specific to the medium to "not only [show] us a world around us, but [it] creates many of the parameters for our subsequent interactions with that world" (Gray 156). Rather than solely reflect social norms and occurrences, television helps create those norms as well as defines what does not fit inside them. Julie D'Acci articulates this influence and power further by stating that "television's electronic sounds and images, its programs and its regular schedules, … gather viewers … and give them a sense of who and what they are… [television programs] therefore, have active roles in shaping the ways TV viewers think about themselves as … human[s]" (373). Medium-specific elements drive the influence of television as well as how audiences interact with and learn from the messages portrayed on screen. Narratives are one of the most effective ways that audiences can identify with television programs.

These elements ensure that television "assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people … they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues" (hooks 2). Television teaches its audience how to live and act in the world around them. In so doing, "television entertainment often holds the power to dictate—to represent—which people, ideas, and behaviors are 'normal,' and which are decidedly abnormal" (Gray 157). This typically leads to the privileging of hegemonic ideas and viewpoints (i.e., heteronormativity, patriarchy, whiteness) as well as the silencing or misrepresentation of marginalized individuals or those who act and/or think in other ways. This privileging often occurs through traditional narrative structures which are more suited to representing hegemonic experiences. Television's influence can not only marginalize individuals and ways of thinking, but its pedagogical nature can also construct identity through the representations of them. The power television has as a medium cannot be understated; thus, it is imperative that attention be paid to how those typically marginalized by television narratives are reclaiming the medium to represent themselves and their everyday lives.

The term narrative is used here to describe the structure and process with which stories are told in television, both the linear (where episodes are connected, and memory of previous events is necessary) and serial (where episodes are more contained within themselves) (García). Jason Mittell argues that "[t]elevision's narrative complexity is predicated on specific facets of storytelling that seem uniquely suited to the series structure that sets television apart from film and distinguish it from conventional modes of episodic and serial forms (29); thus, because of its seriality and ability to utilize long-form narrative structures, television is able to produce more

complex stories and utilize unique methods of storytelling in comparison to film and literature. Additionally, television narratives are ongoing, by nature, and therefore include "formal characteristics, such as a lack of definitive closure, the occurrence of cliff-hangers, and a tendency towards minimal exposition" (Allrath et al. 3). These elements are specific to the televisual medium and are essential in understanding the efficacy of alternative narrative structures. If an alternative narrative structure utilizes these elements, it is more likely to be successful on television; additionally, because these characteristics allow for more nuance and sustained engagement with television audiences, complex alternative narratives that require these elements can thrive on the medium.

However, bell hooks argues that minoritized groups, especially Black individuals, tend to not identify with traditional forms of media and storytelling as they do not represent their reality or experiences. Thus, a nontraditional form of narrative must be utilized in order to convey their experiences. Rather than purely existing as a serial or episodic narrative form, Afro-Surrealist narrative structure in television aligns with Mittell's discussion of narrative complexity where programs use various storytelling devices, spectacles, and "an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling" (33). Afro-Surrealist television narrative attempts to harness the medium's pedagogical power along with the formal characteristics afforded to television narratives to highlight the absurdity of the everyday experiences of Black individuals in the United States.

Popularized by Baraka and D. Scot Miller (in a now deleted blog), Afro-Surrealism is the act of "creating an entirely different world organically connected to this one … [and] stories of real life, now or whenever, constructed in weirdness and poetry in which the contemporaneity of essential

themes is clear" (Baraka 164). While there are many characteristics that define Afro-Surrealist art, including reliance on the whimsical and excessive, most notably "the Afro-Surrealist seeks definition in the absurdity of a 'post-racial' world" (Miller). This absurdity and uneasiness are both created through "the narrative choices themselves, such as a simple act of taking the main character out of their element and putting them in a series of uncomfortable situations" (Smyk 122). By emphasizing the extraordinary, Afro-Surrealism is often heralded as the one of the most effective ways of explaining the reality of life for Black individuals in the United States. Although Baraka originally applied the term "Afro-Surreal Expressionism" to literature, the term has spread to reference art, music, film, and television. Within a novel, "AfroSurrealism often focuses on the storytelling process and the *mise en abyme*, the story within the story, to reveal how narratives help people cope with the pain of daily life. Stories, the Afro-Surreal novel suggest, serve as sources of resilience, as a means of surviving and resisting a racially oppressive society" (Spencer 18). The Afro-Surrealist novel focuses on the imaginary and absurd as a method of coping with everyday life; whereas, currently, Afro-Surrealism in film and television has shifted from absurdity solely as a coping mechanism to representing the absurd in the extreme to highlight the unusualness of Black lives in the United States. Afro-Surrealism serves as a *narrative structure* that emphasizes the absurdity of racial violence and discrimination.

Afro-Surrealism is not "a style, a set of criteria, an ideology, a genre, or even a coherent exploration … [nor] a movement. It is an imaginary, magnetizing loosely related sensibilities" (Francis 97). However, given the shift from literature to film and television, common characteristics are necessary to differentiate the narrative structures from other genres and

forms. Dawid Smyk states that Afro-Surrealist film and television includes the following elements:

> bouts of the dreamlike, hallucinatory, and the fantastical passing into a generally realistic setting; an atmosphere of unease and paranoia, often supported by tonal dissonances, ambivalence of the genre and features of the grotesque; an experimental, eclectic form; elements of satire and parody; a significant role of hip-hop; a specific kind of intertextuality, often referencing staples of Black popular culture and history; anti-capitalist and anti-institutional messages; a complex exploration of Black identity and subversion of its traditional archetypes. (117)

While this is neither a definitive list nor a strict set of guidelines by which Afro-Surrealist media makers must abide, the characteristics described above allow critics to distinguish Afro-Surrealism more easily from other narrative forms like traditional Surrealism, Afro-Futurism, and magical realism, to name a few.

These distinctions are essential to understanding the formulation and impact of Afro-Surrealism in film and television. Rochelle Spencer argues that traditional "Surrealism has always offered a critique of those in positions of power and questioned mainstream ways of interpreting the world" (1). This is certainly true of Afro-Surrealism as well; however, "AfroSurrealism is distinct in how it revisits and explores the weird or strange phenomena encountered by [B]lack people, forcing a confrontation between memories, present-tense reality, and dreams of the future" (Spencer 5). Similar to

traditional Surrealism, "the AfroSurreal narrative resists dominant cultural narratives" (Spencer 6) and "challenges the cultural and economic hegemony of rationality and explores dreams and psychology" (Spencer 9). What separates Afro-Surrealism from traditional Surrealism is its treatment of race. Race is often not a major element of traditional Surrealism, "however, the concept of race as an arbitrary, surreal phenomenon dominates AfroSurreal texts" (Spencer 9). Thus, the prefix "Afro" is extremely important to the integrity of the Afro-Surreal narrative structure.

As opposed to African-Surrealism, the prefix of Afro-Surrealism serves to incorporate a wider range of Black experiences in the world, though focus consistently turns to the United States. As such, concepts like slavery and systemic racial discrimination serve as the backbone of Afro-Surrealism wherein "a protagonist's personal and psychological journey becomes a rejection of racism and western ideas" (Spencer 8). Miller states that, originally, Afro-Surrealism was surreal because it was representative of Black experiences. Later, he argues that "Afrosurrealism sees that all 'others' who create from their actual, lived experience are surrealist … The root for 'Afro-' can be found in 'Afro-Asiatic,' meaning a shared language between [B]lack, brown, and Asian peoples of the world" (Miller 114). Thus, Miller opens up Afro-Surrealism to include and represent not just Black individuals, but also other marginalized voices.

Because of this emphasis on Black and marginalized experiences, Afro-Surrealism is often combined with discussions of Afro-Futurism. While related, the two are distinct methods of representing Black experiences. Miller states that "Afro-Futurism is a diaspora intellectual and artistic movement that turns to science, technology, and science fiction to spec-

ulate on [B]lack possibilities in the future. Afrosurrealism is about the present. There is no need for tomorrow's tongue speculation about the future" (113). Afro-Surrealism presents different areas of emphasis when representing race. Often, Afro-Futurism, like traditional Surrealism, builds a more utopian-like existence for Black individuals through its reliance on the unusual where Afro-Surrealism considers current racial realities through absurdity. More specifically, "[t]he Afrofuturist text both warns us of the future's potential to replicate historical hierarchies and explores [B]lack people's ability to develop their own futuristic technologies to fight domination. Afrofuturism may involve futuristic or fantastic technologies" (Spencer 13). In contrast, Afro-Surrealism focuses on the present reality of everyday life under racist and capitalist systems.

Spencer also argues that Afro-Surrealism is "is similar to magical realism in that this genre also resists the idea of a world understood completely through reason and logic" but "AfroSurrealism's critiques of a specific form of racism—and its purposeful incorporation of ideas from the Black Power and Black Aesthetic Movements—mark it as distinct" from magical realism (10). Thus, Afro-Surrealism incorporates many elements of other genres and narrative structures but is distinct because of its unique articulation of racial issues through absurd representations of the present, everyday experiences of Black individuals.

The pop cultural landscape is turning Afro-Surreal in a time when society is wrestling with racial violence, bias, and inequality. Terri Francis states that "[Afro-Surrealist] work is very realistic in representing the absurdity of [B]lack life … [In America,] the ideals are there and you're aware of what should be going on … but that's not the reality" (Bakare).

Francis further comments that "the journey of Afro-surrealism is inward, it's about imagining how your interior world works and staying in that place to reckon with your everyday [life]" (Bakare). One of the most salient examples of this inward exploration and representation of unusual experiences is *Atlanta*.

IDENTIFICATION OF TEXT

The Emmy Award-winning show *Atlanta* has an all-Black writing staff which includes Glover and his brother, Stephen. *Atlanta* focuses on Earnest "Earn" Marks (Donald Glover), his cousin Alfred "Paper Boi" Mills (Brian Tyree Henry), and Alfred's friend Darius (LaKieth Stanfield), based in Atlanta, who try to make their way in the world through the rap scene. Along the way, they come face-to-face with social and economic issues touching on race, relationships, poverty, status, and parenthood. Holistically, the show comments on multiple issues including police brutality, co-parenting, and white Americans' fetishization of Black culture. Drawing on the pedagogical nature of television, Bijan Stephen argues that *Atlanta* is "a way for others to see [B]lack people as fully human" (8). The program articulates how Black individuals navigate the racist and classist structures while emphasizing the bizarre experiences and situations they encounter in their everyday lives.

Atlanta has captured the attention of many critics because of its unique storytelling, and honest and raw depictions of Black lives in Atlanta. When considering how to characterize the show, one critic stated that "[s]imply 'the best show on TV' will have to do" (Sheffield). *Atlanta*, and creator Donald Glover, is known for its striking cinematography and excellent writing. However, both Glover and his show are best known for being a bit weird and unusual (Glover's comedy special is

even called *Weirdo* [2012]). Discussing the show in the first year it aired, Glover said "I just always wanted to make *Twin Peaks* with rappers … Television shows are like novels … The tone of this, it's going to take people time to figure out what's going on, which I think is a good thing" (Cwik). Tamisha Nicole Askew further states that Glover "wants the viewers to practice some self-awareness by asking themselves: Why am I laughing? Why does this make me feel uncomfortable? How does this moment relate to the current social and political climate?" (3). While this weirdness and unease is not necessarily a trait that traditionally makes quality television, Afro-Surrealism thrives on such a characteristic.

Afro-Surrealist "artist[s] have chosen to use this genre to express their feelings of worry, liberty, and injustice, giving them the room to be as weird and free as they'd like" (Adams). Several critics of the show discuss how *Atlanta*'s weirdness presents a fresh view of Black experiences. The author of the *Afrosurreal Manifesto*, Miller, has even retweeted several comments linking the show with his articulation of Afro-Surrealism. While this weirdness was not directly associated with Afro-Surrealism in the first seasons on *Atlanta*, the show embraced the genre fully for the third season. Evan Nicole Brown discusses how the artist commissioned for the season three promotional materials, Alim Smith, explicitly identifies as an Afro-Surrealist artist. The promotional posters and banners feature stylistic elements that are integral to the surrealist style. Ultimately, "*Atlanta*'s genius is to show the surreality of [B]lack life in America, and without the typical network explanations" (Stephen 7). The show refuses to directly comment on the absurdity that it thrives on. *Atlanta* utilizes discomfort and the mundane to emphasize that reality is inherently surreal for marginalized individuals in the United States.

Atlanta has sparked recent scholarship in consideration of how the program represents Blackness and the everyday experiences of its characters. Given the relative newness of the show, this scholarship has appeared mainly in the form of online articles by academics and theses by graduate students. These vary from how the show articulates "authentic" Blackness through musical counternarratives (Terry), to representations of masculinity and Black women within the program (Askew), and neoliberalism and teenage life under capitalism (O'Donnell). Forthun discusses how Afro-Surrealism is now being utilized within the industry to denote "quality" television. Moreover, several scholars have found that the way that the show is shot and the narrative presented can only occur on television. Smyk argues that the formulaic and episodic nature of *Atlanta*, "an ordinary, slightly comedic situation turned into a nightmarish scenario, which continues to get worse," is an essential element of the narrative structure (120). The narrative structure *Atlanta* utilizes "wouldn't work on any other show; *Atlanta* has cultivated a form that, paradoxically, it doesn't seem interested in repeating … There's an argument here that TV as a medium is opening up now" (Stephen 8-9). As such, television is becoming an essential medium for shows like *Atlanta* which utilize alternative narrative structure because of its history of representation that begs to be challenged along with the formal affordances of the medium. Afro-Surrealism is that alternative narrative structure. Since *Atlanta* attempts to depict a dramatized version of the lives of Atlanta natives, the show must grapple with issues of race and Blackness. Afro-Surrealism allows *Atlanta* to fully explore and explicate the absurdness of race and racial discrimination.

ATLANTA AND *AFRO-SURREALISM*

Thus, several episodes throughout the three seasons of *Atlanta* utilize Afro-Surrealism as a narrative structure. In the episode "Nobody Beats the Biebs" (1.05), Earn and Alfred attend a charity basketball game. Before the game, "Justin Bieber" walks in. While the real Bieber is white, this Bieber is played by a young, Black actor (Austin Crute), a difference that is never acknowledged in the episode. This Bieber often uses the racial slurs, gets into a fight on the basketball court, and even sings during his apology press conference. His actions, paired with the lack of acknowledgement of his race, present a surreal discomfort. The character is visibly Black, but the audience cannot disassociate him from the real-life white Bieber. Relying on the intertextual and satirical nature of Afro-Surrealism, the jokes within the episode are funny because of the dissonance between the two characters. The white Bieber consistently appropriates Black culture and is forgiven for his obnoxious actions because of his whiteness. He has repeatedly adopted aspects of Black culture like hair, dress, and speech and then apologized for his actions. While he often receives negative media attention, like in 2021 when he was called out for wearing dreadlocks, he is often not held accountable for his action (barring one rare case in 2014 where he apologized for using the n-word in various videos) (Karimi). In *Atlanta*, the Black Bieber invites the audience to wonder if the singer would be treated differently if he were Black.

An example of this comes late in the episode. After fighting with Alfred during the basketball game, Bieber apologizes in a press conference. He says that "I guess I been trying to be so cool lately that I became something I'm not" ("Nobody Beats the Biebs" 18:50). He changes his hat from a backwards sideways position to a straightforward one which is met with dramatic gasps from the audience. To this he responds "Wait,

it's cool. This is me. This is the real Justin. I'm not a bad guy. I actually love Christ. I guess I've been hanging with the wrong people," before breaking out into a song from his latest album ("Nobody Beats the Biebs" 19:00). The absurdness of the apology and the audience's reactions to his words and song is apparent and laughable because of the direct connection to the real Bieber's actions. Additionally, individuals continuously reference Alfred shooting another person earlier that year throughout the episode.

The Afro-Surrealist narrative structure can be seen at play in the intertextual references to faux-hip-hop artist Justin Bieber and to his various methods of appropriation of Black cultures. It relies on the lack of exposition or even explanation to produce the absurdity of a Black Bieber. The audience knows that Alfred is attempting to build his career as a rapper and is attempting to prove that he can be taken seriously, a narrative thread that has been building throughout the first season. The introduction of a race-swapped Bieber serves to both showcase the popularity that Alfred is (supposedly) capable of achieving while also creating a sense of disbelief that he will actually be able to achieve that level of success because of his close affiliation with rap music and the negative connotations associated with that type of music.

While Alfred cannot escape this event because of his gangster rapper persona, this Bieber can because of his proximity and popularity within whiteness. This juxtaposition adds to the surrealist nature of the episode. Maya Phillips states that "[t]he race-swapped performances in *Atlanta* usually function as a marker of privilege" (para. 8). Through this representation, *Atlanta* calls attention to the double standard set for Black individuals in the music industry and in America writ large. When they express their culture or make a mis-

take and apologize, it is not readily accepted or excused by the larger public; however, when a white individual appropriates Black culture and/or apologizes for their wrongdoings, their more likely to be forgiven or their transgressions overlooked because of their whiteness. Similarly, if a Black artist associates with hip-hop or rap, they are defined by the genre and the negative stereotypes associated with it; however, when a white artist makes the same type of music, they are less constrained by the stereotypes and can always step away from the genre without it hurting their entire career. By representing Bieber as Black and utilizing Afro-Surrealism as a narrative structure, *Atlanta* points out this irony.

Perhaps the most well-known and well awarded episode of *Atlanta*, "Teddy Perkins" (2.06), is also an example of Afro-Surrealist narrative at work. As mentioned above, the show relies on weirdness and unease as a mechanism to depict racial issues and "Teddy Perkins" is where these feelings are evoked the most. The episode follows Darius's attempt to pick up a piano that he bought from a mysterious older musician. The musician, called Teddy Perkins and played by Donald Glover in whiteface, invites Darius in and proceeds to both show and tell him increasingly strange aspects of his life. From the moment he enters the mansion, Darius has symbolically entered another world. Aesthetically, the episode is very dark contrasting the darkness within the house with Teddy's bright white skin. The *mise-en-scene* features highly ornate decorations and furniture, a striking difference from the sparsely decorated living spaces featured in other episodes. Teddy himself seems to be an allegory of Michael Jackson. His pale skin, dark black hair, high-pitched voice, and connection to the music industry all support this connection.

Throughout the episode, the audience discovers that Teddy has a brother, Benny, who lives in the basement. This brother apparently received serious injuries in an accident and covers himself completely and uses a wheelchair. In the end, Benny kills Teddy and himself because he believed that Teddy was planning on killing him. Stephen states that the "episode, a meditation on stage-managing parents obsessed with their children's art, ends with two gunshots and flashing police lights. Nobody gets what they came for" (9). While there are several ways to read this surreal encounter, one interpretation of the narrative is that Benny is a reference to his Black self that he needed to lock away and try to kill to become a more palatable musician for white audiences. To do so, Teddy needed to hide his Black self and take on more traditionally white characteristics like straight hair, lighter skin, and a higher voice. This entire episode is shot to build suspense and confusion to mimic Darius's emotions and heighten the surreal nature. The way that this particular story is told, through an Afro-Surrealist narrative structure, relies on the formal elements unique to television discussed above. There is little to no clear exposition throughout the episode until the very end as the audience (through Darius) must piece together the lives of Benny and Teddy through context clues and the various props within the mansion. Even then, it is unclear if Benny was real or just a figment of Darius's imagination. The episode relies on an ambiguous ending by continuously drawing upon the surreal nature of the episode and never fully explaining the events that occurred.

By utilizing Afro-Surrealism in this nature, *Atlanta* represents W.E.B. du Bois's concept of Double Consciousness in which people of color have two versions of themselves conflicting with one another: their true self and what white individuals think they should be. However, unlike Ralph Ellison's utili-

zation of Double Consciousness in *Invisible Man*, Atlanta relies on the visual to exemplify the absurdity and discomfort of living within a society dominated by white individuals. This complicates the myopic representation of people of color while also presenting a more nuanced conversation concerning racism within the United States. Rather than focusing on the outward implications of racial discrimination, the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure utilized in this episode (and *Atlanta* overall) highlights the equally important internal ramifications of racial violence. Phillips argues that "[w]hether Teddy and Benny are separate or the same person, the fact remains that both are linked, even in their manner of death, and Teddy's devout belief in sacrifice as the means to success seems to apply even to his identity. If Benny is Teddy's [B]lack brother, or if Benny is Teddy's [B]lack self, then either way Teddy must sacrifice him" (para. 14). This interpretation of Teddy Perkins and his brother also serves as a warning for Darius and, by extension, the audience. It points out the harm that is perpetuated by continual explicit and implicit racism as well as the dangers of centering the white gaze. This highlights the futility that marginalized individuals often feel in the face of systemic racism and discrimination and the internal turmoil they face.

In the third season, *Atlanta* fully embraced its Afro-Surrealist narrative form. The episode most indicative of this is the finale, "Tarrare" (3.10). One of the most introspective episodes of the series, though certainly not the only one, "Tarrare" (3.10) follows Earn's on-and-off girlfriend, and mother of his child, as she navigates the streets of Paris after following (and then separating from) the boys on tour. Vanessa "Van" Keefer (Zazie Beetz) has consistently questioned herself and position in life throughout the program and has demonstrated worrying behavior leading up to the episode. The episode

begins with a friend of Van spotting her in the streets of Paris. When she is approached by this friend, it is apparent that Van has adopted a false French persona, speaking with a French accent and living out an entire life that is very different from hers back in Atlanta. Wielding a hardened baguette which she uses as a weapon and working in a kitchen which serves fried human hands to extremely wealthy people as a special culinary experience, Van refuses to even acknowledge her past life even when questioned by her friend. When her friend finally asks about her daughter, Van breaks down and articulates her longing to be someone else and not have to face her responsibilities back home and the possibility of failure.

Given the setting as well as the heavy reliance on internal struggle and subconscious, the episode is more than likely a direct comment on the comparisons between French Surrealism and Afro-Surrealism. Setting one of the most introspective episodes of the program in Paris is not lost on those who are familiar with the ongoing conversations surrounding the surreal nature of *Atlanta*. Throughout the episode, Van and her friends find themselves in increasingly absurd situations in seemingly ordinary places, an indication of an Afro-Surrealist narrative structure. Unlike French Surrealism, this episode does not linger in the "super-reality" or the utopian. Rather, the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure emphasizes the downfall of living in a utopian sense of mind as well as the futility of entertaining a utopian without addressing reality. The narrative focuses heavily on the disconnect between Van's utopian life and her actual responsibilities in her real life. Van is increasingly paranoid, and her friend consistently considers the fact that Van might have killed a real Parisian and subsumed her identity. Afro-Surrealist narrative structure is characterized by a complex exploration of Black identities. Mixed with satirical elements that poke fun

at French culture and anti-capitalist notions through conversations of wealth and celebrity, the episode's Afro-Surreal narrative visually represents Van's inner turmoil concerning the struggles that come with Black motherhood and womanhood. Her ongoing narrative arc finally concludes, not with a definitive ending, but with an introspective realization that a traditional Surrealist utopia cannot be achieved without first addressing the systemic pressures on and discrimination of Black women.

The final episode of the entire series is titled "It Was All a Dream" (4.10). Seemingly a reference to various fan theories which postulated that the entire show was Darius's dream, the narrative plays on the intertextual aspect of Afro-Surrealism by nodding to the fans and Darius's previous interactions with the surreal. Darius often experienced various unusual moments throughout the series and had strange conversations including how he believed that the entire world was a simulation. In this episode, the audience follows Darius's journey to his sensory deprivation tank appointment. Multiple times, Darius has weird experiences which result in him waking up in the deprivation tank multiple times. Thus, the audience is unaware if what they are seeing is real or just a hallucination that Darius has created while in the tank. These hallucinations include a ride to the center with his ex-girlfriend in which she is pulled over for driving under the influence. She passes the sobriety test and then takes the officer's gun. After crashing the car, she runs off while apologizing to Darius. Darius raises his hands, realizes he is holding the gun, and wakes up in the tank.

Structuring the episode around an inability to distinguish reality from fiction underscores the strangeness of "routine" police stops of people of color. The Afro-Surrealist narra-

tive structure highlights Darius's inner fears and desires and how they are structured or hindered by racial violence and discrimination. For example, when Darius is left holding the gun, he is awoken because of his fear of what is to come. This very real fear is represented through a non-traditional narrative structure to emphasize the idea that it is a subconscious reality for many minoritized individuals.

Another example points to the role of white women in perpetuating racial violence and hindering the everyday lives of Black individuals. In this hallucination, a group of white women continuously laugh at Darius after he supposedly wakes up. He eventually grabs one of the women and yells at her to stop laughing which results in his expulsion from the center. This hallucination highlights the apathy of white women toward Black men's fear and struggles and their role in the punishment of said Black men. Because the Afro-Surrealist narrative structure relies on foregrounding racial issues and the interiority of its Black characters, this scene could be interpreted as Darius's view of and experiences with white women.

Darius then shows up at his brother's house, seemingly awake. After having a full conversation with his brother, Darius says "I miss you, man. I miss you. How's mom? What about dad?" ("It Was All a Dream" 21:50). Darius then wakes up in the tank a final time. Since Darius's family have not appeared or even been mentioned in the entire series until this point, one could argue that either Darius has lost touch with his entire family or they are all dead, emphasizing the ambiguity that is unique to television narratives. This hallucination comments on the loneliness and family values or tensions present in Darius's, and other minoritized individuals, experience of the world. The Afro-Surrealist narrative structure in this scene

relies on the formal elements of serial television like the lack of exposition to cultivate a sense of concern and nonsensical logic to present Darius's internal confusion and accentuate the complexity of his identity.

The episode ends with Darius attempting to discern if he is still in the tank while hanging out with Earn, Alfred, and Van. While he eventually finds out, the audience is not given the satisfaction of knowing what is real and what is a dream. This reliance on the dream and paranoia is a major element present within Afro-Surrealist work. The ambiguous ending emphasizes the strangeness of minority experiences. Often, individuals are met with outright strange and incomprehensible events of discrimination, bias, and prejudice. The program cultivates a sense of unease by again relying on the formal characteristics of television narrative discussed above (ending with a cliff-hanger and not allowing definitive closure). Ending the show without allowing the audience to explicitly label the events that the characters experience as real or unreal, *Atlanta* posits its final use of Afro-Surrealist narrative structure by continuing that sense of unease until the very last second.

CONCLUSION

Afro-Surrealism has re-emerged in the popular culture sphere to represent the varied experiences of Black individuals in the United States. The televisual medium lends itself well to Afro-Surrealist narratives because of its emphasis on the everyday and its pedagogical nature. Additionally, television allows for a more complex narrative experience by relying on specific formal characteristics unique to the medium. Television programs that utilize Afro-Surrealist narrative structure to highlight voices that would otherwise not have a place are distinct from genres like New Weird and New

Absurd (and others discussed above) because of their emphasis on the racial aspects of the absurdity of everyday life. As Phillips articulates, "[i]t's a strange time to be [B]lack in America—surreal, really. The art tells us no different" (para. 18). Given the recent hyper visible surrealness of Black lives in the United States, the demand for more ways to articulate that absurdity has grown.

As evidenced in *Atlanta*, Afro-Surrealism is one such way that Black individuals are utilizing alternative narrative structures to represent their own experiences and providing sources of identification on television. Evidently, more shows, films, and even music videos are attempting to utilize aspects of Afro-Surrealism to tell the stories of Black individuals in the United States (see The Carters's "Apesh*t" music video [2018], *Lovecraft County* [HBO; 2020], *Candyman* [2021], and *Nope* [2022]). Stephen argues that "I wouldn't be surprised to see a spate of new shows from people who have historically been erased from the version of America we see on TV" (10), opening up the phenomenon to alternative narrative forms that represent more than just Black experiences. Returning to the mixtape mentioned in the introduction, Gambino ends the final track with "and then I woke up" (Gambino, "Go DJ"). Much like the final episode of *Atlanta*, the audience is left with the sense that what they just experienced was something in between reality and dream. When systemic and institutional discriminations make life strange and unusual, one of the only ways to represent that is through the nontraditional.

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Book Review: *For the Culture,* Bonnette-Bailey and Bell, eds.

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For the Culture: Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice.
Edited by Lakeyta Bonnette-Bailey and Adolphus Belk.
University of Michigan Press, 2022. 346 pp.
ISBN: 978-0-472-13286-7

*F*or the Culture explores Hip Hop and social justice, providing tremendous insight to this vital intersection at a critical moment. This edited volume examines themes such as identity politics, race, ethnicity, gender, activism, electoral politics, mass movement leadership, human rights, education, and global social justice. This review describes the book's main content and sections, focusing on the gains for scholars of Hip Hop culture, rap music, social justice, social movements, and popular culture.

For the Culture features five sections and 18 chapters. Each chapter advances an understanding of Hip Hop and social justice in some significant way. The book's chapters are introduced ("Intro: 'Do It for the Culture'") and concluded ("Outro: 'The Beautiful Struggle'") with outstanding context from the editors. The "Intro" presents the basis for the entire book discussion by highlighting common themes with a clear structure, sharp language, and great balance. This section is vital in setting the framework because each chapter voices a different relationship to Hip Hop and uses a unique framework and methodology. The chapter authorship features artists, activists, and academics, and the chapters are united by the editors' vision of a better understanding of social movements and Hip Hop.

Section One, titled "Activism or Perpetuation? Hip-Hoppers, Protest Movements, and Mass Incarceration," features four chapters with exceptional strength in political analysis of Hip Hop culture and rap music. These chapters contain important data and narratives, present innovative case study information, and highlight musical examples related to political participation. The analysis is thorough in most places. An example is the "Going Upstate" chapter, which includes a sample list of about 20 songs from NYC artists about the impact of the Rockefeller Drug Laws of the 1970s (22-23). Specific examples like these are the norm in this section and in the edited volume.

Section Two, "Old-School and New-School Methods of Political Engagement," contains four chapters, which add a level of methodological diversity to the edited volume. It is a solid examination of participation; for example, one chapter ("Don't Call It a Comeback") features a detailed examination of the participation from *The Breakfast Club* guests. The chapter contains a listing of over 20 artists with their hometown information, and a brief biography (132-133). This exceptional level of detail at the chapter level is uncommon in an edited volume on Hip Hop. Section Three, "Education and Social Justice: Getting an Education in 'They Schools,'" features three chapters with strong examinations of related literature, outstanding technical details, and clear discussions of education, curricula, and social justice. Clarity is a shining feature of this section, its chapters, and the book overall.

Section Four, "Gender, Identity, and Sexuality in Hip-Hop," presents three chapters. There is an important examination focused on Hip Hop and gender. One chapter ("That's Them…") examines "anti-Black female sentiment." Another chapter's ("Atrevidas") vivid example is the case of TLC's mu-

sic as the only form of representation to be found while grade school and the empowerment entailed in getting their first records leading to an understanding of "girl power" (240). This same chapter also begins to introduce some international perspective to the volume as it relates to gender. This international perspective continues in Section Five, making for a great transition. The writing here is incredibly engaging, even humorous at times. Yet overall, Section Four is driven by extremely powerful personal stories and connections to Hip Hop and gender. Section Five, "Mixing it up: Hip-Hoppers and Social Justice Around the World," presents four chapters that move scholars of Hip Hop and social justice beyond the U.S. There are outstanding points made about the links between politics and music, great areas of lyrical analysis, and perspectives that are not frequently discussed in studies of Hip Hop.

For scholars of Hip Hop and social movements, the diversity of perspective and mixture of new and deeply entrenched authors in the field should be a great interest. It is apparent that this was actively cultivated by the editors' work in uniting the volume. The different types of practitioners, activists, and academic perspectives among other positionalities around Hip Hop and social justice is great for this book. The range of authors should excite many readers, from those who are looking for fresh, on-the-scene perspectives as well as those looking towards new work from their favorite authors. When looking at the table of contents, one of the standouts are some of the names of scholars who contributed to this edited volume. The editors themselves are essential authors in the field *and* they also provide great chapter contributions to the edited volume in addition to the aforementioned "Intro" and "Outro." The indexing, table of contents, and charts are also extremely well done.

For the Culture should appeal to anyone interested in social activism areas such as forms education, activism, electoral politics and mass movement leadership, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, or human rights and global justice. The book is eclectic and balances an array of voices. The scholarship is especially rich, thoughtful, and sound. The editors have assembled a great diversity of methods and scopes, all united by their outstanding framework, chapter content, and documentation. This diversity mirrors the diversity in Hip Hop and in social justice activity.

Reviewed by Lavar Pope, Loyola University Chicago

Book Review: *Straight Shooter*
by Stephen A. Smith

Stephen A. Smith. *Straight Shooter: A Memoir of Second Chances and First Takes.* Gallery Books/13A, 2023. 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1982189495

Most people who follow sports are familiar with the journalist Stephen A. Smith; however, behind the bravado, there is a willingness for Smith to share his vulnerabilities, insecurities, and experiences in *Straight Shooter: A Memoir of Second Chances and First Takes*. In this riveting autobiography, the Hollis Queens, NY native perseveres from a learning deficiency to emotionally navigating the relationships in his life. One does not need to be a part of the sports culture to be captivated by the events which entail Smith's life. Although an autobiography, *Straight Shooter* captures the essence of a novel, while the author's openness immerses the reader within the text. The persona that social media and national television platforms construct of Smith differs from the individual in *Straight Shooter*. One will not expect the difficulties he endures, whether self-inflicted or a product of the environment, and the salience of being a Black man in society with the ambition to succeed.

From the beginning chapters, Smith introduces the family dynamics and the strife that his present but detached father plays in his upbringing. There is humility in the moments of his life that gives the reader a sense of place and compassion. As a youth, Smith dealt with the banter of neighborhood children for being held back in third and fourth grades. He reflects on these moments that contribute to the develop-

ment of his insecurities. The writer's words bring the realism of a child's emotional vulnerability as his mother and father discuss their child's future. Smith recalls, "My mother must have heard one of my sobs and peeked out the window. She cringed when she realized I'd overheard every word that my dad had said about me" (21). Unbeknownst to the Smith family, society and educational professionals in academia determined Smith's condition to be reading deficiency; however, back then, his "problem wasn't labeled dyslexia yet" (22). He details how his sister and friend's brother spent time tutoring him. Yet *Straight Shooter* delivers a social fabric of the past that frames his experiences growing up in Hollis Queens, New York, before leaving for college.

In time, Smith will develop a talent in basketball as it provides solitude from the world and a scholarship to Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, an HBCU, which galvanizes his career in journalism. He discusses the first impression of Winston-Salem State being "a revelation. I was surrounded by Blackness—proud Blackness. It was different than growing up in a Black neighborhood in New York City" (60). *Straight Shooter* chronicles the perception of reality for Smith, and emphasizes the significance of Black identity with a moral compass to uplift each other in society. However, known for his bravado, Smith challenges the conventions of protecting one's reputation by writing a controversial piece calling for the replacement of Coach Gaines. The same Coach Gaines that was a mentor and father figure which Smith once played basketball for at Winston-Salem. The reader can extract from Smith's act the belief in one's morals and ethics that shape character. Coach Gaines validates Stephen's courage and states, "The boy told me to my face he wanted me to retire ... He's an aspiring journalist who prides himself on calling it as he sees it" (73). The reciprocation of

respect is what Smith develops at Winston-Salem as part of his character. In the book, Stephen constantly discusses the personal battles that contribute to the vulnerability and insecurities that journalism expels to allow his confidence to persevere.

Over time, the ambitious journalist writes for rags and journals and establishes a prominent reputation as a sports columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, then as a sports analyst for ESPN. In the social consciousness of inclusive and exclusive language, Smith will learn that his confident voice can be detrimental. *Straight Shooter* captures the contemporary time of social consciousness and ideologies in a shifting society. As a representative of ESPN, the consideration of language sensitivity impacts Smith's hot takes on topics regarding the culture of sports: the Ray Rice incident of domestic abuse, remarks to Ayesha Curry's (actress, author, and wife to NBA player Steph Curry) Twitter response, and criticism of Japanese-born Shohei Ohtani as a potential face of the MLB. Smith's forthright commentary led to his termination from the network and backlash from communities that represent the marginalization of women along with the Asian ethnic culture. Smith reflects on these incidents and conceptualizes their position with his placement as a Black man in society. Readers of *Straight Shooter* are privy to Smith's innermost thoughts and how each event calls for strength and accountability.

Lastly, the autobiography does not circumvent the truth which readers will embrace in knowing who Stephen A. Smith is. What is particularly interesting is the narrative framework of the past, which at times breaks the temporality with present commentary. Furthermore, *Straight Shooter* is a compelling read as Smith's thoughts on contemporary issues,

such as former President Trump's January 6, 2021 attempted insurrection. Another pinnacle event is his reaction to falling ill with Covid-19 and assessing the importance of life and fatherhood. There is no shortage of emotions and Smith's experiences will resonate with readers.

Reviewed by Louie Galvan
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Original Archival Sources on Food: Cookbooks

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By Paul Rich
President, Policy Studies Organization

M ore research into food culture is highly desirable and this journal hopes to play a part. There are untapped resources. The American Antiquarian Society is one of the institutions that actively collects cookbooks and has been doing so since 1929.[1] It is certainly true that a useful tool in studying the changes in diet and food production is the cookbook, which is collected by many people. The Westphalia Press of the Policy Studies Organization has been publishing reprints of scarce cookbooks that provide insights into the sometimes surprising differences in diets as years pass, which of course are reflected in agricultural strategy.[2]

The Library of Congress of the United States also collects cookbooks and comments about them and their history and evolution that:

> Reading a selection of community cookbooks across a time or place can give unexpected insight into aspects of American culture and public history. Unlike mainstream cookbooks, which tend to have just one authorial and authoritative voice, they are crowded with individuals who, while part of a group, may not always agree. A few

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1 https://www.americanantiquarian.org/cookbooks

2 https://westphaliapress.org/

books connect directly with historical events and causes such as war or the women's suffrage movement. But it is also possible to trace some of the widespread social and cultural effects of immigration, expansion, urbanization and industrialization through the ingredients and methods, kitchen equipment and household hints, advertising, and recipes.

One thing these cookbooks have in common is that they were—almost always—compiled by women for the purpose of raising money for a cause. Often, the funds were raised for church furnishings and other improvements, but many groups compiled recipes for more secular causes such as free kindergartens, establishing a library or planting trees in a new town. Despite their generally small size and the relatively humble subject matter, some of these cookbooks were very successful in raising funds, and went through multiple printings over the years.[3]

The commercial promotion of various foods, as the following booklet illustrates, is another aspect that deserves more attention than it has received. One notably major resource that provides unique items is at the library of the St. Paul campus of the University of Minnesota, the Kirschner collection of 5,000-plus cookbooks. But there are understudied troves in numerous libraries waiting for scholarly attention.

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3 https://guides.loc.gov/community-cookbooks

Author Biographies

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Austin Anderson is an English PhD student at Howard University, where he studies literature and culture of the Americas, with a particular focus on racial representation in video games, comics, and visual art. He has published in *The Comparatist*, *Bodies of* Water, *ASAPJ* and has presented at MLA and AAAD.

Shahbaz Khayambashi's research deals with death in the media and the use of imagery in protest. He has been published in *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying*, the *Journal of Radio* and *Audio Media and Public*. He has also built a career in the experimental film and video scene, as a curator and artist.

Justin Martin is currently Associate Professor of Psychology at Whitworth University. His research explores the intersection of moral development with superhero and dystopian media. Recent publications explore relationships between Wakanda and civics education, superhero comics, civics and community, and *The Walking Dead* and Christian philosophy. He also co-teaches an interdisciplinary course on morality within the Marvel Universe.

Julia Mollenthiel is an assistant professor in the African American Studies Department at the University of Florida. She teaches interdisciplinary courses on Black Horror, Black Feminist Theory, and Afro-Futurism. Dr. Mollenthiel remains interested in how race figures into horror films, the history and uses of the Black horror aesthetic, the emergence of the new Black horror genre (i.e., Jordan Peele's *Get Out*), and how the concept of horror can be particularly important to some of the larger goals of Black Studies.

Emily Scroggins is a doctoral student in Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota–Twin Cities. Her research interests include representations of the Southern United States in television as well as gender, race, and fatness. She earned a M.A. in Communication Studies from Colorado State University.

BOOK REVIEWERS

Louie Galvan has an M.A. from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he works as a part-time instructor in the English department. He hopes to pursue a Ph.D. in English, focusing on the Modernist period of literature between 1910 and 1945, particularly the work of Ernest Hemingway. His interests include scholarly research on Mary Shelley's Frankenstein during the Regency period. He is currently working on a short story collection inspired by American novelist Lydia Davis.

Lavar Pope is the author of *Rap and Politics: A Case Study of Panther, Gangster, and Hyphy Discourses in Oakland, CA (1965–2010)*. His second book, *Rap Nations*, explores factors in the origins, persistence, and legacy of rap music on 25 scenes in the U.S. and North America. He earned a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts from Lehigh University and a Ph.D. in Politics from the University of California Santa Cruz. He is a Clinical Associate Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago's Arrupe College.

Related Titles from Westphalia Press
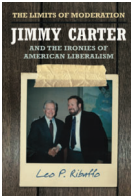
The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism

The Limits of Moderation: Jimmy Carter and the Ironies of American Liberalism is not a finished product. And yet, even in this unfinished stage, this book is a close and careful history of a short yet transformative period in American political history, when big changes were afoot.
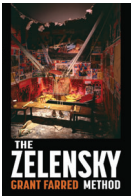
The Zelensky Method
by Grant Farred

Locating Russian's war within a global context, The Zelensky Method is unsparing in its critique of those nations, who have refused to condemn Russia's invasion and are doing everything they can to prevent economic sanctions from being imposed on the Kremlin.

Sinking into the Honey Trap: The Case of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict
by Daniel Bar-Tal, Barbara Doron, Translator

Sinking into the Honey Trap by Daniel Bar-Tal discusses how politics led Israel to advancing the occupation, and of the deterioration of democracy and morality that accelerates the growth of an authoritarian regime with nationalism and religiosity.
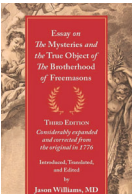
Essay on The Mysteries and the True Object of The Brotherhood of Freemasons
by Jason Williams

The third edition of Essai sur les mystères discusses Freemasonry's role as a society of symbolic philosophers who cultivate their minds, practice virtues, and engage in charity, and underscores the importance of brotherhood, morality, and goodwill.
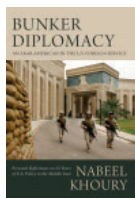
Bunker Diplomacy: An Arab-American in the U.S. Foreign Service
by Nabeel Khoury

After twenty-five years in the Foreign Service, Dr. Nabeel A. Khoury retired from the U.S. Department of State in 2013 with the rank of Minister Counselor. In his last overseas posting, Khoury served as deputy chief of mission at the U.S. embassy in Yemen (2004-2007).
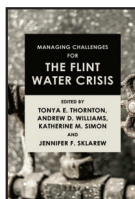
Managing Challenges for the Flint Water Crisis
Edited by Toyna E. Thornton, Andrew D. Williams, Katherine M. Simon, Jennifer F. Sklarew

This edited volume examines several public management and intergovernmental failures, with particular attention on social, political, and financial impacts. Understanding disaster meaning, even causality, is essential to the problem-solving process.

User-Centric Design
by Dr. Diane Stottlemyer

User-centric strategy can improve by using tools to manage performance using specific techniques. User-centric design is based on and centered around the users. They are an essential part of the design process and should have a say in what they want and need from the application based on behavior and performance.

Masonic Myths and Legends
by Pierre Mollier

Freemasonry is one of the few organizations whose teaching method is still based on symbols. It presents these symbols by inserting them into legends that are told to its members in initiation ceremonies. But its history itself has also given rise to a whole mythology.

Abortion and Informed Common Sense
by Max J. Skidmore

The controversy over a woman's "right to choose," as opposed to the numerous "rights" that abortion opponents decide should be assumed to exist for "unborn children," has always struck me as incomplete. Two missing elements of the argument seems obvious, yet they remain almost completely overlooked.
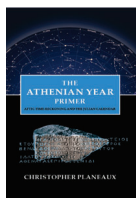
The Athenian Year Primer: Attic Time-Reckoning and the Julian Calendar
by Christopher Planeaux

The ability to translate ancient Athenian calendar references into precise Julian-Gregorian dates will not only assist Ancient Historians and Classicists to date numerous historical events with much greater accuracy but also aid epigraphists in the restorations of numerous Attic inscriptions.
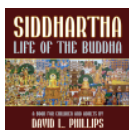
Siddhartha: Life of the Buddha
by David L. Phillips,
contributions by Venerable Sitagu Sayadaw

Siddhartha: Life of the Buddha is an illustrated story for adults and children about the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and work for social justice. It includes illustrations from Pagan, Burma which are provided by Rev. Sitagu Sayadaw.
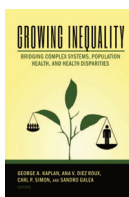
Growing Inequality: Bridging Complex Systems, Population Health, and Health Disparities
Editors: George A. Kaplan, Ana V. Diez Roux, Carl P. Simon, and Sandro Galea

Why is America's health is poorer than the health of other wealthy countries and why health inequities persist despite our efforts? In this book, researchers report on groundbreaking insights to simulate how these determinants come together to produce levels of population health and disparities and test new solutions.

Issues in Maritime Cyber Security
Edited by Dr. Joe DiRenzo III, Dr. Nicole K. Drumhiller, and Dr. Fred S. Roberts

The complexity of making MTS safe from cyber attack is daunting and the need for all stakeholders in both government (at all levels) and private industry to be involved in cyber security is more significant than ever as the use of the MTS continues to grow.

Female Emancipation and Masonic Membership: An Essential Collection
By Guillermo De Los Reyes Heredia

Female Emancipation and Masonic Membership: An Essential Combination is a collection of essays on Freemasonry and gender that promotes a transatlantic discussion of the study of the history of women and Freemasonry and their contribution in different countries.
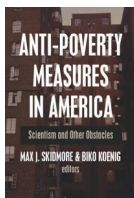
Anti-Poverty Measures in America: Scientism and Other Obstacles
Editors, Max J. Skidmore and Biko Koenig

Anti-Poverty Measures in America brings together a remarkable collection of essays dealing with the inhibiting effects of scientism, an over-dependence on scientific methodology that is prevalent in the social sciences, and other obstacles to anti-poverty legislation.
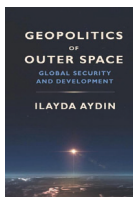
Geopolitics of Outer Space: Global Security and Development
by Ilayda Aydin

A desire for increased security and rapid development is driving nation-states to engage in an intensifying competition for the unique assets of space. This book analyses the Chinese-American space discourse from the lenses of international relations theory, history and political psychology to explore these questions.

Contests of Initiative: Countering China's Gray Zone Strategy in the East and South China Seas
by Dr. Raymond Kuo

China is engaged in a widespread assertion of sovereignty in the South and East China Seas. It employs a "gray zone" strategy: using coercive but sub-conventional military power to drive off challengers and prevent escalation, while simultaneously seizing territory and asserting maritime control.
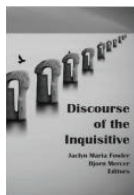
Discourse of the Inquisitive
Editors: Jaclyn Maria Fowler and Bjorn Mercer

Good communication skills are necessary for articulating learning, especially in online classrooms. It is often through writing that learners demonstrate their ability to analyze and synthesize the new concepts presented in the classroom.

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