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Re-Presenting Black People Through OTT Television

Bradley C. Chatman
Eastern Illinois University

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Re-Presenting Black People

Through OTT Television

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Re-Presenting Black People through OTT Television

Bradley Chatman

Eastern Illinois University

Department of Communication Studies

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Abstract

Dynamic and diverse representation of black men and women in traditional television has been suppressed through the lens of many problematic ideologies since their introduction to television. Over-the-top video streaming platforms have created new avenues for making televisual content for mass audiences with less censorship and restrictions. This opens a door of opportunity for studying black representation. Focusing on original television written by black men and women for over-the-top platforms, I perform a textual analysis on *Luke Cage, Dear White People,* and *Broke* as the population of black-written television on OTT to find the character types and roles exist for black people on black-written television shows and how dynamic and important to the plot are black characters on these shows. I found that the interaction of the establishment and black characters cause black-ness to be divided ideologically, socially, and economically among characters in the plots of OTT platforms of black-written television. Although several character's narratives take measures to combat the system, they consistently find themselves being challenged by the establishment in their actions, consciousness, and beliefs. The division of race, class, and black consciousness drives narratives in black-written original television on OTT platforms. This suggests black-ness cannot have diverse representation without consideration of the cultural relationship with the establishment.

Keywords: black-ness, representation, over-the-top, codes

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Chapter One: Introduction

How much does representation matter to you when you see a character on television that you do not like? Do you pay attention to the use of non-white actors in each television series? Have you ever considered the pre-production process of writing and casting for characters for your favorite show, or the platform which you are viewing the series from? Have you ever questioned why a minority character is used in a stereotypical manner in a predominantly white show? These are the questions that many people from marginalized communities like myself consider when watching television. Critically analyzing television has been an area of interest for me since my last semester of undergrad as a mass media producer, studying representation of characters in terms of representation of race and class. This experience encouraged me to attend graduate school to further my studies of representation.

The area of representation that spoke most profoundly to me is how black men and women are represented on television. As a young black man, I have found that while television as a medium has taken strides in allowing black men and women to star and attain strong roles as characters in their programming, it has introduced problematic areas in representing black-ness. For example, the series *New Girl* features a black character named Winston, who is among the main characters in the series, yet is used as a token black character who integrates into a cast of white characters. His representation as a former international basketball player from Chicago gives him a stereotypical black narrative. Television producers, both on network, cable, and premium television, often reflect the white hegemonic power structures in terms of the ideological lens they use in creating representative characters of marginalized groups. This means that television

plays a major role in presenting ideology through the representation, or lack thereof, of characters, which are read as presentations of material reality.

As a producer of media, I acknowledge the profound ideological ramifications that we hold in representing people in televisual content using characters and narratives that they exist within. Additionally, I believe that the channel/platform that the television series is on also plays a major role in how characters are represented. When televisual content lacks diversity in the writing of television narratives and characters, television has limited its ability to create unique, dynamic characters that are appreciated by the multiplicity of viewers that consume television. This has led me to looking at non-traditional, over-the-top (OTT) platforms, for differences in representation of black characters and types. The purpose of this study is to understand how black men and women re-present themselves using popular OTT channels of televisual content as their platforms by analyzing black-written texts. Re-presenting black-ness refers to the representation of dynamic black characters that are reflective of the varying perspectives and experiences of black people. In this study, I argue that black writers can achieve truly diverse representation through OTT streaming platforms of new media, webisodes, and premium television using new stories and characters.

The compromising position that many black viewers of television have adopted stem from an increase of black characters in television and an incremental improvement of their represented image. Since black characters are featured in many shows as well as leading some, the conversation of opportunity has been addressed symbolically. While black characters are used in many television series, television's narratives are still dominated by the hegemonic power structure, which is a majority of white men. White

men compromise 91% of the showrunners, and 86% of the writers, as of the 2016-17 television season (Hunt, 2017). Since there are not many black writers and producers in television, this limits the complexity that can be shown through characters to what the ideologies of the writers and producers of the content. In the context of black men and women, representation seems to be something that black people have minimal control of when we are not in positions of power to influence it.

Television functions through the representation of pre-coded material realities. This imagery manifests in images of black people that are disparaging in nature, and only promote the dysfunction of our culture. Many representation scholars such as Gray (1989) and Smith-Shomade (2008), argue for the importance of showing complexity in characters that do not solely rely upon stereotypes or hegemonic symbolic constructs. Scholars like Dyer (1984) have studied representation in media in terms of how stereotypes function, arguing "righteous dismissal does not make the stereotypes go away, and tends to prevent us from understanding just what stereotypes are, how they function, ideologically and aesthetically" (p. 353). The need for better representation of black-ness continues to be overlooked due to the compromising position that blacks have been forced to assume when given any form of representation on television.

Opportunities for more diverse and complex black representation is becoming possible through recent use of over-the-top platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Video, etc., who work with black men and women to provide televisual content. These types of platforms offer independent television creators an audience for their productions that is not as restrictive as network and cable television. In my first experience with watching black-produced OTT, I noticed something that greatly differed from the traditional

television: the representation was very rich and encouraging. I began to see the glaring difference in how unique and complex each of the black characters were in this show. It was clear that there was an intentional effort to showcase various representations of black-ness in each of the recurring characters. This effort seeks to not only represent the diversity of black-ness, but to re-present it to audiences from the perspective of black men and women from different backgrounds and perspectives. Not all characters have to be good characters in the narrative, but it is important that black-ness has an opportunity to be represented in its full spectrum through dynamic characters and unique television narratives not informed solely by stereotypes.

Over-the-top platforms have provided a new channel of communication that gives black writers and producers the ability to re-present black-ness to the masses without the pressures and limitations found on network or cable television channel's approval. Watching content from these sites and apps has given more black people a space to represent themselves. *Entertainment Weekly* interviewed black woman filmmaker Ava DuVernay for Netflix representation campaign called "First Time I Saw Me" who said "I've seen more representations that feel like folks in my real life behaving in a way that feels familiar to me" when discussing new media (King, 2017). Black men and women have more avenues to tell unique stories of the black experience and re-present themselves through OTT.

The inclusion of the stories of black characters from the perspectives of black writers is essential to the continued progress of televisual content. A recent *Nielsen* report made the statement that programs "with a predominantly black cast, or a main storyline focusing on a black character, are drawing a substantial non-black viewership," with

several network and cable black series averaging "more than 50% non-black viewership" (Beaman, 2017). This suggests that the use of black characters and narratives in television presents unique stories that viewers across cultural boundaries are interested in watching even through the limitations of network and cable television. As a media producer, one area of black-produced television that has led me to critical thought is what the ideologies of black people were, and how they influence the representation of black-ness and the world they perceive. This has encouraged me to watch more black-written, directed, and/or produced television and analyze how black-ness is represented and re-presented when we are given a space that is given to us without the traditional pressures and limitations of television, advertising, and FCC guidelines.

Theoretical Foundation

The two theories that provide the foundation to my textual analysis, are the codes of television and representation. The three codes of television, technical, representational, and ideological, serve to analyze and deconstruct the characters from each series to find the unspoken logic of character narratives and the text. Representation theory looks at the recreation of reality using concepts and ideas from material culture and reality in terms of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other socially constructed identities.

The Codes of Television

The codes of television were created by John Fiske (1987) from his book *Television Culture*, which unpacks television in terms of its ideological functions within society. Fiske refers to codes as "a rule-governed system of signs, whose rules and conventions are shared amongst members of a culture and which is used to generate and circulate meanings in and for that culture" (p. 221). He suggests that television codes

serve to define and reinforce societal phenomena through linking producers, texts, and audiences to a network of meanings that explain the world. This is important in understanding the functions of character in relationship to television narrative, as well as bigger message in the text.

Fiske (1987) introduces the codes of television through the three levels of coding in television: reality, representation, and ideology. Reality, the first level of encoding, refers to the use of technical codes such as the camera, lighting, editing music, etc. to highlight the use of the pre-coded social, material culture to television. Representation, the second level, refers to the use of representational codes such as narrative, actions, characters, setting, etc. to shape the representation of reality being portrayed in television. Lastly, ideology, the third level, refers to the use of ideological codes to organize the previous two codes into a consistent message that is socially accepted.

Use of the levels and codes of television will help to unpack the representations and underlying messages that each character sends in each series. Levels one and two will allow me to take pre-coded material culture and understand how the technical codes are used to create representational codes in television. For example, when looking at a black woman, characteristics such as hairstyle, clothing, skin tone, and many other qualities become framed within the context of television production in terms of conveying meaning to viewers. Level three will consider how the technical and representational codes work together to form ideological codes, which function in television as the unspoken logic of each character. Seeing how ideology operates in the technical and representational codes of OTT televisual content will be vital in understanding how black writers represent black-ness.

Representation

Representation in television re-presents reality from the producer's prevailing ideologies while limiting the realities of people from different real experience. This prevents several stories from being told in television, and limits the amount of complexity a marginalized group can have in representation. Scholars such as Creeber (2006) discuss how television naturalizes our world, and makes problematic biases of marginalized groups seem natural and appropriate. This natural re-presenting of reality refers to what is considered normative in society. Additionally, representation scholars have contributed important scholarship that looks at race (Gray, 1995; Yancy, 2008; Long, 2011), sexual orientation (Dyer, 1984), and gender (Griffin, 2014).

The dominant beliefs and ideas that shape how a person sees the world around them play a major role in what is reflected in characters in television. Studying representation serves to identify how ideology forms different character types and how they are represented in television. Representation that present social and stereotypes provide an outline for creating characters that an audience can either identify with, relate to, or ideologically digest and accept. Warner (2012) argues that "the job of 'character representation' involves not only actors and casting directors but also producers, writers, actors' and writers' guilds, and network/studio executives" (p. 49). This suggests that representation of reality can be greatly impacted by the perspective that the media producers have of one's reality from top down.

Gray (2000) points out that the negative stereotypical representation of blacks as menaces and subservient was important in building and legitimizing the white supremacist power structure in this country. The representation of reality that was painted

in television developed ideologies that served to provide justification for mistreatment and dehumanization. For example, the series *The Wire* has a predominantly black cast, yet the narrative and representation of the characters are through the trope of black male thugs and criminals. This places a huge importance for the representation of characters to be balanced throughout, and empowering to all members of society. Gray (1989) calls for new representations of blackness to have "…a sharper, more engaged analytic focus on the multilayered, dialogic, intertextual, and contradictory character of racial representations in commercial network television" (p. 300-301). The issue is not that there cannot be an unfavorable representation of a black man or woman in television, but when the only representations that we see fall in line with the hegemonic lens, it can influence how black men and women from different walks of life are viewed in this world.

Over-the-top platforms have provided a new avenue for contemporary television shows to reach a mass audience. Over-the-top is a term that refers to the delivery of television content through the internet without the need of cable or satellite services. Subscribers can watch television anytime they want, and have autonomy on what content they watch. These new apps and services create a new channel that media producers can use to host their televisual content. Several independent television producers and filmmakers have found opportunities through these platforms. OTT provides independent television producers with greater levels of creative freedom, as it is not regulated by the FCC. This opens several doors of opportunity for unique characters and different representations than audiences are used to seeing.

Research questions

The question that I ask myself daily when I think of black representation in television is dominated by white men, is what can black writers bring to the table if they can represent themselves unapologetically? In this study, through performing a textual analysis on each text, I will be able to answer this question. My research questions are made to help effectively understand how black writers represent black characters in terms of their narratives, character types, and dynamism. This leads me to the following questions that I will use to guide this study:

RQ1: What are the character types and roles present for black people on black-written television shows?

RQ2: What is the level of dynamism for black characters and plot importance of black-ness on black-written television shows?

Chapter Previews

This chapter serves to introduce the study, foundational theories, and research questions that will guide the study. Chapter two will highlight and review relevant literature that helped inform this study. Chapter three will breakdown the methodology of this study, accounting for the major variables, sample and data collection rationale and protocol, data analysis rationale, and quality assurance rationale and protocols. Chapter four discusses the analyzed data from each text as well as the connections and deviations from each other. Lastly, chapter five details the major findings from the study, its contribution to theory, future approaches, and the significance of the findings.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Tracing character development in television is an essential aspect of analyzing television shows. They are the attractions that draw us to watch television. This section will discuss the origins of television character, how they are created, their importance, and how they establish narratives. In addition, I will discuss how characters are represented in television, and the implications that representation has in our world. Lastly, I will detail the need to expand black representation studies based on the inclusion of over-the-top platforms of television.

The Birth of TV Character

Television is a medium that uses characters to communicate messages to an audience. It is character-driven in the context of a given show or programming. Characters, as suggested by Fiske (1987), "…not only unify scenes within an episode, but episodes within the series" (p. 163). They are what drive the plot and narrative of a given series in each episode as well as season. In fact, Igartua & Ramos (2015) argue "fictional characters stimulate processes that foster involvement with the messages or programs viewed" (p. 63). With the use of character, producers can draw viewer's attention to their content as well as their engagement to the show itself. This makes it essential to understand how characters are created and who creates them.

Characters are born through the processes of scripting and casting for a given television show. Writers and casting directors operate within the context of their medium, in that, television uses messages of a short duration over a prolonged period through seasons to attract an audience. Characters are then ideological tools that serve to carry the message using codes that are familiar to an audience. Fiske (1987) introduces

three codes that operate in television: technological, representational, and ideological codes (p. 222). He describes reality as level one, which refers to the social codes of appearance, dress, environment, speech, gestures, sound, etc. of a given show that are already encoded in television. Representation is the second level, which suggests the level one codes are encoded through technical codes that are implemented in the production of television, such as the work of the camera, lighting, editing, music, sound, etc. Technical codes then transmit conventional representation codes that shape how narrative, character, dialogue, setting, and casting is represented. This creates ideology, the third level of television codes, which organizes the former codes into socially accepted ideological codes such as race, class, patriarchy, individualism, etc.

An example that showcases these three levels of encoding is the television character Eric Matthews from the sitcom *Boy Meets World*. He is presented as a typical American teenager raised in a nuclear family, who is obsessed with girls and engages in most of his social interaction in school (reality). He is a handsome white character with nice hair that is constantly emphasized, and a strong personality that draws laugh sound effects from his sense of humor (representation). Lastly, he is represented as the white character who rarely worked hard or gave his best, but finds redemption because he is a good and likable person in a privileged middle-class family that lives next door to the teacher of his childhood (ideology).

The use of codes in television operate together in creating characters in television. Fiske (1987) asserts that that the codes of television are "links between producers, texts, and audiences, and are the agents of intertextuality" (p. 221). Television pulls from several codes of a given culture and create characters that attempt to embody "reality."

Television has the power to inform our reality through the linking of codes. This portrayal of reality with characters has the potential to influence, reinforce, and inform a culture ideologically. Lastly, Fiske (1987) writes that reality "is already encoded or rather the only way we make sense out of reality is by the codes of our culture" (p. 225). Looking back at the *Boy Meets World* example, this suggests that characters like Eric are pre-coded with social codes from material culture that inform how his character representation is viewed.

In texts, characters are informed by social codes from material reality that viewers are familiar with to establish the illusion of reality. Through these social codes do characters represent a given ideology of the world. An example of this is an episode of the series *Black-ish*, where the 45th presidential results were portrayed through the black and white character's experiences of this series. While the characters are fictional, they used a real event to relate and provide perspective to what is happening in our world. Characters and their roles in television play a role in influencing material reality.

While most television series/serials are based on fictional characters, events, and concepts, there are several aspects about life, and the world, that we learn from television. Gerbner's (1998) theory of cultivation suggests that "television viewing both shapes and is a stable part of lifestyles and outlooks. It links the individual to a larger if synthetic world" (p. 180). We learn about being a student, making friends, and entering professions such as firefighters, police officers, doctors, etc. In our earliest introduction to life, we develop ideologies about what life is around us, and who "we are/can be" in life from the symbolic nature of television. Steiter (1992) relates this back to semiotics, arguing "the signifiers produced by TV are related to their signified by convention, even if…we tend

not to think of the active production of signs involved in TV" (p. 38). Characters in television are characterized intentionally to draw the attention of an audience. Television characters give the idea of possibilities that exist in our world, and what we can be in life.

Ideology on television influences reality regardless of the producer's intent. Steiter (1992) argues "we should discern the distinctive ways of producing and combining signs practiced...because these codes are inseparable from the 'reality' of media communication" (p. 39). Each of the codes that are used in television, whether intentional or unintentional, communicate something to viewers in the form of ideology that has ramifications. The symbolic value of characters in television is very essential in terms of meaning being enforced and reinforced in society.

An example of this is when public figures are used in commercial advertising, it adds credibility to the product, and turns it into a desirable symbol that relates to the mystique of the famous person. Spilski & Groeppel-Klein (2008) suggest long-term viewers "are able to build up a parasocial relationship with a fictional character and come to regard this character as a friend or counselor" (p. 868). Conversely, this can have a negative influence if the public figure is not decoded in a favorable light. The symbolic value of televisual representations is described by O'Donnell (2007) as more "casual" because an average symbol "stands for something else but does not attempt to accurately duplicate it" (p. 168). The visual images in television present representation of reality that create the illusion of a duplicate.

The role of characters in television is critical in effectively disseminating messages to mass audiences. O'Donnell's (2007) work on character highlights the need humans have for images of other humans "in order to have a sense of identity" and "to

fulfill the needs and fantasies that they do not attain in everyday life" (p. 169). These fictional characters embody and portray the endless imaginations of their viewers in ways that often contradict material reality. However, characters are often seen as convincing representations of real people. Regarding the construction of character, Fiske (1987) views character as "…a complex form of representation for it is constructed from one direction by the text and the narrative, and from the other by the body and performance" (p. 179). The embodiment of characters through physical traits and performance are complementary to the narrative and text, in that, they both serve to communicate a refined message to an audience.

Television's use of images plays a major role in constructing characters. The level one code of reality is vital in crafting the appearance of characters through the social codes of our reality in terms of dress, speech, behavior, gestures, etc. O'Donnell (2007) writes, "Television mediates reality by selecting and interpreting images in order to present them to the viewers" (p. 164). Characters are created by television producers with the purpose of drawing the attention of a viewer by representing reality through the lens of a given code of a society to communicate a message. While careful thought and consideration is made when constructing characters, there remains a reference to an ideology that the writer(s) hold that when selecting and interpreting images to bring to viewers.

The influence of ideology continues to encode television characters in a way that is inescapable. Fiske (1987) writes "characters on television are not just representations of individual people but are encodings of ideology, 'embodiments of ideological values'" (p. 225). An example of this is the character Frasier from the show *Frasier*, where the

character has an east coast, upper-class accent that gives him the persona of a sophisticated psychiatrist. The accent is an ideological value that was arbitrarily given to his character as a way to signify intelligence. Grossberg (1998) suggests that "certain codes of meaning are not only intelligible, they are also assumed to be descriptions or possible descriptions of the world" (p. 179). Characters carry a significant weight when considering their signified meaning in society to different segments of the population. The signified meaning of a character may not lead to critical thought of someone of a dominant group, but may be controversial in the eyes of a marginalized group of society.

All television shows construct a narrative for an audience to consume. Fiske (1987) argues that narrative "...works as a sense-making mechanism," that is used similarly to novels and films (p. 130). An example in television is *Dexter*, a television series that highlights a serial killer named Dexter, who only kills criminals that get away with crime based on a code he operates under. Without establishing the narrative of his background throughout the first season, viewers would not be able to understand what led him to kill criminals and why he operates under a special code and ritual for each kill. Scholars such as Butter (2017) have looked at narrative of television terms of different complexities that impact storylines. Narrative seeks to create a cohesive understanding of our experiences in this world in the form of a story. He also writes that "realistic narrative is...the dominant representation on television" (p. 130). The majority of television is realistic, in that, it aims to encode reality using "real-life" concepts and ideas.

Television, in large part, pulls several concepts from the world that we live in, and creates a "realistic," non-existing world. We see practices of medicine and surgery as central themes for television shows, as well as conversations of racial inequality, working

class families, and gender bias embodied in shows such as *Rosanne, Good Times, The Cosby Show, A Different World,* and many others. Kozloff (1992) argues "the world that we see on television is a world that has been shaped by the rules of this discourse" (p. 69). Use of narrative exists both overtly and covertly in television to drive the storytelling process to viewers in a familiar way they can digest.

Characters play a necessary role in establishing narrative in television. Fiske (1987) writes "character acts primarily as a function of the plot; only then is it given individualizing characteristics as an ideological hook for the audience" (p. 131). These individualizing characteristics refer to traits that make characters stand out, yet draw audiences in regard to ideological codes being reinforced. The narrative to which a character is assigned will determine the type of character they are, and the unique characteristics that "makes sense" for that person ideologically. For example, the tone of the narrative of a drug addict can greatly differ based on the race, gender, or class of the character. Igartua & Ramos (2014) writes that some common attributes and stereotypes "are frequently used to get the public to identity more quickly with the characters and to make consumption as light and as efficient as possible" (p. 66). This creates a situation where the uniqueness of a character may be sacrificed for the sake of narrative economy.

In the narrative structure of television, characters are used to drive the narrative of a given television show. Fiske (1987) writes "character, then, is an embodied ideology, and is used to make sense of the world by the relations of discourses and ideology that it embodies" (p. 161). Ideology allows for us to immediately relate to a given character within the context of the narrative they exist in. O'Donnell (2007) discusses intertextuality in television narrative, arguing it "credits viewers with the experience

necessary to make sense of these allusions, offering them the pleasure of recognition" (p. 79). Since character narratives rely on ideological and intertextual cues audiences can relate to, this inevitably limits character dynamism.

Character dynamism refers to how unique and abnormal a given character is in a television show. O'Donnell (2007) suggests characters are "introduced, their personalities defined, and their relationships to one another, to place, and to time have to be established" (p. 80). Characters are carefully developed with intentional efforts made to draw a desired reaction from an audience. She also makes the point that consistent character traits are used for "audiences to know the character and to look forward to seeing him or her each week" (p. 80-81). The traits assigned to each character often restrict the level of dynamism they have, causing limitations of the character's uniqueness. As a result, dynamism of character is an easy element in the narrative of a television show to neglect without seeing a decline in viewership because of the familiarity characters build with viewers.

Representing Representation

While characters in television are often fictional creations of writers, their characteristics and traits are often read as reality by viewers. This is accomplished by producers of media through using representations of reality. Representation in general application is the recreation of reality using concepts and ideas that are real. Fiske (1987) refers to it as "the means of making that sense of the world which serves one's own interests" (p. 321). Representation allows us to produce fiction or non-fiction stories or events based on our views and perspectives of reality. In the context of television, representation deals with the use of plot, characters, and the overall *mise-en-scene* to

communicate to an audience a message. Representation scholars have looked at representation in terms of race (Gray, 1995; Yancy, 2008; Long, 2011), gender (Griffin, 2014), and sexual orientation (Dyer, 1984). While the goal of representation is to give an accurate portrayal of that which is real, it is not always attainable through the limited lens of media influenced by ideology. This is where theory of media representation comes into play when studying texts.

The theory of representation suggests that media cannot give a 1:1 depiction of reality, but attempts to portray it using ideological systems and codes of meanings that we understand and the use of images and sound. Through the organization of several codes and systems of meaning that we consciously and unconsciously agree to, anecdotes, characters, and representations are established as reflections of reality. For example, in medical dramas, when we see surgeries performed, we see a representation of what takes place. Since very few people outside of the profession understand what happens in operation rooms, we accept that what is being shown is an accurate representation. Grossberg et al. (1998) describes the process of representation as "to take an original, mediate it, and 'play it back'" (p. 179). The end goal of representation is to implicitly recreate realities that connect with, and inform the world that is being portrayed.

Character types come into the conversation when examining the dominant society's ideas, and beliefs regarding individuals that deviate from their norms. Dyer (1984) introduces character types as "…a certain kind-of-person [that] performs a given role…" (p. 354). He defines social types as the norm defined by the dominant society, and stereotypes as the deviation of the norm. An example of a social type in television

would be a heterosexual white male that lives in a suburban area with affluence as a result of hard work. An example of a stereotype in television would be a black man that works as a janitor for a major corporate company that is predominately white. In relation to representation, when marginalized groups are represented in television, they often are viewed in the frameworks of stereotypes, while those who reflect the dominant society are viewed through social types.

Additionally, Dyer (1984) argues "in stereotyping, the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups" and equate their differences as "...inadequate, inferior, sick or grotesque and hence reinforcing the dominant groups' own sense of the legitimacy of their domination" (p. 356). When characters are represented through the stereotypes derived from the dominant society, there consistently exists the perpetuation of less-desirable traits of the other in television. Several scholars have looked at stereotypes of the marginalized in television in terms of their influences and the issue with escaping them (Ex: Entman, 1994; Gray, 1995; Ford, 1997; Barnes-Brus, 2005). Social types are chosen, while stereotypes are given in condemnation of the deviation of the normative identities and practices of a society. Television holds a huge stake in establishing what many people consider the norms of society.

Creeber (2006) argues that television "consistently 'naturalizes' the world around us, forever turning ideological bias into a seemingly 'natural' representation" (p. 48). This 'natural' representation refers to the normative practices of a given society. An example of this that television produces is the ideology of the American Dream through hard work, regardless of race, gender, class, etc. Winslow (2010) refers to the American Dream when analyzing the television series *Extreme Makeover*, and argues it promotes

"historical amnesia so that past injustices are forgotten and the myth of a level-playing field" as well as "the disabling of collective political life in favor of acquiescence to institutions of power" (p. 284). Television does not mention the barriers and systematic structures that prevent hard working Americans from attaining the American Dream. Through the naturalization of characters on television, constructs of lived reality become informed by the ideological codes and systems that are represented.

Ideological concepts such as the American Dream, as Winslow (2010) mentions, "stands in direct opposition to so many people's material reality," yet successfully "…promotes the belief that all Americans can transcend their socioeconomic, racial, and gender constraints to rise to the upper class" (p. 278). This suggests that representation aims to paint a reality filled with principles that can be applied to any member of society. Winslow also emphasizes that, "the relationship between ideology and myth is especially important in an age of neoliberalism," (p. 270) and cites how ideology is promoted to advance corporations while ignoring those who truly need support. Ideology serves to advance the desires of those in power while continuing to suppress and oppress the vulnerable in this country. Representation studies seek to highlight problematic ideologies and advocate for dynamism in what the dominant society portrays.

Who Represents Characters?

The dominant beliefs and ideas that shape how a person sees the world around them play a major role in what is reflected in characters in television. An example of this is the male gaze in media, which Mulvey (1975) argues "projects its phantasy on to the female figure" as the "…erotic spectacle" (p. 11). The male gaze represents women from the position of the object of gratification for the male's delight. She also mentions that

while a woman in the narrative of film is normal, "her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline, to freeze the flow of action..." (p. 11). This portrayal of women is represented by the generally male film and television writers and producers who view women from the ideological lens of being objects of pleasure for men. This plays a major role in the creation of characters and their position in respect to the narrative of a television show.

Understanding the influences of ideology in the producer's role, allowing the marginalized more opportunities to represent themselves allows for more diverse perspectives. This is due to the varying ideologies that a person of the white male dominant society may have in comparison to a marginalized "other" in society. Female writers such as Shonda Rhimes, as Long (2011) mentions, used "race-blind" casting methods to avoid traditional pitfalls in ideological biases (p. 1068, 1074). As a result, there was a diverse casting with characters such as Dr. Burke, a dark-skinned black male doctor was a prominent character in *Grey's Anatomy*. While her efforts were not as effective upon examination, allowing the marginalized opportunities to represent themselves and others in characters will allow for diversity and varying representations. Continuing to look at representation and who represents a group serves to identify how ideology forms characters and how they are represented in television.

Black Representation

Black representation in television has always served as a mechanism to reinforce problematic ideology to the detriment of black men and women in America dating back to their introduction to television. Problematic representations were important for the dominant society to control the narratives of blacks in this country prior to the end of

slavery. For example, the film *The Birth of a Nation* played a major role in promoting negative stereotypes of black men and women being savages that needed to be subjugated and stopped from destroying the country and its values. Gray (2000) points out that the negative stereotypical representation of blacks as subservient and inherently bad people "…were necessary for the representation and legitimation of a racial order built on racism and white supremacy" (p. 286). The representation of reality that was painted in television developed ideologies that served to provide justification for mistreatment, denial of resources, and dehumanization.

Black representation historically has cultivated many negative perspectives of black men and women through television. Gerbner's (1998) cultivation theory argues that "some set of outlooks or beliefs can be traced to steady, cumulative exposure to the world of television" (p. 180). Many facets of black identity have been cultivated through the repetitive stereotypes represented on television through characters. Adams et al. (2014) apply cultivation theory to the viewing habits of black youth to argue that they "will accept black-character portrayals and media images as valid models of acceptable and expected behaviors for black people" (p. 82). The influences of poor and static representation over several years from television has increased the difficulties of the path to better representational practices.

While representation has progressed in terms of the number of black people we see on television, hooks (1992) argues "when the dominant culture demands that the Other be offered as sign that progressive political change is taking place…it invites a resurgence of essentialist cultural nationalism" (p. 26). The presence of black men and women on television does not guarantee unique character types devoid of negative

stereotypes. In fact, many of the representations reflect and reinforce the power structure between blacks and the dominant society. Gray (1989) argues "the representations of race and racial interaction in fictional and nonfictional television reveal both the elements of the dominant racial ideology as well as the limits to that ideology" (p. 377). Because of the influence of ideology on culture and reality, representations of black-ness require negotiation in regard to what is problematic and what is a complete and dynamic representation of black-ness on television.

Producers of television, who are predominantly white, perpetuate negative stereotypes of black-ness as well as white superiority in the character representations. This is accomplished both consciously and subconsciously through ideological codes that have been encoded into our society and reinforced through media. Gray (1989) argues "even as the media and popular cultural forms present representations of race and racial (in)equality, the power of these meanings to register with the experiences (common sense) of different segments of the population remains problematic" (p. 377). This suggests that as a result of a longstanding history of encoding negative stereotypes and ideology into society, as well as limited representation, diverse representations are still rendered incomplete to certain audiences.

Re-Presenting Black-ness

The goal of representing any identity category should be diversity as well as dynamism of their characteristics. For marginalized groups that are represented in television, each representation paints a reality or viewpoint that are associated with us. Stereotypes regarding race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc. represented in excess on television all have potential ramifications that are not easy to detach from our identities.

This places a huge importance for the representation of characters to be balanced throughout, and empowering to all members of society.

My use of the phrase "re-presenting" in relation to black-ness refers to the use of representation to create dynamic black characters that are reflective of the varying perspectives and experiences of black people that are not founded on stereotypical ideologies. Gray (1989) calls for new representations of black-ness to have "…a sharper, more engaged analytic focus on the multilayered, dialogic, intertextual, and contradictory character of racial representations in commercial network television" (p. 300-301). An example of diverse representation would be a character of color that is able to negotiate their experience as a minority with their own individuality and make choices based on the negotiation of their identity. The issue is not that there cannot be an unfavorable representation of a black man or woman in television. A problem arises when the only representations that we see fall in line with dangerous stereotypical monoliths, it can influence how black men and women from different walks of life are viewed in this world.

O'Donnell (2007) makes the argument that "individuals may have specific needs that are satisfied from various kinds of representations of characters…but all television viewers have some kind of a need for representation" (p. 170). An example of this is the television series *Black-ish*, which showcases a healthy, middle-class black family that addresses the experiences that black people have and the uniqueness of them. This show is written by Kenya Barris, a black man, in addition to other writers and directors of color. This show is an advancement in black representation when considering it being on the network channel ABC, a socially conservative network. The need for dynamic

representation of black-ness stems from several inadequate ones which have reinforced the stereotypes and toxic ideologies of the dominant society. The argument is not entirely centered on progressive representation of black-ness on television in the context of American nationalism. Gray (1989) sites in his research, that in black representation of television, "the historical realities of slavery, discrimination, and racism or the persistent struggles against domination are displaced and translated into celebrations of black middle class visibility and achievement" (p. 378). Re-presenting black-ness to mass audiences is more about presenting several unique representations of black-ness that exist in black communities.

Acceptable black representation is a concept that requires critical discourse juxtaposed with the history of traits and characteristics that have been attributed to black characters of all identities. Gray (2000) argues that the "heightened expectations have, in turn, produced conflict among and criticism from African Americans" (p. 285). Even in the presence of "black" television with black producers, questions concerning these representations influenced by black people have come into play. The innate responsibility that each black person has in representing the collective race is one that is not placed on members of the dominant society because they are seen as the norm that everyone in society plays catch-up to.

Black representation more recently has evolved into conversations regarding the use of covert mechanisms to reference classic stereotypes of black men and women. One recent concept that has been discussed is the ideology of a post-racial society. When studying shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, which largely does not address race, Cramer (2016) suggests that it "strategically contributes to the ongoing social discourse that produces

and reproduces dominant social realities about race and how people live and perform race in everyday interactions" (p. 475). Long (2011) argues that color-blind ideology "makes it more difficult to see the ways in which older racial hierarchies and their associated meanings continue to be promoted and maintained through different mechanisms" (p. 1069). Both studies of this series suggest that representation of race and race relations are better handled by not addressing them at all. When considering shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, which is written by a black woman, we find that black representation in terms of reflexively addressing race in their relationships is often omitted.

Additionally, many black feminist scholars have observed television and film to trace the representation of black women in popular media. Griffin (2014) cites the movie *Precious* as an example of black woman representation that is problematic, arguing it contains "the omnipresence of the White gaze" and that "whiteness is privileged in *Precious* at the intersections of race, gender, and class" (p. 183). Black feminist scholars as well as critical race scholars have observed both television and film and have both cited the use of the white gaze in the representation of black-ness in television and film. Yancy (2008) writes "To have one's dark body penetrated by the white gaze and then to have that body returned as distorted is a powerfully violating experience" (p. 66). Black representation continues to be a conversation among scholars and black men and women in today's society.

Character representation in television is the driving force that introduces characters to an audience. O'Donnell (2007) places her focus on the position of the audience that receives the representation of the characters. She makes the point that representation "...presents an illusion of the original and its function" (p. 165) and is

approved by the viewers. She also mentions that the "effectiveness is dependent on the viewer's recognizing and accepting it [represented character]." If this imitation can draw the recognition and acceptance of an audience, then producers will continue to sustain stereotypes in their representation of the "other."

The audience's critical prowess and perspective of representation can vary in major ways in terms of what each representation means based on their lens of ideology. Gray (1989) states "media representations of black life...are routinely fractured, selectively assembled, and subsequently become a part of the storehouse of American racial memory" (p. 377). This argument is buffered by Yancy & Ryser (2008), who argues that in media, "Whites became the gazers, those who controlled what was seen and how it was seen," while the marginalized "became the 'looked at,' not 'the lookers'" (p. 732). When black-ness is reduced to an image to be glazed at, it becomes fetishized by viewers, and relegated to stereotypes that do not allow for dynamic representations and unique narratives of black characters.

Television can serve to add fuel to a viewer's existing ideology of the world around them. In addition to the writers and producers of television, the viewers are positioned to provide feedback on representation of "others" by not watching the show. O'Donnell (2007) writes "audience members can derive different meanings by negotiating or resisting the dominant meaning" (p. 176). The perspective of the viewer can greatly influence the success or rejection of a given television show.

Producer Influence

When discussing representation in television, scholars must ask "who is behind the representation?" Representation is the result of the producers behind the scenes and

the frameworks of knowledge that influence them in the creation of television. Creeber (2006) asserts that television "...re-presents reality..." and it "...constructs and articulates it from a particular perspective or point of view" (p. 48). Representation in television re-presents reality from the producer's prevailing ideologies while limiting the realities of people from different real experience. Fiske (1987) offers that characters seen on television function to deny any difference in what is real and what is represented in both production and reception. This function creates a distortion in what the human experience is in this world, and what is possible. An example that is represented on television is the ideology that hard work is the answer for all struggles that a person has in life. Ideology regarding lifting one's self up to be successful is problematic when considering those that are oppressed and have been historically discriminated against systematically despite the hard work they commit. Television reinforces ideology in such a way that is hard to separate from lived experiences.

The influence of the producer is pivotal in understanding how characters are represented in television. Creeber (2006) argues that television as a medium "needs to establish character almost instantly before an audience loses interest..." (p. 47-48). The production of television is a process where all the elements are controlled and decisions are intentional within the goal of establishing the plot and the characters of a show. Representation that represents social types and stereotypes provide an outline for creating characters in which we can either identify with, relate to, or ideologically digest and accept. O'Donnell (2007) believes that white men with the power to control representation, are positioned to give marginalized groups "...certain characteristics and habits turning them into the 'other'" (p. 170). Ryan (2016) writes"non-white writers have

constituted no more than 13% of writers-room employment for several years." This opens the door for opposition of anyone who differs from those who can identify with the dominant groups.

In the context of black representation, there does not seem to be a way to avoid deviation from the subjugation of negative characteristics and stereotypes. Dyer (1984) writes "types are instances which indicate those who, live by the rules of society and those whom the rules are designed to exclude" (p. 355).The black identity is in opposition to the dominant society regardless of the attempts to adhere to their social types. In the conversation of representation, producers are faced with the task of creating characters that are both relatable to viewers ideologically and within the social and stereotypes framework of television. This creates a tension on whether or not to seek for better representation to satisfy some groups or take shortcuts by using codes that have been proven to draw high viewership. When these traits are demonized in the world that we live in, television serves to reinforce these ideologies to audiences to continue a vicious cycle from generation to generation.

Warner (2012) argues that "the job of 'character representation' involves not only actors and casting directors but also producers, writers, actors' and writers' guilds, and network/studio executives" (p. 49). This suggests that representation of reality can be shaped by the perspective that the media producers have of one's reality from top down. If the writer decides, whether consciously or subconsciously, that the criminal in a predominately white television show should look like the stereotypical black male 'thug,' the only way that this can be changed is if someone of influence in the pre-production

process catches this, and points out the potential problems with this stereotypical representation.

In recent years, television has begun to shift in terms of the number of black characters in shows with predominantly black casting as well as black writers and producers of television. Adams et al. (2014) agrees with this "This generation of youth is able to view more black actors and music artists as regular members of prime-time TV shows and blockbuster movies than at any other time" (p. 80). With more black characters and on-screen presence, it becomes essential for scholars to place a focus on the representation of black-ness on television. In recent studies, the conversations of representation have shifted into the ideology of a "post racial" society. Rossing (2012) defines "post-racial" ideology as "a belief that positions race as an irrelevant relic of the past with no viable place in contemporary thought" (p. 45). This belief has been utilized to promote a world that functions in a vacuum with no context regarding black representation and black experiences. Several scholars such as Griffin (2014) and Long (2011), others have resisted this notion, and have critiqued the use of this ideology in the representation of black-ness.

Representation through Varying Platforms/Channels

Traditional network and cable television are largely regulated by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in terms of content and censorship. Additionally, television has been consolidated into very few conglomerates that play a role in stifling diversity in television in terms of race and narratives. This has paved the way for premium television and streaming services in the market of television. Himes et al. (2014) writes "video, DVD, and streaming services opened the market up further, making

investment in quality drama more profitable" (p. 28). The perspective of quality argued is in direct relation to the excessive use of types in network and cable television as a "cookie-cutter" method for producing television. Representation outside of network and cable television still becomes problematic when considering that number of black producers and black characters are the same in many cases.

Over-the-top (OTT) may offer an opportunity for representation of the marginalized through non-traditional means. Baumgartner (2018) writes "a massive number of new OTT offerings from traditional programmers, alongside a mix of genre- and niche-focused offerings...are fleshing out the market" (p. 8). Lobato (2018) suggests "as television studies moves further into the Internet age, it must develop a robust understanding of how catalogs work if it wishes to understand wider dynamics of access, choice, and diversity in digital distribution" (p. 242). With more desire for new, unique content for niche audiences, this opens the door for expansion of study of black representation.

Through the observation of character origin, their overall function in television narrative, and their implications regarding representation, I have established the importance of television having diverse, dynamic representation of characters across the board. Additionally, I have highlighted the lack of complex or dynamic black representation in television historically, as well as in modern television. The goal of this study is to examine black characters in television when represented through the writing of black men and women. This study, in turn, will provide an expansion to black representation studies of black men and women to over-the-top television platforms.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This section breaks down the rationale of how this study was approached, and the methodology used to perform it. It explains the essential variables that were operationalized and the channels that influence these variables that I am studying. Additionally, the approach to the sample was discussed in relation to the variables and channels of communication. Lastly, the methods of collecting, analyzing, and validating data quality throughout the study were expounded upon in detail.

This study sought to study black-ness and representation in televisual content. Black-ness was operationalized through codes of spoken discourse and the physical traits of the main and supporting characters in each series, such as hair, skin color & pigment, and attire. This operationalization allowed me to analyze the ideological codes that are in play and how they contribute to creating black characters in terms of dynamism and their character type. Additionally, I operationalized the representation of characters and narratives in terms of their discourse in relation to their physical traits, characteristics, and actions throughout the series and map them based on the technical, representational, and ideological television codes Fiske (1987) identified.

The study focused on television shows that are exclusive to over-the-top platforms rather than the traditional television conventions such as network or cable. This decision was made as a result of a gap within representation studies of black men and women on OTT platforms. Additionally, I exclusively considered television series written by black men and women. This approach was taken to study the narratives and representations that black writers could bring to television with the limited restrictions of cable and network television in addition to the benefits of using OTT channels of media.

Lastly, character and television narrative are the products that are influenced by the writers and the platform of a given show. In this study, I focused on the dynamism of characters as well as the differing narratives that have been produced by black writers for OTT platforms. Character dynamism is a key indicator of the representation of a black character in terms of how they embody black-ness throughout a given series. Dynamism refers to the unique qualities, traits, and choices of a given character that deviate from the dominant narrative or stereotype. It is important to see how the characters are impacted by the representational practices that the writers give them as well as the ideology and approach to black-ness they are assigned. The narratives that are produced by black writers, as suggested by Gray (2000), are an important part of seeing diverse and more complete representations of black people on television that do not rely on stereotypes that have been perpetuated to black characters over the history of black people represented on television.

The method that was used to conduct this study was textual analysis, which involves looking at a given text in terms of its content, structure, and functions of the messages within it. Scholars that provided inspiration for the use of textual analysis are Griffin (2014), who took a similar approach, using textual analysis to look at the representation of black women in a film, and Long (2011), who critiques approaches to representation from the producer's standpoint as well as the message conveyed through the text. Lastly, Winslow's (2010) study which focuses on ideology that operates in a network reality series helped inform this study. Each of these scholar's work informed and influenced the approach of this study.

Sample

The sample sought to find all American black written, over-the-top original television series that existed. The goal was to have an accurate conversation about representation of black people on original series that was complete. For the sample of this study, I examined all episodes of the following three television shows: *Dear White People, Luke Cage,* and *Broke*. Through this study, I seek to look at the narratives created, and highlight any dynamism that is found in the approaches that black writers take in creating narratives for black characters to function in. Each series has only one season as of October 10th, 2017. The series *Dear White People*, released to Netflix April 28th, 2017, has ten episodes in its first season, with durations between 27-30 minutes. The second series *Luke Cage,* released to Netflix September 30th, 2016, has 13 episodes that are 57 minutes long. Lastly, *Broke*, released September 28th, 2016, has eleven episodes that are 11 minutes long. This study is a census of all black-written content that was available from several OTT streaming platforms.

Each of these shows were selected because they are written, as well as directed by black men and women. This is important to this study because the writer creates the characters and the narratives surrounding each character. The construction of character from the perspective of a black writer is critical to analyzing the different narratives that develop with each character. Examples of predominantly black shows written by white writers were not included in this sample, as I seeks to look at black representation from the perspectives of black men and women in a less-restrictive space in television.

I spent extensive time researching American black-written television on major and minor OTT platforms, defined as sites which offer original television exclusive to the

platform; and I was only able to find three television shows. These three series were selected as the population of black written television on over-the-top platforms. Over-the-top provides a unique approach to television viewing, in that, it is not under FCC regulation, and is not limited to the constraints of Network/Cable conventions, such as commercial breaks and scheduled viewing. Since OTT has opened doors for niche content, it offers the potential to bring unique representations of black characters in television. Television series were selected as opposed to film because of the function of characters in television in terms of development and overall narrative, which differs from the functions they have in film.

Data Collection

The goal of this study was to find the character types and roles that exist for black people on black-written television shows and how dynamic and important to the plot are black characters on these shows. I was looking to find representations of black-ness that are diverse, and provide narratives that do not reinforce the hegemonic tropes that often function in network and cable television. This information is very important in understanding black representation on over-the-top platforms.

I performed a textual analysis on the three series selected. I collected my data by watching each of the three series several times while taking several notes using memoing, derived from Corbin and Strauss (2008) from December 18th, 2017 until February 28th, 2018. I wrote 44 pages of notes in pencil, and used a red pen to draw lines to connect thoughts together as well as a blue pen to make memos to myself of key thoughts I had while watching each episode. This approach was effective in helping me map out what exactly I was seeing in each of my individual series viewings while also allowing me to

derive bigger concepts that operated ideologically throughout the three series. This was essential in helping me to better analyze my data, and find trends in terms of the characters and narratives of these television series on OTT. This was performed on each episode of each show until I reached what Glasser and Strauss (1967) refer to as theoretical saturation, which is the point where no additional data is being attained.

Data Analysis

During and after each viewing, I utilized open and axial coding methods derived from Corbin and Strauss' (2008) approach to grounded theory through the constant comparative method to make connections in my notes among the three selected television shows. This approach is a fundamental analytic process that allows for easy comparisons of different characters within a text as well as different texts themselves. Corbin and Strauss (1990) suggest "conceptually similar events/actions/interactions are grouped together to form categories and subcategories" which give insights on "breaking through standard ways of thinking about or interpreting phenomena" (p. 12).Open coding provided the initial layer of analyzing characters and traits identified, creating categories, and making comparisons between each of them. Axial coding provided an additional layer which allowed me to add my own personal input as I analyzed the character traits, actions, and narratives that each show constructed and make hypotheses that was tested against the data and either was reinforced, revised, or rejected. This method was used in narrativizing trends and consistencies between the three series, and identifying concepts that functioned technically and ideologically across the three series.

Additionally, the use of constant comparative method, derived from Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used to complement the open and axial coding in developing

grounded theory. It was used to identify consistent trends and concepts that were found in the three series. Constant comparative method allowed me to sketch out each main or supporting character in regards to their function to the series. This was pivotal in helping me establish strong recurring narrative and character claims as well as connecting functions of ideology that operated similarly in each series.

Lastly, I approached my data using emergent design, derived from Taylor & Lindlof's (2011) work, which consists of adopting new ideas through the analysis of qualitative data. I used this approach in analysis to allow the data to provide cues as to which direction to take when creating my claims. This was utilized largely in constructing each of my claims in the textual analysis more than the desire to answer my initial research questions. Allowing emergent design to inform my approach was an important step, as it provided me direction throughout my textual analysis.

Validation/Assuring Quality

The collection and analysis methods that were used in my study to construct major character and narrative claims are validated by an extensive process of triangulation and drafting to vet the processes that I performed during my textual analysis. Triangulation allowed me to effectively use constant comparative method in conjunction with axial coding to understand the data that I collected and make connections to larger concepts and functions within the text. This helped to ensure that the data I collected would be informed by the other texts and not as informed by my own personal bias regarding the topic. Lastly, the use of bracketing, as derived by Tufford and Newman (2010), provided a framework for analyzing data without it being tainted by presuppositions and hypotheses. This was utilized by reflexively citing my bias

throughout the study as a black male media producer and critical scholar while allowing the texts to reveal the unspoken logic once decoded.

Chapter 4: Analysis

The Divide of Black-ness

Black-ness is divided in terms of the social consciousness communicated by black characters in relation to the establishment of the dominant society. Black-produced OTT televisual content communicates social consciousness symbolically in two ways: through perception from other black characters, and by identity of self. This symbolic communication is signified through the physical attributes of the characters in their representation as well as character discourse, which appears to be influenced by material culture. The division of black-ness comes through the differing narratives that we see with each character in the television shows. The social consciousness of each character is defined explicitly by their actions both individually and collectively in relation to the overarching, white establishment governing the realities of each show.

Looking at the social, technical, and ideological codes of television formed by Fiske (1987) in relation to characters and the narrative of a television show provides context in terms of the analysis of the text. It is important to set up the characters and the corresponding Fiske codes to explain the function of each character. Additionally, setting up each character allows us to understand the narrative that the show discusses.

In *Luke Cage*, Congresswoman Mariah Dillard and her cousin Cornell Stokes both seek to revive black excellence in Harlem using different approaches that are both invested in criminal activity and corruption. Mariah seeks to use her political power to help Harlem become "black again," while Cornell uses her political power to run crime organizations that carry the front of black excellence. Mariah refers to Harlem as her "birthright" and challenges everyone, including her cousin, when contested regarding it.

When we compare the birthright with one from the dominant society, discourse regarding the transferring of wealth and power takes place. Mariah's view of Harlem as her birthright relates to her family's tradition of being revered as powerful in the black communities of Harlem. Although she supports Cornell, she disagrees with his criminal approach, saying "I have no illusions about our family's legacy, but you are now turning legitimate money illegal all over again." This is important in understanding the criminal legacy of their family as well as the conflicting consciousness of both characters in this series.

Money and wealth are associated with both Mariah and Cornell as traits of black excellence that are embodied in their attires and their actions throughout the series. Both characters dress formally in every appearance on-screen. Cornell always wears expensive, slim-fit suits. This is symbolic of the money that he has, as well as his front as a legitimate businessman. Mariah dresses conservatively, wearing fancy dresses or blouses and skirts typical of a female politician. This relates to the series *Broke,* in that, the three main characters, Miloh, Mo, and Paul decided to live together, moving from Philadelphia to Los Angeles in a leap of faith to find the greatest level of success and opportunity in their dream careers as black college graduates. The approach of appearing credible by means of attire, money, and the relocation to another city relates to their consciousness of living in a capitalist society. These characters each seek to embody the expectations that are expected of them in terms of what success signifies in a capitalistic world for black people.

In several shots of Cornell at his business, he stands in front of a picture of the revered rap legend Notorious B.I.G. wearing a crown. This photo is significant, as '90s

hip-hop was considered music that spoke for the voiceless in the underworld and in the hood. This photo signifies how Cornell views himself as the king of the black community of Harlem as a prosperous, well known black man that has the respect of the streets. This respect is significant in understanding Cornell's character and narrative as a man who is seeking complete power, wealth, and respect of the Harlem citizens as a black man. Both Mariah and Cornell believe in the importance of being in powerful positions to influence the people of Harlem. Mariah invested political money into helping Cornell rebuild a nightclub called The Harlem Renaissance, a family legacy, which they view as a staple of the Harlem community in terms of black excellence and black talent. This club is rather significant in understanding both characters throughout the series. The Harlem Renaissance signifies both black consciousness to the black community publically while signifying criminal activity privately through the front of black excellence.

Although, Mariah is a part of the establishment through her participation in Congress, her public approach toward social consciousness is centered specifically on improving the black experience of Harlem citizens in a time of gentrification. When we consider the corruption and illegal activity that Mariah engages in with her cousin, it confirms that privately, she is not in alignment with the establishment. This relates to Troy from the series *Dear White People*, who worked with the white establishment publicly, yet often engaged in illegal and deplorable activity privately. Troy is the son of the Dean of Winchester University, which is the setting of this series, and he is represented as a light-skinned, preppy, fit character that is often dressed in expensive tailored suits. Troy's representation suggests that he is the handsome, well-received light-skinned black person who works hard, and carries himself uprightly as the son of the

dean. His perceived desires to work hard with and trust in the political systems of Winchester to be successful relates to the ideology of the American Dream.

Mariah often puts up the politician front, making statements such as "These are not projects…It's going to be a community as soon as I get the rest of the funding…this affordable housing initiative is going to change things man." Although she speaks the language of politicians, she is, as Cornell suggests, "the laundromat for the money for him to carry out his criminal interests rather than a member of the establishment. Relating back to Troy, his character receives similar discourse as a "member" of the establishment. One black professor honestly tells Troy that he is a "prop," that is positioned "to show that not all black students want to burn this place down [Winchester]," while students such as Sam and even Coco refer to him as a "puppet." As members of the establishment, Troy and Mariah are used in their positions willingly even to the detriment of black people. This is important in understanding how black characters outside of the establishment view black people who are participants of the white establishment.

Once Cornell exposes Mariah for her hypocrisy and insults her public political front, she attacks and murders him. This relates with Troy's signification of freedom through engaging in public criminal behavior. While Troy is viewed in such a distinct persona in public, behind the scenes, he has a poor grade point average, he has an affair with a lesbian professor, illegally drinks underage, and smokes marijuana. The camera spends a great deal of time exploring his physique, showing several close up and medium shots of his naked body in private spaces such as bathing, having sex, and smoking in his bathroom throughout the season. The attention that the camera pays to his naked body in

contrast to other characters in similar scenes contradicts his public persona among the students and the establishment of Winchester. His public persona connects him to whiteness and the establishment by representing him as a law-abiding young black man in contrast to his protesting peers, yet his private identity is the opposite.

In the season finale of *Dear White People*, Troy finds himself in the intersection of a town hall meeting that locked him out, and a protest by black students, who also do not embrace him. This visual perfectly illustrates the position that Troy is in between the black students and the establishment of Winchester. This leads Troy to destroy a window at a town hall in rage, getting him arrested. This public act of crime signifies his freedom and relief from the pressures of being forced into a box of social consciousness. When he busts the window, Troy is shown using a low angle, hero shot, which symbolizes his freedom. He symbolically freed himself through illegal means, yet in this case, he did so publicly. Understanding freedom through deplorable actions in these two characters is important in understanding the binary crisis of public and private identity that pressures and divides black characters in these series.

This division of public and private personas relates to the divisions of identity that functions within black characters. When Troy and Mariah are seen in the public, their characters function as politically correct as they can, while in private, their actions are in direct conflict with their presentation of selves. In both cases, the private identities of these characters of the establishment are closer to who they really identify as, but the public persona reflects the pressures of society to which they are expected to conform. The private identity is the embodiment of rebellion to the pressures from both the establishment and the communities to which these characters belong.

After Mariah kills her cousin Cornell, she frames Luke Cage, the protagonist of the series, and takes up a social justice approach against him to conjure fear among the public that he is a menace that is a threat to the community. Additionally, she takes advantage of the legal establishment by arguing they are not an ally to black citizens. This is significant in understanding the complexity of her identity as a member of the political establishment in this series. She hosts a rally against law enforcement, where she says "the police putting their hands on yet another young black man…it is wrong…do I trust the cops.? Not blindly…" Her political power as well as her connections with the shared social consciousness of oppressed black citizens provide her with this platform, giving her the impression of social consciousness as a member of the establishment. In this instance, her character points out the corruption of the establishment by taking an anti-establishment approach, talking about the social issues that impact black citizens in a way that positions her as socially conscious. Mariah's character represents a perspective of consciousness that seeks to use black problems as a means for creating a platform for her own personal and private gains.

This relates to the character Lionel from *Dear White People*, a queer black male character majoring in journalism, is not accepted in many black spaces because of his perceived frailness and lack of overt "masculine" features and personality. This created a phobia within him of black people, as the narrator said, "that remind him of the kids from high school" who were insulting of what they perceived to be his queer-ness. When he heard about an invite being sent to students to attend a racist, black face party, he brought it to the Black Student Union's attention, and rallied with them to protest, and disrupt the party. Subsequently, because of his efforts to disrupt the party, many of the Black Student

Union congratulated him, saying "Welcome to the revolution" and accepted him into their circle. This subsequently gives him access to the black student body that he previously did not have, to write compelling articles about the black experience of students at Winchester University.

Lionel's role in covering black issues on campus in the newspaper gives the impression that he is anti-establishment, yet once examined, we find that the ironically named *Independent* newspaper is funded by the rich Hancock family, who also fund the establishment of Winchester. This is significant when considering the conflict that black characters have with the establishment, and the subtle, yet impactful involvement in how they function in each institution. The funding of the Hancocks conflicts the interests of the writers to avoid any articles or stories that paint the Hancock family in a negative light that would lead them to pull their funding.

The editor of the newspaper told Lionel "The Hancocks are off limits," once he became informed about how they impact the affairs of the black students. This places Lionel in a situation where he has to choose between adhering to the desires of the establishment or standing up for the truth that will help advance the causes of the black student body of Winchester. Throughout the series, Lionel works within the establishment to help bring attention to the issues that the black student body faces. Lionel uses the system to gain access to secret information, which he shares with the black students to combat the establishment. Despite his job as a reporter, he often undermined his success as a reporter by leaking his own stories, saying "I guess I just don't like the idea of telling someone else's truth." This suggests Lionel desires for the black students to control their narratives rather than the establishment.

When considering characters working within the establishment to help black characters, Detective Misty Knight is an essential character in understanding how working in the establishment functions in *Luke Cage*. Misty is a black woman in law enforcement who wants to bring back the black communities in Harlem by serving and protecting them through the legal system. She is a brown skinned woman that wears her hair in a curly style, which is atypical of women that work in the white male establishment such as law enforcement. Her hair signifies her connection to the black citizens of Harlem. She is from Harlem, and has built a legacy as an active member in the community through her achievements and success in life, and what she gives back to Harlem in service.

There are several contradictions to what Misty believes regarding the establishment, where she sees the corruption and flaws that many black citizens in the series mention. Her partner, Scarfe, as well as other detectives and officers in law enforcement are revealed to be in partnership with Cornell throughout the series. Although this functioned in the establishment of law enforcement, this did not stop Misty from working to bring justice through the legal establishment throughout the series. Another contradiction comes into play in the pilot episode, where she breaks her role as an undercover detective scooping the Harlem Renaissance to having sex with Luke Cage, who was a bartender at the restaurant. When Luke Cage becomes a person of interest with law enforcement, Misty hides her conflict of interest with him to her partner, and secretly deals with Luke in secret because of their unique relationship. Luke Cage presents a major disruption in Misty's beliefs of the system and establishment of justice through their private interactions. Although she has seen and experienced corruption

among her law enforcement peers as well as failure of the legal systems, she often says "the system will win." Misty believes that while the system of justice of the U.S. is not perfect, it should still be trusted by citizens of Harlem. This becomes significant when considering that even Misty, a purveyor of justice, trusts Luke more than the system despite their disagreements with him.

Among main characters who operated outside of the establishment, Luke Cage is a major character to consider. Luke is a former law enforcement official who became a vigilante and superhero for Harlem due to the corruption and crime spearheaded by Cornell and Mariah that led to the death of his mentor Pop. His decision also stemmed from the limited impact that law enforcement has made in stopping crime in the black communities of Harlem. Luke is represented as a huge, bald, dark-skinned black man that often wears a hoodie. His character is often shot using medium and full shots that shows his stature in comparison to others. This is important when considering how his character ideologically relates to many stereotypes that are assigned to black bodies. This is important in understanding how Luke Cage is represented as a signifier of anti-establishment and black-ness.

Luke Cage was in law enforcement before being falsely accused of a crime, which made him serve time in prison. This experience shaped his view of the legal establishment as well as himself as a black man. Luke taking justice into his own hands as a former law enforcement member signifies that the establishment is not effective in bringing justice to those in need. Since Luke is represented as a black male character in a series heavily informed by material reality, he understands that black citizens are less likely to receive justice than white citizens. He takes this anti-establishment approach as a

result of his super powers, which protects him from danger and provides the strength to defend himself.

The varying experiences of each black character in *Luke Cage* is centered on the theme of what the black communities of Harlem need. This is a similar narrative to the characters of *Dear White People*, who desire to have a college experience that is not impaired because of their race, and characters of *Broke* which desire to be successful black men and women to make their families and community back home proud. Each of the four main characters in *Luke Cage* want to see the black people Harlem prosper for different reasons and from different perspectives. Each of these reasons are challenged among them in terms of their black-ness and their social consciousness.

Cornell Stokes seeks to run the streets of Harlem through trafficking guns and powerful weapons to gang organizations. He takes an anti-establishment approach through organized crime and illegal activities to reach his goal of black empowerment, where complete power, wealth, and control of Harlem in the hands of a black man. Cornell desires to be viewed as a powerful black man, regardless of the casualties that come along the ride. In the pilot episode, we see a medium shot of Cornell standing over someone who betrayed him, where he beats the person to death. Additionally, we see his head perfectly aligned with the crown on the Biggie Smalls portrait as though he had it on his head. This scene signifies both his power and domineering approach in running the streets of Harlem. This approach leads to organized crime and trouble in the streets of Harlem, which are counterproductive of his desires to see black excellence in Harlem. Waging war against the systems and institutions put in place in Harlem in such radical approach that is not accepted by many blacks in the narrative of this series, yet as his

narrative establishes, we begin to understand why he takes this approach. The criminal family associations that raised Cornell as a child controlled his ability to establish his own identity outside of crime. This led to his desire for absolute power and control over everything, in an attempt to gain control of his life.

Although Mariah gives the impression publically that she believes in working with the political establishment to bring black excellence to Harlem, she still works with the underworld to get things she needs done. She desires to be at the forefront of the movement, and she also wants complete political power. She desires power, yet hides it behind the concept of black empowerment as her reason for wanting power. Her belief that being in power will allow for her to give Harlem what it needs is mainly self-serving to her desires rather than serving the idea of making Harlem a Black Renaissance again. Mariah and Cornell both have the exact same end goal, yet take two different approaches in gaining it. This approach proved to be toxic in productivity, which was confirmed when she killed him for conflicting her in this pursuit.

The linking of politics to the underworld that is performed by Cornell and Mariah produces a dysfunctional perspective to black consciousness, which brings disruption to the establishment, yet is self-serving to only them. Their desire to have power as the black faces of Harlem is problematic because the exploitation that the underworld and the establishment participate in both bear negative consequences for marginalized groups. Having a political agenda connected to corruption only serves the interests of those in privileged positions to not be as impacted. This relates to Coco, an antagonist in *Dear White People*, who refers to the social consciousness of the students from the Black Student Union as "self-serving, blacker than thou, propaganda." When social

consciousness is operationalized in both series through binary approaches, black identity becomes divided among characters in terms of how they are treated in their communities. While Mariah and Cornell engage in criminal activity to benefit themselves, the Black Student Union desires to use legal means to oppose the establishment and produce progress. Both approaches, however, seem to lead surrounding characters to believe that these approaches are self-serving at best, and of no benefit to black students at large. Sam and the BSU's belief that change is connected to their class as Ivy League students, who come from families that are likely middle to upper class, and have the access to influence their experience. This invisible function of class plays a subtle role in understanding why they not only believe that they could bring change, but also believe they are entitled to better conditions for black students.

Luke Cage presents a different perspective of a black man that takes an anti-establishment approach for the betterment of black citizens of Harlem. As an ex-convict, Luke experienced the problems of the system by losing everything he had in life to wrongful conviction of a crime. His connection to an establishment that failed him in addition to gaining supernatural strength and impenetrable skin positioned him to be against the establishment. He often used his superpowers to put justice in his own hands. His approach connected with the black citizens of Harlem in a special way, making him a star in the eyes of the citizens despite the framing of Cornell death placed on him by Mariah.

Since Luke took justice in his own hands, he often ran into issues with Cornell and Mariah, whose efforts of organized crime he continued to sabotage throughout the series. Luke's connection with the citizens of Harlem helped him to understand the

negative effects of Mariah and Cornell's approaches of treating the black communities of

Harlem. Additionally, Luke's clash with Detective Misty and law enforcement was a

product of his disapproval of the legal system, and the flaws that it has in prosecuting

criminals while falsely prosecuting the innocent. Luke's vigilante approach in bringing

justice was in opposition to Misty, who wanted to trust him, yet did not approve of him

not working with law enforcement to bring justice. Misty's persistence in standing up for

the legal establishment that faced corruption and an inability to protect citizens of Harlem

was centered in ideology of what the establishment should be rather than what it was.

Operation Woke-ness

In *Dear White People*, black-ness is first communicated through formal group

membership and through being "woke." "Woke-ness" is portrayed primarily through the

discourse between the black characters. Characters who engage in social discourse that is

against the racist establishment and systems of Winchester are regarded as "woke," while

characters that approach racism in Winchester from an assimilationist approach are

ostracized, and not considered woke. The characteristics of "woke-ness" are portrayed in

the connection of black bodies to the rebellion of the white establishment that perpetuate

racism. This is mainly signified socially in the discourses, hairstyles, and attires of the

black characters in comparison to the white characters. The operationalization of "woke-

ness" in this series is associated with black-ness and social consciousness, while the

opposite can be assigned to whiteness a loyalty to the white establishment.

Luke Cage playing the role of a black vigilante hero parallels Sam White from

Dear White People. Sam is the president of the BSU, and is represented as a straight

biracial woman who is read as black, with natural hair, that desires justice and better

conditions for black students at Winchester. She is considered controversial because of her protesting of Winchester and anti-establishment approach to addressing racism on campus. Her character traits are important to recognize when understanding the complexity of her character, as well as her constant contradictions in her identity throughout the series. Her character is often shot close up, and framed in the center of the camera, breaking the fourth wall when she is talking to someone. This implies that she is also seeking to appeal to the viewer in what she is saying. She refers to the BSU as "Winchester's first and only relevant group fighting for black causes on campus."

Luke Cage's character exemplifies the "woke" characteristics that are perpetuated in *Dear White People*. Both characters take radical approaches in fighting against the systems that do not provide justice to the people of their communities. Luke and Sam put disrupting the establishment in their own hands, and take the necessary measures needed to get the results they desire. Although Sam cannot avoid the legal ramifications of her actions the way Luke can, she is able to use her platform as a radio DJ and campus activist to challenge Winchester and bring attention to racism. Luke uses his super strength and impenetrable skin to skip going through the police and the corrupt legal establishment to bring justice and a voice to the oppressed people of Harlem. The function of Luke's powers and Sam's radio platform offer a platform for addressing the corrupt establishment. As a result of this, both characters are regarded as socially conscious, and "woke" in reference to the establishment that they face.

The concept of "woke-ness" in reference to social consciousness is the defining characteristic of each character in *Dear White People*. In this series, woke-ness of one student organization is ultimately defined in relation to the woke-ness of other

organizations. Sam overviews each black organization on campus at the monthly Black Caucus meeting in a way that problematizes them in terms of their consciousness and service to black students compared to the BSU. Each organization Sam names showcases a character that portrays their group's different social conscious perspectives and approaches. She argues that the African American Student Union (AASU) "...basically does nothing and takes credit for the work of the BSU." This suggests that this organization wants to go along for the ride rather than standing out on a limb for justice in a sacrificial way.

Next, she describes the Black American Forum (Black AF) as "mostly mediocre slam poets...they make hashtags and T-shirts." These symbols signify the social aspect of "woke-ness" which is communicated through pop culture mechanisms. This organization is the hype group that brings the attention to what Sam refers to as the "revolution." Lastly, she mentions the Coalition of Racial Equality (CORE), which is described by their president Troy as "the only group here invited to sit at the dean's quarterly student council." Sam correctly points out that Troy's father is the dean, which makes him and CORE untrustworthy partners and "puppets" to the white establishment of Winchester. Each black organization has characters that represent the claims made by Sam.

The embodiment of an AASU member highlighted in this show was Kelsey, a black woman character that has many white friends, and is viewed as naïve to racism. In her first appearance, Kelsey is represented as a token black suburban girl with straight weave hair, holding a cup of coffee, and who speaks with a dialect that is stereotypical of younger white women. This representation positions her character as a not conscious, or not "woke," comedic relief for the "woke" characters in the show. When discussing the

black face party, she says "guys, you know what this is? This is racism." Reggie responds to her, saying "what a revelation, Kelsey" sarcastically, in a response to the obvious statement she made. This example highlights her lack of understanding of racism as a character as well as her position in relation to the other characters as a joke in her on-screen appearances. She was the only represented black student from this organization throughout the series, and is not an integral part of the season's narrative. The function of her character was solely to represent the naivety and lack of consciousness of other black students in relation to the BSU.

Black AF was embodied through one member named Al, who is a light-skinned, black male who dresses in trendy clothing such as graphic t-shirts, jeans, fedoras, etc. The main member of Black AF's character represents being "woke" in a comedic fashion that complements the serious "woke" characters. This binary of serious and comedic is important in understanding woke-ness as a concept that is inclusive of different personalities so long as the personalities do not waver in opposition to the white establishment. One example is where Al says "We need a march on campus, fam. Hashtag Sinchester…Hashtag Black-Farce-Party…Hashtag F$&@-The-Police! That one's evergreen!" Al's discourse throughout the show follows this trend, drawing attention to the revolution, yet not being as substantial to progress on campus as the Black Student Union. While Al's character is not important to the narrative of the series, his character functions to lighten up conversations about racism by providing comedic relief in serious dialogues. This propels the narrative of the series by showing how naturalized conversations of racism are to the black students to the extent that jokes are allowed in serious discourse. He spends the most time on-screen with the Black Student

Union, and is often a complement to the organization in terms of supporting them every step of the way.

Lastly, CORE is represented by Troy, the son of the Dean as well as ex-boyfriend to Sam, and Coco, a former roommate and friend of Sam. These two characters play major roles in the narrative of the series. Coco is introduced as the treasurer of CORE as well as a rival to Sam. Coco is a dark-skinned black woman that wears weaves, and wears expensive blouses and skirts that are atypical of college students. Troy and Coco are in a relationship with each other that is primarily driven by Coco. In sexual scenes, she is portrayed as the dominant partner, as she is framed in positions that are understood as dominant, while Troy is framed as the submissive sexual partner. This signifies Coco's role in their relationship as the one who is in charge. The narrator describes Coco's relationship with Troy saying, "Troy was a legacy kid who had the access a girl like Coco could really get behind." Their relationship is represented as a power move rather than the mutual interest in one another. Troy's position as the Dean's son makes him desirable to Coco despite the many flaws that she is aware of in his life.

When she and Troy are both on-screen, she leads most conversations as the dominant person in their relationship. This is important because Troy's character does not know what he wants, but is constantly guided by his father and Coco, who have personal motives that are carried out through his character. For example, when talking with the prestigious Hancock family, she restates the plan Troy just proposed on admitting students with community service experience, but adds "you'll get more applicants. You'll admit the same number of them, and the acceptance rate goes down, and that's something to brag about." This prompts Mr. Hancock to favorably respond saying "And I do enjoy

bragging," suggesting that her approach was the one that spoke the same language. She also mentions her prestigious mentor to the family to gain credibility among them, yielding Mr. Hancock to say "I had no idea that you were one of the McCullen Scholars. He always had a keen eye for talented youth." Coco is represented as the black girl who had to work harder to succeed than everyone because of her dark skin complexion, yet still seeks to be the most successful through assimilating to the problematic structures that mistreat her race.

As a dark-skinned black woman from Chicago, Coco is very familiar with racism, and what it means to be "woke." This is reflected during a night at a party her freshman year with her white girl friends waiting to be approached by white men, no one approaches her to go into the party, while all her white friends are escorted inside by men. She comes home to Sam and Reggie watching the news report of an officer not being indicted for the killing of an unarmed black teen and says, "Turn that off. How can you watch this s*&%?" Sam responds "I know it's graphic, but we got to stay woke," while Coco replies, "I was born woke Sam. The s*&% I saw growing up...I just can't..." The painful experiences of racism that she has faced growing up has caused her to ignore the topic, and consequently, reject being "woke."

Coco reinforces this, making comments on the BSU's efforts to bring attention to racial injustices, saying "it's still not gonna change anything." Coco's character is represented as one that does not believe that racism can be stopped by her individual efforts, and denies its impact by striving to co-exist in the system despite the conflicts it presents to her. In effect, she rejects "woke-ness" as presented by Sam and the BSU, believing that she has a better shot in proving she is brilliant to the white establishment

regardless of being black. This approach relates to the concept of colorblindness, which suggests that individual differences are of no bearing if an individual strives to be a good, hardworking human. Coco relies on this approach in her pursuit of success through the interdependence of the problematic white establishment and systems.

Coco's approach relates to Misty's approach to justice as trusting the establishment to eventually win in favor of the oppressed and not placing the fight for justice in the hands of members of society. While Misty and Coco both understood the corruption and problematic nature of the establishment that they worked with, they continued to trust them, believing that the work that they do in these systems as individuals without disrupting them can bring improvement to society. Both character's views of social consciousness parallel many forms of conservative discourse that condemns speech and protests that addresses the longstanding problematic white establishment of this country.

When Sam and Coco were friends, Sam wore her natural hair more curly and straight, which showcased her differences as a biracial woman. When Sam started to intentionally wear her hair similar to black women with natural hair to symbolize being "woke," Coco took shots at her hair, and referred to it as a "mess atop your head you like to pass off as natural held together by bobby pins and prayer." Coco's weave in her head prompts Sam to respond saying "you wanna go there with half of India's GDP on your head?" Coco's character resents the implications that Sam's views on social consciousness suggests, which amount to closed minds regarding what it means to be black and socially conscious.

While Troy and Coco had relationships with Sam, their divisions with her comes from the lack of "woke-ness" of Coco and Troy. Troy positions himself as the voice of reason, saying "I'd like to use this meeting to cull some thoughts that CORE can actually take to the dean." This ties into how he carries himself as a politician being candidate for student body president and with his preppy attire. Troy's approach relates to the bureaucratic ideologies that are imposed on him from his father which influence his approach. As a result, Sam and the BSU paint Troy and the CORE organization as "puppets" to his father and the current establishment of Winchester, calling him names such as "Uncle Tom" and "Clarence Thomas." The representation of black characters that disagree with Troy promotes the ideology of black loyalty being confined in the context of being socially conscious, making it easily broken when a member deviates from what is considered "woke." While characters like Misty from *Luke Cage* risked their lives to protect the oppressed in Harlem, Luke Cage resonated with the community more because he gave the impression of loyalty and authenticity as a vigilante that did not work with the establishment. This further confirms that black consciousness is divided in each series.

Contrasting perspectives of black consciousness is represented in the interactions of the characters. During the monthly unified organizational meeting, Kelsey makes the statement "all my white friends are talking about it" when referencing the black face party on campus, and argued "yelling at people who are already on our side, using hashtags and marches...cathartic though it may be...it just makes us look angry." Kelsey having white friends in addition to her defense of white student allies ties her to whiteness and the establishment, which also is assigned to not being "woke."

In another example, Sam's best friend wears a shirt that says "Black, No Sugar, No Cream" which prompts Sam to say "I love/hate your shirt...I can't wear it. I have cream" citing the fact that she is biracial, and not completely black. In this context, being completely black is represented as being authentic, while being mixed with white is less authentic. Both examples are very important in connection to understanding the identity of each character as black students. With limited time to portray characters in television, subtle statements and visuals are used to reveal the identities and characteristics of each representation of black-ness on-screen. Sam's example functions as an insecurity that because she is biracial, she has to work harder to be respected as "woke" and black in how she carries herself. Kelsey's statement reveals that she does not want to disrupt her allegiance to her white friends to protest the racial injustice on campus.

This division of black-ness is heightened through Reggie, Sam's friend and partner in the BSU, who creates a phone application called "Woke or Not Woke," that ranks the "woke-ness" of each black student at Winchester. The application is introduced with a photo on the screen and the following two buttons: one with a black fist emoji and another with a sleeping emoji. The black fist represents being woke, while the sleeping emoji represents not being woke. When the app is demonstrated with the photo of Coco, Samantha and two other friends in unison say, "Not woke," not approving of her. The app has a ranking system, with Samantha and Reggie ranked first and fourth respectively and less "woke" black students like Coco and Troy ranked near the bottom. By gamifying "woke-ness," *Dear White People* has allowed for this concept to be represented in the actions and behaviors of each character.

The "Woke or Not Woke" phone app reinforces the binary of "woke" or "not woke," by presenting the social consciousness of black students as a competition of who is the most "woke" student on campus. Additionally, it gives representation to the concept of being woke, which is ethereal, by making it something that can be signified through symbols such as hairstyles, clothing, and applications. Woke students appeared to be greatly respected among their black peers, while students who are not as "woke" are not respected by black students, yet more respected by the white student body and the establishment of Winchester. This element of competition is most prevalent among students who are against the perpetuated racist establishment of Winchester that does not adequately address systematic racism on their campus. This competition exists as a means of condemning black students that do not share the same views in addressing racism as well as propping up the students that do.

Black-ness is boxed into the overall consciousness of each black character, and whether or not they are "woke." Black characters, who appeared less interested in attacking racism and white privilege on campus through radical means were belittled and considered "not woke" by the "woke" groups of black characters. The parameters of "woke-ness" in *Dear White People* are articulated by the willingness of a character to rebel against and protest the institutions and systems of Winchester and makes "woke-ness" a choice. This relates to *Luke Cage*, where Luke is celebrated by the community and the people of the underworld, while Misty is viewed questionably because of her participation with the establishment. This creates a binary of those that are for change within the current system of the school and those who are against the system of

Winchester, and want to disrupt it by any means necessary. Simply put, this divides black people who are "woke" and those that are "not woke."

Dear White People highlights the division of consciousness and competition through the student organizations, which position the members as the black leaders of Winchester. While each organization is described in terms of their "woke-ness," the binary of "woke" and "not woke" divides their social consciousness. Upon further examination, rhetoric surrounding being "woke" can be mapped to being black with the characters of the series, while being "not woke" logically maps to being white. This then makes sense of the comparisons of Sam to Tracee Ellis Ross as opposed to Rashida Jones, which highlights the binary of black and white despite both women being biracial. Since Tracee Ellis Ross' speech, actions and physical traits are in line with what is associated with black-ness, she is read as black, which makes her an ideal person to compare with Sam. When comparing the actions, speech, and physical traits of Sam to Rashida Jones, we find that she is read as white, which Sam does not have the ability to do.

The distinguishing factor that seems to be reinforced throughout the series is the marriage of black skin and consciousness that leads characters to action. The students that are not considered "woke" are often connected to whiteness in terms of their friendships, behaviors, and approach to addressing racism at Winchester. AASU and CORE members are positioned to whiteness, as they are not considered "woke," while members of the BSU and Black AF are mapped to black-ness because they are "woke." This binary approach is reinforced in how the BSU and Black AF connect with each other better, while members of AASU and CORE are linked together throughout the series.

The characters from the AASU and CORE both have major connections with white people and the white establishment of Winchester. These connections and relationships create conflicts of interest in terms of how the black students from BSU and Black AF view them in being "woke" or "not woke." Based on how "woke-ness" is operationalized in this series, any connection to white people brings into question how "woke" a character is, as evidenced by Sam's hidden relationship with a white man. The binary does not appear to leave much room for characters to negotiate their interactions with white people, which escalates this disruption throughout the show. This major division of the black student characters represents the black-ness as being divided in perspectives of social consciousness.

We continue to see this dynamic of division in terms of blacks being individuals regardless of their perspectives of consciousness. When it is exposed that Samantha has a white boyfriend named Gabe, this creates a contradiction in both her expressed values, and her "woke-ness." One black character makes the statement, "Miss Black Power over here dating white boys" while Reggie shows contempt toward her verbally and nonverbally. The contrast is formed by her stances that she has taken against the racist, white establishment of Winchester. The white establishment is a function of the white male dominated power systems, which create ideological spaces that dehumanizes non-white men and women while exalting and protecting whiteness as the standard of humanity.

Sam begins to receive comments jokingly from her friends and other black students such as "if I knew you liked 'em light, I would have hollered" and "what y'all finna do? Go on a hike just for Instagram? Play hacky sack? Open up an Etsy shop like

that's a real job?" The significance of this quote is found when the activities are connected to white-ness, suggesting that Sam will begin to identify with white-ness and the establishment because of her relationship with Gabe. She receives these comments because of her strong commitment to black-ness and being "woke." She attempts to bring her boyfriend around her "woke" friends, yet is very insecure about his appearance. Gabe dresses in baggy sweatpants and hoodies that are normal for college students. She says to him, "what are you wearing... Don't you have some J's? [referring to Air Jordans] ...Since when do you even wear sweatpants?" He responds saying "are you trying to *My Fair Lady* me for your black friends?" and asks "...so in this instance, you want me to appropriate your culture?" Gabe's attire ideologically signifies whiteness in the mind of Sam, which she believes will make his race more salient to her friends. The salience of whiteness is a major disruption in the binary of "woke" and "not woke."

Sam as a character represents the contradictory behavior that blacks negotiate in being individuals not limited to a given ideology of black-ness. Sam's best friend Joelle highlights her stances by saying "you stay talking about how we can't give up on our men." Joelle also says "Sam, we met in the comments section of that *Medium* article you wrote. 'Don't Fall in Love with Your Oppressor: A Black Girl's Guide to Love at Winchester.'" The cognitive dissonance that Sam portrays disrupts her "woke" view held by her peers, and makes her seem like a fraud. In the binary of "woke" and "not woke," when contradictions exist, black consciousness then becomes less unified and volatile in terms of the trust, as whiteness and the white establishment is considered untrustworthy. This is highlighted when Sam's boyfriend Gabe calls the police when a party they

attended goes out of control, which leads to a gun being pulled out on Reggie. This is essential in reinforcing the concerns of disruption of "woke-ness" with whiteness.

Sam does not have straight hair, a trait that is associated with white bodies, but wears her hair in a natural style pinned up to her head. This signifies that she does identify with the black half of her biracial identity as well as the "woke" culture in terms of wearing her hair natural. Because of her relationship causing a major disruption in her life, she says "maybe I'm not supposed to have a personal life. Maybe all of this is a sign that I'm just supposed to focus on the important things." The different ideologies that Sam has to negotiate between as a "woke" black woman and an individual human have brought several challenges and societal pressures into her relationship.

Black character identity seems to be in shambles regarding what is defined as progressive behavior for black society, and the pressure to conform to this behavior seem to be socially reinforced ideologically. This relates back to the binary conflict of being "woke" or "not woke" in that characters are judged by this in all their actions. Since the characters are represented in this binary, Sam being exposed for dating a white man begins to disrupt this idea of "woke-ness" carried by the "woke" students. With Sam being considered by her peers as the most "woke" student on campus, her contradictory actions create a division in their view, breaking the binary, and opening doors for fluidity in what it means to be "woke."

Similar to Sam, Troy is pressured by his father and Coco to stand with the establishment of Winchester so they all can receive the level of success and achievement that they personally desire. Troy does not desire to be placed in a box or binary, but rather wants to find himself through his own personal desires, which he has not been

given the space to identify. He escapes being boxed into the binary of "woke" and "not woke" throughout the series by making poor and often illegal decisions and engaging in behavior that do not apply to either of the expressed binaries. This is important in understanding how representation of social consciousness of black people is often a disruption to the narrative due to the division of perspectives.

The Black Student Union ran into conflict by the Coalition of Racial Equality for their perceived radical approaches in challenging the establishment of Winchester. Troy and Coco fought against them for not taking an assimilation approach in working with the establishment. Troy was very conflicted as to whether he should challenge the establishment of Winchester that his father is a part of, or continue to find solutions that bring together the existing establishment and black students. Troy agrees with the Black Student Union similarly to how Misty agrees with the sentiments that Luke has regarding the establishment, yet is faced with the pressures of the establishment that he and his father are members of. The clashing of perspectives of social consciousness among black characters supports the idea of a divide between black characters in terms of their social consciousness.

Trapped in the Dark

Black-ness is an inescapable disruption to the narratives of these series. Black characters are often faced with the interjection of race in all major areas of human activity that they engage in. Since television aims to paint a reality from the lens of ideology, black character's skin color plays a role in their treatment among white characters, as well as black characters. Additionally, black-ness plays a role culturally in

the experience of the narrative of characters in terms of how they are treated, and their position in society.

In *Dear White People*, Winchester is an Ivy League school, which bears the expectation or assumption that the students that attend must have the means to pay for their attendance. This suggests that the black students of Winchester are more likely to be children from middle to upper class families that could afford to fund their children. While class plays a major role in the black student's ability to attend an Ivy League institute, the only representation of class that is mentioned is with Coco. She was described as a young, inner city scholar that was supported by Leonard McCullen, a philanthropist that saw her potential, and supported her to be the first in her family to attend college. This suggests ideologically that although the black students come from families that have money, black-ness is more salient to them than class.

This tension between class and race is revealing when considering why black students, who are from families that may have comparable financial situations to white students, find themselves fighting racism. Although this dynamic operates among them, the fact that it is not as much of a factor for Coco suggests that her experience coming from a worst financial situation makes her appreciate being in a prestigious space despite racial mistreatment. Coco can look past racism and the white establishment because she looks at the black students as spoiled and ungrateful.

In *Luke Cage*, Mariah and Cornell took great pride in identifying as both rich and unapologetically black leaders of the Harlem community. This gave them the social clout that they desired in their public perception, which matters in being viewed as powerful

black leaders and faces of the black community in the series. In relation to *Broke*, black-ness was not a disruption to the overall narrative of the black character's lives.

When black-ness is not acknowledged in a represented scenario that is common in the minds of viewers, it is often acknowledged as deliberate. In the series *Broke*, black-ness does not seem to follow this trend of division along the lines of social consciousness. Each of the three main characters dated interracially, yet it never presented a disruption with their black identities. In one instance, the character Mo goes on a double date with his roommate Miloh, and takes out a white woman. The focus of Miloh, however, was on Mo eating ramen noodles prior to the date, which he argues, "I don't plan on being hungry for a dinner that I have to pay for…I gotta eat noodles, then I also pay for whatever Vanessa wants." Mo eating ramen noodles before a date signifies his class, in that, it is an inexpensive food that will save him the cost of an expensive meal for himself at the restaurant. Additionally, this is also an extension of a state school college education rather than Ivy League.

Race in terms of friendships and dating was not mentioned in conversation among the three friends or in any private or public discourses. This deviates from *Dear White People*, where Sam's boyfriend was constantly referred to by her friends and foes as her "white bae." This suggests that the characters of *Broke* are conscious of the salience of class and gender, but not the intersection of race. This connects with the use of sarcastic statements regarding their financial situations, which are both light-hearted, yet revealing of their financial struggles. Social consciousness only comes into play in terms of gender and class with race bringing little disruption among the black characters of this series. In relation to Coco from *Dear White People*, she does not view her race as much as a

disruption as her class growing up in Chicago. She dresses and carries herself socially as though she is in a different class economically, which signifies her desires to be seen in the same light of the wealthy white people, who are a part of the establishment. When comparing her to the other characters of the series and the characters of *Broke*, it appears that race is avoided by characters as a disruption when there are financial issues that the character experiences.

Class is the recurring disruption in every episode of *Broke*, hence the title. Miloh, Mo, and Paul are three black young adult college graduates that both live together because they cannot afford to live in California without having roommates. Miloh is a brown-skinned black woman with braided hair, who dresses casual, yet conservatively, not revealing much of her body or skin. This is important in understanding her character in terms of how class and gender conflicts at times throughout the series in terms of the expectations she has as a woman. While Mo and Paul are the main characters of the series, their role supports the narrative of Miloh's disruptive situation living with two men away from home.

Miloh's conservative style of dressing comes from her mother, who is very conservative in her attire, and constantly projects it onto her daughter, making comments such as "I have seen more breasts escaping shirts here [California]…than I have ever seen in my entire life." Her conservative approach to her attire is signified through wearing a skirt, and covering her body so she does not show off too much skin. Miloh clashes with her mother regarding her view of gender expectations that she believes apply to women such as dressing "like an adult woman" and "livin' with two men," asking her "have you thought about moving in with some girls." Her mother reinforces several ideologies of

gender roles that can be problematic with women as a whole and can minimize their roles in life. This suggests that Miloh's financial situation puts her in a situation where she becomes disruptive as a woman living with men in a series that is informed by material culture.

Miloh rejects her mother's imposed views, calling her "sexist," and saying, "just know I'm not going to be changing any time soon." Miloh's character is represented as a progressive woman who does not desire to be limited by the problematic ideologies of what and who a woman should be. Her character showcases a woman who is not overly sexualized, and lives with two men, whom she is friends with. Material culture imposes problematic stereotypes on women that live with men as friends, which inform her mother's opinions of her daughter. The desire to be successful in a less than ideal living situation makes class a constant disruption in her character's life.

Each of these three are looking for an opportunity to be successful in California, and have taken a leap of faith moving from Philadelphia, picking up busy work to fund their pursuit. This series seems to address the consequences of the American Dream, where if the characters gain an education, move to California, they should find success. Neither character can find employment or success in their area of study, yet instead are found struggling together to make ends meet.

The characters from *Broke* following the ideology perpetuated by the establishment relates to Coco from *Dear White People*, who acknowledges her experience as a dark-skinned black woman, yet still believes that if she works hard and follows the rules of the establishment, she will be successful despite racism in the white establishment. Additionally, Misty from *Luke Cage* also believes in the ideology of

trusting the establishment to do their part in serving and protecting the communities of Harlem despite the realities that black people have experienced with law enforcement reflected in the series. *Broke* implicitly relates class to race through social codes encoded by the mere use of black bodies while the other two series communicate similar themes in relation to the salience of black-ness.

There was one mention of race that stood out in the pilot episode, where the character Mo goes in for an audition, and they try to light him for the camera, they did not have the appropriate lighting for him, causing him to miss one of his auditions. While talking to a friend on the phone, he says "I didn't go to the second one because I was at the first one for three hours. And when I finally got in the room, they took 15 minutes to set up a light because nobody's prepared to light a black man in America!" In this instance, Mo's race was salient to him, which suggests that there is an accepted baggage that does play a role in his life, but not to the extent of class. His conversation is interrupted by a woman mentioning how he has not paid his audition fee, which he then proceeds to complain about on the phone as well. This interruption ideologically suggests that the greater concern of Mo is his inability to afford the audition fee.

Both *Broke* and *Dear White People* are titled based on the disruptive factor that drives the narrative of each episode. In comparison to *Dear White People*, each episode focused on the experiences of several black characters and how race intersected the uniqueness of them. This led to many mentions of race in terms of their experiences at a predominantly white university. Racial disruption seems to be omitted as a concern of the characters in *Broke,* while it is an inescapable reality in the lives of the black characters in *Dear White People* and *Luke Cage* even in conversations regarding class and gender.

Since *Broke* is a much shorter show in duration (11 minutes an episode), there seemed to be less nuance regarding the intersection of race as a disruption that brings unique experiences and perspectives to the experience of class and gender. Class and gender serve as the major disruptive forces in terms of social consciousness and perspectives of society, superseding their black-ness.

The intersection of class and gender operated with Miloh's character, who would not live with two guys if she had the money to live alone in Los Angeles. Miloh's mother does not want her living with her male friends because she does not consider that appropriate of a woman. While Miloh understands her premise, she chooses to live with them because she cannot find women roommates that would have the money to share the high cost of rent. This omission of racial disruption is further confirmed when considering the love interests of each of the black characters, which were mostly white. The excess neglecting of racial discourse in their dating as well as their personal lives positions colorblindness at the forefront of their social consciousness.

The scene with Mo mentioning his race was the only mention of a character's black-ness throughout the entire season. In this instance, it was an inescapable reality that Mo was a black man auditioning in a white-dominated space. This example, however, is an anomaly in this series. The lack of salient black-ness suggests to me that *Broke* sought to portray the black-ness only in the usage of black bodies rather than using black-ness as a salient part of their identity. This is a distinct difference from *Dear White People*, which decided to highlight systematic racism and white supremacy through the experiences of middle to upper class black Ivy League students. This suggests to me that *Broke* deliberately highlights that in addition to being black, many hard working,

educated black people face issues with capitalism and gender expectations that can be as salient as race.

The emphasis of this series seems to be focusing on the humanity of each of these characters outside of race. While this is an admirable approach to television in terms of bringing black characters in roles typically assumed by white bodies, this intentionally propagates the ideology of colorblindness that has plagued modern approaches of black representation. While the characters of this series offer a unique appeal that does not rely on their race, I believe that they deliberately ignore the topic in a similar fashion to what the dominant society produces, which creates similar barriers for dynamic black representation. This creates a world that is only informed by the material culture of class and gender, but ignores the salience of race despite the use of black bodies that intersect them.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In this thesis, I have recorded and analyzed several pages of data collected from the texts selected for this study. As a result, I have decoded the underlying messages and recurrent ideologies that function in each of the texts. This chapter provides the conclusion to this study and addresses the relevance of this study in the conversation of representation of black-ness. Through this textual analysis, I have discovered how black characters are represented and narratives are constructed by black writers in OTT video streaming platforms. Black writers represent black characters dynamically in relation to their position in society under the establishment of power. This suggests that these black-written narratives in OTT all function under the position as the subordinate in relation to the establishment.

Black Narratives and the Establishment

Black writers create narratives that position black-ness in relation to the establishment. Each of the writers take their positions from the margins of the United States and translate it to the narratives of each series. One common narrative in *Broke, Dear White People,* and *Luke Cage* is the marginalization of black characters as by-products of the system of power in the United States. The same way Sam experiences racism from the establishment as a black middle-class Ivy League student in *Dear White People*, Mo experiences at an audition that is not prepared to accommodate black actors being lit properly for the camera in the series *Broke*. Similarly, the desire for Luke to become a vigilante to do what the system cannot do in *Luke Cage* relates to how Sam desires to address the establishment that does not address the social issues black people experience at Winchester. Since each show pulls concepts and ideas from material

culture, topics such as racism and classism are confronted in terms of the establishment that create the conditions for these systems to exist, with black-ness at the forefront.

The narratives in *Dear White People* explicitly address racism from a systematic approach. The anti-establishment protests, lead primarily by middle-to-upper class black college students, attempt to bring change to an Ivy League institution. Additionally, the narratives of black students that work within the establishment who are against challenging it are unpacked. *Luke Cage* addresses the corruption of the legal and political establishment, how the underworld use crime as a result of the establishment, and the role of an anti-establishment vigilante superhero that places justice and socio-political change in his own hands. The establishment remains a consistent theme as the dominant power structure that governs the activity of marginalized groups.

On *Broke,* we see the common, television narrative of friends who leave their hometown to move to a better town as roommates to achieve success and financial opportunities post-graduation. The show intersects class, gender, and race into the story by making the three roommates black, with the main character being a woman, and all three characters being state school graduates looking for a good paying job in their careers. Despite race not being a salient factor socially, the writer is able to critically address the conditions and ideologies that capitalism creates while also building a narrative around the paradoxical narrative of the American Dream in relation to black characters. This means that the establishment informs black-ness and drives the characters actions through its relationship to the characters of each series.

Disruption in Black Narratives

Disruption in the narrative of black characters each stemmed from systemic issues related to class and race. The establishment's role in bringing disruption in the lives of the main characters in each series is a recurring narrative. In *Luke Cage*, Luke presented the disruption as the vigilante who resembled justice to the citizens of Harlem without the need of the corrupt legal establishment. In *Broke*, capitalism presented the major disruption to the narrative to Miloh, Mo, and Paul, causing them to move from their family and home town to find success in their careers. Finding better opportunities for income in their career justifies their investments in college and the pressures to be successful post-graduation.

In *Dear White People*, characters that were black in a predominately white Ivy League school presented a disruption in their college experiences in terms of their interactions with the white students, teachers, and culture perpetuated by the school. Being black and middle-class in a college setting. Narrative disruptions connected to systemic issues being consistent in each series means that black-written series strive to represent the salience of race and class in the daily experiences of black men and women.

Division of Black Consciousness

The establishment of power create division in the social consciousness of black characters in each series. The perpetuation and accusations of racism, corruption, and maldistribution of necessary resources assigned to the functions of the establishment in each series divide character perspectives regarding its role in their lives. In *Dear White People*, Sam and the members of the BSU placed a high priority on being "woke" or socially conscious by addressing racial oppression while members of CORE focus on working with the establishment to bring progress to the black students. Since the

establishment reflects material culture, which is largely dominated by white males, people that worked within the establishment were not viewed as "woke," while people who protested it were considered socially conscious, and were respected by the black student body. This means that social consciousness rejects working with the establishment to help the marginalized because the establishment cannot be trusted to help those outside of the hegemonic power structure.

This division functioned similarly in *Luke Cage*, where Luke's approach to challenging the establishment as a vigilante conflicted with Misty's approach as a detective in law enforcement. While Misty saw Luke Cage as a good man, she did not trust him working outside of the legal system to bring justice. The Harlem community loved Luke Cage for his anti-establishment superhero approach to justice and gave him unwavering support throughout the series. This means that the establishment considers any challenge to it as rebellious, yet those of the marginalized groups celebrate revolutionary challenges to the establishment. This is also suggested in *Broke*, where Miloh's mom reinforces the ideology of the establishment, which informs us that it is immoral for a woman to live with men as friends, while Miloh chooses to live with her friends, who help her to afford the cost of living to pursue her dream career. The ideology that is imposed on these characters comes from both the establishment and its ideology that is carried out by other black characters.

The System Defines Black Consciousness

Black character consciousness is defined by their loyalty or opposition to the white establishment. In *Dear White People*, students who supported the white establishment were not considered "woke," while anti-establishment black students were

considered "woke." This is indicative of the relationship between the establishment and marginalized groups outside the system. Since marginalized groups are not included in the establishment, loyalty to the establishment is seen as reinforcing oppression and marginalization of black people. Sam was considered the most "woke" student as a result of her anti-establishment protests and her unwavering loyalty to the black student body, yet her relationship with a white man conflicted her credibility, and her "woke-ness" throughout the series. Her relationship is operationalized in the series as participation in a white establishment, which makes her opposition questionable.

This concept is reflected in *Luke Cage*, where Misty Knight and Luke Cage both desired justice for the black citizens of Harlem, yet Misty's loyalty to the establishment of law enforcement puts her up against him. Loyalty to the establishment presents itself as a binary to opposing the establishment, which creates a disruption to the narrative of these characters. When relating to material culture, black bodies disproportionately experience high levels of corruption from law enforcement, which is represented in Luke's distrust in the establishment. This is also reflected in the positive portrayal of his opposition to the establishment in the representation of the black citizens of Harlem.

In *Broke*, the Miloh, Mo, and Paul are each represented the loyalty to the ideologies of the establishment, in that, they believed that if they moved to Los Angeles, they could pursue the American Dream despite struggling to afford the basic necessities to live a comfortable life. These three characters are defined by their trust and dependency on the establishment to provide an opportunity for them to justify the money spent to attend state schools and work in their dream careers. This signifies the pressures imposed through the ideologies of the American Dream, which tells us that hard work

should pay off in the form of great success for all Americans regardless of race, gender, etc. that are willing to pursue their dreams. In each series, the characters are defined in relation to the establishment that govern their realities.

Diversity of Representation

The spectrum of characters exemplified through protagonist and antagonist characters are reflective of diversity of representation. Characters in each series reflect a large spectrum of diversity and dynamism of characters. With *Dear White People*, while Coco may appear to be the rich, snobby, conservative antagonist throughout the series, once her upbringing and class is revealed, we understand why she is loyal to the establishment of Winchester. The representation of Coco highlights issues that black characters of lower classes may have concerning appreciation of what higher class blacks do have access to. Since the predominant message of protesting the establishment is led by the middle- to upper-class, seeing the nuance of a character not from that class made Coco's character dynamic.

Additionally, Sam's character choosing to date a white man as a strong, pro-black woman throughout the series signifies that black-ness is not defined being anti-white or anti-establishment, but rather being an individual that does not conform to the pressures of either the system or social pressure. This is what makes Misty from *Luke Cage* a character of interest, as she supports the establishment, yet still supports the black community of Harlem. Her character highlights the importance of understanding that black-ness is not a matter of operating as a monolith, but rather an acknowledgement of their history and culture in this country while retaining individuality of members within the race.

This also is reflected in Cornell from *Luke Cage*, who is positioned as the antagonist in this series, yet becomes an empathetic figure once his troubled upbringing is explored. Not having control over his criminal plagued living conditions as a child played a major role in his criminal behavior and pursuit of power and control. Creating characters that are not only seen through their actions, but the context that leads their actions, is key to diversity as it humanizes the character through ideological codes with which we empathize. Lastly, in the series *Broke*, while all three characters were similar in their story, the narrative of the series was centered on Miloh. Her characters is emblematic of diversity of representation when considering how she chose to live with two men as friends without dating or a sexual relationship with either in a patriarchal society that imposes these expectations and stereotypes on women. Each of these characters from the three series exemplify the ability to make choices, whether good or bad, that are not restricted by arbitrary definitions of black-ness nor stereotypes.

Contributions to Theory

This study was able to take Fiske's (1987) codes of television and update them to the characters of each series to understand how they are produced. Using the representational, technical, and ideological codes allowed for me to contribute scholarship about television written by black men and women through the channel of over-the-top online streaming platforms. This was an area of opportunity that had not been considered in any previous scholarship in terms of applying these codes to a producer from a marginalized group. Additionally, it allowed me to connect everything that I saw and heard on-screen to the ideological code that operated with each major and supporting character in each series.

The findings from this study applies the understanding of narrative in television from several scholars most notably by expanding it to focus on the functionality of narrative disruptions within black-written television on over-the-top (Barthes, 1957; Fiske, 1987; Kozloff, 1992; Butter, 2017). This was done by looking at the major plots in each series, finding the rising action that caused a disruption to the equilibrium of the narrative. Within each disruption, black characters had to make decisions, which allowed for me to gain depth into the identities and roles of each character. This was important in terms of highlighting the underlying phenomena that functioned consistently across each show studied.

Previous representation studies scholars have looked at representation on network, cable, and premium television in terms of race (Gray, 1995; Yancy, 2008; Long, 2011), gender (Griffin, 2014), and sexual orientation (Dyer, 1984), yet have not considered black representation on over-the-top streaming services. This study further expands the scope of black representation studies scholarship to analyzing the representation of characters created for original, over-the-top television written by black-writers. Network, cable, and premium television is largely written by white men from a position of privilege. Studying black televisual content from the position of the marginalized, black writer on online platforms that appeals to niche audiences provided an opportunity to continue the rich scholarship within representation studies and understand the status of black representation in television.

Future Research

Future studies of over-the-top television could focus more on looking at concepts of black identity in terms of gender, performance, and sexuality in the representation of

black-written characters and narratives. This is an area of opportunity that can provide unique insights to how black writers represent black-ness intersected with other identities, find how it functions, and its implications in material reality. Understanding the disruptions that black characters experience in relation to their identity could have similarly profound findings that are dynamic in comparison to the traditional platforms of television.

Additionally, future studies of black representation should focus on expanding the conversation of black representation to black-written, original films on over-the-top streaming platforms. With the culture of media consumption shifting to streaming platforms on-demand, more opportunities for autonomy are available for black writers to provide dynamic representation and narratives regarding black-ness. OTT film provides an additional avenue to create narratives, and study what are the disruptive factors within film narratives in black-written, original films.

Final Conclusions

Understanding black representation in over-the-top television from the perspective of black men and women is essential in bringing diverse characters to audiences. Dyer (1984) first confirmed the importance of allowing people who have been marginalized in a given society to provide diverse and dynamic representations of themselves that do not rely on the social and stereotypes that the dominant society propagates in television. Gray (2000) talks about the importance of having a multiplicity of black characters that are good and bad as diversity of representations. There were several characters that I saw in the texts studied (Coco and Cornell for example) that I initially thought were terrible. Upon further analysis, I began to understand their

complexities in their representation that made them excellent characters despite my personal disagreements. While I believe that disagreeable and problematic characters play a role in televisual content, these cannot be the primary source of information when representing black-ness. If television continues to rely on information from the dominant, white hegemonic power structures in its use of representation of black-ness, we are certain to experience the assigning of stereotypes to marginalized groups in representation and the same stories and characters! Over-the-top original series is a start to promoting diverse television, but the reality remains that network and cable television play a major role in society and popular culture's understanding of the world around them.

This study can also serve to bring attention to the major disparity of black writers compared to white male writers. Currently, there are only three original American, black-written television series that can be found on all the major over-the-top streaming platforms, which host hundreds of white written original series. Studies that showcase the importance of diversity in representing black characters allow for narratives of black-ness to exist in material culture that do not reinforce stereotypes, but instead, present new possibilities.

Without scholarship on the latest media platforms, we can safely assume that the hegemonic power structure will continue to use problematic ideology and stereotypes regarding black people to inform texts. While it is not guaranteed that black writers representing black characters will not utilize problematic ideological codes in their representations, allowing diversity among television writers on all platforms of television offers black people an opportunity to see the multiplicity of characters to help them make

sense of the world around them, as Fiske (1987) suggests, through the embedded ideology of characters. It is important to highlight the findings from these series as well as bring attention to how differently black writers represent black-ness to progress black representation in television.

Each finding from this study confirms that black-written television represents black characters as dynamic in their actions, yet reflexive in regard to their position in society in relation to the establishment of power. This establishment, often regarded as the white power structures, govern the lives of black characters in terms of the decisions that they make within a given area of activity. As a result, black consciousness revolves around the constant disruptions caused by the establishment of power. This disruption results in a division among characters in terms of a given characters participation and loyalty to the establishment that oppress them as a marginalized group.

The dichotomy of the establishment and black character interactions cause black-ness to be divided ideologically, socially, and economically among characters in the plots of OTT platforms of black-written television. Although several character's narratives take measures to combat the system, they inescapably find themselves being defined by the establishment in their actions, consciousness, and beliefs. This is indicative of the marginalized status of black characters. This very division of race, class, and black consciousness serves as the driving factor of black-written television that is available on OTT platforms. When black-written shows approach television, it is not only a conversation of representing the dynamism of black-ness, but it is also a conversation of representing the establishment and the conditions created that influence the lives of black

people in material culture and reality. Black-ness cannot have diverse representation

without consideration of the cultural relationship with the establishment.

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