

6-28-2022

An Interpretive Analysis: Black Men, Masculinities, and the Field of Tropic Play

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS: BLACK MEN, MASCULINITIES, AND THE
FIELD OF TROPIC PLAY

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Mario D. Lewis

2022

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This dissertation, written by Mario D. Lewis, and entitled *An Interpretive Analysis: Black Men, Masculinities, and the Field of Tropic Play*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this dissertation and recommend that it be approved.

Ana Luszczynska

James Burns

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Armond Towns

Benjamin Baez, Major Professor

Date of Defense: June 28, 2022

The dissertation of Mario D. Lewis is approved.

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College of Arts, Sciences and Education

Andrés G. Gil
Vice President for Research and Economic Development
and Dean of the University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2022

DEDICATION

To my beloved family, thank you. I appreciate all that you have sacrificed to ensure that this day would come. We've endured the worst of the trenches to now see the first of us graduate with a Ph.D. While we're not as tight-knit as we once were, I look forward to thanking each one of you in person for helping me achieve this accomplishment. I, at the very least, owe you that much for your unrelenting support and dedication. I love you all dearly. To Uncle Ron, I wish you could've been here to see me walk across the stage, but I know you're somewhere grinning from ear-to-ear with pride.

To my beautiful partner, I genuinely thank you for all that you've done to ensure that I made it to this point. You never failed to remind me what I could become, but most importantly, to remember who I am and what I've already accomplished. You helped me to become the vulnerable and compassionate Man that I am today. You've not only held me accountable, but you've also taught me how to become a kinder, gentler, and open version of myself for the betterment of myself. Thank you, my dear.

I would like to dedicate this treatise to the generations of Black (College) Men who came before me, contemporarily exist alongside me, and will come about in the future. While much work still needs to be done, I offer this document as an addition to the already extensive canon of literature on this demographic. However, I hope that this effort contributes to an alternative way of understanding Black (College) Men. Simply put, we're more than excellence personified, we're more than kings, and we're definitely much more than embodied deficit. I dedicate this work to understand how some traverse space and time while occupying such locations as Black, Man, and collegian simultaneously. Thank you for letting me speak on your behalf.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I genuinely thank my committee for their unwavering support. Thank you, Dr. Burns, for helping me craft my foundational thoughts concerning the scope of the study. Dr. Kolek, you pushed me to stay grounded and to always consider the role of the scholar-practitioner in my work. Thank you. Dr. Luszczynska, you opened my mind up to the very dense world of phenomenology. Your kind words motivated me to think beyond my limits. Thank you. Dr. Towns, it meant a lot to have your participation in my committee. While I have my critiques of representational politics, I am thankful for the opportunity to learn under the wing of an intelligent, Black, and critical scholar such as yourself. Thank you. Dr. Baez, you remained on as my committee chair despite retiring and relocating. You, perhaps more than anyone during my thirty-year sojourn through education, held me to the highest of intellectual standards. While it was tough for me to understand your reasoning at times, I wouldn't have it any other way. Thank you for your unwavering support, but most importantly, thank you for helping me grow as an intellectual.

Of course, shout out to the home team responsible for getting me this far! Gerson, Chelsea, Ricky, Vernon, Joe, Manny, Chazze, Brandon, CYPHER, Jamie, and a host of other individuals and groups must absolutely be acknowledged for their respective roles in my growth process. Without these generous, kind, and all-around great people, I would not only be a completely different intellectual, but I think I would be a completely different person altogether. While we'll never know who that person might've been, I'm perfectly fine existing as this imperfect version of myself because of these people. Thank you all for what you've done for me. Thank you all for accepting me as I am.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION
AN INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS: BLACK MEN, MASCULINITIES, AND THE
FIELD OF TROPIC PLAY

by

Mario D. Lewis

Florida International University, 2022

Miami, Florida

Professor Benjamin Baez, Major Professor

While much has been written about the participation of Black Men in higher education, such scholarship has often been predicated on empirically derived insights that have privileged phenomenological experiences as a primary point of departure for analysis. While this literature has done much to illuminate how higher education scholars and practitioners understand what Black Men pursuing higher education experience, I use this study as an opportunity to think differently about this demographic and those experiences.

With the aim of not only providing a nuanced understanding of Black Men in college—but also a general methodological shift in how they are studied as raced and gendered beings—I utilized philosophical inquiry as my mode of analysis. I analyzed how cultural texts derived from popular culture, such as *Dear White People*, linked with scholarly higher education literature to arrive at conclusions about the college milieu. It is important to acknowledge that the gateway that allowed me both to produce and explore my research topic further was the rhetorical/literary device of the trope. Elaborating further, the trope is generally understood as the commonplace

heuristics that serve as readily recognizable scripts for identifying concepts, texts, and even raced and gendered bodies. Concerning the demographic of study, the trope not only served as a vehicle of analysis, but it also framed how I understood representations of Black masculine being and subjectivity.

In reading theory, alongside my tropic analyses, I engaged in the methodological praxis of diffractive analysis. Through performing these diffractive readings, new insights around tropic realities of being emerged. Consequently, I offer alternative understandings of such tropic performances as “Black Excellence,” and “The Magical Negro” to pose additional questions about how Black Men in college purportedly align with these ready-made frames, but how they also often complicate or potentially contest these archetypes altogether.

Thus, I understand texts like *Dear White People* as not only depicting college-life from the perspective of multiple characters identifying as Black Men—and reciprocally identifiable as such—but as also being generally rife with examples of tropes pertaining to Black Men attending college. This is of significance because of how the ubiquity of these archetypes aid in understanding material realities. This philosophical inquiry thus went beyond the widely accepted readings of text and produced analyses that looked at alternative readings of Black Masculine cis-gender embodiment and subjectivity. Ultimately, this study suggests the importance of drawing conclusions and parallels between popular artistic endeavors and the overlapping real-world happenings that work to order socio-political identities and realities.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I started writing [Dear White People] some [sic] ten years ago as an impulse because I didn't really see my story out there in the culture. I didn't see myself reflected back at me in the films that I loved, even the stories that resonated for me. So, I tried to put myself in the culture, and, you know, that can be a difficult thing when along the way there's really nothing there to tell you that you belong there...If you have a story, if you don't see yourself in the culture, please, put yourself there because we need you. We need to see the world from your eyes.¹

The opening epigraph is from Justin Simien's, creator and director of *Dear White People*, acceptance speech for winning the award for "Best First Screenplay" at the 30th Film Independent Spirit Awards. While brief, the words brim with vulnerability and transparency in route to delivering a poignant overall message. Additionally, I think Simien's words help to foreground the undergirding logic of my study. I'm sure many of those who will read this treatise are familiar with the aphorism "representation matters." While I wholeheartedly believe that there is some truth to this, I conversely also believe that representation is a game of chance. Interpretations may exist in abundance; however, not all representations are selected for salient usage and display. Thus, via primarily analyzing the Netflix series, *Dear White People*, a show meant to depict higher education, I use this study as a means of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men. However, before delving into the nuanced complexities of the trope, it is important to consider the role it has in my study as both social performance and a tool for analysis.

¹ Film Independent, *Justin Simien Wins Best First Screenplay at the 30th Film Independent Spirit Awards*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpBPTVejG2w>.

The Trope

Social being employ tropes as heuristic frameworks that allow for the manifestation of myriad performances or perspectives.² The trope may be foremost understood as “a figure of speech that organizes a set of complex ideas into a kind of linguistic shorthand.”³ Of equal importance to this endeavor is the notion that the trope exists as “a phrase or image that conveys more than its literal meaning,” all while simultaneously possessing the capacity to operate as “an artistic change of a word or phrase from its proper signification to another.”⁴ Further elaborating on the existence of the nuanced understandings of the trope, Quintilian acknowledges the trope as being a deviation from the original meaning of a word or phrase that adds a creative flair to how language is deployed; thus necessitating a nuanced understanding from both a linguistic and conceptual standpoint as well.⁵

Following this logic, it is the explicit deployment of tropes in the public circulation of college-themed popular texts that provided the bases for the conclusions reached in this philosophical study.⁶ These tropes serve as both constitutive archetypes and, perhaps of even greater relevance, context-specific social performances. Specifically

² Kenneth Burke, “Four Master Tropes,” *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1941), 422.

³ Annette Kolodny, “Tropic Trappings in Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto* and Joseph Nicolar’s *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 32, no. 1 (2008), 21.

⁴ Kolodny, “Tropic Trappings in Mel Gibson’s *Apocalypto* and Joseph Nicolar’s *The Life and Traditions of the Red Man*,” 21.; “LacusCurtius • Ad Herennium — Book IV, 19-46,” accessed February 17, 2022. https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rhetorica_ad_Herennium/4B*.html.

⁵ Quintilian, “*Institutio Oratoria*, Book 8, Chapter 6,” accessed April 4, 2022, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2007.01.0066%3Abook%3D8%3Achapter%3D6>.

⁶ Robert M. Diamond, “Defining Scholarship for the Twenty-First Century,” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* 2002, no. 90 (2002), 77. <https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.57>.

elaborating on the performative dynamism of the trope “gender identity—*or any other kind of identity*—is not something that you have, but something that you do—or, at least, something that you have ‘only’ by doing it again and again and again.”⁷ Judith Butler similarly suggests that “social action requires a performance which is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimation.”⁸ What is then essential to parse from Butler’s understanding of the ritual social drama is the twin possibility of *tropic play*—or, the ability for a subject to complicate, contest, or subversively make use of dominant and domineering race-gender tropes. Tropic play is then predicated on the rules of the social drama, even if loosely. The adherence to such rules is an example of performance rigidity.

The Black (College) Man

Considering the unique sociological circumstances that surround Black Men—and to highlight the often mutually constitutive nexus of identity formed by race and gender—the aims of this study prompted me to make use of the hyphenated pairing of both concepts (i.e., race-gender).⁹ This is done to not only capture how existing logics create a social amalgamation that works to produce epistemologies that have historically othered Black Men, but also how these tropic constructs work to generally portray Black masculine praxes as dangerous, and/or problematic social performances.

⁷ Debby Thompson, “‘Is Race a Trope?’: Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity,” *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003), 132. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1512365>. Emphasis added.

⁸ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (1988), 526. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>.

⁹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African-American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” *Signs* 17, no. 2 (1992), 254. <http://www.sfu.ca/~decaste/OISE/page2/files/HigginbothamRace.pdf>.

Important to this project then, is that race-gender being produces both assumptions and performances centered around the masculine. Seeing as how there is a perceptual degree that commonly undergirds how one initially comes to both know and understand processes of bodily racialization and gender construction, I consider Ronald Jackson's insight on masculinities as a guide for how to best observe and take into consideration the byproducts that emerge at the crossroads of Blackness and manhood. Considering this, Jackson specifically states that masculinity is a "perceptual and cosmological category in flux. It is composed and validated by culturally particular behavioral tendencies that are consonant with personal, social, and communal expectations."¹⁰ Thus, in analyzing these racialized constructions, or race-gender scripts of masculinity, I engaged in a study that interrogated the staunch sociologies that often undergird the politics of identifying, as well as being identified, as both Black and Man simultaneously.

Of equal relevance to race-gender tropes and agency is that my explorations of tropic being entailed an understanding that saw dominant tropes as part ethnological mythos that generalizes and attributes race-gender performances to Black Men as a social class in totem. An example of this might be race-gender caricatures that depict Black masculine figures as inept, buffoonish, or dangerous. Of equal, if not supreme importance, it must be duly noted that my analysis reveals that dominant tropes may also be rivaled by other performative ways of being that are willingly or unknowingly validated by the actions of Black (College) Men. In this instance, this may refer to the

¹⁰ Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, SUNY Series, the Negotiation of Identity (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 132.

hypothetical student who is misunderstood as lazy or withdrawn, when instead he is simply more preoccupied with the newfound freedoms of college life, or merely just lacking interest due to boredom and a lack of intellectual stimulation.¹¹

My overall stance regarding prismatic race-gender subjectivities, and therefore equally prismatic ways of being and performing, are anchored by the belief that tropes are not solely a function of racialization deployed by a hegemonic race-gender class. To believe this would imply that said group is the sole variable of an otherwise dynamic sociological equation. This in return means that I understand Black (College) Men as also playing a crucial role in tropic performances, and they therefore also engage in varying degrees of autonomy in relation to race-gender being.

Further exploring this notion that the subject is enacted upon, but also enacts in kind, necessitates that I consider what *agency* might entail as Black Men assume the mantle of *agentic being*. Elaborating further, regarding the concept of agency, I make use of the term in a generic sense. What I mean by this is that when highlighting agency throughout the current treatise, readers should recognize its usage as integral to how the raced and the gendered subject responds to attempts at marginalization. This sentiment is undergirded by Judith Butler's recognition of agency; specifically, the agentic being emerges from the margins of power to contest the dominant dynamics that have historically worked to marginalize and stifle any countering responses to such power.¹²

¹¹ Tyrone C. Howard, "How Does It Feel to Be a Problem? Black Male Students, Schools, and Learning in Enhancing the Knowledge Base to Disrupt Deficit Frameworks," *Review of Research in Education* 37 (2013), 76. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24641957>.

¹² Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 15.

Considering the animating properties of agency race-gender tropes about Black Men and Masculine bodies are not always albatrosses or negative-ordering caricatures. They are also points of departure conveying that Masculine performances are not solely reductionist linear predicaments but are perhaps instead germinal in that they give way to both possibility and depth. Because of my overall aim to call into question the staunch sociologies that encamp race and gender, I hope that even broader arenas that include, but are not limited to, higher education are prompted to reflect back on intellectual and political projects based around race-gender being.¹³

Categorized as a philosophical inquiry into *race-gender* discourses that center higher education, my analyses were primarily conducted through using analytical tools from literary criticism, cultural studies, and philosophical thought with a focus on the racialized, gendered, and masculine “self” as a socio-political construct. More specifically, this inquiry utilized the rhetorical concept of the trope as a frame for establishing conceptualizations, understandings, and possible ways of being as it pertains to *Black (College) Men* and their corresponding masculine praxes. By “praxes” I mean the various constellations of masculine being that Black Men can be read as performing.

Therefore, considering the race-gender performances of Black Men, particularly those in college, I made use of the phrasing *Black (College) Men* to group what I understand as representing the overlapping and various realities of this demographic. In the process, when considering “masculine praxes,” I was able to shed light upon the

¹³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (Routledge, 2004), 8.
<http://ezproxy.fiu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cab06026a&AN=fiu.020528797&site=eds-live> <http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip0410/2003022841.html>.

varying ways that Black (College) Men navigate society under the auspices of race-gender being. This was done through examining performative acts as conveyed through representation within media-derived cultural artifacts. Additionally, the parenthetical verbiage, Black “(College)” Men, hopefully signals not only the writ large tropic constructions that exist sociologically but also how these prevalent understandings of Black Men inform specific institutions like popular media and higher education.

As such, and of paramount importance, what further aids in the grounding of this study are my efforts to think differently about Black Manhood and its corresponding enactments. This act is predicated on an understanding that prioritizes the gendering properties of *man*, versus the biologically-rooted and deterministic properties of *male*. Furthermore, due to its social situatedness, and the interactions that govern these interpersonal dynamics, I transitively understand *man* as allowing for the study of the different calculi that go on to produce myriad ways of existing in the world at the crossroads of Black, college, and Man.¹⁴ This nexus might be what many have come to classify as masculinities or masculine praxes.

On Masculinities

Besides privileging Man as a malleable construct, of corresponding importance is considering the role that masculinity plays in not only identifying how subjects convey their gender status but what practices are used to enact the trope of *man*. I also note that just as tropic performances are abundant, there also exist multiple ways of thinking about masculinities. For instance, considering Raewyn Connell’s work around masculinity,

¹⁴ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” *Gender and Society* 1, no. 2 (1987), 129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189945>.

hegemonic masculinity, specifically, can be understood as the normative means by which one enacts and performs manhood; however, as the qualifier hegemonic is meant to signify, the full performative force of these cultural praxes are only granted to a select few, who, via the capital afforded through these hegemonic performances, influence how *subordinated men/masculinities* relationally exist (the italicized often refers to minority racialized and/or non-heterosexual men and masculine bodies).¹⁵ Karen Pyke provides an example of hegemonic masculinity, claiming that White, heterosexual, middle-class men often serve as the trope par excellence of masculinity by constituting, and thus reciprocally constituting, dominant cultural standards.¹⁶

The thought of the hypothetical conversations that could be generated based on Connell and Pyke's respective thoughts on masculinities are intriguing. However, for the purposes of this study, I'd like to venture into other iterations of theory pertaining to masculinity. Additionally, while a truncated example was provided, Connell's and Pyke's respective offerings clearly have the potential to influence a host of academic and philosophical groups as it pertains to the study of masculinities. In fact, the Connell has revisited hegemonic masculinity in an attempt to address its often rigid and decontextualized application.¹⁷ However, beyond the continuum of hegemonic and subordinate, I am of the belief that further insight is needed when considering the following: The nexus formed by Blackness as a racial discourse, Man as a social

¹⁵ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," *Gender & Society* 19, no. 6 (2005), 832. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

¹⁶ Karen D. Pyke, "Class-Based Masculinities: The Interdependence of Gender, Class, and Interpersonal Power," *Gender and Society* 10, no. 5 (1996), 531. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/189881>.

¹⁷ Connell and Messerschmidt, "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept," 829–859. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243205278639>.

construct that consists of variegated social performance, and Masculinity as a guiding script for these performances.

As such, I understand Angela P. Harris as taking up this project of critical inquiry when proffering that Black masculine performances can evoke not only mimesis but a longing for participation from those already possessing hegemonic masculinity. Thus, Harris problematizes the intellectual grounds that work to produce the axial logics of the hegemonic and subordinate masculinities continuum by calling into question its theoretical limitations.¹⁸ Building upon Harris's sentiments, I postulate that when considering the various social and cultural realities of those gendered as Man and racialized as Black, hegemonic and subordinate labels fail to lend themselves to newly conceived ways of knowing Black masculinity because of a priori understanding of both of these social locations.¹⁹

Elaborating further, and serving as a brief example of the strictures posed by these delimiting analyses, I think it necessary to recognize the perfunctory readings of privilege that are often foisted upon the demographic of study. These readings, or cultural scripts, work to ascribe meaning but also animate analyses of Black Masculine bodies without considering empirical studies that detail the realities of this group. More often than not, these studies detail, for example, how Black Men are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice complex, have the highest unemployment rate, and how they do not

¹⁸ Angela P. Harris, "Gender, Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice," *Stanford Law Review* 52, no. 4 (2000), 784. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229430>.

¹⁹ An example of this are the general attempts to place perfunctory readings of privilege on to Black Masculine bodies without considering empirical studies that detail the reality of the demographic in question.

benefit from, much less have access to, quality education.²⁰ While these studies do not tell a full story, *it also doesn't seem to convey an image of a reality abundant with social privilege.*

Furthermore, not only should this woeful sociological reality be further considered, but it should also perhaps be done beyond baseline arguments that deploy simple plots where man, x , is understood as privileged in perpetuity. For example, I'm reminded of critiques concerning the disproportionate coverage allotted to Black cisgender men who have suffered from police brutality. Elaborating further, while the highlighted group may be overrepresented in the coverage of scenarios of police brutality, it may be a potential mis-judgement to associate state sanctioned murder with privilege.

In continuation, regarding the re-configuration of this socio-political configuration then, I charge future generations of scholars with the task of also deconstructing and then re-calibrating/re-calculating for the weight of Blackness, or y . By doing so, perhaps more can be said about what it means to occupy/categorize oneself as a Black masculine figure. This would potentially mean that linear and planar models aren't necessarily the issue for considering the matrices of race, gender, class, and so forth.²¹

²⁰ Richard V. Reeves, Sarah Nzau, and Ember Smith, "The Challenges Facing Black Men – and the Case for Action," *Brookings* (blog), November 19, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/11/19/the-challenges-facing-black-men-and-the-case-for-action/>; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "A-4. Employment Status of the Civilian Noninstitutional Population by Race, Hispanic or Latino Ethnicity, Sex, and Age, Seasonally Adjusted," May 6, 2022. <https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea04.htm>; Virginia Anderson, "Education Usually Improves Health. But Racism Sabotages Benefits For Black Men," *NPR*, May 18, 2021, sec. Public Health. <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/05/18/996577905/racism-derails-black-mens-health-even-as-education-levels-rise>.

²¹ Extending the metaphor of the equation, maybe the issue, then, is the stock variables that are routinely deployed to consider the nodes formed by race, Manhood, and Masculinity.

Continuing further, citing the sentiments of Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, “the discursive domains that construct the most sustaining and cohesive vision of African American manhood—the social sciences, public policy debates, and racialized discourses—are rarely informed by critical theory.”²² While I agree with Blount and Cunningham’s proposal that there is a recycling of thought regarding the dominant theoretical frames used to research and analyze Black Manhood and Masculinity, I additionally claim that there exists an unwillingness to unpack accepted beliefs that undergird the purported ipso facto conclusions propping up these intellectual frames altogether. Thus maintaining the power of tropes to influence—not their staying power, per se, because tropes are both ubiquitous and evergreen—through dominant or domineering logics.

Furthermore, as Angela P. Harris argues, because of being denied participation in hegemonic masculinities and manhood, Black Men have been able to craft different social performances as alternative forms of masculine praxes.²³ I read what we call race and gender as entailing the use of tropes, so all social performances of race and gender I see as tropic forms, and the repetitions and contestations of them I call tropic play. Thus, it is the concept of the trope, tropic forms, and tropic play that fueled my study of Black (College) Men and their corresponding Masculinities praxes. It is therefore through the acknowledgment of the richness of these tropic forms and play that I understand a newfound possibility for re-considering how Black Men and their masculinities are

²² Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham, eds., “Introduction,” in *Representing Black Men* (Great Britain: Routledge, 1996), x.

²³ Angela P. Harris, “Gender, Violence, Race, and Criminal Justice,” 784.

conceptualized. To offer reconsiderations of such considerations, I provide an analysis of the show *Dear White People*, which served the dual role of data source and vehicle of and for analysis. I uncover in this show the tropes used in the show to represent Black Men's masculinities

Dear White People

This study primarily focused on one popular cultural artifact due to the perceived presence of rich race-gender tropes and cultural scripts within. Specifically, as a form of audiovisual data, and ultimately a metaphor for the raced and gendered experiences of Blacks in higher education, I privilege Netflix's 2017 original series, *Dear White People* (*DWP*) as my primary source of textual evidence. I believe that the connection between popular media and the lifeworlds of social actors stems from the coercive social practices that influence individuals through their residence within societal institutions. This is what Emile Durkheim refers to as *social facts*.²⁴ In other words, texts are not merely apolitical cultural byproducts; they are instead politically charged, both intentionally and unintentionally, with myriad possibilities for both interpretation and influence.

Additionally, I think it is also important to note that many of the analyses that I produce in relation to *DWP* are predicated on transcribed dialogue from the series. While I do not fully delve into mis-en-scene style analyses—in other words, producing thick descriptions concerning the acting, setting, lighting, costume, and makeup worn by characters within a scene—I do conversely provide rich transcriptions and in-depth examinations of the selected dialogue excerpts.

²⁴ Emile Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. Steven Lukes, trans. W.D. Halls (The Free Press, 1982), 56.

Conversely, when considering visual artifacts where conventional forms of dialogue between characters aren't present—for example, I also go on to make use of panels from comic book literature—I deploy a different style of analysis. Moreover, by marrying my own original translations of the visual, with nearly fifty years of comic book lore, I work to create a textual pastiche. This syncretic byproduct is then used as an analytical construct to aid in my examinations of visual representations of Black (College) Men (i.e., my tripart analysis involving Reggie Green, a campus police officer and the comic book character Darkseid in Chapter IV.). Ultimately, I believe that the visual representations studied throughout this treatise and the corresponding sentiments that are produced in the wake of studying them are important because of their ability to evoke certain affective states that written text cannot accomplish alone.

In continuation, Netflix, succinctly describes *DWP* as a foray into how students “of color navigate the daily slights and slippery politics of life at an Ivy League college that's not nearly as ‘post-racial’ as it thinks.”²⁵ The preceding description may serve as an apt explanation of the series for would-be viewers seeking entertainment. However, to convey its relevance to the current intellectual project underway, I will use the remainder of this section to provide additional insights.

Character Guide

Troy Fairbanks

The son of Winchester University's current Dean of Students, Troy is often perceived as just that throughout much of the series—an extension of another being's

²⁵ “Watch Dear White People | Netflix Official Site,” accessed February 22, 2022.

existence. Moreover, while serving as a student-leader, Troy has had little to no time to explore what it might look like to exist beyond the parameters of a neatly drawn, and ironically marred, race-gender script riddled with charges of excellence and achievement. While Troy does seem to have his fair share of fun, it can be argued that much of his foray into recreational drug usage, drinking, and partying are equally indicative of attempts to cope with the taxation posed by constantly maintaining the perfect image. Troy's character is of great significance to my study because his representation not only traffics in dominant tropes that mirror real-world expectations of Black (College) Men, but also because a prolonged engagement with his character revealed the possibility for understanding the workings of tropes, tropic forms, and tropic play.

Reggie Green:

A staunch advocate for racial uplift through student activism, Reggie Green, like Troy, is a major driving force of the show's plot. The son of a Black Panther, Reggie's politics around socio-political identity often serve as an inhibitor as much as it serves to activate politically. What I mean by this is that while many of the social justice endeavors that Reggie pursues are noble, viewers begin to see the burden posed by constantly understanding oneself as needing to be habitually engaged in the struggle. One fateful night entailing a house party, the problematic usage of a politically charged epithet, and an over-zealous police officer, would go on to form much of Reggie's outlook. In the case of my study, though, I turned inward to gain a better understanding of how psychic projections become recycled lenses for myopically viewing tropic constructions. This necessitated that I not simply analyze Reggie as yet another analog for police brutality victims.

Using the aforementioned police officer as a point of departure, I instead took up the self-imposed task of examining the psychic workings of the mind in relation to phobia, materialized tropic representations of this phobia, and what it might look like to challenge the materialization of prereflective cognitions. Despite focusing on the mind that produces, or is at least influenced by, coercive social facts, I posit that Reggie is not lost in such an analysis. Moreover, regardless of whether I refer to him or not, his existence, in the mind of the holder of the phobia, is the trigger for such psychic projections. Thus, he exists as a trace, an utterance, and at all times as what I refer to as the trope of phobogeneity.

Lionel Higgins:

Lionel, from what I gathered, is represented as an endearing character, who, unlike Troy and Reggie, for example, lacks confidence in himself. After multiple viewings of the series, I believe this tropic form to mirror real-world occurrences derived from the challenges posed when dominant and procedural forms of racial identity are prioritized over more nuanced and differing signifying practices of race, gender, and sexuality. Elaborating further, awkward, soft-spoken, and Queer, Lionel is a character with an immense depth that, for me, evoked a particular pathos. His struggle to find a belonging was compounded by the adjoining struggle of trying to socially connect with those represented as holding the same race, race-gender, and even racial commitments and sexual dispositions as him. The intellectual project that I took up in analyzing Lionel, then, saw an engagement with not only intra-communal praxes, but also with what it might look like to be in constant preparation for the Other through hospitality. This entailed exploring unity as more than mere tolerance but as a form of acceptance that is predicated on questioning the very grounds of interpersonal existence.

Additional DWP Characters Mentioned In the Study

Samantha "Sam" White is A formidable student-activist and an intellectual tour de force altogether, Sam is an important, but not necessarily central figure in the series, though some might argue that she's the lead character throughout much of the earlier seasons of the show. Her character hosts a campus radio show that bears the same name as the series, *Dear White People*, where she offers scathing and witty rebukes concerning the racist, sexist, and classist ongoings of the Winchester community. No one is safe from her diatribes. Additionally, she is romantically linked to both Troy, Reggie, and Gabe

Mitchell (see below) at various points in time, for varying lengths of time, throughout the show's series.

Colandrea "Coco" Alexander is highly driven and ambitious. Overall, Coco is an extremely interesting character. While she could be seen as willingly adopting respectability politics, such a conclusion would be superficial. Moreover, while success is a major catalyzing force for Coco, I understand her as a fictional representation that serves as a trope of those who desire to shed the vestiges of their poor and working-class childhoods. This is also complicated by the fact that Coco is a stunningly beautiful dark-skin woman, who for much of the series, is not only at odds with Sam over her social justice orientation, but with what Coco often views as Sam's failure to acknowledge the privilege afforded via her fair skin complexion. Important to note is that Coco and Troy were viewed as the "it" power couple for a brief amount of time within Winchester's Black Community. However, for the latter, their brief time together was merely a trite predicated on sex.

Gabe Mitchell, is the lone White member and potentially least featured of the predominately Black main cast. However, I still see him as serving an integral role both within the show and my study. Moreover, whether explaining the dynamics of radicality and safeness to Troy, or even by panicking and calling officers to de-escalate a tense environment packed with inebriated teenagers and twenty-somethings, Gabe was a tool for thinking through Whiteness and White panic (The trope of phobogeneity). It should be noted that Gabe and Sam loosely date throughout the span of the show. However, Sam does cheat with Reggie during the first season, which nearly causes a permanent rift between her and Gabe.

Joelle Brooks is often referred to within the series as “Sam’s best friend,” but in either instance, her character should be understood as much more than a sidekick. Oftentimes, it is her levity and willingness to understand—for example, listening to Gabe confess that he was responsible for calling the police officers to disband the party—that aid in helping to ground her own struggles while also humanizing others. A talented pre-medicine student, Joelle is linked to Reggie; who, once finally moving past his infatuation with Sam, seeks to craft a relationship with her.

Dean Fairbanks serves as Winchester University’s current Dean of Students. Also of great importance to my study is that Dean Fairbanks is the father of Troy Fairbanks. As such, his presence throughout the study is mostly in relation to Troy. Specifically, the show indicates that what motivates Troy to aspire constantly to excellence, despite wanting to engage in the simple frivolities of youth and/or his own desires altogether, is derived from the rigid expectations set forth by his father. While the more senior Fairbanks can be read as meaning well and wanting to protect his son from the harsh realities that often adversely impact Black (College) Men, I will consider the price this logic might put on Black (College) Men.

Al teeters a fine line between unintentional comedic fodder and a necessary comedic caricature of contemporary student activism. He appears to have his heart in the right place, but is ultimately impetuous. However, when he is not stealing the “annoying” emotional support animals of his peers, he is there to support his activist friends as they continue the “struggle.” But an interesting opportunity for the further exploration of race in relation to ethnicity was missed in the wake of showrunners revealing that Al is actually short for Alejandro. No substantial follow up took place after revealing that Al is

Afro-Latino. Al's relevance ultimately stems from my briefly using his character as a means of comparison and contrast in relation to Troy.

D'unte is a graduate student and member of Winchester's Queer community. He befriends Lionel and serves as a guide of sorts in helping him navigate the "deep end" of his sexuality. Much of Lionel's maturation as a character is due in part to D'unte serving as a mentor of sorts throughout the final two seasons of the series. *Michael* is Lionel's love interest and eventual romantic partner. Also responsible for aiding in Lionel's maturity and eventual romantic exploration.

Additional Insights Concerning Dear White People

Created and helmed by director Justin Simien, *DWP*, the series has creative roots in the 2014 feature film of the same name. In both iterations of the franchise, as an openly Gay Black Man, Simien sought to capture not only his realities but the general quotidian experiences of Black college students. Perhaps most relevant is that *DWP* both works to display the myriad ways that socio-political identities intersect, and how these intersections come together to form nuanced on-screen representations. In capturing these acts, consumers of the series are specifically left with what I see as being thickly conveyed understandings of what it may look like to live at the crossroads of Black-Masculine-Queer-*, Affluent-Black-Masculine-*, and Queer-Black-Masculine-*.²⁶

²⁶ The appending hyphen and asterisk (-*) at the end of each listed tripart phrase is meant to serve as a visual cue denoting additional ways of being. These forms of existence are not only in play, but may also emerge over, across, and through time. Moreover, while race and gender are privileged in this study, as well as minor analyses pertaining to class and capital, I want to acknowledge that there exists other ways of being that I do not highlight. Additionally, especially considering the selected demographic of study, I elected to focus on these particular tripart phrases because of their observed salience. It is still important to note, though, that the show is indeed rife with various representations of socio-political identities (e.g., Queer-Feminine-Black-*, Black-Feminine-Heterosexual-*, etc.).

When focusing on the perceptual aspects of the series—specifically, the Black (College) Men represented within—it is imperative to highlight that despite being a *fictional* work, this does not reduce the cultural artifact in question to merely being *fictitious*. I understand Lothar Mikos as potentially alluding to this when stating that “if the narrated and illustrated story is invented, it belongs to the fictional realm. If it is based on events of the social reality represented in the medium, it is attributable to the non-fictional sphere.”²⁷ Elaborating further, while taking place at a fictional predominately White Ivy League institution, *Winchester University*, there are still overlaps between the real-world existence of contemporary Black (College) Men and their imagined counterparts. Incidents of on-campus discrimination, a lack of access to Black faculty, and the general disregard of campus administration towards the demographic in question are portrayed within *DWP*, and similarly also exist as real-world phenomena within contemporary higher education.

It is through the analysis of these parallel fictional scenarios that I study how the aforementioned nodes of identities are communicated. In then analyzing what has been presented to the viewing audience, I have the appending goal of elucidating how these representations aid in spawning transgressive, nuanced, and complicating readings of Black Manhood and masculinity, or, in other words, I hope to illustrate the contestations that are part and parcel to tropic play. *DWP* serves as an extension of contemporary social realities. As such, through pursuing a deconstructive textual analysis of the selected

²⁷ Lothar Mikos, “Collecting Media Data: TV and Film Studies,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Collection*, by Uwe Flick (1 Oliver’s Yard, 55 City Road London EC1Y 1SP: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2018), 5. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526416070.n26>.

cultural artifact allows for a different methodological approach concerning the study of Black (College) Men.

DWP showcases tropic play that many Black Men would perhaps interpret as familiar, strange, or perhaps even liberatory ways of being. Further extending this line of thought, the show's significance to my project is additionally bolstered by its conveyance of various forms of Black racial and gendered being both in relation to and beyond the domain of higher education (e.g., for some viewers, broader questions about existence beyond the university campus may emerge, perhaps even be answered). My study primarily took into account the fictional realities of three characters: Troy Fairbanks, Reggie Green, and Lionel Higgins.

I selected each of these three figures as key points of departure in separate chapters. In addition to purportedly representing versions of Black Manhood and Masculinity, my preliminary consumption of the series helped me to recognize the rich tropic play concerning Black (College) Men as represented by these three selected characters for analysis. The importance of this occurrence lies in the fact that, even during these rudimentary analyses, the existence of what I refer to as the field of tropic play began to emerge. Borrowing from a Bourdieuan conceptualization of social domains, these *social fields* are rife with power dynamics and corresponding social locations. Similarly, the field of tropic play is marked with dialogical tensions, that is, the discursive struggles that take place between differently privileged tropic forms.²⁸

²⁸ Daniel N. Kluttz and Neil Fligstein, "Varieties of Sociological Field Theory," in *Handbook of Contemporary Sociological Theory*, ed. Seth Abrutyn (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 189.

Elaborating further on these tropic contentions—specifically, how they vie for supremacy via signification—Troy Fairbanks, the main figure in Chapter III, appears to be a well-polished and self-absorbed slacker who solely gets by on cultural capital and good looks. However, when we reduce Troy’s character to such an analysis, we fail to consider the lingering impact of the tropic frame of Black Excellence and the repressive outlook it has placed on his life more broadly.

Reggie Green, the main figure considered in Chapter IV of this study, is depicted as a beloved campus activist and a walking encyclopedia of knowledge, but what happens when book smarts aren’t enough to counteract the burden of “Wokeness” or the harshness of virulent campus police officers? Interestingly enough, before the latter incident with the officer takes place, Reggie appears to be weighed down by his activist efforts. Thus, considering the aforementioned dialectical tensions, especially in relation to being and tropic play, it is then apropos to ask what are Black (College) Men to do, when they become emotionally, physically, and intellectually burnt out from fighting the good fight on behalf of others and themselves?

And lastly, for young Lionel Higgins, the main figure in Chapter V, I understand his representation as already brushing against the subtended outlines of what Black Manhood and its masculinities are often understood to entail. His overall uncertainty with not just his place on campus, but specifically his broader questions regarding personal maturation and belonging are potentially groundbreaking. Moreover, somewhere between the dominant/domineering cultural scripts that render Black Men as social pariahs or bearers of steadfast coolness, Lionel is astoundingly awkward.

In continuation, where Lionel's fictional predecessors, Steve Urkel and Carlton Banks, arguably represent figures who are cast in relief by the domineering frames of their respective fields of tropic play. However, Lionel eventually seeks acceptance beyond the margins of the interstitial domains of the overall field to which he is bound. Such a transgressive turn of events thusly prompts me to ask what it potentially means to be a young, queer, Black Man attempting to find himself all while attempting to define love?

It is because of the depth of tropic performances within *DWP* that I was able to utilize the robust notion of the trope in order to relay what it may entail to think and act beyond dominant/domineering ways of being. Correspondingly, it is also because of these diverse character profiles that I was also able to relate to each one to some degree. I was not affluent, nor a second-generation Ivy League student, yet I often identified with the lofty expectations of Black Excellence heaped upon Troy. Additionally, I could not imagine the gravity of what it must mean to be seen as the default mouthpiece for the university's Black community, but I remember what was expected of me, and transitively what many also assumed of me, as the former Black Student Union graduate assistant for Florida International University. And while I've never questioned my sexuality, I have wondered if I would ever be capable of experiencing love while also simply longing to belong, to be, alongside and in unison with my racial peers.

Despite the fact that the three characters in my study are distinctly different, there are all linked via their Blackness and proximity to various zones of masculinity. It is because of these throughlines that I hope that there might be broader ramifications beyond what is presented to the viewership. Namely, that said viewership could also

possibly recognize the multitudinous forms of embodied being and existence made possible via tropic play.

Another benefit of analyzing a show like *DWP* is that as opposed to engaging in yet another qualitative study of Black Men in college that lays bare their respective socio-academic experiences, the demographic of study may instead take on the position of a *reflective/reflexive subject*. What I mean by this is that while there may be discomfort, disagreement, and even flat-out triggering moments throughout the course of *DWP* for some viewers, the show may also become as a source of comfort and/or reprieve for other Black Men due to their reflections and/or reflexive responses to the depicted tropic performances.

In fact, due to these opportunities to reflect and reflexively act, I believe that multiple possibilities may exist for Black (College) Men post consuming the series. They may take a passive role and simply consume *DWP* as a general spectator; or they can use the series as a means for coming to terms with their own social circumstances; or, potentially, and similar to what I aimed to accomplish via this study, the demographic in question may critically explore race-gender tropes as presented to the public viewership altogether. Moreover, there also is the possibility that some might not agree with the show's framing. This possibility would be fascinating because, if anything, it communicates the polysemic signification in tropes.

Considering the format of my primary data source, *DWP*, it is essential to acknowledge that I offered excerpts of dialogue directly taken from scenes that occur within episodes from the series' first three seasons. While these excerpts were transcribed and accompanied by varying rich descriptions and analyses, I encourage readers of this

study to contend with the source material at their leisure beyond the proffered excerpts and examinations. This is the case because text is a *polysemic* arena where meaning is not fixed but is instead in flux due to constant dialogical struggles that take place between signs (Lest not forget the corresponding struggle to streamline certain meanings as social facts by certain dominant groups.).²⁹ In other words, “films and television shows are basically open to the knowledge, the emotions, the social communication and the practical sense of spectators.”³⁰ Therefore, while I am responsible for stewarding consumers of this research endeavor, I can only proffer my interpretations of the studied cultural artifact.

In continuation, I proffer that by directly consuming the source material, readers may be able to better familiarize themselves with the characters while drawing their own conclusions concerning dialogue, scenes and the general layout of the series altogether. This study ultimately relies upon *Dear White People* as both a cultural artifact and a specific example of textual evidence concerning race-gender tropes. My goal is to study said tropes, not render value judgments about the series or fully relay its contents beyond described dialogues and their corresponding scenes.

Statements of the Problem

When considering culturally-derived archetypes and staunch social scripts, and despite the ever-looming presence of dominant tropes, there still exists the possibility that race-gender tropes may operate as performances of (un)intentional contestation,

²⁹ V. N. Volosinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, trans. Latislav Matejka and I.R. Titunk (Seminar Press, 1973), 23.

³⁰ Lothar Mikos, “Collecting Media Data: TV and Film Studies,” 4.

emancipation, and/or complication (or, tropic play).³¹ As such, Black Men in general, but college Black Men in particular, are often understood through empirically based accounts of experience. Such logic leads to studies that act in kind and privilege methodologies that center empirical ways of knowing and analyzing Black (College) Men.

Purpose of the Study

To be clear, my purpose is to not question the accuracy of empirical studies or the validity of experiences described in them; its focus is instead on how tropes work to produce (and reproduce) those experiences (and their meanings) within given social circumstances. John Leveille illustrates this point further when commenting providing commentary on the trope; specifically, he explains how the broader social milieu in which the self is bound within not only necessitates reductionist tropic performances, but these same performances are specifically qualified, influenced, and regulated by social milieus.³² This takes place through the complicated interplay of ideology, social institutions, and interpersonal interactions that enacts the social milieu and compels the self to conform to its tropic forms.

It seems, according to Leveille, that the promulgation of reductionist notions, or performances of the self on behalf of the self, to be more specific, are compelled into existence by sociologically influenced circumstances.³³ It may be argued, then, especially when considering notions of dominant tropes, that these social contexts produce what I

³¹ Debby Thompson, "Is Race a Trope?": Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity," 132.

³² John Leveille, "Tropic Constructions of the Self," *Theory In Action* 3, no. 2 (April 30, 2010), 95. <https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.10018>. Emphasis Added.

³³ Benjamin Baez, "The Study of Diversity," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75, no. 3 (May 1, 2004), 297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2004.11772257>.

more specifically believe to be *domineering tropic constructs*. My adoption of this stance is informed by Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of the enunciative capacity of cultural difference. Elaborating further, Bhabha calls into question modernity's relation to the colonized other with the goal of questioning purportedly acceptable forms of representation, as well as the presumed correctness of these signifying practices which stall or dismiss altogether delineating forms of cultural synthesis.³⁴

Considering the staunchness of these race-gender archetypes, especially when paired with corporeal being, the concept of the *domineering trope* must be further unpacked as well. I recognize domineering tropes as being marked by those praxes that not only have an established socio-historical presence—thus linking them to the common and/or ordinary—but those praxes that work to produce social capital on the performer's behalf. As these performances occur, not only does, following Ian Hacking, “a kind of person [comes] into being at the same time as the kind itself [is] being invented.”³⁵

While I subscribe to Hacking's notion of auto-inscription of the self, I believe it is necessary to identify that in the wake of these emerging constructs, there are social incentives that promote the continued adherence to certain scripts over others. Alternatively, a major portion of this study considered the rewards, punishments, and perils of enacting seldom highlighted ways of being, while also calling into question both common and purportedly radical ways of race-gender performances. I ultimately found

³⁴ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; Routledge, 1994). 35.

³⁵ Ian Hacking, “Making up People.” In *Reconstructing Individualism: Autonomy, Individuality, and the Self in Western Thought*, Eds. Thomas C. Heller, Christine Brooke-Rose, and Christine Brooke-Rose, (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1986), 236; Paul A. Roth, “Ways of Pastmaking,” *History of the Human Sciences* 15, no. 4 (2002), 128. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952695102015004684>.

myself concerned with what the Black (College) Man as an agential subject looks like beyond ideals?

As such, what might it hypothetically look like to brush against and/or outright contradict dominant and domineering categories of classification? What I found was that Black (College) Men can be read as producing various forms of masculinity. Thus, drawing a parallel between tropes and likening them to Foucauldian power dynamics, tropes may be thought of as forms of discourse that are “not merely negative or prohibitive, *but* [are] always, and more importantly, productive in the sense that [they constitute] domains of knowledge, rituals of practice, and forms of subjectivity.”³⁶ Therefore, pairing this logic with Hacking’s sentiments, I established that not only is knowledge not solely predicated upon institutional and/or hegemonic logics, but it is also not necessarily bound to the responsibility of placating to the dominant/domineering. Instead, there lies the capacity to produce performances that trespass, transgress, and/or transmute ways of being.

On Trop(ill)ogical Thought

Seeing as how I am interested in relaying the nuances of tropes as well, it is then necessary to parse the assumptions that also tacitly traffic in delimiting race-gender circumstances. This entails interrogating modernist and imperial-colonial logics and, concurrently, uncovering the myriad responses of Black Men to these logics. In doing so, my study works to offer pivotal insight into the continued existence of race and gender tropes in the field of higher education, specifically, but also more generally.

³⁶ John Ambrosio, “Changing the Subject: Neoliberalism and Accountability in Public Education,” *Educational Studies* 49, no. 4 (2013), 317.

As to better convey what is meant by the neologism *trop(ill)ogics*, I will make use of a two-pronged explanation that details how I generally understand this framework, as well as how I also discern my project's aspirations and tenets in comparison to the concept of stereotype. Engaging in the former, then, I conceptualize *trop(ill)ogics* as an intervention in the study of race and gender with special regards to minoritized bodies. However, in the case of my study, I specifically deployed this framework as a means of interceding on behalf of Black Men and Masculine subjects. My primary objective was to both complicate and problematize what I see as the prevailing sociological sentiments that often surround them.

This entailed exploiting the trope as both a point of entry and intellectual conduit in order to produce appending thought that add to the already robust canon of scholarship concerning Black (College) Men. It is my hope that in my piloting of *trop(ill)ogical* thought that existing dogmatic, a priori, and presuppositional assumptions regarding raced and gendered bodies can be shifted beyond their current limits. For instance, in Chapter III, I use the fictional ongoing of a television series as an inroad for analyzing the relational dynamics between a heterosexual character and his queer friend.

In continuation, the significance of such an examination lies in my analysis of what I see as a widely trafficked narrative that produces flat constructions of Black Men as homophobic and/or hypermasculine.³⁷ While I do not deny that there are Black (College) Men who give credence to the preceding charge, I am more concerned with analyzing the claim of malfeasance by considering under what circumstances different

³⁷ Athena D. Mutua, *Progressive Black Masculinities* (Routledge, 2006), 72.

tropic performances may manifest. In Chapter V I consider the Derridean concept of hospitality; specifically, I relay the ways that I read tropic forms of Black Men as openly subverting, challenging, and intentionally conforming to dominant narratives regarding sexuality and gender.

To reiterate, my study assumed that dominant race-gender logics associated with Black Men have often been problematic due to how they traffic in narrow and/or oppressive frameworks that shape the experiences of these men in return. For instance, while common but not in totem, these discursive logics, both historically and contemporarily, help to perpetuate the idea of a dangerous racialized Other, a radical difference, which works currently to form social, political, and economic milieus.³⁸ These tropes of difference are premised on the assumption that “people who are in any way significantly different from the majority... seem to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes. And they are often required to be both things at the same time!”³⁹ It was therefore my aim to explore critically these tropes and thus problematize the undergirding logics that allow them to replicate habitually in higher education and elsewhere.

Trop(ill)ogical Thought v. Stereotype Thought

Keeping the aims of trop(ill)ogical thought in mind, while there is an overlap between both concepts—both are heuristics meant to serve as mental frames for structuring knowledge around a given topic. It is important to consider the idiosyncrasies

³⁸ Armond R. Towns, “Toward a Black Media Philosophy,” *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 6 (2020), 852-853. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2020.1792524>.

³⁹ Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other.’” In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Hall, Stuart, Vol. 2, (Great Britain: Sage Publishing, 1997), 290.

that set apart the trop(ill)ological and the Stereotypical. As such, I would like to attempt to control for what I deem as a possible fair and pertinent critique of the emphasis I place on the trope over the course of my study as both concept and tool for sociological examination. This is necessary because the trope readily lends itself to conflation with that of the stereotype.

Attempting to further parse the stereotype from the trope then, it is important to understand what the former entails. A stereotype is “a widely held, simplified, and essentialist belief about a specific group. Groups are often stereotyped on the basis of sex, gender identity, race and ethnicity, nationality, age, socioeconomic status, language, and so forth.”⁴⁰ From what I can gather, stereotypes have a connotation that renders them as something to which one should not readily conform. They’re often conveyed as looming scripts of which the “stereotyped” are constantly suspicious of because they lack redeemable properties that would render them as being optimal, viable, or desirable.⁴¹

While a beneficial tool for studying stereotype threat, there seems to be little-to-no engagement with the potentially myriad possibilities for social performances that present themselves as a response to these stereotypical assumptions; especially as it pertains to possible ways of being beyond the domain of “threat” and conformity or avoidance. It is here where I see the logic of the stereotype as plateauing and where I conversely understand the trope, or trop(ill)ological thought more specifically, as

⁴⁰ “Stereotypes, Gendered Innovations,” accessed February 10, 2022.
<https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/terms/stereotypes.html>.

⁴¹ Claude M. Steele and Joshua Aronson, “Stereotype Threat and the Intellectual Test Performance of African Americans,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 69, no. 5 (1995), 797.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.69.5.797>.

providing the fertile ground for thinking differently about race-gender performativity. While an important concept of great merit, I also think that the stereotype has a limit due to the core tenets bound up within its logic. Concerning the stereotype, then, such a threat-centric focus as a means of studying bodily performances further paves the way for the potentially robust framing properties of the trope. This is due to the latter's potential to highlight the various dynamic performances of the minoritized other beyond a preoccupation with "threat." To reiterate, the trope is not limited to the commonplace understandings of a concept. It can also be a re-imagined way of understanding the same concept anew.⁴²

To be emphatically clear, I am concerned with additional ideas that are not limited or exclusively bound to essential and fixed meanings. This is the case because I see research focusing on stereotypes as often trafficking in a preoccupation with monolithic ascriptions—as well as the value claims that develop in the wake of their emergence—as opposed to a prolonged engagement that denotes the nuanced complexities found within the performances of the stereotyped parties.⁴³ Put simply, I assert that the scope of stereotypic analysis does not place emphasis on the possible generative race-gender performances of the stereotyped party.

As a result of this omission of possibility, my shift from the stereotype as an analytic is predicated on my belief that the trope instead works to draw attention towards the richness of the overall social act, or tropic performance. While this departure from the

⁴² Quintilian, "Institutio Oratoria, Book 8, Chapter 6."

⁴³ Katherine Puddifoot and University of Arkansas Press, "Stereotyping: The Multifactorial View," *Philosophical Topics* 45, no. 1 (2017), 137–156. <https://doi.org/10.5840/philtopics20174518>.

stereotype is not a clean one, per se, trop(ill)logical thought has a concern with not only what the subject purportedly is, but with what it may potentially become.⁴⁴ So while both, trop(ill)logical thought and stereotypical thoughts have a preoccupation with dominant forms of legibility, only trop(ill)logical thought concerns itself with simultaneously unpacking difference and offering ruminations on emergent modalities for conveying the agency of the race-gender being.

In further elaboration, I proffer that the stereotype serves not only as a script but also as a catalyzing psychic assumption that undergirds social scripts. I speak on this dynamic more in Chapter IV. Specifically, I interpret this dynamic as at some point in time working to create—in between the stereotype as mental heuristic and purported materialized script, that is—the possibility for the emergence of tropes and tropic play. Important to the analyses that I produced, then, is that tropic play (which can entail the performance of stereotypes) may counter dominant and/or generalized understandings of race-gender being. This in return prompts me to speculate that I may be better able to perform analyses by focusing on the trope than if I were to make use only stereotype as a point of intellectual galvanization and departure.

I posit that failing to discern the nuances between the trope and the stereotype “[works to] obscure as much as it reveals, [because it is] seeking to establish likeness by

⁴⁴ When mentioning subjectivity, I have a post-modern conceptualization in mind. This iteration understands the concept in question, subjectivity through identity, as historically contingent and constantly in flux. So while there may be adherence/classification under the auspices of identity, the subject in question is informed by myriad social scripts. Thus, there is never a truly whole conceptualization of the self. What should not be lost to the reader, though, is my argument that the subject’s right to actively contest these governing scripts should not be disregarded but acknowledged and unimpinged upon.

ignoring distinctions.”⁴⁵ Empowered by its drive to unsettle longstanding sociological assumptions, trop(ill)ogical thought acknowledges the various sociological, ethnological, and philosophical projects that have worked to render Black Men as avatars that represent a broader understanding of the race-gender nexus, one that I view as often working to codify Black masculinities and manhood as phantasmically sinister, animalistic, and perilous at times. My argument is not that these tropes simply result in social circumstances that constrict Black (College) Men and their corresponding masculinities. Instead, when now operationalized as an analytic, trop(ill)ogics denotes how in many instances tropic play situates Black Men closer in proximity to both material and symbolic violence—or flat out death.

In summation, the issues that I am most curious about, and by commutative property the catalyzing elements that in part help to bring this study to fruition, stem from a perceived dearth of analyses that problematize and/or advance examinations of nuanced, alternative, and generally complex Black masculine race-gender being. To reiterate, I see reliance upon the delimiting but still promising concept of the “stereotype” as actually working to prohibit more prolonged engagements of being as it pertains to the realities of Black (College) Men. It is therefore through harnessing the power of the trope that I understand this dissertation as being an in-road for various new ways of understanding the multitudinous experiences of Black Men in college, as well as potentially Black Men as a broader demographic beyond higher education.

⁴⁵ David Theo Goldberg, “Racial Comparisons, Relational Racisms: Some Thoughts on Method,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 32, no. 7 (September 1, 2009), 1276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870902999233>.

Research Questions

1. The overriding question in this study was:

Primarily via an analysis of the Netflix series, *Dear White People*, a show meant to depict higher education, how are race-gender tropes portrayed regarding Black (College) Men?

2. A second and corollary question is then:

Primarily via an analysis of *Dear White People*, what are the potentially transferrable ways that Black (College) Men can contest, complicate, or altogether subvert dominant race-gender within real-world scenarios?

Significance of the Proposed Study

Higher education like many other institutions is not only a byproduct but also arguably a microcosmic representation of society writ large.⁴⁶ At the most minimal of levels, I understand this study as attempting to shed light on the various issues that plague the experiences of Black (College) Men on campus and elsewhere. More specifically, this includes but is not limited to, shedding insight on such commonplace acts as racial profiling on campus, the hampering of the ability to race and/or gender oneself, and the experience of being othered by both university logics and student peers alike.

This study ultimately attempts to add to the canon of literature, both popular and formal, that documents and analyzes the varying experiences of Black (College) Men. It should conversely not be understood as a project that concerns itself with phenomenological experiences divorced from the milieu from which they emerge;

⁴⁶ Rebecca Newman-Gonchar, "Civility in higher education." *Journal of Student Affairs* 11 (2002), 61-71; Eboni M. Zamani, "African American women in higher education." *New directions for student services* 2003, no. 104 (2003), 7.

especially because much scholarship and media discourse have reported on the social existence of Black Men since the Reconstruction.⁴⁷ Instead, it is meant to serve as an invigorated cultural hypothesis regarding what it possibly could mean to identify under the interconnected headings of Black, Collegian, and Man.

In privileging the philosophical over the empirical, my study took a different approach than is common in the field of higher education. Specifically, it produces analyses that are undergirded by the assumption that *experience* is shaped by, and mediated through, discourses, such as tropic performances. My study assumes that race and gender discourses commonly traffic in narrow and potentially deleterious universal tropes about Black Men.⁴⁸ But tropes, as all discourse, are historically contingent. It is paramount to recognize this treatise as exploring the history and workings of tropes in order to expose such contingencies. Therefore, my critical analysis of tropes shaping what one can know about Black (College) Masculinity stands to serve as a relevant contribution to the philosophy of education and to our overall understanding of the experiences of Black Men.

⁴⁷ Calvin John Smiley and David Fakunle, "From 'Brute' to 'Thug': The Demonization and Criminalization of Unarmed Black Male Victims in America," *Journal Of Human Behavior In The Social Environment* 26, no. 3–4 (2016), 350–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10911359.2015.1129256>.

⁴⁸ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 140.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

This dissertation study lends itself to categorization under the broad umbrella of the philosophy of education. As such, via primarily analyzing *Dear White People*—a show that because of its contents and subject matter has a throughline to higher education—I use this study as a means of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men. I deploy philosophical inquiry as a methodological point of departure to best analyze the presence of these tropic performances.

Mode of Inquiry and Cultural Texts

Elaborating further, Claudia Ruitenberg describes philosophical inquiry as “the various ways and modes in which philosophers of education think, read, write, speak and listen, that make their work systematic, purposeful and responsive to past and present philosophical and educational concerns and conversations.”¹ This study is brought to fruition by a philosophical inquiry predicated upon using theoretical methods as a framework of analysis.

Among the various existing methods of philosophical inquiry highlighted by Bryan Burbules and Nicholas Warnick, one of the more relevant modes of critique entails “an ideological or a deconstructive critique of a term or concept, identifying internal contradictions or ambiguities in uses of the term and a disclosure of partisan effects the term has in popular discourses.”² Much of what I have accomplished in my study, then,

¹ Claudia Ruitenberg, “Introduction: The Question of Method in Philosophy of Education,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 43, no. 3 (2009), 316. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9752.2009.00712.x>.

² Bryan R. Burbules Nicholas C., Warnick, “Philosophical Inquiry,” ed. Green Judith L., Camilli, Gregory., Elmore, Patricia B., *Handbook of Complementary Methods in Education Research* (Mahwah, N.J.;

not only saw me read tropes against what I considered being their dominating socio-historical understandings, but also entailed working to reveal various interpretations of race-gender tropic performances.

Thus, as commonly practiced by philosophers of education, my research aims to advance alternative views of Black (College) Men that are meant to challenge the assumptions undergirding existing epistemological frames.³ This orientation to my study was not only a goal that I had in mind when beginning this research endeavor, but it also aligns with the driving tenets of deconstructive influenced philosophical inquiry. Per Burbules and Warnick, deconstructivist examinations aim to unsettle and call into question governing and dominant logics altogether.⁴

Additionally, my study uses concepts from literary theory and criticism to aid in the deconstruction of race and gender in texts with Black (College) Men as a focal point. It is necessary to note that literary theory and criticism assume by “text” anything that is made readable via human perception and interpretation, including written and visual materials. With this in mind, and returning to Burbules and Warrick once more, an additional tenet of philosophical inquiry is the uncovering of implicit warrants that traffic

Washington, D.C.: Lawrence Erlbaum; Published for the American Educational Research Association, 2006), 491.

³ Frieda Heyting, “Methodological Tradition in Philosophy of Education,” in *Methods in Philosophy of Education*, ed. Frieda Heyting, John White, and Dieter Lenzen, Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education 13 (London; Routledge, 2001), 9.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=nlebk&AN=84804&authtype=s hib&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

⁴ Ibid., 493.

within existing scholarship.⁵ It is along the line of deconstructivist thought that I use philosophical inquiry not only as a means of questioning parochial constellations of thought but also to go as far as to denature them in an attempt to expose the catalyzing properties that form them altogether.

Therefore, in parsing these assumptions, I scrutinized the selected texts at two levels: the first remained close to the text, reading against its purported meanings to expose its underlying logic and contradictions; the second situated these texts within the cultural and political contexts that make them possible. It should be noted that I engaged in this type of reading because I understand the aforesaid social contexts as contributing to cultural artifacts, such as television programs and films, but as particularly representative of Black Masculine performativity. Correspondingly, it should also not be under-emphasized how these same social contexts constitute how these race-gender scripts/performances work to maintain domineering race-gender tropes. Now that I have elaborated on the primary relevance of deconstructivist philosophical inquiry to my study, I think it necessary to elaborate on how the texts in question were read.

Diffraction Reading

Maybe the most important methodological tenet that aided in my interrogations of the selected texts stemmed from what I now recognize as an analytical syncretism. In utilizing philosophical inquiry as a tool of analysis, I was able to read various types of texts through one another. What I mean to say is that philosophical inquiry allowed me to synthesize “disparate research from philosophy itself or other fields...to find meanings

⁵ Ibid., 491.

and implications for educational theory and practice.”⁶ In intentionally raising questions to produce new cultural hypotheses that prompt the consumers of this study to think differently about the demographic of note, I compared traditional scholarship that dwelled upon the realities of Black Men as a primary objective, via comparative analyses, to popular artistic works in which race-gender being was lay to bear for a general audience.

This particular approach is referred to as a diffractive reading. Considering the etymological roots of the term in question, then, diffraction stems from the Latin verb *diffrengere* which means to break apart or into pieces.⁷ Having intellectual roots in feminist theory, and greatly influenced by the physical sciences, diffractive readings usually entail using theory as a means for establishing how and why texts matter, both individually and in relation to one another, and what new understandings may emerge when *reading these texts in relation to and through each other*.⁸

My co-relational readings are performed with the intention of producing fruitful and nuanced forms of knowledge derived from using philosophical tenets as a means of reading popular cultural artifacts. Paraphrasing the sentiments of Karen Barad, diffraction is not only a phenomenon but is also an apparatus that can be operationalized to aid researchers in thinking differently about various topics across space and time.⁹

⁶ Ibid., 491.

⁷ Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” *Parallax (Leeds, England)* 20, no. 3 (2014), 171. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.927623>.

⁸ Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007), 30.

⁹ Ibid., 73.

For example, and especially focusing on the calculus of socio-political identity, this might entail considering what difference potentially looks like beyond the parameters of taxonomic efforts that dictate the current ground for legibility.¹⁰ More concretely, and as it directly pertains to my study, then, I utilize the diffractive reading as an apparatus for both uncovering and scaffolding the nuanced complexities that demarcate Black Men and their Masculinity. To reiterate, this analytical approach is performed using a deconstructivist philosophical lens that aids in unpacking delimiting praxes that order via a priori, exclusive, and non-permeable ways of knowing.

It should then be inferred that a “diffractive methodology takes as its point of departure the position that we are all part of the world and implicated and that it is impossible therefore to maintain a distance from the world.”¹¹ Building upon this premise—and seeing as how I believe that the examined popular works are very much bound to and informed by the milieu form which they emerged—this study approaches textual consumption by way of a methodological braiding. This critical pastiche is marked by the marriage of philosophical inquiry and cultural artifacts to produce original analyses around race-gender tropes. Detailed examples of what these diffractive readings resemble can be found in Chapters III through V of this treatise. However, alluding to these ensuing analyses, I can succinctly say that my overall approach read how race-gender identities are portrayed on-screen, and what makes my methodological approach diffractive is the

¹⁰ Karen Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction,” 169; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 72.

¹¹ Vivienne Bozalek et al., “A Diffractive Reading of Dialogical Feedback through the Political Ethics of Care,” *Teaching in Higher Education* 21, no. 7 (2016), 828.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2016.1183612>.

refusal of readings of raced and gendered bodies through static understandings of race and gender.

For example, it was not enough to proffer that Black (College) Men are not lascivious slackers. Doing so would be a reciprocal act that technically places my analyses within a binary of “either/or-ness” instead of being concerned with ascertaining hidden nodes of difference. While an important counterclaim, this does little to nothing to unpack the driving logic that orders the Black masculine body as the Other.

Instead, I am more interested in what creates the conditions for both tropic realities to emerge but also be maintained. Not to take this critical approach would place the non-fictional world at a distance when in reality it is very much a byproduct of for the social world. By utilizing philosophical and literary tools, I was able to speak to what I understand as being *identity and identity (re)construction*. An example of these concepts can be found in Anthony Appiah’s work that not only speaks to social and cultural locations of being and identity, but further talks about the cultural and contextual dimensions that often render these ways of being as entangled, malleable, and situationally contextual.¹²

Diffraction Reading in Action

In an attempt to explain ways of being in the world, this treatise interrogated how popular texts pertaining to Black (College) Men traffic in racial and gender tropes. I found that these tropes not only have strong ties to historical and societal narratives, but that these narratives also continue to work to influence how these men are represented

¹² Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity* (New York, N.Y.: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018), 18.

sociologically.¹³ My inquiry is guided, therefore, by what Aaron Kuntz refers to as *activist materialism*; that is, the intentional consideration of social phenomena in a manner that creates a living praxis that is informed by both materiality and social practices.¹⁴

However, while I've provided insight into both the general framework that guides my analysis and the theoretical underpinnings that work to animate it, I have yet to provide further insight regarding how I actually examined the principal text, *DWP*. In prioritizing philosophical inquiry, I instead relied heavily on interpretation, the socio-historical, and the artistic as a means of arriving at different ways of thinking about race and gender. In this case, the studied effects produced by difference were predicated on the nexus formed between the ascription of, and conformance to, socio-political identities by raced and gendered bodies.

In continuation, through reading with and through established theoretical frameworks, I analyzed *DWP* across multiple sittings. My approach entailed the steadfast consumption of the first three seasons of the original Netflix series (there are four in total). The primary difference is that this time, it was as a scholar driven by specific research questions and with an intentional intellectual outcome—not just as a general audience member in search of entertainment.

Further detailing this transition from passive viewer to the researcher, I consumed the series with the intention of ascertaining new understandings of characters, dialogues,

¹³ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 9.

¹⁴ Aaron M. Kuntz, *The Responsible Methodologist: Inquiry, Truth-Telling, and Social Justice* (N.A.: Routledge, 2016), 94.

and scenes, all while ruminating on the overall representation of Black (College) Men within the series. Accompanied by a moleskin notebook, electronic recording pen, and a keen focus directed towards my three selected characters of analysis—Troy Fairbanks, Reggie Green, and Lionel Higgins—I commenced my foray into the fictional world of Winchester University. A description of how I went about this sojourn can be found below:

- I initially viewed all three seasons of the series in its entirety. This is what I refer to as a “soft consumption” of the audiovisual.
- I next engaged in a secondary review of the series. However, this viewing entailed taking copious notes in relation to the audiovisual data source. This was especially the case for scenes that directly involved Troy, Reggie, or Lionel, as well as other scenes that may have indirectly been related to these characters despite their absence.
- Equipped with a more robust understanding of *DWP* I began a meticulous review of my notes that entailed cross-referencing my aggregated observations with the numerous scenes that were analyzed.
- Lastly, after assuring alignment between observed scenes and my records, I then proceeded to synthesize my notes, so as to produce analyses that would go on to become the many three chapters of analysis in the current study.

It should be noted that the aforesaid keen observation is indicative of what Peter Clough and Kathy Nutbrown refer to as *radical looking*, or the attempt to transgress beyond established epistemologies and to inquire about what might be further ascertained

outside the parameters of personal experience.¹⁵ Thus, while important, my experiences as a Black (College) Man consuming the series cannot alone arbitrate the scope of this study.

Additionally, some of the measures that I took were designed to offset the previous general consumption of the series. While I acknowledge that I will never be able to un-watch the series in an attempt to remove prior memories and judgments, I can ensure that no scene from the original three seasons would go un-watched going forward. This, at times, was painstaking because of its redundancy. Nonetheless, I was able to note emotional cues, bodily maneuverings, and character dialogues from a more critical and nuanced perspective. This renewed perspective helped not only inform how I imagined characters to exist within a given moment and space, but also allowed for new conclusions to be drawn differently to understand the quotidian experiences associated with representations of Black masculine embodiment, sexuality, and collegiate existence.

What is also germane is that this process, due to how it is automatically bound up with a philosophical lens, lends itself to varying degrees of data analysis. What I mean by this is that while I may not have paused a scene for a prolonged amount of time to read its corresponding notes alongside/in relation to a Derridean text, I still can consider what might be observed when applying a deconstructivist lens in relation to the scene in question.

For example, my initial thoughts on a scene from Season 2, episode 10 of *DWP* provides an illustration of this practice; specifically, it proves to be fertile ground for

¹⁵ Peter Clough and Cathy Nutbrown, *A Student's Guide to Methodology* (SAGE, 2012), 26.

considering the concept of justness. Upon viewing the scene in which it is revealed that the campus police officer who pointed a gun at Reggie was relieved of his duties at Winchester, it is also immediately revealed that the former officer has already obtained another job with the state police agency because of nepotism.¹⁶ The Derridean sentiment that “you can calculate what is right... But the fact that it is rightly calculated does not mean that it is just” readily yields itself for usage as a point of intellectual departure.¹⁷ In other words, not only does this scene, in relation to Derridean thought, allow me to consider the precarity of justice, but it also promotes an opportunity to think further about what justice entails and whether it is nothing more than a chimera of sorts.

Now, considering more direct and prolonged forms of analysis, I am specifically reminded of the work that I conducted in relation to Troy as an individual character in Chapter III and with Lionel in Chapter V. Through reading scenes diffractively—via deconstruction, the literature on the Magical Negro Trope, the Lyotardian concept of the *Le Différend*, and other theoretical and philosophical frames—I was able to offer differing perspectives about Black masculine being. For example, regarding the dynamic friendship of Troy and Lionel, instead of solely dwelling upon notions of hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity, I was able to more broadly unpack how their capacity to relate to one another offers potentially world-breaking insights around radical notions of Black intra-communal politics.

¹⁶ Justin Simien, “Volume 2: Chapter X,” *Dear White People*, 2018. Netflix. Timestamp: 4:32-5:30.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John Caputo (Fordham University Press, 1997), 17.

While this may not be an exhaustive accounting for how I operationalized diffractive thought throughout this study, both as phenomena and apparatus, I believe that the preceding examples provide brief insight into how I am generally approaching the relational readings of cultural artifacts and philosophical frames. This method is crucial because not only does it allow for prolonged engagements with textual artifacts via theory, but it even allows for impromptu analysis to take place while the consumption of said artifacts takes place. Now transitioning from diffraction, the next section provides insight into the frames that I used to aid in my study of race, gender, and my overall deployment of the trope as an analytical lens.

Texts as Cultural Artifacts

I thought it appropriate to collect myriad text that complemented the selected philosophical and interpretive mode of inquiry. Via trop(ill)ogical analysis, the study critically engaged not only the scholarly literature on Black Men but also other artifacts derived from domains of popular culture in order to understand how they also influence common understandings of Black Men and their masculinities. Examples of popular texts that I examined include the Netflix series *Dear White People* and Graphic Novels and Comic Books that highlighted space, time, and cosmological ordering (i.e., *The New Gods*, *Final Crisis*, etc.).

By challenging the normal, traditional, or conventional formations of Black masculine collegiate being, I worked to eschew denotative race-gender scripts in order to evoke differently nuanced tropic readings. For instance, in Chapters III and V, respectively, I call into question the ramifications and therefore accepted meaning of such concepts as Black Excellence and intra-communal praxis, respectively. Focusing on

Black Excellence, it most often entails achievement at the highest of levels by Black race-gender subjects despite the broad institutional barriers that have historically worked as preventatives.¹⁸ However, a study such as mine considers what happens when it eludes social agents to ponder further about what it is that was achieved, as well as what exactly constitutes a meritorious act altogether (Surely the beloved introvert with no extra-curricular activities, a modest 3.2 GPA, and a love of anime can be typified as Black and Excellent, right?).

In taking this approach, I was able to make use of a tactical reading style that saw me not only draw upon disparate texts, but insert and exchange meanings. In the process, both popular and formal higher education cultural artifacts served as metrics of contrast and comparison, as I contended with meaning and meaning-making in relation to Black (College) Men. Another benefit of this endeavor was that through analyzing artifacts derived from popular culture, I was able to reveal traces of how dominant cultural tropes work across different societal valences. For instance, the *DWP* character, Troy Fairbanks, could be seen as having much in common with the dominant trope of the “hypersexual” Black Man, a race-gender script with a longstanding home in and outside of the American academy.¹⁹

I note that while cultural artifacts—I’m specifically considering the filmic variety here—can be read as a *text*, my analytical approach does not solely rely upon

¹⁸ BExcellence Team, “Why Black Excellence Is a Mindset, Not Just a Hashtag,” Black Excellence, September 4, 2017. <https://www.blackexcellence.com/why-black-excellence-is-a-mindset-not-just-a-hashtag/>.

¹⁹ Tommy J. Curry, “He’s a Rapist, Even When He’s Not: Richard Wright’s Account of Black Male Vulnerability in the Raping of Willie McGee,” eds. Jane A. Gordon and Cyrus E. Zirakzadeh, *The Politics of Richard Wright; Perspectives on Resistance* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2018), 148. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7tq4sb.11>.

semiological analyses concerned with linguistics and sign systems. While it is important to consider free play and autonomous forms of interpretation, it is also equally important to consider the ramifications and potential responses to a given text as well. So, yes, text communicates, but I deem it also necessary to attend to the various readings that may emerge from these messages and the role of social agents in interpreting and being interpreted (Thus my preoccupation with analyzing race-gender tropes via performativity.).

To reiterate, I understand my methodological approach—a philosophical inquiry propelled by interpretivist intellectual leanings—as apropos for the exploration of how Black Men exist in relation to prevalent tropes across cultural fields. It is important to consider how bureaucratic practices of ordering are bound-up within culture and how they work to inform what many come to understand as race-gender representation.²⁰ As such, the capacity to traffic widely in social facts is an example of how cultural artifacts, intentionally or otherwise, lend themselves to operationalization via popular forms of globalized culture.

It is thus my belief that while popular culture widely traffics in dominant and domineering race-gender tropes, it still houses the potential for the emergence of other possible subversive forms of Black masculine being. This is the case because popular culture is bound to be co-opted and manipulated under the influence of cultural bureaucracies. In the process, capital and power often influence the dynamics of said cultural bureaucracies. However, affixed to this cultural praxis is the twin possibility of

²⁰ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” 108.

diffractive and multitudinous ways of being, by which I mean existence that is not predicted on unitary and/or domineering race-gender tropic performances.²¹

Considering that this study employs theory as a means for pursuing the philosophical method as a useful tool for exploring texts, I draw from a confluence of research methods and theoretical techniques referred to as a *bricolage*.²² To clarify, while theory permeates the various valences that we occupy as agents bound up within a milieu, it should also be noted that my application of theory, in this case, is done with the goal of intentionally placing frames of thought into conversation with audiovisual data. So yes, while social agents are bound up within and exist in relation to theory at any given time, I assert that it is the careful exploration of this relationship to the theoretical/philosophical that must be explored.

Perhaps what makes diffractive reading a challenge, then, is not only that it lends itself to multiple theories, but that it highlights strands of thought that still reverberate within the discourses that are produced in the wake of using theory to examine textual evidence. So, while I do not overtly reference such intellectual traditions as existentialism, structuralism, post-colonialism, or New Criticism, the lingering presence of their tenets throughout my study is possible.

Accordingly, the constellations of thought that were chosen were selected because not only do they help to fuel the particular types of analysis to which I aim to

²¹ “Diffract Definition, Meaning & Synonyms | Vocabulary.Com,” accessed March 7, 2022, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/diffract>. Diffraction is the result of “energy [which] travels in waves, including sound, light, and water. These waves move, spreading out after they pass through small openings and bending around the objects in their path. In other words, they diffract. [Emphasis Added].”

²² Shirley R. Steinberg, “Critical Pedagogy and Cultural Studies Research: Bricolage in Action,” *Counterpoints* 422 (2012), 233. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42981761>.

engage in, but because I recognized them as helping to unfold the nuanced complexities that exist at the crossroads of Black Being and existence. The foremost philosophies found throughout the ensuing chapters that have helped to guide my thinking the most are as follows: Derridean Deconstruction and Cultural Studies. *DWP* thusly serves as my vehicle for investigating race-gender tropes. This is the case because of its capacity to represent non-fictional occurrences that take place in the real world. Despite *DWP* serving as both my focal point and overall lens, a prescription is still needed to adjust said lens. Thus, this is where I see the guiding frames of Deconstruction and Cultural Studies coming into play.

Deconstruction

I have the arduous and borderline blasphemous task of not only summarizing Derridean deconstruction but also parsing and conveying the sentiments residing within its dense intellectual thickets. Before delving further, though, I note that deconstruction is a constellation of thought that consists of multiple theoretical concepts which aid in its “operationalization” and eventual “application.” As such, deconstruction, at least as an auto-operationalizing event, is concerned with a critical reading of the textual. Moreover, deconstruction works to separate the chaff of metaphysics—the overriding belief in the existence of intrinsic and essential properties—from its privileged position in relation to texts.²³

In addition, when considering the potential for deconstruction to be enabled for political endeavors emphasis may be placed on its ironic goal of “operating necessarily

²³ Herman Rapaport, “Deconstruction’s Other: Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Jacques Derrida,” *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995), 99. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/465147>.

from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure” to contend with what is not readily emergent beyond commonly accepted ways of knowing.²⁴ Drawing a parallel, I see myself as doing this, residing in these ready-made socio-political spaces because of my unwillingness to dispatch with such categories as human, identity, and performance.²⁵

Another important tenet of deconstruction, at least as characterized by Derrida himself is that “[d]econstruction takes place, it is an event that does not await the deliberation, consciousness, or organization of a subject...It deconstructs it-self. It can be deconstructed.”²⁶ What I understand Derrida as suggesting is that inherent within texts is the potential for meaning to emerge relationally to external forces. In other words, and important to the aims of my study, is that the semiotic structures that compose a text are always engaged in play (regardless of the motifs of the author and reader.). Thus, especially when reading both race and gender as types of text, due to their communicable properties, the meanings of race-gender performances are correspondingly in habitual play as well.

Considering the dynamism of the textual, I then seek to examine the semiological aspects of human flesh in action more deeply via problematizing dominant and domineering racial scripts. This approach is significant because I understand it as

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (JHU Press, 1967;1998), 24.

²⁵ This is in due part because such a hasty decision forecloses the study of nuanced ways of being. Thus, while I do acknowledge that identity can enclose, and therefore foreclose, I argue that the hull of an aircraft carrier can do the same while still playing a crucial role in safe transport to a new location. In other words, I am interested in knowing if identity can be used as a stepping-stone of sorts for a differently oriented reality where Black (College) Men can exist beyond the narrow assumptions that permeate within society.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, “Letter to a Japanese Friend,” in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, ed. Peggy Kamuf (Columbia University Press, 1991), 274.; Rapaport, “Deconstruction’s Other,” 102.

potentially offering support to Black (College) Men. For example, because the promise of community is inherently separatist, I understand the Derridean concept of *hospitality* as possibly working to contribute to a heretical field of possibility. I explore this further in Chapter V. I see this objective as not only worthwhile but necessary because I want to capture the various and iterative ways that Black (College) Manhood may exist through tropic performances. Also, I focus on alternative ways of understanding race-gender being at the margins, or within what I refer to as interstitial spaces, because legibility beyond the marginal may also entail new forms of repression and surveillance directed towards already marginalized parties. Consider the adverse impact of broken windows policing on poor and working-class racial minorities as an example of this dynamic.²⁷

In grappling with readings of performativity, I contend with the different iterations of race-gender tropes that work to represent or brush against the *bodily autonomy*, or the agency of the raced-gendered figure, especially as it pertains to the lingering presence of dominant and domineering scripts. As I begin to unpack the potential ways that Black masculine and cis-gender subjects produced tropic constructions, it is also necessary to consider how domineering tropic forms attempt to relegate iterative ways of being to marginal zones.

Elaborating further, what I understand as taking place in these zones then, are not only constant attempts to order flesh under governing race-gender scripts, but the possible emergence of transgressive corporeality via antagonizing said race-gender scripts. This argument is extremely important to my study because the trope can be

²⁷ Ngozi C. Kamalu and Emmanuel C. Onyeozili, “A Critical Analysis of the ‘Broken Windows’ Policing in New York City and Its Impact: Implications for the Criminal Justice System and the African American Community,” *African Journal of Criminology & Justice Studies* 11, no. 1 (April 2018), 71–94.

confused as being synonymous with the metaphysical. What I mean by this is that bound up within the concept of the trope is the corresponding concept of essence. Therefore, despite the polysemy of race-gender representations, I see dominant and domineering tropes as working to establish themselves as fixed ways of knowing under the false pretenses of a metaphysics of presence. If this is the case, then, no tropic performance can serve as the lone interlocutor of race-gender being. That is, no lone tropic construct, no matter how pervasive its performance, can serve as the be-all, be end-all for depicting Black Men and their corresponding masculine praxes.

Cultural Studies

Seeing as how much of my study is predicated on the analysis of Black masculine forms—especially those derived from camera-as-interlocutor—I then need to both convincingly and carefully parse the “scripting” of said forms. As such, what is needed in return is an additional framework that can aid in the understanding of Black Masculinity as performed. Therefore, following the thematic through line of “contingency,” “futuraity,” and “possibility” already set forth by econstruction, cultural studies can be viewed as an analytical lens that when coupled with additional critical thought potentially offers “a clinical mode of speculating rigorously about the incipient directions of a society.”²⁸

Furthermore, despite the presence of these dominant tropes in both cultural artifacts and real-world settings, I avoid producing a project that would imply that all Black Men are, and henceforth shall be, survivor-victims in perpetuity of antiblackness.

²⁸ Ted Striphas, "Keyword: Critical," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10, no. 2-3 (2013), 327.

To avoid this, I make use of cultural studies' penchant for studying how culture articulates the quotidian occurrences that drive the operations of a given society. This is specifically done by considering how existing material and discursive operations impact how social agents exist within their sociological milieus.²⁹

In continuation, a project that makes use of cultural studies should openly acknowledge that it is an expansive school of thought with multiple theoretical strands and practitioners who deploy theory as a means of analyzing the political on-goings within society.³⁰ However, what may be the thread tying any iteration of Cultural Studies together is the ongoing concern with the structures, mechanisms, and subjects that compose cultural spheres. Thus, Cultural Studies as “both an intellectual and political project [is] designed to produce provisional forms of analysis of a particular situation by means of an ongoing dialogic process.”³¹

In subsequently exploiting this notion of the provisional, especially as it pertains to the “data” that I will be analyzing, I think cultural studies will be rather beneficial in examining the domain of the cinematic (namely because of how the cinematic emerges from the milieus in which they are produced.). Furthermore, Raymond Williams asserts that those wishing to study culture must be attuned to the material byproducts that emerge

²⁹ Lawrence Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* (Duke University Press, 2010), 8.

³⁰ Chris Barker and Emma A. Jane, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (SAGE, 2016), 5.

³¹ Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays, Volume 1: Foundations of Cultural Studies* (Duke University Press, 2019), 31. Authorial Note: Akin to Cultural Studies' tenets as a critical project, I assert that the trope is also a “provisional truth” of sorts. This is the case because certain tropic performances have a dramaturgical air that allow the performer, or dramaturg, to intentionally engage with and occupy one tropic performance, or truth, over another.

in the wake of social relations and the already existing cultural formations.³² Considering the aforesaid socio-cultural dynamics, I understand textual evidence as opening itself up to continuous tropic play, especially when considering the filtered understandings of multiple social agents (e.g., showrunners, writers, actors, consumers, etc.). As such, it stands that as Black (Collegian) Men move through various settings and occupy multiple different realities, so do their filmic counterparts.

In summary, considering its aims, through the study of *Dear White People*, this project can best be thought of as a means of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men. By using tools from literary and critical theory and criticism—specifically, constellations of thought that are influenced by both deconstruction and cultural studies—therein lies the potential to bring to light the superfluousness of race-gender tropes in non-fictional representations of Black (College) Men. Correspondingly, this may allow for scholars and general consumers alike of higher education themed media and scholarship to better situate these texts within the cultural and political milieu responsible for producing them. The proceeding chapter commences my initial exercise of trop(ill)ogical thought via the analysis of the polarizing *DWP* character of Troy Fairbanks.

³² Raymond Williams, *Culture*, ed. Gavin Mackenzie (Fontana, 1981), 30-31.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BURDENS OF EXPECTATION

For ages, the Black Man has been seen as many things. As sketchy, as wild, as arrogant and insensitive, but I'm going to let you in on a little secret about Black men. We have a softer, more sensitive side. That's right. We love... We laugh... We care... And believe it or not, we cry. What I'm saying is... we got layers, y'all. Our multitudes got multitudes. It feels so good to get this off my chest. Thank you for letting me share. Let's explore this a bit more, shall we?¹

Character Profile: Troy Fairbanks

While Troy could be seen as just another privileged student who attends a fictional Ivy League University, it could conversely be argued that he is a character clearly taxed by multiple forms of pressure that aren't readily alleviated by his popularity and capital. Therefore, and in line with my intellectual aims of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men, via *DWP*, I See Troy as a beneficial point of departure for my first analysis.

In continuation, son to an overbearing father—who also serves as the Dean of students at the same university which the former attends—Troy was quite literally groomed to meet and eventually exceed all expectations placed upon him by his father (It is pertinent to highlight, though, that the senior Fairbanks saw his attempts at grooming Troy as a form of preparation for navigating society.). While I do not want to wax poetic and paint a rose-tinted image of Troy Fairbanks, I think it necessary to highlight that the show makes clear that his mother was not present throughout most of his life. And because of this, Troy seemingly had much confusion and frustration regarding her

¹ As performed by Garret Morris. Maurice Marable and Phil Augusta Jackson, "Pilot," *Grand Crew (TV Series)*, The National Broadcasting Company, December 14, 2021. Timestamp: 0:00-1:00.

absence. Nonetheless, viewers are offered a rather intriguing example of what it might look like for a Black father and son of a particular class, race, gender, and education status to interact with one another.

With this in mind, Dean Fairbanks often challenged Troy to excel beyond whatever his latest accomplishment was. For the more Senior Fairbanks, it wasn't enough to have Troy merely enrolled at an exclusive institution. Troy had to thrive in order to not only to show potential but also to eschew dominant tropic expectations that saw Black (College) Men as inferior. For instance, a large portion of Troy's inner conflicts stem from his father's demand that he run for the head student position of his dormitory, and then eventually, student body president.

Were these campus roles more than resume fillers that might one day lead to legitimate professional opportunities? Perhaps. But for Troy, we eventually learn that for now these experiences neither align with what he has wanted, nor do they correspond with the trajectory of where he wishes to pilot his race-gender being. Prior to his pursuit of unfettered being, Troy serves as a prime example of what it may mean to be understood as embodying domineering tropes, while simultaneously contesting them. For instance, there are multiple scenes in which he could be typified as a hypersexual Black Man, but I instead read him as simply enjoying both non-committal and consensual sexual escapades. Considering the latter counter-reading, it is then necessary to consider what it may mean to harness the energies of *tropic play* to obtain a modicum of reprieve from the pressures of being a student-leader, over-achieving son, and Black (College) Man.

Another important aspect of Troy's character profile is the tendency of showrunners to place him in between radical Black student protestors and those Black students who want to usher in change alongside campus administration. While Troy could be understood as primarily rallying on the side of the latter, it is interesting that in one of the series-defining moments, Troy takes a stance that skirts any clear-cut affinities and in return showcases the frustrations that come along with external expectations. Furthermore, it was in the wake of a moment of campus vandalization that Troy gained his father's attention in full.

In addition to maneuvering the challenges posed by having an overbearing parent, as well as the expected racial patriotism of Winchester's radical Black community, Troy is characterized as being capable of masterfully blending into his surroundings no matter the situation. What I mean by this is that whether he was campaigning for feminist organizations around issues of inclusion and affirming feminine identities or attempting to rally his all Black residence hall peers under the auspices of racial unity, Troy understood how to appease the desires of others. In fact, Troy becomes so masterful at maneuvering the political landscape of the university, that he earns the nickname "Troybama."²

What is important to parse from these moments of social fluidity—in reference to Troy's ability to navigate social settings—is that like former President Barack Obama, Troy had to both constantly embody and politically maneuver under the race-gender trope

² This new moniker tethers Troy's first name to the surname of the forty-fourth and first Black president of the United States.

par excellence.³ A prime example of this plays out against a backdrop of two Winchester alumni and donor events featured throughout the first season of the series. The primary point is that Dean Fairbanks uses Troy's respectable demeanor and success as an inroad for soliciting money from donors. However, focusing on Troy specifically, the viewer is eventually made aware that in the process of trying to meet the expectations of so many, Troy has never had an opportunity to consider how he wants to operate as a Black (College) Man, something that is common with many Black Men.

I ultimately see Troy as a character that teeters a restrictive line between *respectability* and the liberated self. To clarify, acts of respectability denote "how marginalized groups work to show those in the dominant population that they are indeed worthy of respect and able to adopt the dominant group's values and behaviors."⁴ What makes the younger Fairbanks perhaps more interesting as an object of analysis is that his deployment of respectability entails manipulation as opposed to baseline conformity. Most importantly, though, we eventually see Troy begin to progress towards indulging his own desires more fully.

³ Adam Nagourney, Jim Rutenberg, and Jeff Zeleny, "Nearly Flawless Run Is Credited in Victory," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008. <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/world/americas/05iht-05recon.17541362.html>.

⁴ Brandon A. Jackson, "Cultivating a Professional Pose: Collegiate Black Men and Professional Self-Presentations," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 15, no. 2 (ed 2018), 521. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X18000231>.

Sorcerer Supreme: The Magical Negro

In reference to The Magical Negro Trope, Anthony K. Appiah states that it most often entails a portrayal of the “noble, good-hearted black man or woman.”⁵ A common trope in film, literature, theatre, and television, the Magical Negro usually connotes a kind of stewardship by helping White protagonists navigate and overcome hardship. For the purposes of this chapter I will call this tropic form “The Magical Negro Trope” (TMNT). Further theorizing around the undergirding logics of TMNT, for the aforementioned dynamic of stewardship to be the case, it implies that the tropist responsible for executing it is a privative entity. It is privative in the sense that its presence is brought about because of a deficit; an absence that necessitates its emergence into a particular milieu for the sake of exploitation and/or operationalization (i.e., TMNT is needed because those around him lack their own.).

Considering this, in analyzing the presence of the Magical Negro in film, Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham indicate how the character embodying the trope in question is notably underdeveloped and often reduced to a lesser role when not serving as a steward.⁶ Similarly, film director Spike Lee notes how often times the magical negro is

⁵ Kwame Anthony Appiah, “‘No Bad Nigger’: Blacks as the Ethical Principle in the Movies,” in *Media Spectacles*, ed. Marjorie B. Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Routledge, 1993), 80.

⁶ Cerise L. Glenn and Landra J. Cunningham, “The Power of Black Magic: The Magical Negro and White Salvation in Film,” *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 2 (November 1, 2009), 147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934707307831>.

portrayed as not using their special powers to help themselves and/or those closest to them (i.e., Black people) within the films they appear.⁷

Audiences can observe this dynamic in the often-analyzed character “John Coffee” of the film *The Green Mile*. A hulking, Black Cis-gender Man, Coffee is eventually sentenced to death despite being falsely accused of committing a crime. Most pertinent, though, is that he has been mysteriously endowed with an otherworldly gift that allows him to heal the ailments of others; correspondingly, I also note that he often utilizes the ability in question to the benefit of White characters. Despite being extended an open invitation to be released before his quickly impending execution, Coffee instead willingly elects to see his state-sanctioned execution by means of electrocution through until the brutal end. Focusing on Coffee’s death in relation to his tropic performance, what is important to note is that “Magical Negro films labors to personify redemptive suffering and violence. In specific, the anguish and cruelty endured by the Magical Negro character transforms the disheveled White character into a morally improved person by story’s end.”⁸

In continuation, and especially in light of considering the aforementioned John Coffee, I see the potentially opportunity to draw a throughline from cinematic representation to the immediate domain of real-life racial dynamics and lived experience. Patricia Hill Collins asserts that “as the ‘Others’ of society who can never really belong,

⁷ Gary Crowds and Dan Georgakas, “Thinking About the Power of Images: An Interview with Spike Lee - Document - Gale Academic OneFile Select,” *Cineaste*, no. 4 (Spring 2001), 5. <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A75099687/EAIM?u=miam11506&sid=bookmark-EAIM&xid=8eccc7b4>.

⁸ Matthew W. Hughey, “Racializing Redemption, Reproducing Racism: The Odyssey of Magical Negroes and White Saviors,” *Sociology Compass* 6, no. 9 (2012), 758. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9020.2012.00486.x>.

strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries.”⁹ In placing these sentiments together, it appears that whether in the context of creative works, or even in the context of non-fiction, both the Magical Negro and generally marginalized serve as a necessary point on the line of social demarcation.

The Magical Negro Improper v. The Free Radical

As such, and extending this logic further, it was through repeated watching *Dear White People* that I grew to understand one of its main characters existing as a type of distortion of the Magical Negro Trope (TMNT Improper, if you will). Elaborating further, Troy Fairbanks character exists as what I have come to identify as being a variant, or *The Magicless Negro*. And it is here that I see the deviation away from TMNT proper begin to take root. Unlike its traditional understanding, Troy’s improper performance of TMNT is marked by his commitment to aiding his racial peers (this is a degree of depth that is not generally associated with representations of TMNT.).

Concerning notions of intra-racial burdens and procedural tropic performances, then, throughout the continuity of Season One, *DWP* portrays Troy as habitually saddled with the burden of adhering to a monolithic or procedural Blackness. Considering this newly articulated form of TMNT, I understand it as being fueled by, to coin Gloria Anzaldúa’s neologism, a faux *magico-ontology*.¹⁰ This enchantment thusly positions

⁹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Rev. 10th anniversary ed. (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 69.

¹⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands* (Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 42. It should be noted that Anzaldúa’s usage of the phrase “magico-religious” works to inform how I understand the magico-ontological. However, while I focus on a certain fluidity of interpretation as it pertains to race-gender subjects—especially as it relates to the magical negro trope—Anzaldúa utilizes it as a point of reference to ancient cultures that believed the

Troy as one-part ideal collegiate student leader, and the other part as the toxic bane of radical Black collegian political praxes. What I thought was most intriguing, though, was that no matter how he was positioned throughout the series, it seemed as if Troy was rendered as always existentially vulnerable due to the fluidity of external interpretation. This existential conundrum is especially important because as the series eventually reveals, Troy is also at odds with who he wants to or purportedly needs to be for himself and others.

A pivotal scene highlighting this precarity of subjectivity occurs at a fund-raising event for prominent, wealthy, White donors and university administrators. Specifically, before the following excerpt, a conversation with far-reaching ramifications—involving Troy and a few other party-goers—takes place during the event in question. The conversation is pre-empted by banter about student enrollment. However, it ends with a discussion about the possible disbanding of an all African-American residence hall (referred to as Armstrong-Parker [or A-P] in the series). The conversation in question was prompted because donors viewed the residence hall as not only being supported by the university, but as ultimately fomenting self-segregation and an overall environment of division and hostility.

Troy: I think that went really well.

CoCo: Troy, this is not what going well, looks like these people are talking about pulling their \$10 million donation.

Troy: I didn't hear them say that.

CoCo: Trust me. I'm fluent in WASP.

Dr. Hobbs: Actually she's right. Why do you think you're here?

abnormal subject was not only derived from the ethereal, but a gift that concomitantly marks their uniqueness.

Troy: [Stands up in excitement] Because after that article my father wants to prove he loves and respects me. And he's trying to make things better between us...No, that's not it.

Dr. Hobbs: You're here to show that not all Black students want to burn this place down. You're props.

CoCo: [Adopting a melancholy tone] Of course we are...

Dr. Hobbs: If integrating AP is the only thing in the way of this school and the support of its largest donors, what do you think is gonna happen?¹¹

Taking this scene into full consideration, it is crucial to highlight how Troy's race-gender performativity is indicial of supposed model socio-academic exploits (e.g., Dr. Hobb's assessment that Troy and CoCo were present to "show that not all Black students want to burn this place down. You're props."¹²).

It should also be noted that the proper version of TMNT exploits in question seldom allow for anything less than perfection. For instance, in attempts to both surveil and police his son, the senior Fairbanks makes Troy take drug tests to prove his sobriety (This information is obtained via Troy's self-disclosing to his roommate that the testing is a response to his freshmen year being "a blur."¹³ Returning the focus to Troy's race-gender performativity more broadly, the show thus illustrates a particular trope associated with Blackness in college, that which signals a "safeness" to administrators and/or university donors. As Dr. Hobbs suggests, Troy is operationalized as a semaphore of respectability by the Winchester administration. This can also be observed in yet another donor meeting that took place earlier in the season. After craftly maneuvering a

¹¹ Nisha Ganatra, "Volume 1: Chapter IX," *Dear White People*. Directed by Netflix, April 28, 2017. Timestamp: 10:48-11:35.

¹² *Ibid.*, Timestamp: 10:48-11:35.

¹³ Charlie McDowell, "Volume 1: Chapter VIII," *Dear White People*. April 28, 2017. Timestamp: 18:12-18:40.

conversation where a donor had assumed that he was an athlete that could probably help the school's football team, Troy has this brief exchange with his father:

Donor: I bet the old Griffins would be better with you on the field... You're probably pretty fast.

Troy: [Briefly chuckling] I adore the old pigskin, Marty. But alas, I fell in love with crew.

Troy's phone begins to ring, and he excuses himself from the conversation only to then cross paths with his father, Dean Fairbanks.

Dean Fairbanks: [Referring to the same donor from earlier in the scene]: So, um... are they ready to put their name on our new student center?

Troy: I set 'em, you spike 'em.

Dean Fairbanks: That's my boy.

*Dean Fairbanks laughs in approval, pats Troy on the shoulder, and then proceeds to engage with the same donors he and Troy were speaking about.*¹⁴

Returning to the broader argument regarding Troy's positioning as a representation of Black (College) Men, his body in relation to the performative acts he produces is valued because of its latent potential to communicate appropriateness (in addition to the already mentioned safeness.). However, while this may be in tune with the common understanding of the TMNT, and as I will discuss in-depth shortly, I purport that Troy eventually offers viewers a glimpse into potentially transgressive ways of being beyond tropic expectations of propriety (i.e., TMNT Improper).

However, for the time being, the dynamics of safety and acceptability are parsed through insights offered by Troy's politically juxtaposed counterpart, Samantha "Sam" White, the most salient example of the "free radicals" that the series juxtaposes against Troy.). Samantha is portrayed as a rebel-rousing student who takes the university to task

¹⁴ Justin Simien, "Volume I: Chapter III," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 0:31-0:53.

at every turn. Whereas Troy and others also share his approach that ushering in change on campus might work within the existing system in order to transform it, Sam and her political peers conversely transgress the system aiming to slash, burn, and build anew.

Remembering that TMNT is a privative entity, this is made painfully clear when Sam reminds Troy that, “you need me to be me.” This sentiment is closely followed by further context offered by another seminal figure in the Series, Gabe, a White, cisgender, heterosexual, man, has progressive politics, and frequents Black spaces at the university. More importantly, though, and reflecting on Sam’s words, Gabe clarifies her brief yet powerful assertion, explaining to Troy that “the more radical she is, the more acceptable you become.”

While I agree that Sam and Gabe’s claim resonates with racial negotiations in “real” life, there is something extremely intriguing that needs further exploration. Indeed, most if not all things do exist relationally to others; especially when considering the intricacies of intra-racial dynamics.¹⁵ However, for the sake of more broadly considering race-gender performances, I’m compelled to ask what does an in-depth and critical analysis of this relational dynamic entail at its broadest limits? In an intentional reversal of logics, what if Troy’s safeness is what conversely allows for progress through the radical agitation enacted by his peers?

While Troy’s status of serving as a beacon of both propriety and safety may vex Winchester’s radical Black students, it can conversely be argued that both parties, regardless of how they understand their political praxes, are interpellated by the same

¹⁵ Andrea Lloyd, *Writing Verdicts: French And Francophone Narratives Of Race And Racism* (PhD diss., The University of Pennsylvania , 2019), 43.
<https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5324&context=edissertations>.

milieu they seek to contest. In the process, both parties mutually work to inform and define where each other stands politically because when the safety signaled by one group begins, it also concomitantly brushes against the radicalizing characteristics that denote the transgressive Other.

Focusing on Troy, I think it's too easy and reductive to assume that he only engages in the highlighted dominant tropic performances because of the safety it supposedly affords him/his peers (i.e., reprieve from his controlling father and/or serving as a reminder that all Black Men in college have the potential to be molded into a "respectable" figures.). Instead, I speculate that while Troy's character is fueled by the desires of another when conversely considering material realities, it is still very possible that many Black (Collegiate) Men who similarly signify as someone like Troy, may elect to embody respectability because it allows for them to operate as what Sam Greenlee (1969) refers to as the "spook who sat by the door."¹⁶ To clarify, in portraying themselves as representations of respectability, Troy's material counterparts are also, inadvertently or otherwise, eschewing certain race-gender tropes that pathologize Black (College) Men as deficit laden objects, inadvertently or otherwise.¹⁷

While Troy's character may not initially appear transgressive, it still does not mean that he is not already serving, or cannot eventually serve, as a disruptive cog within an oppressive machine (TMNT proper versus TMNT improper). This potential is

¹⁶ Sam Greenlee, *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* (Allison & Busby, 1969).

¹⁷ Shaun R. Harper, "Niggers No More: A Critical Race Counternarrative on Black Male Student Achievement at Predominantly White Colleges and Universities," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education: Critical Race Studies and Education* 22, no. 6 (November 1, 2009), 699. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903333889>.

exhibited in the earlier moments of season 1, episode three. Specifically, after a flashback depicting the various ways in which Troy's father has goaded him into doing his bidding since adolescence, as well as into his contemporary adult years, Troy is depicted as finally taking a stance of opposition in relation to his father. The scene in question comes as a response to Troy receiving photos of a Black-face party being held on campus while he and his father attend a donor meeting (The party is also being brought to a screeching halt by members of Winchester's Black student population):

Narrator: This time, however, was different. Troy saw something in those photos he simply could not abide.

Troy: Dad, this is serious.

Dean Fairbanks: You're being rude, son.

Troy: How about I tell your donors about the kind of school they're giving to?

Dean Fairbanks: You listen to me—

Troy: No, you listen to me for once. We need to get the campus police over to Garmin House now.

Troy's intentions are presumably well-meaning here. However, his affinity for the existing political apparatus perhaps overwhelmingly informs the overall trust he places in campus police. Nonetheless, I do not think viewers should readily dismiss the breadth of his actions. Not only did Troy stand up to his father, but he was also able to bring attention to a situation that was slowly devolving into both a political and material powder keg. It is arguable that Troy potentially foresaw the deleterious consequences if campus police did not disband the party. This conclusion stems from the party being portrayed as growing tense as Winchester's Black students begin to arrive and attempt to hold their White peers accountable for what they see as an egregious spectacle of racial voyeurism.

Troy once again could be understood as complicating attempts to order him as complacent within the status quo. In season 3, episode 4, after Troy's character finally gained a position on the staff of the university's student satire magazine, he pens an article that satirically "makes fun of White folks who complain about affirmative action denying them opportunities."¹⁸ Correspondingly, it should be noted that the conflict in this scenario is derived from the editor removing the broader social context of the article in question and reducing it to a piece of comedic fodder. Reading the heavily-edited article aloud to the audience, Troy appears to be in disbelief at the problematic undertones. The article excerpt in question is as follows: "We all know with a name like Tyrone [on the resume], White folks ain't called my Black ass back."¹⁹

While *Dear White People* begins to show flecks of Troy commencing tropic play as he shifts away from the safeness that he once signaled as TMNT proper, this still takes place against the backdrop of tensions posed by ideological disagreements centered around the politics of Black performativity. Moreover, Troy's stance on student activism should not be mistaken for a lack of racial allegiance due to a supposed enacting of more accommodating than radical tactics. To render such a reductive valuation is very much problematic in that it allows not only for the naturalization of race but has the capacity to erect standards of racial adherence by which to judge the race-gender performances of individuals. Oh, what a tangled socio-political web we weave or has been woven?

¹⁸ Justin Tipping, "Volume 3: Chapter IV," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 2:12-3:41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, Timestamp: 2:12-3:41.

In continuation, if race is socially constructed—especially in relation to the myriad forms of cultural semiosis that come to field how race is understood across space and time—then it must also be acknowledged as susceptible to malleability as well.²⁰ Whether because of ocularcentrist leanings predicated on sight, and/or (strategic) essentialist logics that operate under the guise of progress via unity, understandings of racial allegiance ironically work to systematize and/or narrow how race can be traced, enacted, and (re)molded. Accounting for this narrowing, Stuart Hall sees strategic essentialism as essentializing and hereby portraying “difference as ‘their traditions versus ours’, not in a positional way, but in a mutually exclusive, autonomous, and self-sufficient one. It is therefore unable to grasp the dialogic strategies and hybrid forms essential to the [African] diaspora.”²¹

Building further upon Hall’s assertion, while some may simplistically view Troy as a sellout panderer to the establishment, it would behoove those levying this claim to reassess how they have come to understand political maneuverings, especially in relation to the African and African Diaspora. Most apropos to my charge that monolithic understandings of race-gender are not only phenomenologically/existentially constricting, is the accompanying claim that the procedural logics used to understand the contours of race-gender should be brought into question by both “out-groups” and “in-groups” alike.

For instance, consider Troy’s dilemma of struggling to operate with more autonomy in relation to his own desires; perhaps more specifically, he has a desire to both

²⁰ Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation* (Harvard University Press, 2017), 78.

²¹ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” 110.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735>.

have greater cachet among his peers as well as the power to usher in change en masse. Returning to Season One, episode eight, in response to Lionel's claims that Winchester must be an ideal place for Troy—namely because Troy is the student body president and his father is the Dean of students—Troy contests this assertion when revealing that everyone simply views him as “a mouthpiece for the administration...or a fucking mascot.”²² This aligns with an earlier scene in the episode where Sam and Reggie sarcastically congratulate Troy for delivering an off-screen speech presumably full of empty rhetoric post the Black-face party: “Nice speech, Mr. President. Not a single racist got pardoned and you promoted fire safety. Way to go.”²³

I find it ironic and telling that one of Troy's most ardent critics in Sam began to have her ideological struggles. Elaborating further, the weight of Sam's radical leanings started to wear on her. In fact, by season three, the audience sees Sam end her tenure with the fictional radio show that she used as a bully pulpit to deliver her stance to the campus community throughout the series' first two seasons. This change is partially due to meeting her once radical but now extremely conservative predecessor, who is characterized as admittedly more concerned with lining her pockets via placating the politics of the right.

Speaking on the socio-academic experiences of students of color, Julie J. Park alludes to the ever-looming challenge of not taking up the mantle of stereotypes and

²² Charlie McDowell, “Volume I: Chapter VIII,” *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 12:13-12:32.

²³ *Ibid.*, Timestamp: 8:38-8:45.

dominant tropic ways of being faced by collegians.²⁴ Both Troy and Sam can be understood as exhibiting the burdensome weight of not only expectations—whether from one’s minoritized in-group or dominant out-group—but the lofty weight of failure and the seldom relenting taxation that comes with maintaining these performances of racial patriotism. I deem it problematic to be a racialized subject who critiques the monolithic portrayal of your racial in-group by other racial populations, only then to criticize others for their race-gender performances because it fails to meet desired expectations envisioned by members of said group.

Said more pointedly, then, analytical lenses of duality or binarity miss a crucial point in that they fail to critique dominant ways of knowing and understanding the social and political, and in the process arguably reinscribe the same undergirding logics that are thought to be problematic. Along these lines, a more practical focus should be placed upon cultural hegemony, specifically, the interruption of trivial cultural power dynamics that have historically worked to oppress and relegate.²⁵ This re-shifting would ideally better allow for the altering of the predominant dynamics and dispositions of cultural power, as opposed to a constant denial of alterity.

At this point, to reiterate, in the case of Troy, what I understand as making him a distortion of TMNT, is that his character does not perform feats of magic as commonly portrayed in the cinematic genres of fantasy and science-fiction. With this reading of TMNT in mind, it may be beneficial to reflect on the previously mentioned dialogue

²⁴ Julie J. Park, *Race on Campus: Debunking Myths with Data* (Harvard Education Press, 2018), 23.

²⁵ Stuart Hall, “What Is This ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?,” 106.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/29766735>.

about acceptability between Troy, Sam, and Gabe. Namely, note how regarding how the politics of the two former characters render them both legible, but only one of them, Troy, is acceptable. However, in this stance towards the characters lies a conceptual weakness that does not account for the capacity of the tropic bearer to shroud itself while engaging in subversive or deviant acts under the guise of TMNT.

Therefore, shifting to a more metaphorical reading of magic, this perhaps means that the Magicless Negro is not without capital as some degree of externally derived influence, or in this case, enchantment. Sam's explanation of the dynamic she and Troy share, the radical versus the accommodative, influences this line of thinking. An example of this occurrence, for instance, appears in Troy's, potential to gain magical properties through extenuating circumstances (Becoming activated by the images of the Black-face party sent to him by his roommate comes to mind here.).

Before analyzing any further I reiterate, that my understanding of the trope is predicated on assumed naturalistic constructions of identity. These common understandings are derived from various social, historical, and cultural associations that are trafficked across space and time and neatly packaged as natural and instinctual modes of being for ready use and consumption (This is of course in relation to the corresponding gazes that recognize and interpret these performances.).²⁶ Conversely, tropic dynamism denotes how tropic performances operate and by what interpretive and/or performative means they are "accomplished." In other words, if the Trope is the vehicle in its entirety, the tropic dynamic can best be thought of as the fuel source that animates the vehicle.

²⁶ Debby Thompson, "Is Race a Trope?": Anna Deavere Smith and the Question of Racial Performativity," *African American Review* 37, no. 1 (2003), 129.

Continuing to apply this logic to *Dear White People*, then, and elaborating further on the possibility of differing and non-domineering tropic performances, Troy is a caricature of the ideal Black (College) Man. Specifically, Troy is represented as affable, socially well-versed/savvy, and willingly works within campus parameters to address issues. However, considering higher education context, there still exists other possible ways of being beyond this tropic construction par excellence. This is exhibited by a secondary figure within the series named “Al Lucas.” While presumably well-meaning, he’s somewhat of an oafish character, in that he lacks a certain social awareness, which in return constantly puts him at the receiving end of eye rolls and disapproving head shakes. An example of what might prompt these responses of disapproval is Al’s decision to steal the emotional support animal of a fellow student because he sees it as a disruptive nuisance.

Rash and outspoken, Al’s introduction in the series’ inaugural episode directly brushes against Troy’s. For example, while Troy’s student organization willingly meets with campus administrators to address their grievances, Al prompts his group to take to the pavement and immediately protest: “We need a march on campus, fam: #Sinchester! #BlackFarceParty! #Fuckthepolice! That one’s Evergreen.”²⁷ A more direct scenario that highlights the perceived differences between Al and Troy takes place in the aforementioned scene that showcased a dismayed Troy in the wake of his first published piece. In further elaboration, after detailing what the article in question was supposed to entail prior to the editor taking creative liberties, Al interrupts Troy to tell him that “I

²⁷ Justin Simien, “Volume I: Chapter I,” *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 11:47-14:30.

thought you [Troy] disappointing people was a thing of the past.”²⁸ In analyzing these occurrences, I understand that Al and Troy want to address the same grievances. However, Al is depicted as not wanting to pursue a respectable or accommodating route to secure redress.

Reflecting on both Sam and Al’s respective yet overlapping stances on Troy’s political praxes, what is represented is a failure to engage with what may become of a tropic performance more critically. For The Magical Negro Trope, there must be some recognizable or willing performance of the trope in question already in play (i.e., "Troybama"). I speculate that the safety afforded through the regular performance of TMNT grants space to more transgressive forms of being because of how unexpected they are. Thus, while oppressive social constructs encourage the commodification of some performances, there still exists a litany of race-gender tropes in constant play that Troy may utilize. I assume this is why his character stops entertaining donors and instead aids his peers at the spiraling party.

Thus, the Magical Negro proper has the potential to occupy domains beyond serving as a mere steward for White subjects. I understand Troy as not only being bogged down by the weight of an overbearing parent, but as also hampered by the general expectation of adopting radical politics. As a figure endowed with magic there is a potential to communicate safeness, but there is also the corresponding possibility that the tropic bearer, Troy in this case, may potentially pursue safeness in a matter that doesn’t align with the will of the institution (Winchester University). In other words, not only

²⁸ Justin Tipping, “Volume 3: Chapter IV,” *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 2:00-3:37.

does The Magical Negro improper begin to emerge here, but it is perhaps in certain contexts, ironically, the more impactful tropic frame when compared to the radical. Thus, I explicitly assert that it isn't necessarily farfetched that subversive tropic performances can potentially emerge from what some might think of as non-generative tropic templates. Now, if only I could convince Troy's peers that this is the case.

The Bleak Albatross of Black Excellence and Racial Patriotism

Explicitly diverting my attention back to Troy, and based on the textual evidence presented thus far, his representation should not be hastily interpreted as indicative of wanting to engage in politics of respectability and baseline assimilation to dominant cultural values. Viewers eventually learn that Troy has instead been groomed to be the ultimate example of what some might contemporarily refer to as *Black Excellence*.

Although briefly defined in Chapter II, as a reminder, Black Excellence refers to Black subjects "achieving success and fulfillment through a drive to question the status quo, to thirst for knowledge, and to be the best representation of one's self while understanding the larger societal implications beyond individual success."²⁹ Similarly, Laurie A. Walker et al. recognize Black Excellence as the laudable achievement of Black subjects despite the presence of immediate adversities and systemic barriers to success.³⁰

Relying on these understandings of Black Excellence, what seemingly results when both *Blackness* and *Excellence* are paired together, both fictionally and materially,

²⁹ Stephen C. Scott, "Black Excellence: Fostering Intellectual Curiosity in Minority Honors Students at a Predominantly White Research Institution," *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council—Online Archive*, 2017, 110-111.

³⁰ Laurie A. Walker et al., "#StayMadAbby: Reframing Affirmative Action Discourse and White Entitlement on Black Twitter.," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 2021, 8. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000275>.

is the lauding of certain performative acts of being as more meritable than others (I claim that this mirrors the fictional portrayal of how Troy's tropic performances are accepted in particular spaces over the course of the series.). The issue I have with this logic is that there is a major risk of reducing myriad Black experiences to that of a totalizing Black experience; or in this case, the narrowing of Black performativity and being in favor of dominant/domineering race-gender tropes.

For instance, despite working towards the same goal of garnering support for Winchester's Black community, it is most notably Troy who is allowed to enter spaces with prestigious alumni as opposed to Al. From an intra-racial perspective, Troy is also often expected to use his status as both student body president, and his general proximity to campus administration, to address the needs of his Black peers. However, it seems that in failing to execute this task, his Blackness and dedication to "the struggle" are often called into question. Thus, another pitfall stemming from the deployment of monolithic conceptualizations of Black Excellence rears its head.

Moreover, in the case of Troy, a certain mythological narrative not only defines who is excellent and/or Black, but it also gets to determine who is qualified to be called a Black leader on campus. Consider the mobile app developed by fellow character Reggie Green to determine which Winchester students were "woke" or not. Due to other characters perceiving him as performing beyond the purview of radical racial tropes, Troy was labeled by the application in question as being "not woke."³¹

³¹ Barry Jenkins, "Volume I: Chapter V," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 9:36-10:07.

In continuation, I mean to convey that Black Excellence is often understood as and can indeed be a celebratory classification that heaps both praise and encouragement in the face of structural adversity. However, I must acknowledge that Black Excellence runs the risk of becoming a universalist or transcendental heading under which it orders race-gender subjectivity. Therefore, when subjects deploy Black Excellence as a form of exaltation, they work to mythologize specific ways of being. In return, this practice risks dismissing broader structural issues that allow only a select few to be “excellent.”

Conversely, concerning achievement and/or general participation within higher education, others not recognized as exhibiting the form of excellence in question are ordered as deficit-laden objects by scholars and intra-racial peers alike. Brian L. McGowan et al. warn against such education research practices by calling for a move beyond deficit perspectives when producing scholarship regarding the social group in question.³² It is important to note that contemporary scholarship is not likely to caricaturize Black (College) Men as paternalistic objects in need of guidance. However, through such narratives as Black Excellence—namely the more delimiting and restrictive iterations of the concept in question—that deficit logic still exists within higher education literature and policy. To reiterate, this is the case because the rhetoric often associated with excellence is inherently diametrically opposed to all others who fail to meet its standards.

³² Brian L. McGowan et al., *Black Men in the Academy: Narratives of Resiliency, Achievement, and Success* (N.A.: Springer, 2016a), 3.

Consider the *My Brother's Keeper* (*MBK*) initiative that materialized under the Obama administration in 2014.³³ While not explicitly operating under the moniker of Black Excellence, I argue that many of *MBK's* objectives nonetheless considerably overlap with the mythologizing properties of Black Excellence (i.e., racialized bodies overcoming structural adversity to achieve success). In addition, what makes the program in question most relevant to my study is the emphasis it places on attaining higher education; namely, how young men of color should leverage their autonomy as an inroad to both reaching and succeeding at the highest of academic levels. Moreover, *MBK* was developed as a national initiative to address the

persistent gaps boys and young men of color face and helps all young people achieve their potential for college and career. This initiative has a comprehensive mentoring component that supports students in schools and in communities... Sometimes referred to as a coherent cradle-to-college-and-career strategy for improving the life outcomes of all young people, *My Brother's Keeper* challenges communities to achieve six goals that ensure (1) all children enter school cognitively, physically, socially and emotionally ready; (2) all children read at grade level by 3rd grade; (3) all youth graduate from high school; (4) all youth complete post-secondary education or training; (5) all youth out of school are employed; and (6) all youth remain safe from violent crime.³⁴

While this program is presumably well-intended, I think in some ways it extends the deficit logic that often surrounds Black boys and other young men of color. It again overemphasizes personal agency as a means of combatting broader systemic issues (e.g., poor education systems, community policing practices, under-resourced communities, etc.). For instance, under *MBK*, the community and other people of color within said

³³ "My Brother's Keeper," The White House, accessed April 25, 2022. <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/node/279811>.

³⁴ Joseph Sanacore, "Will Obama's My Brother's Keeper and Similar Initiatives Have a Positive Impact on Low-Income Students?," *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas* 90, no. 4 (July 4, 2017), 152. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00098655.2017.1330591>.

community are now charged with addressing issues directly tied to broader sociological on-goings through offering mentorship. This shifting of precarity management to the local and individual domain is a telltale sign of neoliberalism because it works to disembed the students of color from the economic and political milieu that created the supposed need for *MBK* altogether.³⁵ So, similar to Black Excellence then, *MBK* is another aspirational political heading that misses the mark because it seeks to order under the narrow auspices of race and gender in the name of success.

Furthermore, as a rejoinder in the broader argument of studying nuanced race-gender tropes, the offered critiques of Black Excellence are meant to problematize processes of extra-racialization and dynamics of intra-racial policing. This stance necessitates earnestly contending with what a more robust understanding of Blackness looks like when not galvanized by excellence. In doing so lies dormant the potential to better understand how Black Excellence perhaps (re)produces burdensome and assumed expectations and an overall illusory, perhaps even chimeral, understandings of raced and gendered beings.

To reiterate, my central claim at the moment is that when Black Excellence is treated as a finite goal instead of a participle that denotes infinite action, the generative possibilities for race-gender being are foreclosed.³⁶ In other words, inherent in Black Excellence is the potential to narrow Blackness to faux universal race-gender

³⁵ Bianca J. Baldrige, "It's like This Myth of the Supernegro': Resisting Narratives of Damage and Struggle in the Neoliberal Educational Policy Context," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 20, no. 6 (November 2, 2017), 782, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2016.1248819>.

³⁶ Jacqueline D. Ashley, "Myth of Black Excellence: A Study on Ethnic Identity and Authentic Leadership," (2019), 6. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2206655501/abstract/611D9F7F13234D6FPQ/1>.

performances. An example of this might be Black Excellence being reduced to high achieving college-educated men clad in suits and always willing to “reach back” for their race-gender peers. Still, however, also exists the capacity to foster breaks from dominant/domineering tropic performances. Thus, instead of promoting the colloquial ordering of Black being and subjectivity, Black Excellence has the potential to encourage differently nuanced rhetorical performances (e.g., the different character profiles of Troy, Sam, and Reggie).

Also of importance to my critique of how Black excellence is understood, practiced and promoted, is the complication of scholarship that generally works to privilege Whiteness as a point of departure. Foremost, though, it is important to clarify that I understand Whiteness as not only a racializing process, but one that also works to normalize and therefore constitute, distinguish, and even maintain differences between racial identities.³⁷

Myra Washington similarly highlights how scholars have operationalized “Whiteness to be not just a way to examine the world around us but the way, which [in return] reproduces the constitutive and normative function of Whiteness” altogether.³⁸ What I find equally alarming is that in seeking to articulate and account for the

³⁷ Alastair Bonnett, “‘White Studies’: The Problems and Projects of a New Research Agenda,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 13, no. 2 (1996), 147. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026327696013002010>.

³⁸ Myra Washington, “Woke Skin, White Masks: Race and Communication Studies,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020), 262.

ramifications of Whiteness as both a construct and racializing process, the concept in question becomes reified as a static category.³⁹

I have come to observe these preoccupations with Whiteness, although warranted, as speaking to the experiences of students of color as well as the scholar-practitioners who serve them. I am specifically reminded of literature that has a protracted focus on higher education spaces and its overall community proceedings. These spaces are seen as either being dominated by and therefore racialized by Whiteness; being impacted by the presence and overall institutionalization of Whiteness and therefore influencing campus racial climate and community dynamics (i.e., the interactions between racialized bodies); or understand Whiteness as warranting further study concerning the campus ecological milieu, as well as the corresponding scholarship that studies these environments.⁴⁰

What I mean to convey is that my qualm is not that I think the referenced projects are not worthy of exploration. I instead believe that intellectual preoccupations with the subject's responses to Whiteness attempt to order its reality—not Whiteness as an all-consuming sociological event that orders Black (College) Men—may produce a differently nuanced understanding of race-gender tropes. Additionally, in taking this

³⁹ AnnLouise Keating, "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' (De)Constructing 'Race,'" *College English* 57, no. 8 (1995), 902. <https://doi.org/10.2307/378620>.

⁴⁰ Diane Lynn Gusa, "White Institutional Presence: The Impact of Whiteness on Campus Climate," *Harvard Educational Review* 80, no. 4 (December 1, 2010), 464–490. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.80.4.p5j483825u110002>; Shaun R. Harper and Sylvia Hurtado, "Nine Themes in Campus Racial Climates and Implications for Institutional Transformation," *New Directions for Student Services* 2007, no. 120 (2007), 7–24. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.254>; Nolan L. Cabrera, Jesse S. Watson, and Jeremy D. Franklin, "Racial Arrested Development: A Critical Whiteness Analysis of the Campus Ecology," *Journal of College Student Development* 57, no. 2 (2016), 19–34. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2016.0014>.

approach of studying race and racialization, therein lies the possibility to better understanding the nuanced complexities of Whiteness.

Elaborating further, I explicitly acknowledge Whiteness and its role concerning the constitution of Blackness, so much so that it has ironically become a significant concern of my study. However, reflecting on the thoughts of Washington, I think it is detrimental to solely or overly emphasize Whiteness as a focal point when analyzing Black embodiment and performance, subjectivity, and being. Therefore, to acknowledge a concept then, in this case, Whiteness, does not automatically mean that it should be centered as the designated point of departure when studying matters pertaining to socio-political identity.

In centralizing Whiteness, scholars risk inadvertently dismissing alternative ways of understanding. I, of course, cede that specific intellectual projects may have aims that warrant the usage of Whiteness as a metric for analysis. However, paramount for understanding my critique is that if not critically performed, not only are specific racialization processes further reified, but intellectual boundaries beyond the dialectic of oppressor and oppressed are never broached. Considering Eyo Ewara's reading of Frantz Fanon, it is vital to acknowledge the deleterious effects of racism because it has historically prompted Black subjects to understand and place the self in conversation with Whiteness and racism.⁴¹ Despite White racialized subjects being granted such authority both psychically and socially, surely other tropic performances must exist and therefore

⁴¹ Eyo Ewara, "Fanon's Body: Judith Butler's Reading of the 'Historico-Racial Schema,'" *Critical Philosophy of Race* 8, no. 1-2 (2020), 270. <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.8.1-2.0265>.

merit additional study? In other words, while Whiteness may be ubiquitous, how do Black bodies elect to exist in any given space and at any given time?

To not belabor this point too much more, I offer an example of what I recognize as a nuanced understanding of the trope beyond simple musings that assert “because Whiteness.” Moreover, *Homo Africanus Americanus Moralis* (HAAM) offers a glimpse into Black performativity across space and time. In fact, I think this trope still exists and arguably has a throughline directly connecting it to Black Excellence. Derived from comparing various hip-hop performances and performers—hardcore rap and conscious rap—Ronald A. Judy understands HAAM as acting as a preserver of particular communal dynamics while also communicating subverted forms of knowledge in spite of structural oppression.⁴² I understand Judy as offering an analysis that privileges Black existentiality instead of dwelling upon Whiteness's influence and capacity to objectify. Thus, whether engaging in acts of interstitial reprieve or striving to be an intentionally rebellious signifying body there is a richness in action that merits the study of Black race-gender performativity. In other words, what does it look like to exist in the afterlives of structural oppression, as opposed to dwelling upon said structure as the point of departure? While performativity and interpretation may jostle in perpetuity, “we” may never truly be the master of our respective fates; however, surely exists the potential to appease the desires of our respective “souls” through tropic performativity?⁴³

⁴² Ronald Judy, “On the Question of Nigga Authenticity,” *Boundary 2* 21, no. 3 (1994), 220, 226. <https://doi.org/10.2307/303605>.

⁴³ This is meant to be a play on Sir William Henley’s poetic work “Invictus.” The paraphrased stanza reads as follows in its original form: “It matters not how strait the gate, How charged with punishments the scroll, *I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.* [emphasis added]” Excerpt From: William Ernest Henley. “William Ernest Henley - Delphi Poets Series.” Apple Books.

Returning to *Dear White People*, I think viewers are provided an example of what the subject's struggle for autonomy may entail through Troy's already mentioned impactful insurgence against the trope of Black Excellence. Elaborating further, in the aforementioned scene where Troy stands against his father, the elite Winchester donors are not understood as his priority, much less concern at the moment. Instead, he appears alarmed by the possibility that the Blackface party could lead to a melee or some other deleterious event. I presume this is why when Troy arrives at the fracas scene, his roommate thanks him for "making sure they don't arrest the Black kids."⁴⁴ Taking his insurgency one step further, mere seconds after passing by his roommate, Troy proceeds to confront the White student who was responsible for throwing the party, Kurt Fletcher (The son of the sitting president of Winchester University). Shortly after this, the narrator of the series makes it known to the audience that "in the wake of the party, with students of color needing an advocate, and White students needing to assuage their guilt, Troy became the man of the moment."⁴⁵

While Troy does capitalize on this moment—eventually securing the student body presidency amid the racial tensions on campus—it is still important to point out what happens when there is a presumption of race and/or gender commitments. Moreover, the line of thinking in reference, specifically racial commitments and racial patriotism, also aids in producing arguments around socio-political identity that are correspondingly devoid of depth (i.e., the assumptions that are often made about Troy's character by

⁴⁴ Justin Simien, "Volume I: Chapter III," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 2:23-2:25.

⁴⁵ Justin Simien, "Volume I: Chapter II," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 2:39-2:49.

others in the series.). Extending this notion further, not only are certain aspects of identity arguably reified, but these rudimentary arguments that are ultimately fueled by baseline identity politics also work to maintain and advance both ideological frameworks and eventually material manifestations that govern how Black bodies should arguably perform and potentially conform to more dominant and acceptable ways of being. Thus, when problematic archetypes are countered with flat caricatures, returning to Troy, more harm has potentially been brought into existence than alleviated.

Furthermore, regarding the emotionally conflicted state that defines much of Troy's mood throughout the majority of the first season, his character not only benefits from the critique of the socio-academic expectations that are visited upon Black collegian men, but what may be most laudable is there is a valence that considers what this may look like beyond a prolonged preoccupation with Whiteness. As such, I see Troy's excellence begin to emerge because, for a brief moment, he acted in a manner that, although reactionary, was allowed to materialize instead of being self-muted. While these instances may be brief, I argue that *Dear White Peoples* usage of them has potentially far-reaching ramifications. Analyses calling into question oft accepted constellations of thought regarding race and gender, mainly as represented through the cinematic, may aid in complex and prolonged engagement with the variegated (re)presentations of raced and gendered ways of being within higher education settings.

Considering Troy's progression through the ranks of Winchester's political ladder, I note that by the end of the first season he is constantly working to fulfill the desires of everyone else around him while denying his own: He fails to placate the needs of his fellow Black peers who also reside in his residence hall; he fails to quash the brewing

student rebellion and undergirding racial tensions that have come to pass in the wake of the Black-face party; and he also was unable to garner the respect and outward affection that he so ardently desires from his father, Dean Fairbanks. To be frank, the only time where Troy seems to be at peace is when he's engaging in recreational drug usage and/or having sexual encounters with fellow students or the aforementioned Dr. Hobbs (Unbeknownst to both Troy and Dr. Hobbs, not only was one of their rendezvous filmed by Kurt Fletcher, but he would eventually reveal the existence of this recording and use it as a form of Blackmail to subdue Troy's political actions post the Black-face party.).

In this frustrating personal bind, and perhaps further defined by his politically subdued state as a student, son, and overall figurine of Black Excellence, viewers are provided with a prime example of the existential precarity endured by the magicless negro. While he is enchanted with the hope and well-wishes of others, he still cannot solve the problems of those around him nor his own, but he can quite literally fornicate and smoke through whatever ails him. But, you know, down with Whiteness.

As season one progresses, it is during its denouement that glimpses of new and liberating ways of being are slowly revealed. When carefully parsing through the waning moments of the series' inaugural season, Troy's failures are shown to be the means by which he can unbind himself from the expectations forced upon him. In finally transgressing, Troy expands on what Black Excellence might look like under different circumstances; in doing so, he interjects himself on behalf of himself.

In further elaboration, clad in suit and catalyzed by mounting frustrations, it becomes clearer that Troy is slowly reaching a crossroads as a person. What helped him along the way was a mass email notification sent to the entire school betraying the

information that AP house was to be integrated. The isolated quote from the article that perhaps catalyzed Troy's tropic shift in question: "All this over a 10 million dollar drop in a 14 billion dollar bucket."⁴⁶

Building the moment further, what seems like a greatest hits compilation of scenes reminds the viewer of Troy's journey thus far: The montage recollects how his autonomy has been muted by the desires of others and called into question by his peers; that his presence in politically charged spaces works to negatively caricaturize him more than it does to aid him in serving the needs of his fellow students of color; and of paramount importance, it reveals the nadir that is his relationship with his father, Dean Fairbanks. In what appears to be a moment of both reflection and revelation, Troy vividly recalls the following conversation regarding his reluctant run for a prominent student leadership position:

Dean Fairbanks: Look, nigga, you're gonna hit these Ivy-lined streets, and you're gonna leave neither hand unshaken or baby unknissed.

Troy: Yes, sir.

This is yet another example of Troy being operationalized at the behest of an external figure. However, soon after the montage runs its course, it appears that an affective shift has taken place in Troy. Some might call this a moment of revelation; others might view his internal reflections as simply being the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

Regardless, in a moment of what seems like primal rage, Troy emancipates himself from a presumed lifetime of forced propriety under the narrow auspices of Black Excellence. He then manages to locate a maintenance cart adjacent to where he is

⁴⁶ Adam Nagourney, Jim Rutenberg, and Jeff Zeleny, "Nearly Flawless Run Is Credited in Victory," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2008, sec. World.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/05/world/americas/05iht-05recon.17541362.html>.

standing. With shovel in hand and fueled by frustration, disappointment, and anger, Troy makes his way toward the building where the town hall meeting is being held. In one fell swoop, the raucous arguing factions of protestors in front of the building are silenced by the shattering of a glass door pane. Simply put, the once magicless negro has ignited his own spark via failing—spectacularly. While possibly not in line with how many understand Black Excellence as being, this literal act allows Troy to unfetter himself from the clutches of expectations. Troy briefly chose to be but to do so on his own accord.

Black Being in Flight: Blackness, Being, and Performativity in Action

Troy can be considered an entry within a non-bounded, maybe even boundless example of Black masculine collegian existence. By observing Troy in the milieu in which he exists, the viewer is prompted to consider what may happen when seemingly counterposing and irreconcilable modes of being are cast aside altogether for more illegible modes of representation and embodiment.⁴⁷ Of similar importance, the consumer of the series is also confronted with a critical reckoning with how the notion of “safeness” is potentially complicated by the Black masculine collegian; especially when considering, how in the broadest sociological sense, the group in question, as all signs are, is constantly enmeshed in an interpretive flux.

Transitioning my focus to season two, viewers are introduced to a comparatively different Troy from the version portrayed during the show’s inaugural season. Still searching for total self-authorship, viewers now find him grappling with the aforementioned metaphysical flux and precarity of being. It appears that Troy is directly

⁴⁷ Jack Halberstam and Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

opposed to passively or reticently accepting the imposition of signage that others attempt to visit upon his flesh (which may be easier said than done).

Despite the developments that have taken place in the wake of the now-infamous town hall incident—Troy breaking the glass windowpane and immediately being arrested by campus police afterward—this newfound trajectory may bring Troy a step closer to a more self-desired status. I see this as possibly being the case because this new phase may allow for personal growth in the wake of youthful folly. Seeing how this may be the case, I now take this time to delve into Troy’s season two exploits. However, in the process I contend with not only race-gender identity and construction, but I do so by analyzing the perception of Troy as he is seen through his other peers. It is my hope that through doing so I not only provide additional insight into Troy as a character but that I also provide insight into the potentially overlapping real-world race-gender performances of his counterparts as well. This is the case because I believe Troy to serve as an exemplary case of a liquid or fluid Blackness in action.

For example, consider the following cold opening scene from season 2, episode 7 of the series that shows a flashback to Troy’s outburst, as well as provides a point of continuity that connects the formerly enslaved Black university workers to that of their contemporary post-emancipation counterparts (Namely, Troy Fairbanks):

Narrator: After years of academic excellence, overachieving and perfect finger waves, Troy Fairbanks snaps.

A FLASHBACK OF TROY BREAKING THE BUILDING WINDOW AND
THE
ENSUING MOMENTS AFTERWARDS, BRIEFLY PLAYS

Narrator: [Returning to the present] Troy awaits his impending punishment; there are no nerves because he's dreaming of freedom.

Troy: I'm sorry I let you down, dad...maybe I come back next year...Maybe I go to Europe, or South America, I'm not particular...
Dean Fairbanks: You're not getting suspended.
Troy: [In dismay] So it'll be like nothing ever happened?
Dean Fairbanks: You're welcome.

Narrator: The punishment may not fit the crime, but thus is the power of being a legacy. Watch closely.

A MONTAGE OF SCENES DESCRIBING THE IMPOSITION AND
ALTERING OF THE WINCHESTER LEGACY ADMISSIONS POLICY
BEGINS TO PLAY

NARRATOR: 1840: Remember Dr. Adams? Though his theories were developed as justification for slavery—like Jar-Jar Binks and Omarosa—his belief in a scientific basis for white supremacy endured, resulting in the legacy admissions program established in 1922. To ensure the school's stock remain purely white. 1976: Henry Adams rolls over in his grave, probably, as a generation of less pure students dream of their children too becoming legacy. One such dreamer is [Eventual Dean] Walter Fairbanks, whose legacy lives on in...

MONTAGE SCENE ENDS

Narrator: [Condescendingly referring to Troy] This guy...

A CUT SCENE IN THE VEIN OF A SOCIAL MEDIA POST IS UTILIZED
TO SHOW A SHIRTLESS TROY SOLICITING NOTES FOR A MISSED
CLASS
LECTURE

Troy: Fucking Mondays, am I right? Yo, If anybody has notes for Dr. Paulson's 9:00 am lecture, holler at your boy. Woke up late as fuckkkk.

Narrator: Now you might wonder why Troy let his image go from goody-goody to good-for-nothing. *But unlike his white peers, Troy finds there to be quite a chasm between legacy and liberation [Emphasis added]*⁴⁸.

What the narrator is alluding to is Troy's transition from a vaunted student leader who, just a semester ago, sought to mend fences and ward off any attempts at burning bridges. Instead, what the viewer is shown, or perhaps interprets, is the inserting of an auto-

⁴⁸ Tiffany Johnson, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Timestamp: 0:00-1:50.

narrative meant to rival others' interpretations. Regarding the preceding dialogue, what I find most interesting is that tantamount importance to reconstituting oneself is the desire to seek reprieve through performing differently (i.e., Troy denying his academic commitments/his desire to relocate abroad). Moreover, in what seems like an attempt to catalyze liquid Blackness, Troy is searching for a type of interstitial reprieve. This is what Eddie Glaude refers to as an *elsewhere*.

Expounding further on this concept, the elsewhere may indeed be a location; however, its significance stems from the refuge it affords those who patron its domain. For the prolific twentieth-century cultural critic, author, and philosopher, James Baldwin, it was more than a place that finally allowed him to reflect on the fresh corpse of the civil rights movement. The reprieve granted via the elsewhere allowed for him to muster the resolve to locate “the will and space to reckon with his trauma, grief, and rage on the page...and to bear witness for those who did not survive the betrayal and witness to what happened to those who did.”⁴⁹ This is clearly more than a momentous event for Baldwin professionally. Glaude explicates even further, essentially relaying that within this elsewhere there was an important internal reckoning that had to take place, *that needed to take place*. Glaude writes of Baldwin:

Like Jeremiah's, [Baldwin's] social vision was deeply connected with his own psychic anguish. In fact, from the beginning, he arrived at his broader conclusions about the country and about human beings, generally, through a relentless exploration of his own pain, fragility, and vulnerability. The mental and psychic collapses over the course of his life figured centrally in what and how he wrote. The wounds caused by his stepfather, the pain of growing up poor and black, and the feeling of isolation as a queer black man (he would say that he had to create himself as if he had no antecedents) along with his deep sense of loneliness

⁴⁹ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (Crown/Archetype, 2020), 109. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fiu/detail.action?docID=6071505>.

shaped how he saw and experienced the world.⁵⁰

While I don't fashion my thought process as overly romantic, I imagine that upon finding his elsewhere Baldwin was afforded the opportunity to exist, or simply to be. It didn't just placate to his desires to escape the hardships of the American imperial reality. It was a personal journey that allowed for him to not only bear witness, but to bear his soul. To not only re-signify the new, yet somehow old, experience of the Black in America, but to reflect on the zeitgeist and the rising anger of Blacks in America.

Most importantly, though, the grief that Baldwin held throughout the downturn of the civil rights movement, as well as the anxiety he had regarding the burgeoning Black Power movement, was finally able to be expressed. At this point in his vaunted career, he already warned of the incendiary fate that would befall America if it would not turn from its wicked ways. While I don't think he was possessed by rage per se, I do understand him as being driven by the need to not only lament on behalf of a largely oppressed social class—as he had done through many of his creative and philosophical musings before—but on behalf of *himself* as well.

Now placing Troy and all the Black (College) Men whom he serves as a tropic representation of into conversation with Baldwin, the only thing that might exclude Troy from being the latter's literal opposite is the fact that Troy is also “phenotypically” Black. Unlike Baldwin Troy is from an upper middle-class family, a second-generation collegian, and what some argue as being “conventionally handsome.” But what happens when we remove Troy's social status and aesthetics? Viewers see that he has similarly

⁵⁰ Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own*, 109.

had racial burdens placed upon his tired shoulders; his father, while loving, is manipulative and arguably does more to harm Troy more than any other character within the series; and while seemingly consensual, it appears that both fictionally and even cinematically, he is valued, perhaps even coveted at times, for his sexual aptitude and good looks.

Now placing his aforementioned social status back into consideration for analysis, other viewers of the show might disagree with my conclusions because of Troy's higher possession of cultural and social capital. While his class standing does add an important layer of nuance, this logic still potentially traffics in dangerous assumptions by merely prioritizing class over race and gender, as opposed to analyzing it in relation to race and gender. Additionally, some viewers may also argue that Troy is afforded a certain type of privilege due to his aesthetic appearance, and/or that he is simply an entitled rich kid with daddy issues. By this logic it seems that in exchange for years of emotional manipulation and abandonment that being categorized as conventionally handsome is more than a fair consolation prize of sorts.

Yes, Troy is a fictional character that did not have to endure the rigors of his real-world counterpart in Baldwin. This means that he did not have to see his friends reduced to martyrs, nor did he have to produce both creative and philosophical works under the pressure of American racial apartheid. However, Black (College) Men who exist in the non-fictional world deserve some degree of reprieve if not an actual elsewhere to accommodate their respective needs and desires. While it may seem that I've created a red herring argument by proffering that viewers may categorize Troy in a particular light, I ask that my espoused sentiments not be readily rebuked as logical fallacies.

What I mean by this is that in my attempts to contextualize why Troy is deserving of reprieve, I do so as a response to potential counterarguments that would dismiss the fictional plight and overall richness of his character and therefore its capacity to serve as a social fact. Additionally, and perhaps with greater ramification beyond trop(ill)ogical thought, though, I correspondingly draw a parallel between Troy Fairbanks and James Baldwin because I understand the fictional former as being tethered to the non-fictional latter. What binds them is the burden of not only excellence, but the general demand of expectations for greatness often placed upon the figurative and literal backs of Black (College) Men.

As such, when Baldwin posits that “the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star, as an immovable pillar” it is not enough to ponder the Black body’s diametric relation to Whiteness and White bodies. What I mean by this is that I think it also necessary to contend with the intra-communal politics that narrowly order Black bodies as well (i.e., the lingering heading of Black Excellence). While scholars providing commentary on *Black youth often site how they are perceived as being older than they actually are*, what is perhaps lost is how their elder intra-racial counterparts have re-articulated the logic of this race-gender trope but through expectation instead.⁵¹ As such, what is often expected of many a Black youth, both overtly and silently, is not

⁵¹ “The Essence of Innocence: Consequences of Dehumanizing Black Children - Florida International Univ.,” accessed May 14, 2022, 527. https://fiu-flvc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=cdi_proquest_miscellaneous_1559013542&context=PC&vid=01FALSC_FIU:FIU&lang=en&search_scope=MyInst_and_CI&adaptor=Primo%20Central&tab=Everything&query=any.contains.The%20Essence%20of%20Inn; The American Psychological Association, “Black Boys Viewed as Older, Less Innocent than Whites, Research Finds,” <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/03/black-boys-older>.

only that they must overcome longstanding social adversities but they must do so despite systemically entrenched mechanisms of oppression.

I'm reminded of Bill Cosby's infamous "pound cake" speech—as well as his literary work with African American psychologist Alvin Poussaint—charging Black parents to not only raise their children, but more pertinently also caricaturing poor and working class Black youth as criminalistic, devoid of civility, and anti-intellectual.⁵²

Adding the additional layer of gender, former President Barack Obama's 2013 Morehouse College commencement speech also comes to mind. During his address to the graduating class, President Obama specifically states his belief that

many young men in our community continue to make bad choices. Growing up, I made a few myself. And I have to confess, sometimes I wrote off my own failings as just another example of the world trying to keep a black man down. But one of the things you've learned over the last four years is that there's no longer any room for excuses.... We've got no time for excuses—not because the bitter legacies of slavery and segregation have vanished entirely... [but because] nobody is going to give you anything you haven't earned. And whatever hardships you may experience because of your race, they pale in comparison to the hardships previous generations endured—and overcame.⁵³

Now, while the latter example does consider the enduring effects of institutional oppression, it still unfairly demands that these newly graduated young Black Men not only succeed but that they must do so against the grain of broad sociological adversity.

While this is perhaps neoliberal rhetoric at its finest—*namely because of how it foists the responsibility for addressing various forms of social precarity upon the individual*—I

⁵² N/A, *Bill Cosby Famous Pound Cake Speech*, 2009. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gh3_e3mDQ8; Bill Cosby and Alvin Poussaint, *Come On, People: On the Path from Victims to Victors* (Thomas Nelson, 2007), 119.

⁵³ "Read President Obama's Commencement Address at Morehouse College," Time, accessed May 11, 2022. <https://time.com/4341712/obama-commencement-speech-transcript-morehouse-college/>; The Obama White House, *President Obama Delivers Morehouse College Commencement Address*, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e50Tt9qJRQk>.

think it is also problematic because of who is delivering the message in question and the broader sentiments being espoused.⁵⁴ Effort, akin to narrow understandings of excellence then, does more to mask the nuanced complexities of the lived realities of Black (College) Men.

Rejoining the broader argument, not only are such expectations like excellence and success heavy burdens to carry at times for Black Men, but I also see them as aiding in further complicating an already arduous sojourn through public life; one that, for many Black Men, is often marked by trauma and a general subduing of the ego. Thus, before anyone demands more of young Black (College) Men, it is necessary to question what “more” entails. In doing so, these hypothetical charges centered around success, achievement, and excellence are finally scrutinized beyond their gilded value.

By this logic, while Troy attends an elite university where his father is the Dean of Students, and while necessary for specific arguments about capital and class, this should not bar him from being viewed as vulnerable to the various hardships that plague the poor and working-class members of his racial and scholastic peer group.⁵⁵ Now drawing a parallel between the fictional domain of *DWP* and the arena of the non-fictional world, germane to how I understand Troy, especially concerning Baldwin then,

⁵⁴ Massimo Pendenza and Vanessa Lamattina, “Rethinking Self-Responsibility: An Alternative Vision to the Neoliberal Concept of Freedom,” *American Behavioral Scientist* 63, no. 1 (January 1, 2019), 101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764218816827>.

⁵⁵ I do believe that it is important to account for the role that class has in relation to race and gender. What I do not care for are critiques that do not correspondingly traffic in certain challenges that potentially still arise regarding race and gender. So while I understand that the young men President Obama addressed are more than likely of a certain class status, both economically and culturally, I cannot simply write off their proximity to danger when stopped by racist law enforcement. While they have the capital to set bail and/or hire an attorney to seek redress, I still think that it is extremely important to realize that access to wealth, while extremely important, cannot be over-emphasized.

Troy nor his non-fictional peers should be discounted from meriting the same degree of reprieve as their vaunted predecessors. This stance is informed by how I understand the legacies of such real-world dynamics as masculinity, dominant racilogics, and the general burden of lofty expectations existing as forced inheritances operating within the real-world and cultural artifacts (i.e., artistic endeavors like *DWP*).

Thus, whether fictional or otherwise, too often have Black (College) Men been measured by dominant and domineering archetypes of masculinity. The demographic in question is also measured against their race-gender peers' immense legacies and the general hardships they endured while cementing them. In the process, their expected success is also tied to their ability to navigate these obstacles. In support of this claim, I once again offer President Obama's Morehouse address as an example of this dynamic. However, I also point to how Troy is positioned as a leader responsible for bearing the brunt of stewardship through turbulent times on campus (e.g., The Black face party and the ensuing fallout).

To clarify once more, the issue is not that Troy fails to compare to Baldwin, King, X, or DuBois. Using Troy as a metonym for his fictional counterparts, and reciprocally using his non-fictional counterparts as a metonym for also conveying Troy's struggles, myriad historically oppressed raced and gendered bodies have potentially had countless moments, years, and even decades violently usurped from them because they were goaded into accepting a pre-populated/selected existence as something or some thing's other.

So, for example, as well-intended as “dress for success” seminars and school sanctioned auxiliary support groups may be—or any other attempts to codify Black

(College) Masculine being under the auspices of excellence—it is delimiting to pigeonhole the demographic of note under the auspices of a select few headings. Not only do such reductionist stances work against any possible self-reflexive and autonomous desires, but they also contribute to the lingering power of the dominant/domineering race-gender trope. To be clear, these archetypes will probably persist for the foreseeable future; however, it is their power to both order and deny the sentience of the tropic bearer that should be grappled with.

Those with a differing take may respond to my stance by noting how the promotion of certain tropic performances over others—the touting of Black Excellence as the ideal race-gender performance, for example—is not only meant to be aspirational but also tactical for the survival of Black Men within a harsh society. However, at what point does the pressure to “be like,” as opposed to simply “be” morph into an albatross and thus an additional burden? I pose this question because similar to how I encourage viewers of *DWP* to think differently about the presence of race-gender tropes, I similarly urge readers of this treatise to ponder deeply about the conclusions and/or perceptions they may have regarding the performativity of Black Men and Masculine bodies.

Through adopting this perspective, I suspect that even if dominant/domineering race-gender tropes are not unsettled to the degree of eradication, there still emerges the possibility for new frames of legibility to emerge. The importance of the salience of these new tropic ways of being stems from their general recognition, as opposed to using them as a means of replacing or supplanting already dominant/domineering tropes. Thus, these tropic forms serve as additional and alternative ways of being in response to race-gender archetypes. For instance, while young Black (College) Men who excel academically and

participate in extra-curricular events are worthy of acknowledgment, so are their peers who may not. Not because they are privative or marred by deficit, but because the dean's list, fraternities, and community service may not interest all those who enter the ranks of higher education. Therefore, it is equally important to note that regardless of the intention of the tropic bearer to enact counter-performances, optimal or sub-optimal, fully acknowledging these performances in degree, scope, and kind is crucial in speaking to the richness of Black race-gender being.

With this argument in mind then, I now take the time to draw further conclusions about Troy in relation to the aforementioned politics of aspiration. Thus, when especially considering dominant/domineering intra-communal race-gender tropes and tropic dynamics, if it perhaps weren't for the ever-looming presence of Black Excellence, respectability, and yes, even Whiteness, we'll probably never know what Troy could have been—*and that's also perfectly fine.*

As such, whether Troy engages in respectability politics under the auspices of Black Excellence, or if he conversely decides to elide such performances altogether, perhaps the most egregious error is not the “mislabeling” of what tropic performance or dynamics are in play (i.e., the Magical Negro proper vs The Magical Negro improper). Moreover, maybe the more impactful analysis is to consider how race-gender performances broadly allow for multiple ways of being due to interpretation. This in return means that dwelling upon one specific act of being may actually work against the tropic performer's desires for self-referentially, in that it dismisses the generative powers of tropic dynamism and the overall capacity to be(come). Maybe this also means that Blackness is always in flight, in constant motion.

The Quest to Be(Come)

Further, considering the possibility of self-referentiality via generation, a turning point in Troy's character arc comes about in the seventh episode of the second season. After failing miserably at his standup comedy debut, he partakes in the recreational usage of 'shrooms along with members of the campus' satire comedy magazine. Throughout the remainder of the episode, what ensues is the execution of a "quest" by the aforementioned group to find out *"Who Troy Fairbanks really is?"*

As I will relay via the usage of my textual artifacts, Troy has pivotal conversations with other characters who provide insight as to who or what they believed Troy to be at various points of their friendship (past and present). What I deem as the foremost pertinent excerpts from each conversation are listed here alongside the corresponding commentary. I chose these excerpts because of how they work to portray the external interpretations of Troy. Specifically, the listed scenes and corresponding dialogue display such crucial concepts as agency, performativity, and general being. Showrunners did this by capturing how Reggie, Sam, and Coco come to understand him throughout their college career and allowing an intoxicated Troy to reflect on their revelations briefly in response.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ To clarify, dialogue preceded by the qualifier "Freshmen year" is derived from season 2, episode 7. The scenes in question are meant to serve as flashbacks. I would like to be emphatically clear that these scenes aren't captured in past episodes because they technically do not exist in the series' timeline prior to the episode in question. The series' point of departure in season 1, episode 1 takes place at a later fictional date and time than the three highlighted characters' freshmen year at Winchester University (Troy, Reggies, and Sam). I presume that incorporating these scenes was done to not only advance the plot, but to provide a brief glimpse into Troy's friendships with Reggie and Sam.

Troy and Reggie

Freshmen year: You're kind of like the Black guy in a White sit-com. Everything you do and say seems designed to make *them* laugh.

Second Season: Troy, this is your problem, man. You spend too much time thinking about how other people see you.⁵⁷

Troy and Sam

Freshmen year: [Answering Troy's question as to what she "saw in him."] Mostly like the worst parts of Ben Carson and Clarence Thomas combined.

Second Season: [Reflecting on Troy post their tumultuous break up]: All I could see was this little boy. A boy so eager to please he becomes whatever people want him to become. And there's power in that. I suppose. If you ever figured out how to use it. But, somehow I guess despite all our shit, I just can't help but root for you. in response.⁵⁸

Placing these two excerpts into conversation with each other, and considering what has transpired in the show thus far, for *DWP* viewers it is likely not surprising that these characters adopt such a stance. Moreover, both Sam and Reggie are written and portrayed, especially throughout the series' first season, as the faces of radical activism that take place at Winchester. While Sam and Reggie may directly contest issues—breaking up the Black face party and/or directly confronting campus bigotry via organizing—both characters are well-acquainted with Troy's differing strategy of appeasement, manipulation, and deception.

In continuation, concerning the preceding excerpts of dialogue between Reggie and Troy, Reggie is clearly alluding to how Troy is not only overly concerned with perfection, but how the latter lets such a lofty ideal dictate so much of his being.

Conversely, Sam, was revealed to be yet another one of Troy's romantic conquests.

⁵⁷ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Netflix. Timestamp: 13:07-15:03

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, Timestamp: 17:10-20:11

However, it is Sam more so than Reggie who traced Troy's antics back to the trauma producing faults from which they emerged. As Sam alludes, coupled with the demands of an elite institution and Black Excellence, inadvertently or otherwise, Troy's father has reduced him to the status of prop. In return, this priming, this grooming seems to be a major, if not the primary catalyst for Troy's problematic ways. Most significant in both scenarios, though, is that Troy's façade was compromised. The magic that the Sorcerer Supreme once used to bedazzle spectators has backfired because they can now see the clearly broken and fragile person behind the spectacle.

While Reggie and Sam could be argued to have delivered the most accurate assessment of Troy's current state of being, CoCo could be seen as providing the most acerbic critique of Troy. At this point in *DWP*, Troy and CoCo have not only had a tumultuous end to their sexual relationship, but it is revealed that CoCo, unknown to Troy, was pregnant but decided to pursue an abortion instead of carrying the child to term. On his psychedelic quest for self-discovery, and just like his brief conversations with Reggie and Sam, Troy offers an apology but is instead met with a sobering rebuke.

Troy and CoCo

Present day: Let me stop you there. You don't need to apologize. I get it. I was just a body to you. Or you're the one who's just a body, a shell. There's nothing about your life that's alive. It's not even yours. You're just someone else's legacy...Stop fooling yourself into thinking that you're on some kind of a journey. Or that you'll have a breakthrough after all this happened. You jumped off your daddy's ship into the icy cold depths of the sea grasping for a life vest. I only keep one, Troy, and it's taken. Sorry.⁵⁹

I find CoCo's choice of words absolutely fascinating and timely. The choice in verbiage reveals to the viewer the dimensions of existence concerning embodiment. What I mean

⁵⁹ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Netflix. Timestamp: 21:28- 22:47.

by this is that to have a body does not automatically mean that one is agentic, nor does it mean that the body in question isn't constantly susceptible to domineering measures of ordering and governance (Alice Walker's critiques of Virginia Woolf come to mind here.).⁶⁰ As such, similar to Reggie and Sam, CoCo calls out the interconnectedness between psychic constrictions—the mental constructs that undergird Troy's tropic performances—and Troy's general lack of awareness on how to make use of this newfound bodily autonomy.

At this point, we've seen three classmates offer insight to Troy. What should not be forgotten is that Troy is experiencing this while in a drug-induced state. With this in mind, before Troy has the opportunity to come down from his psychedelic high, he has two more crucial conversations (One being with a lost service dog and the other being with his father).

Troy and Sorbet

Present day: Don't be so hard on yourself, Troy. Society doesn't reward introspection in black men. In my 18 months on this earth, I've noticed black masculinity left unfettered can grow toxic like a tumor... The real question is, who are you when all of that is removed? Are you just a body like CoCo suggests? Are you your feelings like the ones Sam felt for you? Are you made up of the thoughts of others as Reggie implied, or are you pure consciousness?... You're none of them. If you were your body, you'd have more control over your sexcapades; if you were your feelings or thoughts, you wouldn't have to constantly numb them'; And as far as pure consciousness, all it took was some stems and caps, and here you are talking to a dog.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mother's Gardens," in *Within the Circle An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 404.

⁶¹ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Netflix. Timestamp: 22:58-23:53.

Starting with the comments made by Sorbet, the aforementioned service animal, she cleverly summarizes all the conversations that Troy has had prior to reaching her on his quest. As such, I focus on the assertion that she makes pertaining to Black masculinity left unattended. Such a claim overextends in its attempt to classify en masse because it sets delimiting parameters around masculine subjects. Can Black masculinity be extremely problematic at times? Yes. However, any masculine, feminine, or queered race-gender performance can grow to be cankerous if trauma informs its praxis. Maybe the more pressing issue is that the world in which Black (College) Men find themselves fails to acknowledge altogether ways of race-gender being that do not align with its dominant/domineering race-gender tropes.

Multifarious Blackness and Being

Once acquaintances, perhaps even budding friends, Troy and Reggie shared a mutual interest in Samantha ‘Sam’ White; albeit for different reasons; specifically, the former “genuinely” admires Sam for her intellect and passion for helping the Black student community, while the latter ultimately operationalizes her as a pawn for his political advancement. However, more pertinent to my analysis is Reggie’s assertion that Troy is akin to the token Black character in a situational comedy.⁶² Consider the following dialogue that takes place immediately after Reggie makes this claim of Troy:

⁶² Unfortunately, there is no one scene that specifically alludes to/supports Reggie’s charge (especially from a denotative perspective.). I believe that Reggie is specifically referring to textual evidence, or the lack thereof in this case, that pre-dates the hypothetical timeline from which the show begins. However, what I interpret the showrunners as working to convey throughout seasons one through two, is that Troy could be—perhaps even should be?—understood as a figure that thrives despite his lack of radicalism and his overall tendency to placate to the desires of others (e.g., his role as a prop at donor meetings, his student organization being granted constant access to administration, and his desire to work within institutional parameters to accomplish change.).

FRESHMAN TROY: [While Staring at his campaign poster] *I should have worn a different jacket. I look like Bill Nye the Science nigga.*

FRESHMAN REGGIE: [In direct response to Troy's preceding jocular statement] *See? Total token black guy quip. You told me to be brutally honest.* Now look, I've done some polling and you've only got about a 20% chance of winning head of house. You've gotta engage the woke contingent.

FRESHMAN TROY: So you don't think I'm Black enough for A-P? I mean, what you want me to do? Fuck a Kardashian or something?

FRESHMAN REGGIE: Too Black.

FRESHMAN TROY: I spent my whole life learning how to disarm White people, and now my own won't trust me.

FRESHMAN REGGIE: You're a bridge to that world, man. That's why I'm helping you. You just got to get our folks to see you're for us and not them. I'll make it simple. Get her [Sam] on your side.⁶³

What intrigues me about this is the framing that takes place and what this analysis means in relation to one purportedly Black male collegian (Reggie), typifying another in this particular context due to how he performs his Blackness (Troy). In relegating Troy to the role of Token and perhaps even implying that his Blackness lacks a certain authenticity, Reggie is advancing dominate racial dynamics that ultimately work to mute and disregard tropic performances that are thought to be too strange, unfamiliar, or even satirical in comparison to dominate discursive narratives of Blackness.⁶⁴

In other words, intentional or otherwise, there is no room for attempted transgression it would seem.⁶⁵ A raced and gendered subject is either forced to exist

⁶³ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Emphasis Added. Netflix. Timestamp: 13:18-14:05.

⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, *The Fateful Triangle: Race, Ethnicity, Nation*, 170.

⁶⁵ I use transgression here because, despite the concept of alterity being applicable, I argue that to willingly engage in alterative acts can assuredly denote attempts at transgression. Moreover, the person who elects

narrowly in relation to a plexus of dominant narratives, or conversely be governed by the parameters of communal jurisprudence. It is likely not coincidental that Reggie's understanding of race-gender appears to be predicated on persisting discursive and popular culture practices that have been normalized across multiple cultural, historical, and social fronts.⁶⁶ More pointedly, I interpret Reggie's understanding of the token, and transitively, its role as a tropic frame that aligns with domineering tropic frames. While Reggie may not racialize Troy as "White" he views the actions that he takes as being steeped in Whiteness.⁶⁷ The issue in this, however, lies in the ever-sliding scale of capital associated with certain race and gender performances in relation to others. More specifically, these tropic frames—The Magical Negro, The Token, and the Black being of Excellence—work to cast a long shadow upon those who have to bare the material burden of what I refer to as race-gender patriotism and/or allegiance. Namely because participating and/or being represented within these tropic frames works to reinforce procedural understandings of Blackness.

In addition to realizing the various ways that representations of Black (College) Men may be complicated, my preoccupation with the generative should not be forgotten. This study is fueled by interpretation. Focusing on the population of study, then, I think it necessary to trouble readings of Black Masculine signification; especially those that are

and/or simply finds comfort in being the outlier could be arguably thought of as transgressing because of how they readily occupy domains of being beyond the dominant, as well as the margins of marginality.

⁶⁶ John T. Warren, "Doing Whiteness: On the Performative Dimensions of Race in the Classroom," *Communication Education* 50, no. 2 (April 2001), 95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03634520109379237>.

steeped in domineering race-gender logic. These same attempts at signification hold abundantly nuanced, and abundant nuances, of performance. For example, one person's perception of a docile negro is another's attempt at subversion.

This is why transgression, as both an act and overall concept, is crucial. Having a denotative understanding that associates it with a denial of compliance, transgression also has an additional association that characterizes it as a foray beyond existing boundaries.⁶⁸ For all intents and purposes, it is this voyage beyond what is thought to be permissible that may be the most generative. As such, I think that by thoroughly considering the role of the transgressive social performances of Black (College) Men—as illustrated by my trop(ill)logical analyses of the character Troy Fairbanks—from a political perspective, we may also be able to better think through and confront the formative rationales that influence world-making (and the performers tethered to these worlds). This is important because I suspect that these same frameworks give rise to cultural scripts which in return produce the undergirding protocols that mold race, gender, and masculinity.

Returning to *DWP*, further rumination on Reggie's assessment of Troy as a token negro who serves the purpose of the readily manipulable form of entertainment is necessary. Specifically, tokenism is not only indicative of a singular stand-in for plurality but as understood by Reggie within the context of the series, it correspondingly serves as a certain type of negative symbolism concerning Black (Collegian) Being. However, despite being a malleable and idealized conceptualization of being in the world, like *all*

⁶⁸ "Transgression - Dictionary Definition : Vocabulary.Com," accessed August 2, 2021, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/transgression>.

forms of symbolic representation are, the symbolism of the token is interpreted by Reggie as being worthy of ridicule.”⁶⁹

What must be expressly understood, then, is that a sentient race-gender being has the potential to signify in relation to his perceived symbolic status at a moment’s notice. When considering these emergent tropic forms, though, to avoid the lure of essentialist trappings, the resulting significations should not be mistaken for new and supplanting race-gender schemas predicated upon imaginary or innate calculi.⁷⁰ Taking this moment to parse signification from references to intrinsic traits, it is necessary to acknowledge “the difference between *saying what a thing is* and *that a thing is*, respectively. The difference may seem subtle but is crucial, being that between signifying a certain way of *thinking about* blacks and it *referring to* blacks.”⁷¹ Building upon, Judy’s sentiment then, these counter or differently read emergent tropic forms should not be understood as neatly capturing Black (Collegian) Masculine being and Manhood in totem. Instead, they are performances that are taking place in flight.

Continuing to grapple with Judy’s assertion, then, I additionally interpret his commentary as giving way to the task of distinguishing between commonly understood raciological assumptions of what Blackness purportedly is, and instead grappling with the myriad possibilities of the multitudinous ways in which it already exists. So while race is a socially constructed and maintained phenomenon, dominant and domineering

⁶⁹ Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, “What is Racial Domination?,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 6, no. 2 (2009), 336. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1742058X09990166>.

⁷⁰ Ronald A. T. Judy, “Irony and the Asymptotes of the Hyperbola,” *Boundary 2* 25, no. 1 (1998): p. 166. <https://doi.org/10.2307/303940>.

⁷¹ Ronald A. T. Judy, “Irony and the Asymptotes of the Hyperbola,” p. 175.

sociological scripts work to mask other alternative ways of Black race-gender being (This is exemplified by Troy's ongoing displeasure and quest to find out "who he is" and how he seeks to exist in the world as an agentic being.).

Returning to Troy and Reggie, even if a racialized subject believes themselves to be an authorial figure, it may never be possible to establish an ideal, readily transferable, and universal coda for Blackness; I would seriously question why one would want to do this in the first place. However, what may be more plausible is to consider what it might look like to reconstruct and come to terms with the various unexplored zones of reading, or gazing, mind altogether. Toni Morrison elaborates on the writer-reader-imagination continuity and how it not only allows for the possibility of differently informed textual readings, but how these readings potentially allow for knowledge to be recast.⁷²

Heeding Morrison's call to not only question content, but the very grounds on which text and textual analysis are established, I believe this is why Reggie's aforementioned present day critique of Troy— "[T]his is your problem, man. *You spend too much time thinking about how other people see you*"—is not only an important critique, but one that denotes why free-play, specifically free-play in relation to raced and gendered subjectivity is necessary. In this case, however, tropic play isn't necessarily evoked to interrupting the performance of a Black body in relation to the White gaze, but it could just as easily apply to Reggie's assessment of Troy. Moreover, while Troy may be seen as a token who entertains and appeases, a blind eye should not be turned to

⁷² Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 3.

potential for Reggie's assessment of try to be equally constricting of tropic play (i.e., trading in one way of delimited being for another).

Multifarious Blackness, Continued: The Black Boggart

Still under the influence of the mushrooms that he consumed; Troy hastily leaves Reggie to find Sam. Finally tracking her down at the campus radio station a conversation about their brief romantic triste takes place. After unpacking why their relationship failed, Sam's assessment of Troy as a person provided yet another important point of departure for analysis.

SAM: Once I let the fantasy of the man you were die, repeatedly, all I could see was this little boy. A boy so eager to please he becomes whatever people want him to become. And there's power in that. I suppose. If you ever figured out how to use it. But, somehow I guess despite all our shit, I just can't help but root for you.

TROY: I was so focused on my bullshit. Sam, how can I do that to you? And Reggie too. I destroyed what could have been for you guys. Thanks, Sam. Gotta go. Bye.⁷³

Not only does this lay a foundation for exploring how the Black masculine body is manipulable, but it also denotes how even amongst "racial peers," there is little to no refuge from expectations or assumptions—self-imposed or otherwise.

Troy's next conversation took place immediately after his brief time with Sam. This time viewers see him race off to find CoCo, an ambitious fellow student and yet another one of his romantic tristes. Finally locating her, he finds her in their residence hall where she is leading a meeting for the student organization that Troy was once the president of

⁷³ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2018. Emphasis Added. Netflix. Timestamp: 17:10-20:11.

CoCo: Meeting adjourned. I'm starting to get a headache from the stench of failure coming off of Troy's tired tweed.

TROY: Coco, please listen. I treated you poorly, and you have every right to be upset—

CoCo: Let me stop you there. You don't need to apologize. I get it. I was just a body to you. Or you're the one who's just a body, a shell. There's nothing about your life that's alive. It's not even yours. You're just someone else's legacy. Like Muffy. She reeks of you.

TROY: Look, how do I make it right?

CoCo: I don't want to be right with you. I've made sacrifices to get out of your tornado's path, and I'm better for it.

As this dialogue takes place a montage of flashbacks plays for viewers. We see Reggie staring from afar as Troy and Sam walk together while holding hands (after Reggie already advised Troy and relayed his romantic interest in Sam). We next see a shocked Sam holding a phone and reading the text exchange between Troy and his next rendezvous (only minutes after Sam and Troy made love). Lastly, the camera returns to present day where CoCo is conversing with Troy.

CoCo: Stop fooling yourself into thinking that you're on some kind of a journey. Or that you'll have a breakthrough after all this happened. You jumped off your daddy's ship into the icy cold depths of the sea grasping for a life vest. I only keep one Troy and it's taken. Sorry.⁷⁴

Establishing a throughline between both Sam and Coco's analysis of Troy, the former appears to understand him as fungible, while the latter characterizes him as the epitome of thingliness/empty vessel altogether.

In continuation, and once again drawing a parallel to real-world phenomena, concerning Black (College) Men, they exist as specters that bear the signifying memory of prior cultural understandings (or race-gender tropes). However, while the demographic

⁷⁴ Ibid., Timestamp: 21:28- 22:47.

of study is interpellated through these various constitutive discourses, of equal importance to consider is what might tropic play look like once agency is seized.

Therefore, and especially considering the multiple ways that Troy was understood by his peers (e.g., as being a token, a child willing to please, and a lifeless shell), it appears that he represents different things to different people. In other words, akin to both race and gender, there is a fluidity that allows for him to both perform and be perceived as occupying these different spaces. This is what I specifically refer to as the tropic dynamic of boggartism.

The boggart in question—depending on the interpretation advanced by its author—does more than evoke fear or wreak havoc. Crucial to understanding the ensuing analyses, is that I am shifting focus from the boggart’s invocation of fear. What I instead wish to emphasize is that the fabled creature has the ability to manipulate its own material form with the intention of producing a particular affect from those who gaze upon its being.⁷⁵ While this particular understanding of the fabled boggart is somewhat obscure, it does have roots in both literary folklore and later cinematic representation.⁷⁶

Considering this, the prospective critique that I find to be most intriguing is that Troy is not simply an opportunistic shapeshifter, but that he is also simultaneously impacted by the same tropic dynamic he uses to please others and makes use of for personal gains. It seems that even when the boggart accomplishes his goals—securing the

⁷⁵ I. M. Konstantakos, “Aristophanic Shape-Shifters: Myth, Fairytale, Satire,” *Logeion* 7 (2017), 128. <https://www.logeion.upatras.gr/node/186>.

⁷⁶ Hanne Birk, Denise Burkhard, and Marion Gymnich, eds., “*Harry - yer a wizard*”: *Exploring J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter universe*, Wissenschaftliche Beiträge aus dem Tectum-Verlag. Reihe Anglistik, Band 6 (Baden-Baden: Tectum Verlag, in der Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2017), 47.

student body presidency, wooing Sam freshmen year, or using Reggie for his knowledge only to cross him later—it appears to be a pyrrhic victory of sorts because all parties involved are adversely impacted.⁷⁷

Furthermore, what I find intriguing is that while the notion of manipulation as a means of survival is a cruel fate for both the boggart, Troy, and its victim alike, I'd have to inquire as to what conditions, or perhaps even who is responsible for creating an entity of this ilk? Correspondingly, what is the cost of preying on the anxieties of others? In other words, who created Troy and what effect does this dynamic of boggartism ultimately inflict upon his being going forward?

Elaborating further, Troy has not simply learned how to bend to the will of others. It instead appears that he has come to internalize and master the very same fungibility that has historically and contemporarily rendered Black flesh as not merely malleable, but existentially vulnerable and precarious. It thusly appears that through processes of internalization, not only is this existential vulnerability accepted, but it is also normalized as a dominant/domineering discourse.⁷⁸

To clarify, I'm not centering Troy as a victim who is bullied into submission at every turn. What I am instead saying is that Troy has become so accustomed to being an object that he readily shapeshifts to accomplish his goals and/or to placate to the needs and desires of others. This is perhaps why his relationships, both romantic and social, are ultimately gilded. That is, they are ultimately hollow because Troy will eventually “shift”

⁷⁷ The deleterious impact for Troy is delayed, as he comes to acknowledge his frustration overtime as actual disillusionment and regret.

⁷⁸ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 117.

with little to no warning. In the process he appears to alienate himself while suffocating his own desires. In hindsight, this is what I presume Season 2, episode 7, as working to portray.

Based on what the series reveals, it becomes clear that Dean Fairbanks has played a major role in Troy's boggartish tendencies. The most telling scenes that directly portray this take place in the wake of Troy's quest for self-discovery. Specifically, a seemingly frustrated Troy reveals that the only thing his father ever taught him was how to use people to the point where he is not even aware of his actions.

TROY: I'm trying to find—

DEAN FAIRBANKS: What, trouble? Expulsion? Jail?

TROY: No, me. I'm trying to find me.

DEAN FAIRBANKS: And just who is that?

TROY: I have no idea. Zero clue. You've never given me the room to figure that out.

DEAN FAIRBANKS: I will not apologize for having your best interests at heart. Everything that I have done has been to shield you from—

TROY: Look around.

TROY: You failed. The only thing you ever did for me is teach me how to use people, like you use me, and it's so ingrained in me, I don't even see myself doing it!

DEAN FAIRBANKS: Use you? Everything I do is for—

TROY: You. It's for you. Last week, I was chilling with Reggie, and he said the craziest thing. He said...he was going through a hard time, and you were there for him.

DEAN FAIRBANKS: Just as I am here for you.

TROY: You listened to him. You didn't tell him what to do or treat him like some fucking puppet. You trusted that he'd figured it out. And the whole time... he's talking, I'm thinking to myself, "Who is this guy When do I get to meet him?"...Maybe you should go.⁷⁹

Visibly upset and probably dealing with whatever post-high symptoms persist in the wake of 'shroom usage, Troy confronts the author of the fable he's bound within. The viewer is then provided with not only a bird's-eye view into a vulnerable conversation between not Black Men, but a dialogue between a father and his son.

Perhaps it is unfair to blame Dean Fairbanks for his ways. After all, not all Black Fathers have a Duboisian-like epiphany where it is revealed that life for a Black son under boots of White Supremacy is ultimately less desirable than a premature demise.⁸⁰ In fact, Dean Fairbanks is a Black Man who also navigated Winchester, and like many of his real-world counterparts, I imagine that much of his rearing practices are influenced by how they themselves were treated as Black Men in society.

However, unlike DuBois's newborn son who unexpectedly died ten days after birth, Troy is represented as a young man who has not only endured the burdens of expectation but also the paralyzing and disingenuous ways of a presumably well-intentioned father. Suffices to say, all this contributes not only to the fictive milieu in which Troy is bound, but the very internal workings of his mind. *But, you know, Whiteness, Patriarchy, and Toxic Masculinity—rinse, wash, and repeat repeatedly.*

⁷⁹ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter VII," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 25:32-28:10.

⁸⁰ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Cosimo, Inc., 1903:2007), 130.

Final Musings on Troy Fairbanks

Summarizing my Chapter III efforts, I understand Troy Fairbanks as serving as an intriguing signifier of race-gender tropes. Therefore, and in line with my intellectual aims of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men, via *DWP*, Troy's character provides ample opportunities to study attempts to represent this demographic via popular cultural artifacts. Specifically, through trop(ill)ogical analysis, I explored how his character conceptually aligns with certain caricatures of Black Men but in many ways also contests them. For instance, I extend beyond conceptualizations of the Magical Negro trope as a mere steward. Elaborating further, Troy Fairbanks engaged in multiple acts that lend themselves to being viewed as problematic, but what should not be undervalued is that his tropic performances ran an expansive range of possibility. In some scenes Troy can be viewed as a master manipulator, while in others he appeared to be masterfully manipulated by external forces. In some moments his alignments with the institution aid in reinforcing the status quo, while in others he singlehandedly is the catalyst for disrupting racist practices.

Where I see the most urgent intervention taking place, though, is through my proffered reading of *Black Excellence*. Perhaps more than any analysis housed within Chapter III, I see a readily transferrable frame of thought for questioning how notions of *Black Excellence* work to mold not only the realities of Black bodies but how this narrow tropic frame rearticulates a procedural understanding of Blackness. Thus, seeing as how trop(ill)ogical thought finds itself pre-occupied with dominant and domineering understandings of socio-political identity, I use it to critique the narrow notions of achievement intrinsic to the rhetoric pertaining to *Black Excellence*. To reiterate once

more, Black Excellence as commonly understood, works to exclude those who do not meet its lofty ideals. Additionally, in readily accepting this tropic frame many do not stop to consider what Black Excellence manifests as practiced, and of equal importance, the potential dangers of upholding such a tropic frame.

Ultimately, I proffer that Troy Fairbanks is more than just a shape-shifting vessel or legatee of an enduring social and cultural history. The primary episode analyzed, season 2, episode 7, starts off with Troy in a holding cell at the university police station. However, it ends with him revisiting his desire to pursue standup comedy. Unlike his earlier failed attempt, though, Troy succeeds. I think this is because despite not knowing concretely who or what he is, Troy decided to use his morphing ability to transition into something anew. Something that was reminiscent of his desires, not what the status quo told him he had to do, nor what his father, a fellow Black Man, relayed that he had to be. Simply put, for a brief moment in time, Troy Fairbanks existed; he finally understood and seized his opportunity “to be.”

Lastly, it would be both dismissive and shortsighted to imply that Black Men and other racialized minority subjects should merely operate aside from, or as a mere reversal of dominant racial projections and/or charges of racial allegiance. As such, considering the staunchness of these tropic frames, and looking ahead to Chapter IV, I turn to the recesses of the mind to consider the power of psychic workings. I am specifically interested in knowing what psychic phenomena are potentially responsible for phobic projections on to the flesh of Black (College) Men. This shall be accomplished through analyzing one of DWP’s most infamous scenes; specifically, the Character Reggie Green’s interaction with a university police officer. A moment that while fictional, is not

fictitious, and as such, may have real-world transferability due to the social facts housed within.

CHAPTER FOUR

MUSINGS ON COSMIC BLACK MASCULINE BEING AND SUBJECTIVITY

I'm a good person, who doesn't pose a threat, but they see me as one. And that is a threat to me...I'm done seeing myself through other people's eyes. I'm telling you what's going on beneath my skin. That's my takeaway. I don't give a fuck about theirs.¹

When considering American racial iconography, specifically its impact on the bodies it is used to order, I am intrigued by the prospect of analyzing the various problematic cultural productions that stem from its influence. With specific regard to the Black masculine cisgender body as media, the current chapter grapples with the existing tensions between sight, site, and interpretation. As a reminder, this preoccupation is driven by my desire to examine race-gender tropes, via *DWP*, regarding Black (College) Men. Similar to Troy, then, Reggie Green is also another character, who, through a prolonged engagement with the concept of phobia, stands to betray additional insight regarding the psycho-social workings of race-gender tropes.

Furthermore, I would like to reiterate that while my analyses may differ, my ongoing aim is to think beyond the epistemological thresholds of race and gender.² This interest has led to a preoccupation with how both discourses of race and gender work to produce representations of Black (College) Men within cultural artifacts depicting environments of higher education. Therefore, despite being the words of a fictional character, the opening epigraph nonetheless indicates a certain degree of empowerment in

¹ Justin Simien, "Volume 2: Chapter II," *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 26:32-28:24.

² Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei, "Plugging One Text Into Another: Thinking With Theory in Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (April 1, 2013), 264.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412471510>.

contesting the social impositions placed upon cis-gender Black masculine figures. However, especially when critiquing the effectiveness of dominant and domineering tropes, it might also prove seriously beneficial to examine how these bodies are interpellated.

In continuation, I believe that to be typified as a Black (Collegiate) Man does not automatically relegate one to being positioned between Scylla and Charybdis.³ To render the most well-rounded depiction of Black masculine collegians necessitates careful consideration. I specifically see myself as doing this by engaging with how the corporeality of Black (Collegiate) Men both evokes social memories and general states of emotional and physical being, or *affective intensities*, as it pertains to the perceptuality of Black masculine being.⁴

Continuing to focus on *Dear White People (DWP)*, I would like to shift elsewhere within the show's fictional universe. While I won't be grappling with a new locale per se, I will nonetheless be turning my attention toward another pivotal character within the fictional series: Reggie Green. Before doing so, and as a reminder to readers, in the preceding Chapter III I offered musings about being and existence in relation to Troy Fairbanks. Specifically, I considered how he not only troubled tropic performances but sought to represent himself anew altogether within the field of tropic play. I'll now be engaging a new object of analysis with the hope of revealing the motivations that are

³ "Scylla and Charybdis." Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed November 16, 2021. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Scylla-and-Charybdis>.

⁴ Eric King Watts, *Hearing the Hurt : Rhetoric, Aesthetics, and Politics of the New Negro Movement* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 14.

potentially responsible for producing the psycho-social perceptions of Black (College) Men.

Character Profile: Reggie Green

Briefly referenced in Chapter III, Reggie Green is an integral figure within the fictional Winchester University student community. Raised by a father who was a member of the Black Panther party, Reggie is portrayed as having the same radical politics undergirding his activist endeavors. Each season of the show finds him dealing with the various ways that university policies and procedures pose obstacle that greatly complicates life for the various marginalized groups on campus. Ever dedicated to the struggle, his political commitments often place him at odds with some of his peers whom he deems as being less concerned with the deleterious effects of “the struggle” on various marginalized campus communities.

Considering the first season of the series, Reggie plays a crucial role in not only the plot but also in showing the daily complexities that are often explicitly and implicitly associated with being a raced-gendered body at an elite higher education institution. It is during this same season that viewers are reminded that no matter if you possess an abundance of intellectual talent, the threat of danger is always imminent. During a house party that becomes raucous and ends with a shoving match between Reggie and his White friend’s usage of the “N” word while singing a rap song, all that could possibly go wrong does indeed go very wrong.

The one opportunity where Reggie the activist is finally in a space to act as a carefree college student is not only short-lived but mired altogether by unfortunate circumstances. In the wake of the verbal spat with the previously mentioned White friend

and fellow student, Addison, it is eventually revealed that a party-goer notified the campus police. A small group of officers arrive at the party location and proceed to harangue Reggie as opposed to speaking with him and the other student whose language, along with Reggie's response, helped catalyzed the tense moment that we now have.

Deciding that he had enough of Reggie's defiant tone, and ultimately angered by his non-compliance when asked to present his university identification card, an officer brandishes a pistol and aims it directly at Reggie. This brief instance triggers a chain of ensuing events that span across the three latter seasons of the series. Gripped by the trauma of his experience, and as specifically acknowledge by the series' creator and director, Justin Simien, Reggie begins to show symptoms associated with *dysthymia*, a psycho-emotional disturbance that is akin to, but not diagnosed as clinical depression.⁵

Reggie's struggles stemming from his encounter with the officer are further explored throughout the second season. While his peers are clearly interested in his wellbeing post-incident, Reggie not only seeks stability but also begins the arduous task of mentally grappling with what he endured the night of the party. Reggie is shown to be triggered by not just flashbacks, but by the continued presence of the officer who was not immediately fired post-incident. Furthermore, a school-provided therapist, access to an assortment of alcohol and drugs, and an abundance of "sympathy sex" were still not enough to lift Reggie beyond his vulnerable state of confusion. He eventually works

⁵ Elizabeth A. Martin and Tanya A. McFerran, eds., "Dysthymia," in *A Dictionary of Nursing* (Oxford University Press, 2017). <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780198788454.001.0001/acref-9780198788454-e-9996>; "'Dear White People' Creator, Justin Simien, Didn't Want To Be 'PSA-y' About Mental Health." YouTube. accessed November 23, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlGaE6Hvn1M&list=PLohcfnkWMHtzSUiw1h_boiXX7CyFmIUd&index=5.

towards achieving balance, but only after concluding that the gaze of others, while ever-present, will no longer preoccupy his thoughts nor be solely responsible for animating his actions.

While Reggie's character briefly disappears from prominence at times throughout the second season, it becomes clear that he's integral to the advancement of other characters (i.e., Troy, as I briefly discussed in Chapter III). During this same season it also appears that he might be on the verge of finding romance with another seminal figure within the series, Joelle Brooks, as they slowly begin to craft a healthy romantic relationship. The significance in this stems from the show's main character, Samantha White, and how she once captured the eye of a young Reggie Green; so much so, that despite being in a complicated relationship of her own, she would end up sleeping with Reggie in the immediate wake of "the incident" in season one. However, this one-off tryst would not be an obstacle and a healthy relationship was eventually able to form between Reggie and Joelle.

During season three, Reggie finally gets what he seemingly craved throughout the show's continuity: A panacea in the form of corresponding race-gender representation. Reggie now has access to someone who appears to *get it*. Dr. Moses Brown returns to campus in the computer science department (Reggie's field of study). Engendering Reggie's trust and loyalty even further, Dr. Brown develops a pilot version of a mobile app that helped to manage the psychological, social, and physiological needs of its users. Reggie seemed to be finally happy, but his newfound stability appeared to come at a cost. His relationship with Joelle began to suffer and it also becomes apparent that he isn't addressing his dysthymia, but only suppressing its presence by distracting himself with

the aforementioned app. In the process, it is also made clear that Reggie's new mentor was actually a nefarious individual. It is eventually revealed that he is sexually coercing Winchester students and has a past filled with inappropriate behavior dating back to his original tenure as a Winchester professor.⁶

In the last episode of the third season, and after much chiding and calls from his peers to hold Dr. Brown accountable, Reggie takes matters into his own hands and works up the nerve to ask his mentor about the growing allegations of impropriety. Clearly caught in a lie and not remembering the earlier details that he told Reggie when initially asked about the issue, Brown inadvertently admits his guilt. Reggie erupts in disappointment and leaves. Through this event he realizes both the errors and dangers of hero-worship. While all was not right, and he was far from being okay, it appears that Reggie was slowly beginning to put the pieces of his life in order.

Brief Musings on the ID Card

Briefly reflecting on what the police officer demanded of Reggie, what societal circumstances necessitate that a 2x3 plastic card should justify, any more or less, the presence of its possessor within a given space? As showcased through Reggie's encounter at the party, it would seem that concerns over identification allow for the reduction of minority race-gender beings to mere things in need of discipline and policing. I read *DWP* as once again relying upon realism because of how this dynamic

⁶ By "sexually coercing," I mean that Professor Brown is portrayed as taking advantage of the commonly understood asymmetrical power and gender distribution between ("Male") faculty and student. Moreover, it is made known to the viewer that Brown is using his influence to pursue sex with various young women from the Winchester University student community. It is additionally revealed that Brown's influence is so immense, that the highlighted victim, Muffy Tuttle, was afraid to speak out on the matter despite being the daughter of a state senator (A political position that, as the show implies, more than likely has a considerable amount of power and influence as well).

parallelly exists in real time. Concerning spaces of higher education, then, Black (College) Men, including those who serve as faculty are treated “like intruders into a predominantly white space in which [they do] not belong,” thus highlighting the overall suspicion they wantonly attract as well.⁷

I acknowledge that there is a contentious relationship between working class and/or raced bodies and photo identification.⁸ However, under current societal regimes, to be understood as a responsible citizen one must comply before being granted the opportunity to participate in the existing social contract.⁹ Returning to the project underway, in applying these sentiments around identification to Reggie’s current predicament—namely, the officer’s contestation of the appropriateness of the presence of a race-gender being of Reggie’s kind—this moment has the potential to provide rich analyses. As such, further examinations of the scene in question and in relation to theory as well as other cultural artifacts, may produce new conclusions regarding how both affective and perceptual experiences work to inform sociological understandings of Black (College) Men.

Cosmic Horrors and Abominations: Musings on the Black Phobogene

Oh, you think darkness is your ally. But you merely adopted the dark; I was born in it, molded by it. I didn't see the light until I was already a man, by then it was

⁷ DeMarcus A. Jenkins, Antar A. Tichavakunda, and Justin A. Coles, “The Second ID: Critical Race Counterstories of Campus Police Interactions with Black Men at Historically White Institutions,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 24, no. 2 (March 4, 2021), 160. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2020.1753672>.

⁸ Richard Sobel, “The High Cost of ‘Free’ Photo Voter Identification Cards” (The Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice), 2. <https://charleshamiltonhouston.org/research/voter-id/>.

⁹ Aja Y Martinez, “The Responsibility of Privilege: A Critical Race Counterstory Conversation” *Peitho: Journal of the Coalition of Feminist Scholars in the History of Rhetoric and Composition* 21, no. 1(2018), 215.

nothing to me but BLINDING! THE SHADOWS BETRAY YOU BECAUSE THEY BELONG TO ME!¹⁰

“I. Am. The. New. God. All is one in Darkseid. This mighty body is my church. When I command your surrender, I speak with three billion voices! When I stare into your eyes and shatter your dreams, and break your heart, it is with six billion eyes! Nothing like Darkseid has ever come among you: Nothing will again. I will take you to a hell without exit or end. And there I will murder your souls.”¹¹

In the case of Reggie Green, as well as the other two characters that I have elected to study, *DWP* allows for his character to deviate from flat race-gender representations. That is, he could be understood as having a certain nuanced depth that may have not been as apparent if captured in another medium and/or context.¹² Through a pooling of artistic visions *DWP*'s directors, showrunners, and writers develop a character that experiences love, anger, success, as well as paralyzing failure. This depth is captured through richly developed narrative arcs as opposed to a standalone scene. The final product results in a protagonist who not only showcases the typical shortcomings of youth, but also the taxations of student activism, as well as the various hazards of existing as Black and masculine within a classed, gendered, and racialized space (i.e. Winchester University). While Reggie exists as a *leitmotif* that is reflective of the society in which it is produced—in that his life is individually marred by hardships that are common to Black

¹⁰ Christopher Nolan, *The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012, accessed May 23, 2022.

¹¹ Grant Morrison, *FINAL CRISIS* #5, 2021. <https://www.dccomics.com/comics/final-crisis-2008/final-crisis-5>.

¹² For example, we might compare “Reggie Green” the TV character to a movie character that is also made to represent Black (College) Men. Both of these fictional figures are meant to display what it purportedly means to be a young, radical, and Black (College) Man. However, due to the logistical nature of the episodic series there is arguably additional room to develop a TV character more robustly than compared to a movie character confined to the span of an approximately two hour film. This is not to say that the figure from the movie isn't a nuanced character, that, if analyzed wouldn't produce rich insights. Instead, this is to say that through providing multiple opportunities for analysis, Reggie's positioning perhaps better aligns with our current milieu because it allows for more pertinent tie-ins to contemporary spaces of higher education and Black race-gender being.

Men as a social class, but not definitive of his/their respective realities en masse —it can be argued that the legibility of his performances denote a paradox of newness and familiarity.¹³

With this in mind, Toni Morrison's explication of this satirical turn might prove relevant to aid in better contextualizing how both Reggie's illegibility and legibility are represented to the viewer. Morrison specifically proposes the notion that creatives "are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability...to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."¹⁴ It is in response to the series' creative richness, then, that I now use Reggie's character as a point of departure for studying the psychic underpinnings of dominant and domineering race-gender logics. To be emphatically clear, this goal necessitates that widely trafficked a priori logic around Black (College) Men be further called into question. Thus, grappling with characters like Reggie holds the potential to further explicate and explore these assumed logics, as well as the often unaccounted for deviations from such staunchly entrenched societal rhetoric.

Returning to the analysis, endearing, triggering, and astoundingly powerful, one of the most crucial and notorious scenes from the show is the aforementioned encounter Reggie has with a campus police officer. What I've often wondered as I've watched this scene time and time again, as both a general fan and a fledgling scholar, is what affective

¹³ Chris Baldick. "leitmotif." In *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*: Oxford University Press, 2015. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.ezproxy.fiu.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780198715443.001.0001/acref-9780198715443-e-647>. Note: Leitmotif can be thought of as "A frequently repeated phrase, image, symbol, or situation in a literary work, the recurrence of which usually indicates or supports a theme."

¹⁴ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Harvard University Press, 1992), 15.

stimuli evoke and later animate this type of material response? What are the driving catalysts that prompt a campus safety official to brandish a presumably loaded pistol towards the face of a young Black Man attending the same university the former is ironically tasked with “protecting”?

After subsequent thought, and in response to the visceral and mental discomfort that stemmed from habitually viewing the scene in question, emerging sentiments centered around perception, consciousness, and culturally/historically derived race-gender dynamics began to take root. I concluded that Reggie is not merely threatening in the eyes of an officer. Elaborating further, it seems that for some, being categorized as young, Black, and a cis-gender man traffics in schemas that indexically render the population in question as threatening. Best thought of as the various context-specific ways an item exists, indexicality denotes the shifting usage of articles, adverbs, and pronouns in speech to denote this presence. For example, two people could state “I am tired.” While they both hold that they are tired, there is a shifting of context because of the utterance being made by two different subjects.¹⁵

Delving further into the indexical ordering of the racialized and gendered being, then, I posit that in certain instances the race-gender subject is rendered as not capable of existing along a continuum of non-static being. Studying the dynamics of hierarchy between linguistic systems, Kate Anderson notes how reductionist indexical orders are predicated on large-scale assumptions that go onto produce repetition of thought in

¹⁵ Lucy Suchman, “What Is Human-Machine Interaction?,” in *Cognition, Computing, and Cooperation*, ed. Scott P. Robertson, Wayne Zachary, and John Benjamin Black (Intellect Books, 1990), 41.

relation to the socio-cultural linguistic practices of groups.¹⁶ Drawing a parallel to the semiotic capacities of flesh then, it thus seems that Black race-gender being is presumed to be not only indexical, but it is also predicated upon narrow understandings that become ordering constructs of universality (and therefore working to constrict tropic play.).

Applying this line of thinking to *DWP*, considering the police officer who drew his service pistol on Reggie, and transitively the many real-world officers he represents, I think there are grounds to argue that the Black (College) Man implicitly exists as a limited object within the minds of others. From a perceptual standpoint the show positions the officer as not only an extension of legal authority as noted by his labor role, but he is additionally represented as being a White and cis-gendered man.

The significance of the officer's representation stems from its association with data revealing that from 2015 to 2021, three quarters of the 135 incidents of police shootings were committed by White officers.¹⁷ It seems that those who act as the officer, either implicitly or explicitly, are psychically placing Black bodies into readily specifiable race-gender monoliths marked as "dangerous." I believe this is possible, because as alluded to earlier, not only do these narrow mental constructs work to mask how Black bodies engage in multi-faceted tropic play, but they have the additional power to conceptualizes the demographic of study as perpetually negative figures of alterity.

¹⁶ Kate T. Anderson, "Justifying Race Talk: Indexicality and the Social Construction of Race and Linguistic Value," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18, no. 1 (2008), 112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1395.2008.00017.x>.

¹⁷ Cheryl W. Thompson, "Fatal Police Shootings Of Unarmed Black People Reveal Troubling Patterns," *NPR*, January 25, 2021. <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/25/956177021/fatal-police-shootings-of-unarmed-black-people-reveal-troubling-patterns>.

In continuation, to examine this occurrence—specifically, how individuals perceive Black masculine race-gender being—a broader exploration of the relation between the psychic and the material is necessary. This examination is predicated on my suspicion that Black (College) Men exist as an anxiety that persists in both thought and form. In being rendered as phantasmic and anxiety-inducing, certain tropic constructs are being produced at the expense of the demographic being studied.

Put simply, in the minds of external gazers, the “Reggies” of this world exist as avatars for broader anxieties. Thus, due to imagined scenarios where harm is purportedly enacted against others, Black Men are psychically cast as negation personified. As such, what is of equal importance to consider is the impact of such machinations in relation to real-world scenarios. Evoking Fanonian thought, the concept of the *sociogenic* may prove useful here. Specifically, the sociogenic entails a preoccupation with “what emerges from the social world, the intersubjective world of culture, history, language, and economics. In that world, [Fanon] reminds us, it is the human being who brings such forces into existence.”¹⁸

With this in mind, and highlighting the power of phobic anxieties in relation to sociogenesis, the same way that Reggie is codified and interpreted as a specific type of “other” by the campus police officer, generations of Black Men have similarly been interpreted as phantasmal, threatening, and/or violent psycho-social entities. This phenomenon is what I refer to as the *trope of phobogeneity*. Elaborating further on this concept in *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon relays that

¹⁸ Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought*, 22.

[t]he choice of the phobic object is therefore *over-determined*. This object does not come at random out of the void of nothingness; in some situation it has previously evoked an affect in the patient. His phobia is the latent presence of this affect at the root of his world; there is an organization that has been given a form. For the object, naturally, need not be there, it is enough that somewhere it exist: It is a possibility. This object is endowed with evil intentions and with all the attributes of a malefic power.¹⁹

Homing in on Fanon's use of the Freudian concept of overdetermination, per Fanon's analysis, it appears that to acknowledge the race-gender anxieties produced by phobia, is to acknowledge not only affect directly but also the resulting impact of such affective energies upon the material world. I imagine that this in return has a bearing, regardless of valuation upon the interpersonal exchanges between the holder of the phobia and the object cast as phobogenic. Continuing the line of thought, Curry also alludes to the general pathologizing of Black Men when highlighting the "Black male's perpetual susceptibility to the will of others, [and] how he has no resistance to the imposition of others' fears and anxieties on him."²⁰

I see both Fanon's and Curry's sentiments as being of great importance because while these psychic ruminations of the race-gender other take root as implicit manifestations within the mind, I believe that they correspondingly influence explicit and material actions in their wake. These material actions are ultimately influenced by cultural practices that work to influence how knowledge is constructed around a given subject.²¹ In other words, I understand phobogeneity as bridging the domains of the

¹⁹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Revised (Pluto Press, 1952; 2008), 119. Original Emphasis.

²⁰ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 29.

²¹ Stuart Hall and Stuart Hall, "Introduction," in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (SAGE, 1997), 6.

psychic and the material. As it specifically pertains to non-fictional Black (College) Men, the aforementioned mental constructs that work to paint this demographic as phantasmic and phobogenic perhaps also correspondingly produce material effects of the same scope.

Adding to this proposed notion of psycho-social dread predicated on race-gender being, I advance that this schematization of not only Blackness, but Blackness in relation to gender, creates a phobic marker that, working as a race-gender trope, further distinguishes between those who are welcomed and not welcomed (especially as it pertains to university campus settings).²² So much so that even in spaces of higher education race when paired with gender imposes such a great weight that it masks the salience of class and/or socioeconomic status.²³ Elaborating further, and returning to *DWP*, not only were the pleas of Reggie's peers ignored, including the appeals made by the White student whom Reggie tussled with, but they also weren't enough to offset the anxiogenic trigger posed by Reggie's race-gender being. In return Reggie was not given benefit of the doubt; instead, his corporeal being was saddled with the potentially fatal projection of fear, anxiety, and suspicion.

What I'm attempting to convey is that phenotype, corporeality, and other psycho-social mechanizations work together to not only denote difference *but specifically serve as a warning sign that heralds danger*. Therefore, the following question is asked as a

²² DeMarcus A. Jenkins, Antar A. Tichavakunda, and Justin A. Coles, "The Second ID: Critical Race Counterstories of Campus Police Interactions With Black Men at Historically White Institutions," 149–166.

²³ Pierre W. Orelus, *Living in the Shadows: A Biographical Account of Racial, Class, and Gender Inequities in the Americas* (BRILL, 2020), 71-72; Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Arrest of Henry Louis Gates," *The Atlantic*, August 12, 2010. <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2010/08/the-arrest-of-henry-louis-gates/61365/>. Considering on-campus and/or denote how class status not only is toppled by the immense weight of race-gender existence, but how this byproduct of this weight materially manifests into acts of harassment, detainment, and physical harm as committed by police officers.

means for both animating and guiding the remainder of this section: What insights are potentially gained from unpacking the signaling properties that marry both the lived and projected material realities of Black (College) Men to the psychic constructs that exist in the mind of those who come to understand them as phobic triggers? In other words, why are Black (College) Men so often met with unwelcoming attitudes in these predominately white spaces of higher education? *What imagined dangers merits that they are surveilled, regulated, and kept out?*

Taking up these inquiries, then, and considering those who render Black masculine flesh as phobic when real-time encounters occur, I posit that beyond the partition that separates the psychic from the material exists more than the agitating mental forces of phobia. There is an additional nihilistic plain where imagined Black masculine essence resides as ethereal madness and despair. It is this reality, fueled by phantasmic imagined projections of Black masculine figures that catalyzes these deleterious responses. Furthermore, these raced and gendered psychic constructions are comparable to the *Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror*. Made famous by the early 20th century science-fiction novelist H.P. Lovecraft, the horrors that bear his name can be thought of as representing embodied forms of nihilistic thought, that if not kept a bay will eventually not just challenge, but outright unravel epistemological underpinnings of humanity; not only is sanity at stake then but the stability of the Anthropocene altogether.²⁴

²⁴ David McWilliam, "Beyond the Mountains of Madness: Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror and Posthuman Creationism in Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* (2012)," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 26, no. 3 (September 22, 2015), 531.
<https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&issn=08970521&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA531844451&sid=googleScholar&linkaccess=abs>.

Having roots in early twentieth century cosmic-themed science fiction, both the concept and literary sub-genre of Lovecraft Horror usually depicts a world in which humans cannot comprehend the sheer terror posed by cosmic monstrosities.²⁵ In the wake of interacting with these otherworldly entities, the resulting internal dynamics—fear, anxiety, despair—are seldom if at all ever overcome. Will Murray similarly explains that what distinguishes the beings in question from commonly fabled monstrosities, is that even simple mental attempts to contend with their existence will induce madness unbound.²⁶ Put succinctly, what I should be understood as doing is advancing the claim that the proclivity to cast the Black (College) Man as phobia personified, has psychic roots within a malevolent counter cosmos as imagined by the mind. Correspondingly, these same phobias are in return supported by problematic understandings of race-gender corporeality and performance.

Further considering madness and fear, while it is important to engage with the overt acts of the police officer, it is also important to acknowledge the other actions that were later revealed to have made the scene possible altogether. Gabe, another figure within the show, admits to a peer that he was responsible for alerting the cops when he perceived a threat.²⁷ Also of pertinent interest, is that similar to the officer who would

²⁵ Boran Tandoğan, “An Examination of Elements of Cosmic Horror Within Adventure Time,” *Journal of English Language and Literature Club* 2, no. 1 (March 8, 2020), 40. <https://dergi.ingilizdebeyati.net/cuidek/article/view/220>.

²⁶ Will Murray. "Lovecraftian Horror." In *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopedia of the Stories That Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, edited by Matt Cardin, 571-573. Vol. 2. (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2017). *Gale eBooks* (accessed September 30, 2021). <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CX7354600247/GVRL?u=miam11506&sid=bookmark-GVRL&xid=414bab56>.

²⁷ Nisha Ganatra, “Volume I: Chapter VII,” *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 5:50-5:59.

eventually arrive, and akin to most of the partygoers in attendance, as well as what appears to be the majority racial makeup of the fictional Winchester University, Gabe is White.

Briefly following up on Chapter III's musings on Whiteness as both an analog and analytic, I'm intentionally engaging in a nuanced form of identity politics that necessitates a reliance upon already existing raciological thought. Furthermore, this is why I gravitate towards theoretical frameworks that deem it necessary to examine from within these dominant structures (i.e., deconstructive thought comes to mind here).²⁸ Through taking this stance not only am I attempting to examine the fear of the White police officer, and by proxy his non-fictional peers as well, but I am studying what undergirds these acts of racialized panic altogether.

In other words, I am aiming to avoid racial nominalism as a means to an end. So while I'm intrigued by Michel Foucault's suggestion that "[m]aybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are," I am ultimately apprehensive towards such an approach.²⁹ Moreover, despite agreeing to an extent, my apprehension is not derived from whether I think Foucault's hypothesis is possible, but rather its plausibility to come to fruition in the wake of centuries-old entrenchment of staunch race-gender logics.

I therefore exploit the vestiges of contemporary raciologies in order to explain, parse, and further disrupt narratives. This, in return, necessitates that the current study

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (JHU Press, 1998), 24.

²⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982), 785. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197>.

must rely on the usage of multiple interdisciplinary lenses as analytics, all while challenging and re-appropriating in the process. With this in mind, and once again returning my focus towards the genre of cosmic science-fiction, I found myself intrigued by the work of H.P. Lovecraft as well as other similar themed literary works. As outlined thus far, the Lovecraftian understanding of being vis-à-vis terror still houses further analytical potential. However, to exploit this potential further, I must contend with the often phantasmic material manifestations derived from the aforementioned psycho-social constructions.

Elaborating further, in addition to my argument centered around cosmic terror, I am also still engaging with the notion that a partition exists between the human as conceived by modernity and those of differing, and conversely, non-human race-gender bearings (Black [College] Men, in this case). This specifically results in my interest in examining the generally ascribed reality of *la bête noire folle* (the Black mad beast). With this in mind, Gordon's understanding of the subsuming dynamic of Blackness as conceptualized by Fanon is pertinent, in that: "The dehumanizing bridge between individual and structure posed by antiblack racism marks the Black , who is, in the end, 'anonymous' in a perverse way, which enables 'the black' to collapse into 'blacks'."³⁰ While Black masculinity exists in abundant multiplicities, it appears that this homogenizing typological act of racialization not only ascribes a particular understanding

³⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said: A Philosophical Introduction to His Life and Thought* (Fordham Univ Press, 2015), 22.

of Black and gendered being, but that it also serves as denying the application of humanist logics.³¹

This in return constructs the Black subject as what I refer to as *rem non grata* (translation: The *thing* not welcomed). Further parsing this concept, the very fact that one is not welcomed leads me to infer that its presence, in return, must reside elsewhere. Parallely, it is with *rem non grata* in mind that I submit Fanon's view that ascribed Blackness "affords a strange intimacy, in which blacks are always too close, which stimulates anxiety for distance to the point of disappearance or absence... They are problematic beings, locked in 'a zone of nonbeing'."³² It thusly seems that "to be" in existence as a Black being, in what may be described as a paradox, is both materially and immaterially possible.

Interestingly enough, it may be argued that such concepts as identity-specific residence halls, student organizations, and academic auxiliary groups may serve as a type of materialized zone of alterity (a play on Fanon's concept of the zone of non-being). This doesn't mean that they aren't important to the success of students navigating the predominately white milieus in which they reside. It does briefly prompt me to wonder, though, whether having these roped-off spaces operates as not only a form of placating, but serves the dual purpose of establishing a literal location of non-being through sequestering. For example, to be present here, in a residence hall for Black students, is a

³¹ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 129. Note: "Black males are not imagined as living human beings. They are merely thought to be particular expressions of group phenomena—individual examples of a problem population that are the criminals, deviants, and dangers that plague society."

³² Gordon, *What Fanon Said*, 37.

way of being absent and thus not triggering others by your unwelcomed presence.

Considering Troy's search for an elsewhere—or a place to simply reside, rebuild, and be away from the hostilities posed by constant existential precarity, it appears that the elsewhere of the Black Collegian subject is, in return, the elsewhere of the potentially racist xenophobe.

Again focusing on the mental construct that supports the trope of phobogeneity, phobic triggers occur in this interaction between the welcome and unwelcomed. During these interpersonal exchanges, though, it appears that the full weight of the raced and gendered other is made present within a given space (akin to what happens to Reggie and the Officer). The triggered party, fearing what might emerge from the uncanny valley, attempts to hold the line against whatever may emerge from this within this zone of alterity (e.g., the constant usage of unnecessary and unlawful force concerning real-world police interactions with Black Men.).³³ Returning to the source material, *DWP*, a prime example of this is Gabe being anxiously moved to engage in preventative maintenance, via racialized panic, and calling the police to temper the now quickly spiraling party.

All hail, Lord Darkseid.

To better understand this, my attentions must now slightly pivot from the domain of conventional literary fiction to that of the comic strip. The ensuing analysis not only

³³ Marcus Cheetham et al., "Arousal, Valence, and the Uncanny Valley: Psychophysiological and Self-Report Findings," *Frontiers in Psychology* 6 (2015), 55. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.00981>. Cheetham et al. interestingly proffer that the "main prediction of the Uncanny Valley Hypothesis is that observation of highly humanlike characters and objects (depicted along the dimension of human likeness) will evoke a sharp negative peak in affective experience (depicted along the familiarity dimension). This negative peak, referred to as the uncanny valley, is characterized by feelings of strangeness and disquiet. These feelings are suggested to be stronger for dynamic stimuli. The valley occurs at the point along the dimension of human likeness at which category membership as human or non-human is highly ambiguous."

continues to consider the nexus formed between science fiction and literature, but it now also examines what happens when the medium of the comic strip is introduced as an additional analytic for parsing Black masculinity. Earlier, I proposed the question, *What is the supposedly aggrieved seeking to keep at bay behind the wall?* In an attempt to answer this question, I now think it beneficial to analyze the cosmological ongoings of the DC comic universe. Before doing so, however, it is important to contextualize the general importance of the comic book medium to this endeavor.

It is pertinent to note that much of what piques the reader's interest in the comics strip is derived from the text in question's ability to cause not only wonderment, but to encourage its consumers to imagine, interpret and infer beyond what it signified within its panels.³⁴ When considering the docility of the comic still, akin to the physiognomy and somatic aesthetics of fleshly embodiment, it appears that they both operate as living paradoxes. While neither conventionally "performs" nor "communicates," the vivid images of both the page and the corporeal form still manages to enthrall the imagination. In other words, comics not only allow for a connection between reader and text, but for the former to engage in a play that is hinged upon the interconnectedness of the psychic, graphic, and semiotic.³⁵

When considering its dynamism, the comic exists as a narrative form. It is here between the adjoined space of the narrative and the rhetorical, where the medium is most intellectually alluring. While the comic book is primarily meant to relay the ongoings of a

³⁴ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics* (Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2007), 11.

³⁵ Scott Bukatman, "INTRODUCTION: Hellboy and the Adventure of Reading," in *Hellboy's World*, 1st ed., Comics and Monsters on the Margins (University of California Press, 2016), 11. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1989394.3>.

fictional world, they, like other popular cultural artifacts, also allow for the insertion of non-fictional social elements indicative of the milieu in which they are composed.³⁶ One of the ways in which narrative drawings accomplish this is through the usage of *typification*. Thierry Groensteen understands this concept as entailing the abbreviation of a figure to common perceptual associations in order to render them as not only signifying but readily decodable.³⁷

Placing Groensteen's sentiments in a conversation with *DWP*, then, what I see as working to typify Reggie, and of equal importance animate the officer's response, is his tone of indignation. Describing the scene further, presumably upset because of the officer's disposition, Reggie looks towards the officers, says "fuck these pigs" and then attempts to leave.³⁸ As a series, *DWP* is a social artifact that is imbued with contexts that are parallel to the real world milieu in which it is produced. While I connotatively read this scene as the aggrieved party growing upset, I believe that an officer might conversely categorize Reggie's defiance as a type of non-compliance. Thus, by not cooperating, this perceived unruliness works to uphold dominant and domineering race-gender tropes that portray Black Men as brutish, unruly, and generally dangerous.

In continuation, to better contend with what I now understand as a phobia predicated on not just misplaced fears propped up by generations' old race-gender tropes, but as also simply absurd understandings of Black (College) Men, I deploy the comic

³⁶ Sheena C. Howard and Ronald L. Jackson II, *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 12.

³⁷ Thierry Groensteen, *The System of Comics*, 162.

³⁸ Barry Jenkins, "Volume I: Chapter V," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 21:40-23:00.

book as an overlapping lens of analysis. In other words, equally phantasmal understandings of Black masculine being merit an equally phantasmic analytical construct. As such, I am now drawing a parallel between the DC cosmic villain, Darkseid, and the Black (Collegiate) Man as a phantasmic projection.

For readers not familiar with DC canon, the famed cosmic villain, Darkseid, is a near impervious Goliathan figure, who also possesses deadly glowing red eye-beams, size altering capabilities, and a host of other fearsome talents.³⁹ His significance to my study does not stem from a topical interest in his anthropomorphic form and/or abilities, per se. Focusing upon his objectives and overall fictional exploits—despotic leader, galactic conqueror, possessor of universal free will, and pursuer of infinite knowledge, to name a few—my concern is that the isolated study of his typified being does not address the assumed evil that dwells beyond, but in relation to, his aesthetic profile.⁴⁰

In continuation, I instead understand him to exist as the aforementioned Eldritch Abomination—an evil of the highest order.⁴¹ Chronicling the epic origins of Darkseid and others of his ilk, they belong to a race of cosmic entities who possess powers that are

³⁹ “(New) God Bod: The 5 Weirdest Facts About Darkseid’s Body, Explained,” CBR, August 30, 2020, <https://www.cbr.com/darkseid-body-anatomy/>.

⁴⁰ “Darkseid,” DC, October 15, 2012. <https://www.dccomics.com/characters/darkseid>. It should be noted that “[i]n the known DC Multiverse, one name stands above all others when it comes to supreme villainy—Darkseid. Ruling over the hellish world of Apokolips, Darkseid doesn’t merely mean to conquer a planet or subjugate his enemies—he seeks to rob the entire universe of its free will and replace it with his own... Darkseid can be defeated, but never truly destroyed. As long as malice and despair exist, the God of Evil will always find a way to return and attempt to spread his tyrannical rule over all who live. On Apokolips, there’s only one key thing every subject must understand about their ruler—Darkseid IS. There is nothing else.”

⁴¹ “Inside the Mind of Grant Morrison - IGN,” accessed November 29, 2021. <https://www.ign.com/articles/2009/02/03/inside-the-mind-of-grant-morrison>. Per Comic Writer Grant Morrison, “They’re all devils. Again, in doing these kinds of stories I went directly to, ‘Okay, what’s the culture’s idea of evil?’ And it’s always the devil in some form, the menacing Other. Darkseid’s the kind of apocalyptic evil, the Biblical evil that spreads itself through whole cultures and brings them to their knees.”

so phenomenal that their intra-cosmic quarrels have actually resulted in the altering of what physicists refer to as the multiverse.⁴² For instance, after losing a skirmish with his son and fellow New God, Orion, Darkseid literally falls upon the multiverse and subsequently obfuscates the realities of the non-cosmic inhabitants below in the process (See figure 1).

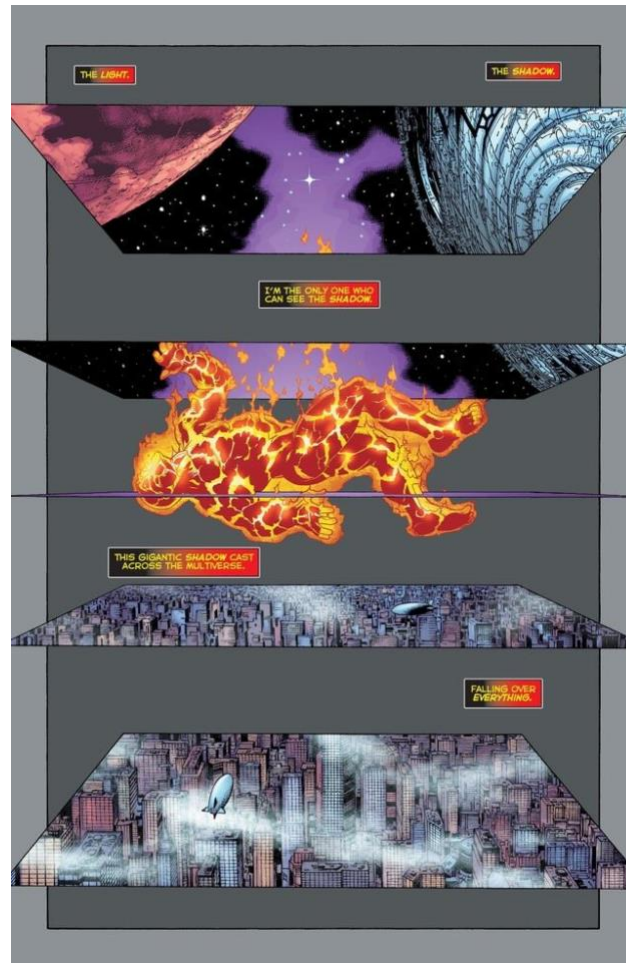


Figure 1. Darkseid obfuscating the mortal realm as he falls from the domain of the celestials, depicted above. Pencilers, George Pérez; Inkers, Scott Koblisch; Colorists, Alex Sinclair; Letterers, Nick J. Napolitano.

⁴² Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York, UNITED STATES: Columbia University Press, 2014), 5. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fiu/detail.action?docID=1603585>. called our ‘Hubble volume’ or ‘observable universe;), whereas the greater ensemble of unseen worlds constitutes the multiverse (sometimes called ‘metaverse’ or ‘megaverse’.)”

More pertinent to my study, though, is that when considering the interplay between the cosmic and earthly dimensions, I understand Darkseid as an example of tropic play on the grandest imagined scale possible. As such, in recognizing his cosmological-incarnate continuity, the rhetorical roots of the trope may aid in better explicating his existence and overall utility as an analogy for Black Masculinity's ascribed danger. Furthermore, through what might be described as the substitution of one object by means of association with another, Darkseid's furcated and multi-planal existence is animated by the same rhetorical functions that characterizes the master trope of metonymy.⁴³

The significance of this concept, metonymy, is not predicated upon its classification as a tropic dynamic of substitution. Its relevance more so stems from its capacity to describe Darkseid's existence as a Godhead entity. For example, the Godhead is exhibited in Christ's embodiment of the Holy Triune: Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.⁴⁴ The point of this theological analogy is to draw parallels between how Christ not only served as the messiah, but more pertinently serves as the embodiment of the Christian God. When considering Darkseid and his abundant avatars, this dynamic is mirrored, but with more fractures. Moreover, his avatar operates as a semaphoric representation for what lies beyond.⁴⁵ These avatars not only do the bidding of the entity

⁴³ Jeanne Fahnestock, *Rhetorical style: The Uses of Language in Persuasion*, *fulcrum.org* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

⁴⁴ "Colossians 2 - KJV Bible - Bible Study Tools," *biblestudytools.com*, accessed November 29, 2021. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/kjv/colossians/2.html>.

⁴⁵ Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (1941), 422. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4332286>.

that evokes their existence, but in the case of Darkseid they also convey the terror, albeit abbreviated, of the unseen malevolent cosmic force by serving as a reductionist proxy for an infinitely evil essence that resides beyond space and time. This aligns with Grant Morrison's description of Darkseid stating to the comic reader that he " touches many worlds now. He wears many faces."⁴⁶

When analyzing these manifestations, especially in relation to Darkseid's multifarious iconographies, I charge that Black (College) Men similarly appear in myriad material forms (i.e. bodies). Yet, despite the presence of these differing manifestations, what often persists is the intractability of dominant race-gender scripts that have worked to produce narrow schemas of legibility under dominant narratives.⁴⁷ Therefore, in addition to dread and danger, I understand these scripts as continuously working to remind observers that additional narratives of fear, laziness, and disinterest are tethered to Black Men. This is what Fanon recognizes as being an "affective ankylosis," or the rigid perception of the embodied trope as understood through the eyes of the gazing subject.⁴⁸

Elaborating further, Fanon's understanding of ankylosis not only denotes the temporality of racial visualization, but it also relays the variables that have allowed for these racist formations to persist over time (e.g., the affective afterlives that have emerged in relation to cultural, political, and social scripts that have worked to

⁴⁶ Grant Morrison, *The Multiversity: Guidebook (2014-) #1* (DC, n.d.).

⁴⁷ W. A. Smith, T. J. Yosso, and D. G. Solorzano, "Racial Primes and Black Misandry on Historically White Campuses: Toward Critical Race Accountability in Educational Administration," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 43, no. 5 (2007), 561.

⁴⁸ Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 92.

circumscribe raced and gendered bodies over time.).⁴⁹ Building on this sentiment, what is important to take away is that the Black (College) Man is not merely seen as resembling an eldritch abomination. Moreover, century's old race-gender scripts work to influence the irrational decisions produced by the racist mind in question when concerning the fixed perception of the former's corporeality. In response to this false consciousness, all generative possibilities for perceiving the race-gender body beyond the aforementioned frames are foreclosed.⁵⁰ Thus, the habitual rendering of Black (College) Men as phantasmic objects within the mind of the gazing subject continuously takes root due to these affective impulses (i.e., the police officer who accosted Reggie).

Focusing on Darkseid once more, it is important to remember that he is an extra-dimensional essence capable of producing avatars to do his dreadful bidding. As such, briefly enlisting the help of rudimentary quantum physics, Darkseid is understood to exist beyond the parameters of the four theorized dimensions that are believed to make up space (i.e., length, width, depth, and time). It is here, in relation to the aforementioned multiverse, where his cosmic essence exists; consequently, it is within this arena that the most wretched form of evil houses itself, waiting for the right moment to interject and wreak havoc upon all existence. Therefore, considering the respective minds that project this phobia on to the corporeality of Black (College) Men, perhaps it is this same imagined evil that "animates" their fear and anxiety towards the population of study (thus "justifying" the extreme actions of those who police them).

⁴⁹ Alla Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing," in *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*, ed. Emily S. Lee (SUNY Press, 2014), 141.

⁵⁰ Alla Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing," 142.

This capacity to project sentiments outward and upon flesh, then, prompts me to once more reflect on the party scene from *DWP*; specifically, the moments prior to the officer's arrival. Moreover, another angle from which to consider the scene entails thinking through what it means for Black (College) Men to paradoxically be rendered as threat and fetish all-in-one. Prior to his conflict with the officer, Reggie was depicted as the joyous focal point of the party. After Reggie was invited to participate in a trivia game against other party-goers, the series goes to great lengths to showcase his brilliance. Marked by quick camera cuts and multiple non-sequiturs—presumably serving to represent both the speed and accuracy with which Reggie answered all posed questions—it would seem that for a majority White on-lookers the threat of phobia was held at bay. Regarding Reggie, for maybe the first time in the series' inaugural five episodes, all was right and “the struggle” posed by la bête noir, cosmic dread, or the embodiment of a phobic trigger seemed to not be present. Similar to the outcome of Troy's search for engage in different forms of tropic play, Reggie, via his own means, was allowed to simply “be” within the field of tropic play.

Before culminating my musings, though, it is pertinent to consider the affective shifts that appeared to take place concerning Reggie's presence: One minute he was the party's champion who could do no wrong; while in the moments that immediately followed he was understood to be a rabble-rouser who was once again engaging in his usual race-baiting antics; and in the midst of the devolving party, for Gabe, he represented the corporeal embodiment of negative affective intensities. However, and despite it being revealed that it was Gabe who made that fateful phone call to the campus police department, I also don't think it farfetched that this same phobic sentiment wasn't

possibly held by other White party-goers as well (Many of which were depicted as debating with their minority peers about the White student's usage of the word in question).

Considering the latter notion of panic, then, what might happen if this proclivity was challenged by the gazer upon their perception of the race-gender body and its corresponding performativity? In other words, a transition from relying on the supremacy of perception, or mere observation of the racialized and gendered object, and to tap into the *receptivity* of vision may instead be both necessary and beneficial. *Receptivity*, in this case, can be thought of as an openness to the adoption of new affectivities beyond commonly understood race-gender schemas.⁵¹

Furthermore, Alia Al-Saji, while admittedly not offering a panacea for racist-sexist discrimination, proffers that the act of *hesitation* may be beneficial in instances where our pre-reflective judgements attempt to render codified views of the raced and gendered figure. This is the case because through hesitating, the ankylotic frames that are readily deployed so often, can now through a self-critical processes of reflection, not only question the overdeterminacy of the field of tropic play but also prompt the gazer to call into question the formative sociologies that undergird these social fields as well (Further distinguishing between the reactive and active subject).⁵² Therefore, if the Black masculine body shall be tethered to race-gender phobia in perpetuity, just as the comic strip artists takes pause, hesitates even, before drawing each comic panel, perhaps those

⁵¹ Alia Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Critical-Ethical Vision: Merleau-Ponty, Bergson, and the Question of Seeing Differently," *Chiasmi International* 11 (July 1, 2009), 372. <https://doi.org/10.5840/chiasmi20091170>.

⁵² Al-Saji, "A Phenomenology of Hesitation: Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing," 150-155.

who three-dimensionally gaze upon Black (College) Men can do the same before the act upon their judgements. In doing so, not only might myriad lives be spared, but perhaps the simple chance to be in the world as Black and Man can mean something beyond pariah, fetish, or threat.

Final Musings on Reggie Green

In summation, through primarily reading *DWP* through the phantasmic literary and comic lenses, I showcased how the trope of phobogeneity, as induced via the concepts of cosmic dread and the eldritch abomination, may give way to further insight in understanding the perceptions of Black (College) Men (both their external perception and general existence in relation to other raced and gendered bodies within a given milieu.). This objective is fully in line with my goal of examining race-gender tropes, via *DWP*, regarding Black (College) Men. Thus, as I've shown, Reggie Green is a character that offers nuanced ways for potentially depicting and understanding how race-gender tropic performances work through psychic phobias and real-world attempts at phobic projection.

By once again utilizing trop(ill)ogical analysis, I have worked to convey how narratives touting fear and anxiety still thrive and undergird how many come to understand and recognize Black masculinity through bodily performances. The analysis in question entailed delving further into how the perceived differences between identities is not only maintained via epidermalization, but by also considering how variables stemming from the social world inform how raced and gendered bodies are staunchly perceived as opposed to generatively received.

In a final attempt to further showcase what a trop(ill)ogical analysis of this ilk might additionally entail, and explicitly drawing a throughline to the contemporary, I will now consider what it may look like to understand Reggie's fictional reality in correlation to real-world scenarios. Considering Reggie's fictional status, then, similarly entails examining how Black Men are rendered as avatars, or emanations, that represent a broader understanding of the race-gender nexus to which they're existentially tethered.

Thus, adopting a historical lens to denote the ongoing presence of these phantasmic tropes, I point to the archival research conducted by Johnathan Gayles: Specifically, in the wake of combing through the print media annals of the New York Times, focusing on artifacts ranging in date from 1900 to 1949, it is revealed that he uncovered over 130 references to Black Male bodies as being phantasmal, threatening, and/or violent "giant negroes."⁵³ Jane Rhodes also relays that the twentieth-century press, through similar phantasmic ascriptions, "exaggerated incidents in which blacks were involved, [and] that the racial identification of 'colored' or 'Negro' ...were frequently paired with pejorative adjectives such as 'burly negro', 'negro ruffian', ...and 'colored cannibal'."⁵⁴

These print descriptions are perhaps merely indicative of the phobic sentiments around race-gender that ultimately denote the respective time periods from which they emerged. However, important fruits may be produced when considering that contemporary societal occurrences (re)articulate the stubborn and unrelenting presence of these same raciologies. More recently, then, consider the testimony of Darren Wilson, the

⁵³ N/A, "Blackademics TV," 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/video/blackademics-tv-cofield-gayles/>.

⁵⁴ Rhodes, *Framing the Black Panthers*, 34.

now infamous Missouri police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in 2014. In the midst of testifying Wilson conveys that “When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan... That’s how big he felt and how small I felt just grasping his arm.”⁵⁵

Nothing will ever justify the state sponsored eradication of life. Interestingly enough, and for the sake of analysis, Brown did have an eighty pound advantage over Wilson, while both parties were actually the same height.⁵⁶ Yet, Wilson engaged in a typification of Brown that not only saw him as comparatively larger, not only portrayed him as emphatically stronger, but unequivocally typified him as fatally threatening. I am of the position that there is no possible way to rationalize what Officer Wilson did by pulling the trigger and killing Michael Brown. However, and per the political aims of trop(ill)logical thought as a means of inquiry, as painful as it might be, a thinking beyond what is readily observable must take place.

Simply put, if the officer in question hesitated further he could’ve potentially seen that Brown was of no threat. Perhaps if officer Wilson curtailed his fears, he could’ve been made privy, perhaps via directly conversing with Brown, that he was a recent high school graduate with future aspirations as opposed to this being made known through the reflections of a grieving mother. Lastly, if he hesitated, he might’ve realized that there is value in the same human flesh that he attempted to render as both phantasmic and

⁵⁵ Benjamin Wallace-Wells ,“Police Shootings, Race, and the Fear Defense | The New Yorker,” accessed November 14, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/benjamin-wallace-wells/police-shootings-race-and-the-fear-defense>.

⁵⁶ Ibid

abominable, the same flesh that post-mortem was denied the dignity of humanity and lay in the summer heat of Missouri for hours unattended.

Is the emphasis I place upon hesitation hopeful thinking? Maybe. However, in between calls for legislation and increased accountability of police officers, stopping to think before one reacts should potentially be considered the most readily accessible way to address these state-sanctioned murders. Thus, hesitation should instead be understood as fundamental to how raced and gendered bodies interact with and among each other; especially those bodies who are aware of the fixity of these race-gender phobias.

Considering Reggie once more, radical, scholastically gifted, and a Black (College) Man, his positioning within the primarily observed scene serves as an analogical depiction of Black Men who attend college. When specifically considering the relation to the milieu where Reggie fictionally resides, not only is *a particular type of institution showcased, an elite Historically White Institution, but he also serves as a particular race-gender performance that is being (re)presented to viewers*. Through the framing properties of media, *Dear White People* is able to not only convey the dearth of Black and/or Black masculine bodies at elite private universities, which mirrors real world dynamic, but also relays the experiences of the demographics in question by means of creative storytelling.

Through placing *DWP* in conversation with other cultural artifacts, in this case, literary science-fiction and the comic book, I posit that Reggie's plight can be given further consideration. Not only are these examinations potentially "fresher," but they also have a very real through line that connects the fictive and "the real," the past and the present, and the domains of the psychic and the material. While Reggie's encounter with

the officer is portrayed through creative measures, there are counterparts who exist sans the sound stage and camera. As such, I can't help but to wonder if their existence is indeed tied to an imaginary plane, or has the holder of race-gender phobias and bias simply been issued a license to serve as judge, jury, and murderer whenever confronted by a perceived threat?

The next chapter will take on a different tone as I begin to analyze the final character, Lionel Higgins. Another dazzling representation of race-gender being, Lionel is a Queer Black (College) Man who is represented as being in pursuit of belonging. While he doesn't have the fluidity of Troy, nor the radical commitment of Reggie, Lionel's overall uniqueness lies in his overall uniqueness. Additionally, I see the friendship that he develops with his roommate, Troy Fairbanks, as housing great potential for analyses of the Other and the dominant; especially when emphasis is placed upon shared race-gender social locations (or the intra-communal).

CHAPTER FIVE

ANTINOMIAL BLACK BEING AND MASCULINITIES

Our contemporary world has created a situation that cannot stand. We have [multiple] opposing views of the self, but we have pressures to collapse these into one ironic view.¹

In Chapters IV and V, respectively, I have analyzed *The Magical Negro im/proper* in Troy Fairbanks and the *Radical Black Phobogene* in Reggie Green. Elaborating further, if the former is young, Black, and existentially fluid, and if the latter is young, Black, and the embodiment of phobic anxieties, then the next character to be analyzed perhaps represents something different altogether. In the case of the character Lionel Higgins, due to his awkwardness, non-confidence, and general quirkiness, the possibilities for exploring Black and Queer Masculinities are abundant (Namely because these traits aren't often associated with fictional representations of Black Men; at least not in any way that I can understand as being redeeming). My final character analysis, then, *DWP* character Lionel Higgins, is the last character that I will use to execute my objective of considering race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men within *Dear White People*.

Providing preliminary thoughts on the matter, I think it necessary to embrace the potentiality of tropic play. Therefore, if race is indeed socially constructed and maintained, then there lies the corresponding capacity for different racial frames and performances to correspond as well. An example of this could be the various socio-political factions that organized around African-American identity in the mid-twentieth

¹ John Leveille, "Tropic Constructions of the Self," *Theory In Action* 3, no. 2 (April 30, 2010), 104. <https://doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.10018>.

century. The mainstream Civil Rights movement, the Nation of Islam, and the Black Panthers all had political aims that sought to uplift the Black community. However, because Blackness is not a cultural, social, or political monolith, these outfits had philosophical nuances that were not readily reconcilable. While phenotype may aid some in visually racializing other Black peers—namely predicated on a perspective that through a shared epidermalization others may be acknowledged as also being “Black”—this is an example of a purported linkage based on perception alone. As such, despite this presence of a racial through line, and to reiterate my overall point, when considering these three groups, clearly there exists nuanced understandings and expectations regarding Blackness.

Thus, especially when thinking through and about Black (College) Masculine being, I provided the preceding example as a point of departure for not just highlighting differing *intra-communal* racial praxes but also figuratively illuminating the possibility for the emergence of any and all forms of being as it pertains to Black subjectivities.² Perhaps in order to bypass altogether the pitfalls that are bound up with the darkness of foreclosure, then, it may also be necessary to recast these under-illuminated spaces in the vein of those who’ve been relegated to them.

In continuation, and building on Toni Morrison’s conceptualization, this would in return mean that in the process of re-signifying the dark—referring to peripheries that

² Any preceding usages of *Intra-communal* should be understood as referring to a population of individuals, usually along the lines of race and ethnicity, who share overlapping cultural, social and political values and who also exist in close and continuous proximity to each other (e.g., the residents of the aforementioned Black dormitory or the Broader Winchester Black community.). Thus, my usage of *intra-communal* should not be conflated with any theoretical or philosophical strands of thought that considers community as an object of analysis (e.g., Jean-Luc Nancy’s contemplations on the *Inoperative Community*).

house those who exist at the margins of illuminated spaces (i.e., marginalized raced, gender, and minority sexualized beings)—it is concomitantly imperative to grapple with the (Un)selective permeability of Blackness. What ideally emerges are new attempts to consider what Blackness purportedly “is,” while also taking up the important task of acknowledging what it can potentially be.

Before the nuances of race-gender being can be thoroughly recognized and/or demarcated from one body to the next, however, it is crucial that those who have been othered—those who lie beyond the auspices of traditionally understood race-gender being, and who, in the process have correspondingly served as metrics of contrast that reified said hegemonic purview—finally be both recognized and welcomed in the process.³ This aspect is crucial because Blackness occupies many domains, operates via myriad performative dynamics, and materializes in countless embodied forms. As such, whether fictionally or in the domain of the “real world,” those who would tout Troy’s affluence, intelligence, heterosexuality, and conventionally handsome aesthetics, and Reggie’s intellectual brilliance, commitment to justice, and overall resilience should also work to laude and welcome Lionel’s quirky, awkward, and Queer (sexual) praxis.

As it stands, and in relation to the academy, it has actually become common across many academic fields to problematize the sociologies that are produced in relation to Whiteness.⁴ The intellectual grounds of such a process makes sense because regardless of whatever form Blackness and Whiteness may take, especially as currently conceived,

³ Jorge Capetillo-Ponce, “Defining the Other,” *Human Architecture* 2, no. 2 (2003), 122. <https://www.okcir.com/product/journal-article-defining-the-other-by-jorge-capetillo-ponce>.

⁴ Adolph Reed, “Response to Eric Arnesen,” *International Labor and Working Class History* 60, no. 60 (2001), 69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547901004446>.

both are bound to one another because they are products of historical projects of racialization. However, specifically focusing on the intra-communal politics of Blackness it is also of tantamount importance that “we” interrogate what it means to be an “I” in relation to “us.” Thus, in an attempt to reclaim and more importantly re-negotiate the politics of hyphenated existence, crucial questions must be asked: What can it mean to be a Black race-gender being within a society predicated upon domineering “-lithic sociologies”?⁵ What does it mean for a spade to classify itself as such, but to understand that it ultimately exists in relation to a dozen other similar yet indexical figures?⁶

Character Profile: Lionel Higgins

Hailing from Houston, Texas, Lionel Higgins can best be described as a mild-mannered young man with a penchant for journalistic inquiry. (Soon to be) Openly gay and newly outed, Lionel interrupts much of what we know and stand to learn about the various tropes of Black (College) Masculinities.⁷ Moreover, his character arch tells a particular coming of age story that may be familiar to some, yet completely distant and contradictory to others. Nonetheless, a continuous analysis of Lionel is important due to its potential for showcasing the realities of those who lie beyond the dominant constitutive factors that denote monolithic iterations of Black masculinity.

⁵ These are race-gender logics that denote/promulgate narrow and/or singular ways of practicing masculinity.

⁶ In reference to the italicized phrase *hyphenated existence*, the nomenclature and classificatory device of African-American serves as an example. In addition, and exploiting the usage of the hyphen to the fullest, I submit that there exists both implicit and explicit ways of qualifying how one personal identifies and/or how to best identify (an)other (i.e., Lionel existing as more than a Black-man; specifically, he is a Queer-Black-Collegiate-Man).

⁷ The episode alludes to Lionel “outing” himself as gay. Despite him awkwardly trying to collapse his sexuality as not readily lending itself to “labels,” season 1, episode 2, ends with him coming out to his roommate, Troy Fairbanks.

Much of season one depicts a journey that relays the successes, challenges, and general concerns that come with matriculating from high school senior to college freshman. Armed with his plastic framed spectacles, a non-manicured curly afro, and an abundance of introversive energy, Lionel is soon to become a celebrated figure despite likely never thinking he would become one. This newfound exaltation is not catalyzed by a drastic and predictable character makeover—à la the common trope found within television series—but because even during his self-doubt and confusion he helped to play a crucial role in exposing racism on campus.⁸

However, prior to this event being explicated in full, the character's initial exploratory episode presents viewers with something rather intriguing. In this episode it is revealed to the audience that Lionel has struggled to reconcile his own race-gender performativity with other more procedural ways of denoting Black masculinity.⁹ As the episode progresses it is communicated during the opening montage that not only is Lionel timid, but his race-gender performance, and by commutative property he himself, also exists as an intra-communal aberration.

Continuing further, the afro that he dons is too coarse and curly for White barbers to cut. Yet still, even within the confines of the Black masculine tabernacle that is the Barbershop, Black barbers appeared to turn him away when pursuing patronage at their shops. I presume that this scene is meant to communicate that even though these barbers are independent contractors who are often paid per haircut, Lionel's

⁸ "The Makeover," TV Tropes. <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/TheMakeover>.

⁹ Justin Simien, "Volume I: Chapter II," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 0:00-3:02.

“strangeness” isn’t worth the trouble and/or discomfort that it might bring. Further clarifying, for many Black Men the Black Barbershop is the last bastion for unfettered dialogue between heterosexual and cis-gender men. A space where frank conversations can take place and where Black life is celebrated, questioned, and even lamented.¹⁰ However, as Juwan Holmes conversely notes the Barbershop, despite its status as a positive conduit for Black masculine discourse, it is not uncommon for those who are present to not welcome all iterations of Black Masculinity.¹¹

Post Lionel’s failed barbershop venture, the proceeding scene serves as a transition meant to showcase a brief glimpse into Lionel’s high school hardships. Specifically, he is seen both explaining and mostly justifying his choice to dress as Star Trek character, *Geordi La Forge*, as a Halloween costume. His peers ridicule his decision, alluding to how lame and “gay” he looked for dressing as what might be argued as being one of the few non-problematic forms of “Black” science-fiction representation. And interestingly enough, it was after this scene that viewers are introduced to collegiate Lionel, as he sits alone consuming his meal. It was during this scene that the character appears to have an awakening and, as the show’s narrator ironically states, “grow a backbone.”¹²

Notified via mass social media invite, both Lionel and the audience are made aware of a forthcoming party that was quite literally promoting an opportunity for the

¹⁰ Mychal Denzel Smith, “I Miss My Black Barbershop,” Time, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://time.com/5884543/black-barbershop-coronavirus-protests/>.

¹¹ Juwan J. Holmes, “What It’s like Being Black and Queer in a Barbershop – Xtra,” accessed January 24, 2022, <https://xtramagazine.com/culture/the-barbershop-refuge-for-black-men-not-if-theyre-queer-164479>.

¹² Justin Simien, “Volume I: Chapter II,” *Dear White People*. Netflix. Timestamp: 1:56-2:29.

mostly White Winchester student body to, and once again coining Toni Morrison's phrase, "play in the dark." The bacchanal in question would go onto become what the show references as "the Blackface party"—a crucial moment that interconnected the fates of many of the series' characters from season one until *DWP's* culmination in the fall of 2021 with its fourth season.

Lionel and a few other members of the university's Black Student Body descend upon the Blackface party. A chaotic scene unfolds, but before so, we see Lionel ascend to the role of leader. Specifically, he alone offers a galvanizing rallying cry prior to disrupting the event with his peers: "Let's do this." The small mass of Black students confront their White counterparts while recording via cellphones and simultaneously administering rebuke. White students clad in urban apparel from the early 2000s, curly wigs, hair extensions, and of course blackface, are offset against their clearly aggravated Black counterparts. The scene's penultimate moment entails Lionel on a dais toppling stereo towers, as if to highlight his awakening and showcase his newfound empowerment, right before his roommate and student leader, Troy Fairbanks, arrives with campus security to disband the now raucous scene.

In the wake of his efforts to not only expose, but to lead the charge in breaking up the Blackface party, Lionel appears to have garnered acceptance among his Black peers. In the span of what appears to be days, he went from eating alone to being invited to sit with the same group of students he watched from afar; not merely longing to join them, but from what I presume, to be accepted by them. In other words, I understand there to be a difference between *being among* v. *being of*. Before he could accept the offer of the

more radical outfit of Black students, though, Lionel readily accepts Troy Fairbanks' invite to come sit with the Black student leaders who are more *institutionally aligned*.¹³

As to not reduce the richness of the character, I will briefly summarize some additional developments that take place in this episode and key to Lionel's character arch: The show alludes to the fact that Lionel is not only potentially gay, but that he is currently stuck in the "crush on the straight roommate phase" of his journey towards accepting his Queerness (This is revealed via fantasy scenes that he is indeed sexually attracted to his roommate, Troy Fairbanks); Lionel attends a party frequented by members of the Winchester queer community and after awkwardly fumbling about still manages to be invited to participate in a failed threesome with a seemingly heterosexual cis-gender couple (It culminates with Lionel accusing his male counterpart of requesting the threesome as a guise for hiding his own homoerotic desires); and the discovery that the Blackface party invite was not sent by the all-white staff of the campus satire magazine, but instead by a Black Student as a means of exposing the already existing aforementioned campus racism (Samantha White, hopes to incite a response from both the student body and administration.).

As season one progresses we see a maturing Lionel who not only is becoming more secure as a fledgling journalist but also as a young queer Black (College) Man in the midst of exploring romance, sex, and sexuality. Consequently, the remainder of the season depicts the aftermath of Lionel no longer longing after his clearly heterosexual roommate, Troy Fairbanks, but instead a rewarding journey towards becoming a

¹³ What I mean by the italicized phrase is that this group of students seeks to work alongside administration to address their concerns.

supportive friend; it also conveys the tensions between maintaining journalistic integrity while also being saddled with a competing commitment to exposing campus racism; and perhaps most intriguing, the viewer is provided with glimpses of what being a cis-gender Queer (College) Black Man in Black heterosexual spaces might entail.¹⁴

If season one was marked by Lionel's ascent towards romantic and sexual exploration, then season two details what it might look like to live out purported "truths," and the ensuing journey to establish newly minted understandings of love, romance, and sexual identity in the process. In further elaboration, post a failed attempt at wooing the editor, Silvio, of the same school newspaper that he once worked for, Lionel meets another Winchester student, Wesley, who he appears to be more in tune with socially. Both characters, Wesley and Lionel, actually meet at a party where they were hiding behind the comfort of their respective phone screens. Also germane is that in between pursuing both of these romantic relationships, viewers are not only shown the nuanced complexities of queer spaces, but how said queer spaces seemingly perpetuate a continued dynamic of Othering—despite being composed of a cadre of the marginalized (both historically and contemporarily).¹⁵ Lastly, the season details how Lionel often steers the self in order to navigate spaces where sexuality functions in relation to race—and in some cases trump it—and how this dynamism continues in spaces where the

¹⁴ As a point of clarification, the on-campus racism that I am specifically speaking to in this instance refers to the structural racism committed on behalf of the university and its donors. In chapter three where Troy was the main focus, one of the major driving forces of racial tensions on campus was the potential, and eventual as we see during Volume 2 of *DWP*, defunding of the Black residence Hall "Armstrong-Parker." The series strongly alludes to the Hancock's as being conservatives who were once Winchester student themselves; specifically, especially, in the case of Mr. Hancock, he was not in favor of integration and/or contemporary initiatives around racial equity at the university.

¹⁵ Krishna Pattisapu, "The Necessity of Intentionally Closed Spaces for LGBTQ Youth of Color," *The Assembly A Journal for Public Scholarship on Education*, June 30, 2019, 33-37.

converse is represented is also true, in that, race is subsumptive of sexuality. However, I do acknowledge that different socio-cultural locations may lead to different understandings of Lionel's tropic play.

In further elaboration, focusing on the broader connecting storyline of season two, the overall campus milieu is impacted by the introduction of an anonymous social media figure. It is eventually revealed later on in a plot twist that the figure in question was actually Silvio. Throughout season two the anonymous individual comes to prominence by harassing many of the university's Black student leaders via social media (which in emboldens the conservative student population at Winchester).

Lionel, accompanied by Brooke, an important secondary supporting character to the series, tries to track down and expose the anonymous social media figure but ultimately fails. What's important about their budding partnership, though, is that it starts off as a rivalry but becomes a unifying experience. Brooke is an ambitious, over-committed, and quirky young journalist herself. While working the case she reveals to Lionel that much of her cantankerous disposition towards him is derived from that fact that she, a brilliant Black (Collegiate) woman, is accustomed to being "the only one." Interestingly enough, and to Lionel's credit, he uses this as a point of connection and relays that he understands the lonely isolation and degradation that comes along with existing somewhere between rarity and outcast.

As season two reaches its climax, by mere chance Lionel uncovers the identity of the aforementioned anonymous social media personality, "AltIvyW," on his own. Despite

being disheartened by the fact that it was his once romantic interest, he performs what he believes to be his due diligence—I assume this is driven by how he has come to understand his political commitments as both a budding journalist and Queer-Black-Collegiate-Man—and exposes what he has learned to the campus community. This all takes place against the backdrop of cultivating a fledgling relationship with Wesley. Focusing on the latter, Lionel manages to find a degree of romantic stability. However, in the immediate wake of losing his virginity, his partner shatters his reality and informs him in so many words that sex, romance, and monogamy aren't necessarily mutually binding interests.¹⁶

The season ultimately culminates with Lionel and Sam now working together on a season's long mystery. Unlike the earlier pairing of Brooke and Lionel, this new partnership now embarks upon a journey towards uncovering a secret society believed to be composed of elite Black alumnus ("The Order of X"). This time, though, the journey bares fruits, as Lionel and Sam end the season on the verge of uncovering a generations-old mystery with ties to the enslaved Black community that once serviced Winchester University. This is important because at this juncture not only do both characters simply need "a win," but because both are seeking to belong to something more; especially because this "something" might serve as a "panacea," or at the very least a "deus ex machina" that will help the Black students level Winchester's skewed playing field.

I will admit that while a fertile point of departure for additional intellectual thought, I was unsure of how to analyze Lionel's sexuality at times. Additionally, as a

¹⁶ Lamar Dawson 4/25/2018, "'Dear White People' Creator Justin Simien: 'You Can Date A White Guy And Still Be Black As F*ck,'" LOGO News, accessed January 24, 2022, <http://www.newnownext.com/dear-white-people-justin-simien-gay-lionel/04/2018/>.

self-identifying Black (College) Man, I felt awkward to report on and unpack Lionel's general awkwardness. Perhaps this is due to the fact that I see myself greatly mirrored in Lionel's peculiarities?). Nonetheless, because of this discomfort, I knew that Lionel had to be one of the characters that I analyzed. Similar to Troy Fairbanks and Reggie Green, I see Lionel as also being a potentially generative example denoting Black (Collegiate) Masculinity and being.

Furthermore, even if I cannot identify with his sexual labels and performances, I can harp upon the throughline that connects us: Our masculine performances overlap because both Lionel and I are awkward, Black, and nerdy. As such, it seems that what connects this representation to the real world is that both Lionel and I have not only desperately desired to be "among" our peer groups, but to be "of" these peer groups as well. This logic in return thusly allows for a specific understanding of Queering as both act and practice. Specifically, one that troubles the axial planes of romance, sexual orientation, and/or sexuality. It instead represents a practice that "represents a resistance to anything that is socially defined as normal...If queer is not linked solely to sexual objects and desires, it can be understood as a reaction to broader structures of social and cultural domination."¹⁷ In understanding this dynamic lies the opportunity to better establish a rapport between the various existing iterations of Black (College) Masculinities that are hinged upon the previously mentioned through lines.

¹⁷ Guillermo Avila-Saavedra, "Nothing Queer about Queer Television: Televised Construction of Gay Masculinities," *Media, Culture & Society* 31, no. 1 (2009), 7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443708098243>.

As such, while all three chosen characters of analysis may not be exhaustive of the myriad existing forms of Black (Collegiate) Masculinities, it is Lionel, who, regarding the nexus of Sexuality-Race-Gender, represents hoards, throngs, perhaps even entire generations of Black, Queer, and cis-gendered men in college: The most obvious being those who have been dissuaded from telling their stories; or of tantamount importance, those who have had the nuances of their race-gender performances delimited and/or misinterpreted; and still, possibly those who also represent what has been “*seen*” before, but has ironically never been understood.¹⁸

As previously mentioned, Season two of *DWP* was a challenge to wade through at times. Following this groundbreaking effort, season three raised the stakes even higher by showcasing Queer-Black-collegiate-gendered realities. In the process, the show *dared to trespass* beyond the comforts of heterosexuality and rudimentary portrayals of non-heterosexual minorities. Thus, season three saw a serious attempt to not only contend with nuance, but to address the interstices that reside within such already intricate iterations of being. With this in mind, the third installment of *DWP* informs and enriches, all while serving as a new form of “representation” for their viewership.

In what I describe as being a fictional amalgamation—this mixture hypothetically consists of films like “Paris is Burning” and “The Rocky Horror Picture Show,” as well as television series like “The Real World” and “A Different World,”—season three sees Lionel slowly but surely begin to find *and now actively participate within Queer*

¹⁸ Graeme Wilson, “They See a Caricature,” 208. Lionel, like Reggie and Troy has a certain depth that allows for not only rich analysis, but their nuanced representation allows for cultural hypothesis to take place. For example, Wilson highlights how “Lionel represents a complete rejection of the ‘sissy’ archetype, instead embodying a more progressive media model of black LGBT masculinity, where homosexuality is not deviant but instead normalized and can coexist with blackness without either contradicting the other.”

communities. In a standout moment in season three, D'unte, a newly introduced character, states to Lionel that “[y]es, we have the chance to reinvent human sexuality without puritanical oversight. But it’s perfectly valid to, you know, have a boyfriend and be basic.”¹⁹

This one quote alone greatly captures Lionel’s season three endeavors. Elaborating further, the centrality of his story at this juncture “finds Lionel, now single, experimenting with other parts of queer culture. And because he’s so green, [he] sees everything with fresh eyes, making him an ideal audience surrogate.”²⁰ Unpacking this sentiment, not only does Lionel serve as a renewed and nuanced form of representation, but he also has been positioned as a cultural broker of sorts in that his character embodies just as much as it informs regarding the Queer community.²¹

Throughout the remainder of this season, viewers see Lionel continue his maturation process. His latest adventures, both sexual and social, encourage him to pursue new literary exploits under the anonymous pseudonym of “Chester.” Taking artistic liberties, Lionel via Chester, is able to give the Winchester community a glimpse into his newfound world of self-exploration. What should not be understated is that even in the midst of discovery, Lionel will go on to find his most stable attempt at a

¹⁹ Tiffany Johnson, “Volume 3: Chapter VII,” *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 15:48-16:08.

²⁰ Conde Naste, “Dear White People Season 3: Lionel Is Showing The World How Gay Culture Works | Them.,” accessed December 30, 2021, <https://www.them.us/story/dear-white-people-season-three-lionel>. Emphasis added.

²¹ Lanita Jacobs-Huey, “The Natives Are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among ‘Native’ Anthropologists,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002), 797. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3567257>.

relationship yet. The only catch is that Michael, his newest potential love interest, is HIV positive.

As the season unfolds, we see their interest in each other gradually grow. They are portrayed as sometimes socializing at *kikis* throughout the season, as well as more general interactions on campus (A *kiki* is a space where Queer bodies often gather in order to celebrate, decompress, or simply socialize with one another.).²² However, it is only after Michael fully confronts Lionel about his interest in him—by ascertaining on his own that the fictional “Brown eyes” is supposed to be a pseudonym in reference to him—that headway towards something stable begins to form.²³ While more developments take place regarding the aforementioned secret society storyline, I think the richness of Lionel’s character reaches its peak through the depiction of his broader social pursuits, local interpersonal relationships, and self-contemplation and personal reckonings over the shows initial three seasons.

Somewhere Both over and in the Refraction:

Pure unity or pure multiplicity...is a synonym for death.²⁴

²² “Queer Undefined,” Queer Undefined, accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.queerundefined.com/search/kiki>; Anja Matthes and Sony Salzman, “In the Kiki Ballroom Scene, Queer Kids of Color Can Be Themselves - The Atlantic,” accessed January 25, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2019/11/nyc-kiki-community/599830/>. Further emphasizing the possibility of the emergences of queer possibilities, it should be noted that the “kiki scene traces its roots to 1920s ballroom culture, an underground community that emerged in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance as a safe space for queer people of color. In the 1980s, ballroom culture gained broader national attention when the HIV/AIDS crisis led its members to start advocating for greater visibility, acceptance, and support.”

²³ Justin Simien, “Volume 3: Chapter X,” *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 13:10-16:20.

²⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Deconstruction in a Nutshell: The Very Idea (!),” ed. John D. Caputo (New York, USA: Fordham University Press, 1997), 119. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823290680-006>.

When considering the character Lionel Higgins the possibilities for analysis are abundant. Similar to Troy Fairbanks and Reggie Green, Lionel Higgins correspondingly exists as an oppositional construct to real-world counterparts who also exist under overlapping circumstances. As such, this stance not only animates my ongoing tropic analysis of the politically charged university milieu but also informs my understanding of how the self relationally exists to tropic performances altogether.

It is this conclusion that has led me to believe that Lionel, correspondingly, denotes a character who despite being fictional still has rhythmic compatibility with many Black (College) Men. What I understand as making him most relevant, though, is his overlapping racial, gendered, and sexual realities. Lionel's intersectional profile is then of paramount importance when considering more broadly how these social locations potentially animate the policing of the Other within intra-communal spaces.

In continuation, scholars studying these connections have frequently noted how existing sociologies, specifically traditional dominant performances of masculinity influence the race-gender-sexual realities of Queer Black (College) Men.²⁵ While these researchers and I indeed share overlapping sentiments regarding the perpetuation of problematic and/or narrow notions of hegemonic masculinity, it is also crucial to avoid

²⁵ Terrell L. Strayhorn and Taris G. Mullins, "Investigating Black Gay Male Undergraduates' Experiences in Campus Residence Halls," *Journal of College & University Student Housing* 38/39, no. 2/1 (April 2012), 140–161, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=a9h&AN=88056459&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8862125>; Lori D. Patton, "Preserving Respectability or Blatant Disrespect? A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Morehouse Appropriate Attire Policy and Implications for Intersectional Approaches to Examining Campus Policies," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 27, no. 6 (2014), 724–746. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2014.901576>; Keon M. McGuire et al., "In Search of Progressive Black Masculinities: Critical Self-Reflections on Gender Identity Development among Black Undergraduate Men," *Men and Masculinities* 17, no. 3 (August 1, 2014), 253–277. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X13514055>.

pseudo-positivist understandings that codify any iterations of masculinity as static. Missteps such as these run the risk of “Black males [being viewed as] the exemplifications of white (bourgeois) masculinity’s pathological excess. In other words, the toxic abnormality of a hegemonic white masculinity becomes the conceptual norm for Black Men and boys.”²⁶ Thus, broader questions about masculinity must emerge, while still levying rebuke when necessary.

It is in response to my own call to acknowledge the fluidity of Black masculinities, as well as their potential to co-exist parallelly that I now return to Lionel. Specifically, through examining Lionel’s personal maturation it seems not only possible for Black (College) Men to re-orient their tropic performances—a conclusion already reached in Chapter III—but it might also be argued that such a performance works to cast said masculinities as *antinomy* (two occurrences that, while taking place separately, are both equally valid outcomes for a situation.).²⁷ This outcome is especially salient when his character is analyzed in relation to his peers and the university environment. Furthermore, when considering antinomial Blackness in opposition to the notion of Blackness as multiversal threat, as discussed in Chapter III, the current scales back the scope of its analysis from the cosmic and multiversal, and seriously contends with the more immediate where, when, and how of tropic play.²⁸

²⁶ Tommy J. Curry, *The Man-Not: Race, Class, Genre, and the Dilemmas of Black Manhood* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 3.

²⁷ Tomi Bartole, “The Ontological Antinomy: Food, Surfaces, and Transcendence in the Village of Awim, Papua New Guinea,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 10, no. 3 (December 1, 2020), 874. <https://doi.org/10.1086/711879>.

²⁸ Reflecting on Lionel’s development throughout *DWP*, many of the moments that were pivotal to his maturation and optimal development did not occur in the confines of an identity based resource center, nor while parlaying with like-minded individuals at a rally based around the oppression of gender sex

In continuation, and once again drawing upon the Fanonian concept of the sociogenic, one's understanding of personal being takes place within the context of the broader environment in which they reside and in relation to the other conscious beings inhabiting said environment.²⁹ This has led me to believe that the college campus is then ripe with not only myriad understandings of social performances that convey race, gender, and sexuality, but corresponding bodily performances that convey said understandings (directly, indirectly, or perhaps even ironically). When comparing these bodily performances, it is not unfathomable that many of these ways of being do not align. And yet, it is through the existence of their relational difference that there is still a chance for antinomial aspects to function and exist relationally despite the looming presence of dominant and domineering discursive practices.

Further parsing out its importance in contesting the dominant, when considering the dynamism of antinomial Blackness, it is absolutely plausible that a Black (College) Man can pursue athletics and casual semi-romantic relationships—heterosexual, queer, polyamorous, or otherwise—while also serving as a student body president and Rhodes scholar candidate. Similarly, in the case of Lionel, the seemingly disparate elements of his personal constitution can and often do liaise between one another to produce a subject. This appears to not only be the case for Lionel, but research on Black (College) Men also speaks to how Queerness and sexual orientation overlap with other aspects of

minorities. While these scenarios have played well-documented roles in aiding queer college students of color belonging and survival, they are not the only ways to gain a better understanding of the tropically constructed self.

²⁹ Emily Anne Parker, "The Human as Double Bind: Sylvia Wynter and the Genre of 'Man,'" *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 32, no. 3 (2018), 443. <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.32.3.0439>.

social and personal forms of identification, as well as the university environment in which they reside (i.e., a Historically White College or University versus a Minority Serving Institution.).³⁰

Therefore, in operating from within these environmental contexts, the Queer Black (College) Man has the potential to exist as an *auteur* of their own story arch, so to speak (Meaning that they may not be able to control how they are interpreted but doggedly fight for a final say in the matter, nonetheless.).³¹ The ensuing analysis then has the objective of rendering both explication and critique of processes that undergird broad social dynamics that challenge and/or influence auteurship. An approach such as this entails thinking beyond the existing staunch parameters of *subsumptive and* homogenizing Blackness.³² Thus, further detail must be provided regarding the auteur's existence in relation to the dominant.

Lights, Camera, Action: The Auteur and His Supporting Ensemble

Lionel and Troy's pairing within various onscreen moments denotes the potential for heterosexual and Queer masculinities to be placed into literal conversation with each other. Similarly, in an example of art perhaps imitating life, or at the very least

³⁰ Donald Mitchell and Darris R. Means, "'Quadruple Consciousness': A Literature Review and New Theoretical Consideration for Understanding the Experiences of Black Gay and Bisexual College Men at Predominantly White Institutions," *Journal of African American Males in Education* 5, no. 1 (2014), 26; Lori D. Patton, "Perspectives on Identity, Disclosure, and the Campus Environment Among African American Gay and Bisexual Men at One Historically Black College," *Journal of College Student Development* 52, no. 1 (2011), 81-82. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0001>.

³¹ "Auteur Definition, Meaning & Synonyms: Vocabulary.Com." <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/auteur>.; "Auteur: The Chicago School of Media Theory." <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/auteur/>.

³² Emily Lenning, "Unapologetically Queer in Unapologetically Black Spaces: Creating An Inclusive HBCU Campus," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 1, no. 39 (May 18, 2017), 285. <https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/hjsr/vol1/iss39/24>.

coincidentally aligning with dynamics uncovered via higher education scholarship, similar opportunities may exist on college campuses. Per the preceding character profile I have already highlighted Lionel’s attempt to not only grapple with the “peculiarities” of his Blackness but how he is also not quite fully open to, much less capable of, beginning to understand the contexts of his Queerness.

As season one progresses, the series allows for not only the growth of Lionel’s story arch from a temporal perspective, but for Lionel’s conceptualization of his Blackness, Queerness, and Black-Queerness, to grow more earnestly than it had in his non-captured past. In further elaboration, seeing as how the show is a college-centric series, we are not made privy in full to the formative childhood, adolescence, and young adult years preceding Lionel’s Winchester tenure..

In continuation, one of the earliest instances portraying Lionel’s understanding of his Queerness, and of tantamount importance Troy being made aware of the advantageous position afforded to him via his masculine heterosexuality, occurs during season 1, episode 8. Specifically, during a shared videogame session, Lionel protests Troy’s usage of the colloquialism/slang term “pause.”³³ While Troy immediately recognized and admitted to the problematic event, Lionel counters with a rebuke, yet seized the opportunity to both sarcastically and playfully educate. The exchange between them is capture below:

Troy: Pause

Lionel: [Literally pauses gameplay and proceeds to glance over at Troy]

³³ “Pause » What Does Pause Mean? Slang.Org,” Slang.org, accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.slang.org/pause-meaning-definition/>. Pause is defined as a “slang interjection that is used to negate the sexual connotations of a previously made comment. Often used after accidentally saying something that can be interpreted as homosexual.”

Troy: Sorry. Force of habit. What's the opposite of pause?
Lionel: *Hmm. Not silencing millions with your hetero-supremacy.*³⁴

The phrase “pause” is commonly said as a counter or corrective measure in the wake of a statement or act that has been deemed as non-heterosexual, in a space occupied by individuals who are (presumably) heterosexual. The importance of the quoted dialogue, though, lies in Lionel’s gumption to not only acknowledge the wrongness of Troy’s utterance, but to chastise him for the casualness with which he uses the word. This is where I see Lionel as beginning to engage in auteurship here. Lionel’s response serves as a rebuke towards the broader systems of oppression that correspondingly allow for Troy to so easily dispatch the invective in question. Lionel is working to play a more active role in communicating how he wishes to engage in tropic play. In further elaboration, Lionel’s actions denote the possibility of transformation to occur when a subject—or those possessing nomadic subjectivities—utilize their agency to disrupt the status quo’s capacity to marginalize those who do not align with its narrow logics.³⁵

Furthermore, his conceptualization of the self becomes emergent. Through utilizing performative and transformative agency, Lionel not only affirms what he will not tolerate as a self-identifying gay individual, but he also directly challenges Troy, his counter opposite. In the process, the parameters of his sexuality are further contoured and pronounced. In a second seminal event, occurring during the same scene, Lionel, now the inquirer, questions Troy about his proneness to verbal outbursts while gaming:

³⁴ Charlie McDowell, “Volume I: Chapter VIII,” *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 5:57-7:08.

³⁵ Tzelepis, Elena, *Vulnerability in Resistance*, ed. Judith Butler, Zeynep Gambetti, and Leticia Sabsay (Duke University Press, 2016), 154.

Lionel: I was thinking, what if I turned my parade story into a parade story about you?

Troy: YOU SHIT-FUCKING TURD! Sure.

Lionel: Have you been formally diagnosed with Tourette's?

Troy: No Need. You see, straight guys are encouraged to never express the full range of human emotion, causing it all to be bottled up inside during sports and—YOU FUCK BAG! And videogames.”³⁶

Taking a brief moment to address Troy's explanation, while I understand the sentiment he is attempting to convey, I cannot fully agree with his argument as presented to *DWP* viewership. This stance stems from a perceived lack of context that considers not only gender and sexuality, but both standpoints as being mediated by, and in relation to, racial-cultural norms and broader socio-cultural practices.³⁷

In further elaboration, and adding to Troy's hypothesis, I proffer that Black Men—and arguably all men who subscribe to dominant and domineering understandings of masculinity, for that matter—are often taught to more so mask their emotions. However, these purported emotionless performances are instead mistakenly understood as acts of muting. While I could categorize this as an act of pathologizing, I very intentionally use the word muting instead. This is done because despite muting still being a pathology of sorts, to be rendered as mute implies that there are traces of an emotion that, while not fully emergent, still very much exists. In other words, I also understand the potential for Troy's outburst to serve as a form of emotive expression and/or catharsis.

³⁶ Chuck Hayward, “Volume 1: Chapter VIII,” *Dear White People*. Timestamp: 5:57-7:08.

³⁷ Shea M. Dunham, “Emotional Skillfulness in African American Marriage: Intimate Safety as a Mediator of the Relationship between Emotional Skillfulness and Marital Satisfaction, 59-60. <https://fiu-flvc.primo.exlibrisgroup.com>.

In continuation, potential mis-readings of not just emotion, but the muting of more robust conveyances of emotion has the dangerous corresponding potential to render this demographic as incapable of engaging in more nuanced forms of being. In the process, it might also be argued that the anti-dynamism of “emotional muteness,” perhaps plays into the logics of dominant tropes that aid in the interpolation of Black Men as emotionally unintelligent and/or unavailable.³⁸ Thus, pathology in an instance such as this is achieved through first rendering a subject as emotionally mute.

Additionally, while more than likely not meant to be malicious, I think that while potentially jarring due to their abruptness, outbursts like Troy’s shouldn’t be hastily rebuked. While I am not exculpating these actions, I do believe that topical readings run the risk of, coincidentally, muting the richness of both language and communication. And simply put, videogames can be extremely frustrating. Therefore one might be able to achieve catharsis via loudly yelling obscenities. I also might add that in this moment, Troy, nor Lionel, have to worry about perfection or fitting-in, respectively. They’re simply two college roommates willingly engaging in banter while playing videogames.

Shortly after the scene where Lionel and Troy are bantering over videogames, both parties come together at an off-campus bar and reveal their overlapping feelings of helplessness. For Lionel, however, his candidness allows for an important through line to be distinguished. Troy and Lionel suffer from yet another trope commonly associated

³⁸ Ronald L. Jackson, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, SUNY Series, the Negotiation of Identity (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 75.

with Black Men and manhood: *The Absent Black Father*.³⁹ In Lionel's case, his father died when he was six years old and therefore literally absent for the past 12 years of his life (and per Lionel, arguably the first six as well). For Troy, as documented in Chapter III, in a more figurative sense, he was also hampered by an "absent" father. As a reminder, per my analysis of Troy, his father simply failed to acknowledge the young man that he wished to become, and not the one that Dean Fairbanks wished he would continue to be. Thus, in the process, Dean Fairbanks both engages in and represents a type of absence via refusing to acknowledge Troy's attempt at molding his own being.

Is it practical to believe that these brief conversations counter the salvo of material and symbolic repudiation? Of course not, at least not in totem. While it might not be completely farcical to entertain this idea, I still would doubt its real-world transferability. However, what is potentially represented by these dialogues are templates for what can manifest if the constrictive parameters of Hetero-Blackness are transgressed against. What does connect both Lionel and Troy is that there is a through line of disregard present in both of their lives. Moreover, the potentially more salient argument is that Troy is a tropic representation for what it might mean to renegotiate one's own hetero-masculinity in order to show concern, empathy, and general comradery. To adopt this ethical praxis entails the evocation of

an affirmation of friendship and hospitality on the basis that I always have something outside myself inside myself, so affirmation of self requires affirmation of others. Ethics cannot be absolutist...Ethics must allow the Other to

³⁹ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (La Vergne, United States: The New Press, 2020), 221.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/fiu/detail.action?docID=5651869>.

be distinct and different from me. I do not try to drag the Other into a relationship of indebtedness to myself in showing pity.⁴⁰

It would seem that it is therefore not enough for the Troys of the world to be kind to those who exist at the brink of marginality (i.e., Lionel). There instead must be a critical reorientating. It seems that his newly reached understanding is attained by navigating what was once thought to be non-charterable cartographies of the unconscionable. In the process, though, there must be an attempt to welcome the marginalized, unfettered, and without change. The other must remain as such to be embraced and continually valued as such.

In an attempt to place theory, creative fiction, and higher education scholarship into conversation with each other, the often cited effects of the coming out process endured by queer students of color are an important point of departure for further analysis. It should be noted that I say “process” to not only emphasize the temporal aspects of coming out—as in when, frequency, and futurity—but to list the spatial aspects that denote locations (i.e., dorms, classrooms, extra-curricular activities, social events, etc.). Also, automatically bound up with this logic are the acts of naming and identifying what one purports to be sexually and/or romantically to another. Suffices to say that this process, especially in higher education spaces, is reported to be stress-inducing due to fears of ostracization, but also potentially and paradoxically liberating in some instances.⁴¹ Yet, due in part to his own romantic frustrations and estrangement from the

⁴⁰ Barry Stocker, “Contradiction, Transcendence, and Subjectivity in Derrida’s Ethics,” accessed January 19, 2022. <https://www.eurozine.com/contradiction-transcendence-and-subjectivity-in-derridas-ethics/#footnote-15>.

⁴¹ Reginald A. Blockett, “I Think It’s Very Much Placed on Us’: Black Queer Men Laboring to Forge Community at a Predominantly White and (Hetero) Cisnormative Research Institution,” *International*

Black Winchester community, Lionel finally elects to identify who and what he is to Troy in Season 1, episode 2. The following scene takes place after Lionel takes up Troy on his offer for a haircut:

Lionel: Troy...I'm gay. I don't know why that is so hard for me to say. I've always known.

Troy: [Returns to the bathroom with hair shears] What you say, my man?

Lionel: Just, I'm into guys...

Troy: Oh, cool.

Lionel: Yea, vaginas are like art in a museum. Beautiful to look at but don't touch.

Troy: Yeah, agree to disagree. Now, I gotta get these edges super crispy because you motherfuckers are picky as shit.

Lionel: I'm not like that.

Troy: Nah, you're an original, man. Anyone can see that.⁴²

Further delving into this scene, prior to this moment and even after coming out to Troy, Lionel's long-standing sexual attraction to the latter still remained. During the earlier portion of season one viewers are habitually made aware of the depths of Lionel's affinity for Troy; moreover, as both parties share a suite, the former attempts to pleasure himself while secretly listening to Troy's sexual escapades from the adjoining room. However, the ensuing act of self-pleasure that took place post the coming out scene *could be* understood as the emancipatory "contact that [Lionel] needed with himself to begin to

Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 30, no. 8 (2017), 800–816.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1350296>; John R. Sauve, "Issues Facing Gay Black Males in College," *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 13, no. 2 (December 16, 1998), 21–39.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J035v13n02_04; Bruce Allen Carter, "'Nothing Better or Worse Than Being Black, Gay, and in the Band': A Qualitative Examination of Gay Undergraduates Participating in Historically Black College or University Marching Bands," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 61, no. 1 (2013), 26–43. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41999565>.

⁴² Justin Simien, "Volume I: Chapter II," *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 24:38-27:40.

accept who he is as a Queer male[,] while simultaneously embracing the Blackness he gains through his newfound relationship with Troy.”⁴³

While this analysis has its merits, I still think that it runs the risk of centering, and therefore, placing the expectation for a acceptance under the patronage of the cis-gender, heterosexual, Black (College) Man. Thus, if this is the same dynamic that is often championed under the auspices of the ready-made logics of what is contemporarily referred to as “*Allyship*” and/or “*Accomplice-ship*,” then what is actually interrupted at the level of the ideological?

While I do not champion the belief that structural change en masse is the sole measurement of progress, I often wonder if local victories should be the aim for now. Put differently, it is the critique of rhetoric that ordinarily dictates how the acceptance of the marginalized Other should be understood, exist, and ultimately operate that aid in my quest to think differently about its logics on behalf of those who exist at peripheries.

In further elaboration, those who operate as the dominate (Troy), in relation to the Othered (Lionel), both embody and perform as broader examples of the potential that can be met out by aspiring towards prolonged attempts at empathy. Thus, it is through once again actively occupying the shell of these socio-political frameworks—race, ethnicity, class, gender, culture, and so forth—that we may differently come to know Black Masculinities, Queer or otherwise. I say this approach is necessary not because of a lazy unwillingness to wrench free of these dominant and domineering tropic frames, but I proffer this conclusion because I instead fear that these social scripts can never be

⁴³ Christopher Sewell, “Finding Lionel: Reconciling Multiple Identities as Black, Gay, and Gifted in Dear White People,” *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education* 19, no. 1 (2020), 42. <https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/taboo/vol19/iss1/4>.

eradicated in full if at all. Thus, it is through the interconnectedness of social actors that tropes have the ability to both be enacted as complicating, countering, and subverting constitutive discourses.

Additionally, and maybe even Ironically, I cannot speak for the Queered other. This is not because of baseline identity commitments formed through a corresponding political framing, but because I am simply unfamiliar with this particular iteration of othering. However, due to what I see as being common threads that connect these tropic realities, therein lies the potential for resistance through brief interruptions of common ways of knowing and performing race, gender, and sexual dynamics.

While there exists the double bind of *the advantageous* merely placating to the oppressed other by engaging in rhetorical performances of righteousness and virtue signaling, therein also lies a potential bind posed by solely relying on the Black cis-gender hetero-masculine figure to serve as the one responsible for welcoming his Queer counterpart. Ruminating on this sentiment a bit more, some may see this as resembling performative activism or allyship. Additionally, those operating under the auspices of performative allyship are said to be driven by “the need for validation and acceptance and may intellectually understand the issues at hand, yet not sacrifice their social or economic capital to challenge the systems they benefit from.”⁴⁴ In response, I assert that any act committed by a social actor, regardless of intention or outcome, is a performance and therefore performative. Also of importance to highlight is that such claims seemingly traffic in a desire for “authenticity” and/or “genuineness” when acting on behalf of the

⁴⁴ Mariah L Wellman, “Black Squares for Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram,” *Social Media + Society* 8 (2022), 2. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221080473>.

Other. I therefore advance the counterclaim that to be concerned with this sentiment is a privilege in and of itself.

In continuation, Reginald Blockett's findings regarding the Kinship Networks of Black Queer Men (BQM) on campus speak to the prevalence of alienation. Specifically, Blockett found that not only are BQM marginalized by the Predominately White Institutions they attend, but that they are also made to feel unwelcomed by their White Queer counterparts on campus as well.⁴⁵ What should also be noted is that the phenomena of othering was still experienced by minority raced, gendered, and now sexualized persons while attending an institution whose federal classification aligned with their racial identity. Lori D. Patton, Reginald A. Blockett, and Brian L. McGowan found that while these spaces often affirm racial being and identity, matters pertaining to sexual identity and sexuality often leave much to be desired by Black students attending Historically Black Colleges and Universities.⁴⁶

Considering these hardships, I feel comfortable advancing the claim that the marginalized so often do not have the luxury of being concerned with whether an act is “performative”; especially when it offers respite from immediate exclusion and relegation. What we have presently then is a double bind. On one end, this bind is marked by a dynamic of disenfranchisement and/or patronization. While on the other end, questions around agential being arise as the privileged other takes on the form of the

⁴⁵ Reginald A. Blockett, “I Think It’s Very Much Placed on Us’: Black Queer Men Laboring to Forge Community at a Predominantly White and (Hetero) Cisnormative Research Institution,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30, no. 8 (September 14, 2017), 810. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1350296>.

messianic figure, in that them and them alone can right wrongs. Thus denying the Queer other the opportunity to respond in kind to the oppressive milieu in which they are bound within. However, since community is not a viable means for potentially achieving liberation, then what option does this potentially leave Queer Black (College) Men?

Hospitality in Anticipation of the Other: Achieving the (Un)Achievable

Considering the predicament of the double bind, I see the proceeding musings as attempting to envision the dynamics of inter-relational being differently. What I am proposing, then, is not merely comradery for the sake of unity. What I instead see this analysis inching towards is a radical reconstituting of not just the dominant in relation to the non-dominant, but altogether a questioning of the grounds that constitute their relationship. Thus, while commonplace concepts of equity, diversity, and inclusion may readily deploy community as a hollow means of addressing broader forms of institutional oppression, I concretely consider interconnectedness as being predicated on the tethers that bind Black (Collegian) Masculinities in an overlapping struggle for signification.

In continuation, over the course of this study I have considered some of what I understand as being the constitutive socio-political processes that work to inform what Blackness was, is, and may potentially become. However, what the current chapter aims to accomplish, especially the ensuing section, is heavily focused on Antinomial Blackness in relation to the domain of the intra-communal. By further exploring the politics of Black Love I proclaim the need for a mass reckoning with what it not only

⁴⁶ Lori D. Patton, Reginald A. Blockett, and Brian L. McGowan, "Complexities and Contradictions: Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer Students' Lived Realities across Three Urban HBCU Contexts," *Urban Education*, 20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920959128>.

means to love in relation to one's own Blackness, but what it means to endorse subordinated tropic performances in relation to the communal and one's own Blackness; by ruminating further, there is the possibility that the generative constitutive capacity of Blackness, gendered-being, and sexuality are concurrently examined and potentially even ruptured as currently understood.⁴⁷

While the denaturing of these discursive narratives, or dominant tropic forms, is predicated on a literal praxis of "love"—one denoting romance and prolonged emotional attachments—I still think it helpful in producing a more nuanced understanding of love via the relational. This conceptual shift is enacted through attempted empathy, care, and concern for the Other. In further elaboration, I advance the claim that to love those whom society has deemed as the objectified and undesired, denotes a relationship fueled by compassion and empathy.

In continuation, considering the on-screen dynamics of Troy and Lionel's friendship, it should be foremost understood that my goal is not to prioritize heterosexuality as the sole conduit for liberation. What I mean by this is that it is not an objective of this study to center Queerness via a disarticulation from heterosexual and dominant ways of being. In other words, I don't intend to utilize a basic inversion that understands the "have-nots" as finding liberation through the benevolence of the "haves."

This is important because I think it a possible misstep to attribute Lionel's evolution from a fledgling gender sexual minority, to openly gay man, to eventually a curious and proud "queer person of color," to the dominant other. This dynamic works to

⁴⁷ Patricia Hill Collins, "No Storybook Romance," in *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (Routledge, 2004), 251.

not only center dominant understandings of Black masculinities, but it also de-emphasizes the richness of Lionel as both character and semaphore; specifically, one who despite having aid from a heteronormative/sexual masculine peer from time to time, was able to take on a certain agentic capacity via a prolonged journey through his own Queerness. Through harnessing the full breadth of his capacity to act in response to, as opposed to settling for an existence of the objectified and acted upon, Lionel accomplishes the following:

- Not only does he stand his ground when confronted in the waning moments of the finale of season one by his newspaper editor—This is in reference to the immediately preceding actions of Lionel: Specifically, his writing an expose article detailing the shady history of administration and their plan to integrate the all Black dormitory of Armstrong-Parker—but Lionel then openly embraces the same editor when he’s unexpectedly kissed by him.⁴⁸
- Through his fictional literary series—specifically, under the nom de plume of “Chester,” the focal point of said series—Lionel satirizes, conveys, and ultimately works through his growing pains, and pleasures, as a Queer-Black-Collegian. Perhaps of paramount importance, though, it would seem that this artistic journey was crucial in helping him hone his personal voice as well.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Justin Simien, “Volume I: Chapter X,” *Dear White People*, April 28, 2017. Netflix. Timestamp: 22:36-23:54.

⁴⁹ “Back On The Yard: The Men Of ‘Dear White People’ Open Up About Their Characters” *Essence* (blog), accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.essence.com/celebrity/men-of-dear-white-people-netflix/>.

- During his first “ki” (shortened version of the already discussed term “Kiki”) he not only begins the process of meeting the broader Winchester LGBTQA community of Color, but he also learns more about the cultural practices and verbiage of this population (i.e., his introduction to pronouns like “V” and the concept of “girl dick.”).⁵⁰
- Lastly, and perhaps the most telling example of Lionel’s transition from fledgling nubile to experienced participant, happens in relation to what might be thought of as a racial-sexual-intra-communalism. In further elaboration, through the introduction of other LGBTQA characters, Lionel affirms that he is finally ready to venture into the “*deep end of the Gay pool.*” In further elaboration, in season three, episode seven, we find him attending a sex party with his newfound peers.⁵¹

In continuation, seeing as how one of the aims of this study is to critique domineering tropic masculinities, I therefore think it detrimental to interpret Troy’s actions as the lone catalyst of Lionel’s growth. I instead categorize them as mechanisms of support along the lines of friendship. Moreover, throughout the series, Troy does appear at times to relinquish the privileges afforded to him via his social standpoints, as well as often working to contest normative iterations of masculine performance to support Lionel (directly and indirectly). This juxtaposition in return works to de-emphasize the role of “straightness” in Lionel’s character arch.

⁵⁰ Kimberly Peirce, “Volume 3: Chapter III,” *Dear White People*, August 2, 2019. Netflix. Timestamp: 12:21-17:17.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, Timestamp: 5:17-18:20.

However, and of tantamount importance, this critical re-orienting makes way for the continued possibility of Queering the self, on behalf of the Queer-identifying self; Lionel's trajectory and movement towards a fuller expression of his own personal desires, interests, and dispositions comes to mind here. Placing this assessment in dialogue with the broader objectives of this chapter then: To reach this point of self-realization may in return mean that the only way to "arrive" at community—along with radical love and relationships—is to Queer how the concept might be commonly understood moving forward. Before doing so it is important to distinguish between Queering as popularly understood and my particular evocation.

Hence, I follow a conceptualization of Queer that conceives of "queerness [as being] less about object choice than about the recognition on the part of others that one is not like others, a subject out of order, not in sequence, not working." This is specifically met out via "resistance to regimes of the normal" and "not changing identities to justify desire, but desiring in ways that make strange the relations between identities."⁵² This understanding is similarly informed by Halberstam's take on Queer time as being "a theory of queerness as a way of being in the world and a critique of the careful social scripts that usher even the queerest among us through major markers of individual development and into normativity."⁵³

While analyses of the discursive are crucial, it is also pertinent to focus on how hierarchies are not only established but also how they work to coerce and/or police the

⁵² Charles I. Nero, "Queering The Souls of Black Folk," *Public Culture* 17, no. 2 (2005), 256-257. <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-17-2-255>.

⁵³ Carolyn Dinshaw et al., "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (June 1, 2007), 182. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2006-030>.

self into normalcy within non-hospitable outfits. These attempts to police are then perhaps another example of why and how the concept of community is both fallible and non-obtainable.⁵⁴ Importantly, if these spaces are indeed tiered, hierarchical, or reminiscent of castes, then I assert that they actually exist in violation of the rhetoric oft-associated with “community.” I posit that they instead exist as (faux) intra-communities. As such, while the clarion for a porous Black-Sexual-Political reorientation is important, it is then paramount to consider what it might look like to establish radical race-gender politics altogether. In the process, this shift in praxis is meant to not only reorder certain dynamics, but to also radically question the very foundations on which concepts like unity, Black Power and empathy are established.⁵⁵

Thinking through what such a reality might entail, I proffer that this imagined milieu should be predicated upon an unrelenting tendency to welcome the marginalized without question. It should be noted that this is not to say that violence against the Other is still unfathomable and/or absent.⁵⁶ However, the avoidance of said violence is perhaps accomplished by not only greeting the marginalized but also voicing concern when they cannot and/or have had their voice muted. For instance, returning to *DWP*, when after an evening of failed sleuthing, Brooke begins to “disrobe” and makes sexual advances towards a clearly uninterested and flustered Lionel

Lionel: [Scoffs] I really blew it.

Brooke: Yeah, I blame you as well...Sorry, force of habit.

⁵⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 113.

⁵⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, "No Storybook Romance," 250.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 47.

Lionel: Not the story...Although that's not going well, either...We need to clear our minds.

****Brooke frees her hand of the rubber ball that she repeatedly tossed in mid-air moments prior. The camera shows her with her back turned to Lionel. She begins to grin, unbutton her blouse, and then turns to meet the gaze of a clearly tired Lionel****

Brooke: [Clears throat]

Lionel: [Alarmed and confused] Why are you disrobing!?

Brooke: This little "will they or won't they" dance we have, we need to see where it takes us.

Lionel: It takes us to "won't they."

Brooke: Let's see, huh?

Lionel: [Awkwardly laughing] I'm gay.

Brooke: Oh, that's so reductive. Gay, straight...Sexuality is a spectrum.

****Troy playing videogames with Reggie in the adjoining room overhears the exchange between Brooke and Lionel and loudly chimes in from afar on Lionel's behalf.****

Troy: No means no.⁵⁷

Troy could have left well enough alone and let Lionel fend for himself against Brooke's advances. However, by this point in the series it is well established that Lionel is a friend of Troy's. It would therefore be a neglectful analysis to not acknowledge what friendship has allowed to take place in this given moment. Even if but for a brief moment, Troy's utterance has allowed for the safety of Lionel's Queer self-praxis to remain un-impinged by not just the presumptions of masculine heterosexuality, but by any unwanted advances of sex altogether (straight, gay, queer, or otherwise).

In continuation, the multifarious ways of being denoted by Lionel and Troy have the potential to enable both coterminous and multitudinous masculine tropic performances. In doing so, a pivotal break away from the deafening silence of the

normalcy of hetero-supremacy may be established via the interruption of what Jean Francois Lyotard refers to as *Le Différend*, or the power afforded to those who are in command of a language as compared to those who are not.).⁵⁸

As a result of contesting the status quo, no longer is the outcast and marginalized being solely charged with altering their deleterious state of affairs. Instead, it is the “privileged” who now ideally works alongside and not simply on behalf of traditionally excluded parties. Elaborating further, this turn of events comes about as a form of redress in that historically “[t]he one who says there is something [injurious] is the plaintiff, it [was up to them] to bring forth a demonstration...*Reality is always the plaintiff’s responsibility.*”⁵⁹

In return, something beyond mere validation and/or tolerance is offered. This new and necessary transgression theoretically fosters a space that is hospitable to the minoritarian and often contradictory Other.⁶⁰ Thus occupying the space of the liminal is no longer predicated on solitude and/or silencing—the very parameters that mark effects stemming from the creation of the Différend to begin with.

In continuation, and further contending with this notion of the liminal, referencing, for instance, the previously mentioned scene where Lionel’s Halloween

⁵⁷ Justin Simien, “Volume 2: Chapter VI,” *Dear White People*, May 4, 2018. Netflix. Timestamp: 17:03-18:22.

⁵⁸ Jean-François Lyotard and Georges Van Den Abbeele, “The Différend, the Referent, and the Proper Name,” *Diacritics* 14, no. 3 (1984), 5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464840>.

⁵⁹ Jean-François Lyotard and Georges Van Den Abbeele, “The Différend, the Referent, and the Proper Name,” 5. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/464840>.

⁶⁰ Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), 42.

costume is mocked, which then results in a failed attempt to relay its importance to his peers, a double injuring occurs. Not only are viewers shown Lionel's failed attempt to voice his displeasure (*injustice*), but his rebuttal is also expressly impugned through the mockery of his high school peers (i.e., the denial of *injury [or Damages]* and thus the mutual constitutive dynamics that anchor *Le Différend*).⁶¹

Shifting to a real-world scenario, though, the hindrance of the double injury is not limited to the domain of the fictional. In fact, due to the provisional nature of privilege and advantageousness, it can often be observed in higher education spaces where queer students are denied not only unfettered participation, but are correspondingly met with derision once they try to “trespass” and/or contest said spaces as well. Cis-gender queer Black (College) Men are commonly isolated from the broader campus milieu: This isolation is often compounded by the concern that by “coming-out” to the campus community, that ostracization may possibly ensue and damage interpersonal relationships; ongoing discrimination that intersects along the lines of race, gender, and sexuality when especially attending Historically White Colleges and Universities; and interestingly enough, the converse yet overlapping intra-communal struggles that occur despite attending Minority Serving Institutions that purportedly “align” with one’s racial identity.⁶²

⁶¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Le Différend* (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xiii.

⁶² Terrell L. Strayhorn and Tavis G. Mullins, “Investigating Black Gay Male Undergraduates’ Experiences in Campus Residence Halls,” *Journal of College & University Student Housing* 39, no. 1 (April 2012), 145. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=shib&db=a9h&AN=88056459&site=ehost-live&scope=site&custid=s8862125>; Amalia Z. Dache and Keon M. McGuire, “Coming Back Home to Live and Not Die: A Human Geography of a Working-Class Black Gay Male Navigating the Local Higher Education Pipeline,” *Urban Education* 56, no. 6 (July 1, 2021), 876. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085920987297>; Steve D. Mobley and Jennifer M. Johnson, “‘No Pumps Allowed’: The ‘Problem’ With Gender Expression and the Morehouse College ‘Appropriate Attire

Further building upon this call for a disruption of *Le Différénd*—as to dwell upon re-imagined Black communal spaces—it is specifically here where the Derridean understanding of *hospitality* comes to mind. Contradictory in nature, hospitality is ironically willed into existence via tenets that beckon its presence due to an inherent aporetic impasse that prevents action. Bound up within the concept of hospitality, then, is a contradiction. The host has the power to welcome the guest; however, they simultaneously cede a portion of their power through extending a hospitable and unconditional welcome to the guest.⁶³

The significance of this concept to my study, then, is predicated on the reality that those who've been made to feel most comfortable, coining Derrida's phrasing, in this metaphorical "house," concurrently pose a countervailing challenge to the materialization of community. Thus providing another example of why the concept in question, community, is destined to never materialize. This is the case because per this understanding of hospitality, one must be willing to cede, or at least greatly mitigate, the same defining properties that contribute to their comfort as the dominating other. Thus, through this hospitable praxis the dominant not only works to accommodate the Other in perpetuity, but in the process also forces a breakaway from marginalizing practices. In other words, the Other need not be present and/or materialized in order to be considered.

Policy," *Journal of Homosexuality* 66, no. 7 (June 7, 2019), 868–889.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2018.1486063>.

⁶³ Maribeth Erb, "Gifts from the Other Side: Thresholds of Hospitality and Morality in an Eastern Indonesian Town," *Oceania* 83, no. 3 (2013), 296. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42705034>.

Hospitality as a radical place of welcome works to eradicate the structural aspects of community in that, “its radical openness would destroy any borders as lines of separation, division and identification.”⁶⁴ I therefore make this bipartite connection—in reference to *Le Différend* and Hospitality—because not only does each concept prove important to the animation of antinomial race-gender subjectivities, but also because once BOTH excluded and dominant parties begin the work of addressing historical and ongoing acts of marginalization more optimal ways of interdependent existence seem possible. These new realities if anything may hold the potential for an existence that doesn’t resemble pure unity and/or separation. But instead, a milieu in which singularities emerge.

Thus, it must be emphasized that the concept of hospitality potentially has a major role in ensuring that peripheral zones not only remain malleable, but porous altogether. Due to this same potential to not only begat, but to extend a hospitable welcome, those engaging in dominant tropic performances “must watch out for the ways tradition and community become excuses for conservatism, for the exclusion of the incoming of the Other, and hence constitute ‘as much threat as promise’, as much a trap as a tap.”⁶⁵ To therefore mitigate, rebuke, or deny certain race-gender performances in favor of “acceptable” practices of masculinity is not only delimiting, but it continues to perpetuate hegemonic understandings of “normalcy” that stymie counter-parallel attempts at

⁶⁴ Marie-Eve Morin, “The Spacing of Time and the Place of Hospitality: Living Together According to Bruno Latour and Jacques Derrida,” *Parallax* 21, no. 1 (January 2, 2015), 32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.988909>.

⁶⁵ Jacques Derrida, “*Deconstruction in a Nutshell*,” 109.

illustrating one's subjectivity; thus stymying attempts to achieve empathy, compassion, and the capacity to understanding those who are ostracized altogether.⁶⁶

Final Musings on Lionel Higgins

This chapter entailed exploring Lionel's maturation, but more specifically, his gradual adoption of Queer being over time. Focusing on notions of masculinity, Queerness, and hospitality, I use the *DWP* character in question, Lionel Higgins, to examine race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men. More than any other character, I understand a trop(ill)ogical examination of being as necessary in order to trouble how we conceive masculinity. This is the case because I believe that Troy and Reggie's masculine performances, while still marred with certain expectations and hardships, are not hampered by the adverse weight assigned to Queerness. Through analyzing Lionel, I have hopefully communicated how community fails us. This is not because of a lack of a desire to enact its idealistic goals, per se, but because it is ultimately an unobtainable endeavor altogether. However, even if community never manages to come to fruition, trop(ill)ogical examinations necessitate that generally questioning the staunch rhetoric of governing sociologics must always be a goal. I therefore advance the Derridean conceptualization of hospitality as a means of unsettling these societal fixities.

Directly considering my own personal narrative, I understand Lionel's shyness and his ironic desire to be a part of the same community that works to silence him. While I thoroughly identify with the marginalizing force of Black nerdness, I cannot conversely

⁶⁶ Terrell L. Strayhorn and Derrick L. Tillman-Kelly, "Queering Masculinity: Manhood and Black Gay Men in College," *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 1, no. 2 (2013), 91. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2979/spectrum.1.2.83>.

relate to the twin impact of his sexual praxis. Yet, from both an intellectual and social standpoint, that does not mean that acceptance and/or overlapping scenarios of “identification” cannot take place. Thus, it is through continuously working to draw parallels and act on their promise to aid those who are habitually silenced that potentially produces radical ruptures (all of which are potentially welcoming or threatening, but potential is present nonetheless).⁶⁷

To reiterate, I ultimately hold that any conceptualization of community, no matter how well intended, is doomed to exclude because of irreconcilable politics. Thus, in placing the Lyotardian concept of *Le Différend* in overlapping proximity with the Derridean logics of hospitality, all members of a society are tasked with questioning existing material realities. Per my earlier clarifications, responsibility is not squarely placed upon cis-hetero man to intervene on the behalf of Queer-Black-Collegiate-Men. This is the case not because the former is over-taxed and/or should be allowed to eschew accountability, but because solely placing the responsibility upon this group, as well as other relationally advantageous or privileged groups, only produces a dynamic of paternalism. To adopt such a paternalistic practice would mirror the dynamics of dominant and domineering expressions of gender that have historically allowed for cis-gender and heterosexual men to lord over the differently gendered and sexual oriented

⁶⁷ Jacques Derrida, *The Politics of Friendship* (Verso, 2005), 42. Note: “*We have here, in any case, friends seeking mutual recognition without knowing each other.* One who calls and questions oneself is not even sure that the new philosophers will be part of the free spirits that we are. The rupture will perhaps be radical, even more radical. Perhaps those whom I am calling will be unrecognizable enemies. *In any case, I am not asking them to be like me, like us.*” Emphasis Added.

other.⁶⁸ Such a dynamic is something that trop(ill)ogical thought cannot idly standby and accept.

⁶⁸ Maria Lugones, “The Coloniality of Gender,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, ed. Wendy Harcourt (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), 2. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-38273-3_2.”

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS

This study was an attempt to both add to the existing canon of literature on Black (College) Men, popular and formal, and it was also designed to serve as a tool that would aid in problematizing the broader sociological sentiments that exist around race and gender altogether. Specifically, via primarily analyzing the Netflix series, *Dear White People*, a show meant to depict higher education, I executed this study as a means of examining race-gender tropes regarding Black (College) Men. In the process, I used the rhetorical and literary device of the trope to examine performances of race and gender. This goal of ideological deconstruction was animated by two driving research questions:

1. Primarily via an analysis of the Netflix series, *Dear White People*, a show meant to depict higher education, how are race-gender tropes portrayed regarding Black (College) Men?
2. A second and corollary question is then: Based on the analysis of *Dear White People*, what are the potentially transferrable ways that Black (College) Men can contest, complicate, or altogether subvert dominant race-gender within real-world scenarios?

While volumes have been written ad nauseum about the socio-academic experiences of the demographic of study, I see the analyses that I was able to produce as being differently positioned both intellectually and methodologically. In relying on philosophical inquiry as my methodology, I deployed an approach that entailed utilizing the trope as a tool of analysis. Through what I specifically refer to as trop(ill)ogical

thought, I considered the dynamic possibilities of representation in both media artifacts, and the possibility for these representations to serve as templates for Black (College) Men seeking to make sense of the material nexus between Manhood and Blackness.

My approach to this study entailed explication of race-gender tropes as social performances, but also making use of them as analytical tools. Through the analysis of multiple scenes, dialogues, and even the direct sentiments of showrunners, insight was proffered regarding what it might look like to not only identify as Black and Man, but what it might potentially look like to exist under these headings as a college student. While my primary objects of study were representations, it is also of crucial to understand that these representations do not simply emerge independently of milieus; thus, they are social facts and not socially fictitious. Over the span of the study, I showcased the throughlines between popular cultural and the social world responsible for producing them.

Through prolonged engagements with what I refer to throughout this treatise as cultural artifacts, I focused on three characters: Troy Fairbanks, Reggie Green, and Lionel Higgins. These characters were chosen not only for their salience as featured figures within the series, but because they are written to represent Black (College) Men. These characters were also selected because I understood them as occupying overlapping and at time different valences, or tropic frames for Black being. Most importantly, though, I proffer that some of these performances—while perhaps not directly emphasized by *DWP* showrunners—lend to nuanced interpretations as complicating and/or subverting tropic performances.

Focusing specifically on each of the major chapters of analysis, then, beginning with my examination of Troy Fairbanks, in Chapter III, I elaborate on his connection to The Magical Negro Trope (TMNT). While he, like many of his non-fictional counterparts, I presume, is over-burdened at times by the weight of expectations, I consider what it looks like contending with the gravity of reality. Moreover, I use the analysis of TMNT to consider the impact of the crushing force of Black Excellence and racial patriotism.

Troy, despite being viewed by his peers as a complacent tool of the university administration, demonstrates how this notion of expectation works to inhibit tropic play. As such, it was found that Troy was not merely a do-gooder who sought out the approval of the administration, but that he was a tired and frustrated young man who was desperately in need of an interstitial reprieve because achievement exacts a heavy toll. However, this toll was often masked by academic, political, and social expectations.

Ultimately, through analyzing Troy, I was able to critique the prevalent understandings of how Blackness “should” operate within a given intra-communal space. This dynamic, or what I refer to as being procedural Blackness, is arguably an obstacle that I see as not only working to traffic in narrow race-gender tropes but also producing additional burdensome and delimiting expectations of Black (College) Men.

In Chapter IV, I used the character Reggie Green as a means of thinking through what compels external entities to interpret Black (College) Men as phobic and phantasmal projections. As a point of departure, I made use of a particular scene that entailed Reggie having a gun drawn on him by a campus police officer. However, instead of dwelling upon the represented fears that Reggie experienced as a victim, I instead

made the police officer my primary object of analysis. In doing so, I delve into the realm of the phantasmic, via literary science-fiction and the comic book.

In continuation, influenced by Fanon's assessment of the Black Man as being a phobogenic figure in the mind of Whites, I extended this sentiment further. Specifically, I highlighted the ever-looming dominant race-gender trope's role in influencing affect. I proffered that not only is the Black (College) Man anxiety-inducing in the minds of many, but this anxiety is catalyzed by a cosmic dread/eldritch abomination. While these cosmic figures often take on avatars, the true evil they represent resides within the confines of a dimension elsewhere beyond the Anthropocene. In drawing inspiration from these comic and literary figures, I then investigate how they conceptually overlap with how Black (College) Men are caricaturized (both psychically and materially.).

Lastly, in Chapter V, I study the character Lionel Higgins. A truly intriguing figure, Lionel serves to teach us more about the structural and philosophical failures of community. This character posed my greatest intellectual challenge. Richly portrayed and written, Lionel made me reconsider my understandings of gender, race, and sexuality altogether. In the process, I examined the representation of Queer Black (College) Men.

Furthermore, it was through the analysis of these moments that I reached beyond the plateaus of allyship, and considered what it might entail to challenge exclusionary race-gender logics. The Derridean concept of hospitality was pivotal because of its positioning of the privileged in relation to the Othered. For example, it was found that in order for any modicum of welcome to take place, those who are the most advantaged must be willing to cede a portion of their power. While this might seem like an obvious statement, what makes this an interruption of the status quo, is that hospitality demands

forgoing of false narratives of togetherness. In adopting hospitality, then, there is a continuous acknowledgement of the need to account for those who are ordered under marginalized headings. It is the latter group who must be habitually accounted for to ensure that disruption of the aforementioned exclusionary practices are called into question in perpetuity.

This study offered insight into not only the experiences of Black (College) Men, but the possibly myriad ways they exist in the world. I set out on this intellectual journey with the goal of critically examining the nuanced alternative ways that race-gender being might be interpreted. Through engaging with the popular cultural artifact, *Dear White People*, I was not only able to uncover and work through representations of Black and masculine existence, but I was also able to draw conclusions with potential implications for domains beyond the fictional realm.

The overwhelming takeaway that I obtained after engaging with these three characters was that Blackness has the potential to take on many forms. Explaining further, trop(ill)ogical thought was used to consider how race-gender performance can be steered to gain new and underexplored ways of existing at the crossroads of raced, gendered, and cisgender man. This means that despite the pervasiveness of dominant and domineering tropes, and because of this same race-gender sociality, that there are myriad ways to signify beyond what is thought to be permissible or even possible.

So, while dominant and domineering interpretations are ultimately beyond the control of Black (College) Men, how the respective members of this group elect to perform, conversely, appear to be completely open for both personal praxis and external

interpretation. In further elaboration, considering Troy, Lionel, and Reggie, all three can be read as transgressing documentary readings of Black (Collegiate) Manhood.

While Reggie's chapter may not seem to have a hopeful or aspirational ending when compared to the other two, it should be noted that the character ultimately decides, whether successful or not, to move beyond the mental prison that the thoughts of others had trapped him in for so long. Additionally, by reading the Fanonian concept of the phobogenic Black Man through the cosmically absurd—The Eldritch Abomination and Cosmic Horrors—I was able to provide an additional perspective that uses popular lenses and theories to add to the already rich cannon on race. This is specifically done by not only studying the popular but in the case of comic book theory, using a philosophy that is predicated on popular cultural artifacts as a means for thinking differently about socio-political identity.

Considering Lionel, it was found that not only are aggrieved parties often silenced, but that their attempts to voice their grievances often go unheard. This appears to happen because of the failure of dominant groups, or those who privilege procedural performances of race and gender, to recognize nuanced tropic performances. What is most significant to understand here is that I analyze this from an intra-communal perspective. In other words, I take a prolonged look at how Lionel interacts with his raced and gendered peers.

Lionel faced the challenge of not only existing as Black and Masculine, but he had the additional variable of queerness attached to his personhood. Additionally, he was also a self-professed “nerd.” What I found was that in his journey to feel comfortable with his own tropic reality, Lionel, in fits and spurts, worked to find zones of

comfortability. Through this habitual search for acceptance, he was able to achieve belonging a under the auspices of his sexual identity.

Implications

When considering the broader implications of a study of this type, I think it important to reflect on the various forms of data that served as my objects of analysis. Specifically, in focusing on popular culture, I believe that I offer an example of what a pathway beyond empirical modes of study might entail. In studying *Dear White People*, I was able to examine race-gender representations of Black (College) Men.

While surveys, focus groups, and interviews are crucial for gaining additional insight into various education-related and non-related topics, I believe that the prolonged study of artifacts derived from the popular may also provide an additional glimpse into cultural phenomena. *Dear White People* is a series that not only offers an additional perspective, albeit fictional, into the contemporary landscape of higher education, but the series also goes to great lengths to both replicate and depict many real-world occurrences. In other words, through studying content such as *DWP* not only are scholars, practitioners, and students afforded additional opportunities to study race, gender, sexual identity, and a bevy of other topics but they are also given the chance to draw parallels between the lifeworlds they themselves inhabit.

Additionally, it should be noted that the streaming platform responsible for producing *DWP*, Netflix, is available in over 190 countries; correspondingly, the streaming giant amassed over 200 million unique users by the end of 2020.¹ Considering

¹ “How Netflix Uses Data to Pick Movies and Curate Content,” *Ohio University* (blog), June 17, 2020. <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/netflix-data/>; “Cobra Kai and Its Big Move to Netflix | Maryland Smith,” accessed July 2, 2022. <https://www.rhsmith.umd.edu/blogs/cobra-kai-and-its-big-move-netflix>.

this, I'd argue that such statistics perhaps alludes to the reach that a show like *DWP* might have to influence thought all while reflecting the social facts of the milieu from which it emerges. This quite literally means that learning may take place beyond the traditional classroom, journal article, or homework assignment. This is the case because, as I have worked to highlight throughout this treatise, *DWP*, serves not only as a cultural artifact but as a viable source of textual evidence that bears the mark of the social processes that it works to represent. Thus, educators stand to not only offer a non-traditional manner of engaging texts, but they also can question stalwart socio-political ideas while simultaneously deconstructing the notion of "text" altogether.

In addition to its pedagogical and research implications, and especially in relation to the latter, when also considering the theoretical, conducting an inquiry of this type also works to accompany and enhance empirical research. What I mean by this is that while certain measures may be able to convey what Black (College) Men think—for instance, information recovered from a focus group, surveys, or even ethnographic methods—a study of this type may aid by giving empirical studies additional depth and nuance.

Elaborating further, what I've done over the span of this treatise was not only provide an additional analytical lens, trop(ill)logical thought, but I've also offered different linguistic and theoretical concepts that may serve as tools for enhancing what we already purportedly know about the demographic of study. Whether considering the hyphenated pairing of race-gender or the conceptualization of Black Excellence as a well-intended but reductionist mythology, I've offered interpretive tropic frames that stand to elucidate beyond accounts of the phenomenological.

Tropic play is beneficial in understanding not only the experiences of Black (College) Men, but specifically how the trope animates both actions and thought in both the tropist and those who interpersonally interact with the tropist as well. Simply put, tropes traffic in understandings and therefore perform work on subjects as well as do work on behalf of subjects. Thus, it stands that in studying the trope, academics may add a valence to their research. So for instance, when particular representations of Black (College) Men stand as the privileged ideal conceptualization of excellence, tropic play potentially paves the way for those researchers setting forth such an argument to reflect and ask, why a particular tropic frame denotes excellence and not another?

The next implication that I highlight pertains to the node formed via the convergence of conventional politics and education. Elaborating further, we currently reside within a society where rights are either constantly denied or usurped altogether: Texts that are deemed controversial are being banned; conservative politicians and their followers are producing unfounded strawmen arguments and calling for the removal of critical race theory from schools; all while there is an ongoing push by these same political factions to generally avoid any prolonged examinations of structural power in relation to socio-political identity within public education spaces. With this being said, the study of popular culture has the potential to allow for subversive forms of inquiry and examination to take place. For those educators who wish to explore outside of what is mandated by their state—and therefore not solely rely upon the state’s textbooks, curriculum, and policy—turning to popular cultural artifacts as a source material might prove beneficial.

For instance, having students analyze the media coverage of the state's re-writing of such atrocities as American chattel slavery and settler colonialism serves as a means of not only informing students about the political struggles that mold their educational experience, but it also potentially serves as a means of catalyzing a deeper dive into American history. In the process, students are hypothetically left with a more thorough understanding of contemporary political happenings, additional insight concerning historically significant moments within our nation's past, and a comparatively more affordable means of learning. Elaborating further, news coverage can be streamed in the classroom or at home for free via most news websites, public access television, or local news stations. Such an approach may be perceived as a bending of the rules and/or direct defiance of a state's educational edicts. However, an assignment such as the one described works to subvert because it doesn't prioritize socio-political identity, per se, but because it instead uses media content as an inroad for exploring the ties between contemporary society, historical events, and ongoing cultural practices.

Lastly, when specifically considering higher education, there might be a general fiscal advantage to using popular culture. Similar to the ability to stream news and media content into the K-12 classroom, the college professor can just as easily do the same with popular entertainment materials like *Dear White People* or similar content made available through the respective complimentary websites of network television outlets. As such, in a higher education landscape where course materials have reached exorbitant prices and tuition and fees have similarly reached an all-time high, popular entertainment-based forms of textual evidence may allow for not only more affordable education resources but less rigid objects of study (i.e., the peer-reviewed research article or the textbook.).

Final Thoughts

*I don't mean to burden you. It's just, umm, I had a conversation with a wise man. He asked me a question like, "How could you be in the position to say so much, but say so little," so this is me saying a lot.*²

We live in a world that is inhabited by myriad social subjects. However, this study was meant to be an intervention on behalf of a particular demographic, Black (College) Men. In the waning moments of this document, perhaps more than at any preceding point, I want to convey why I took on this exercise. I do this not merely as an attempt to convince readers, per se, but instead to clarify beyond the intellectual, political, and theoretical justifications I've already offered.

Simply put, whether considering the scholastic articles that I read while satisfying my graduate higher education degrees or consuming popular culture artifacts that highlight higher education, I've always felt that I could not see myself in these creative and/or intellectual projects. Regarding the former, while I understand that these are often fictional takes on real-world matters, I, as a reminder, do conversely believe that the contents of cultural artifacts aren't necessarily fictitious. Similarly, while I have not consumed the canon of literature pertaining to Black (College) Men, I'm often left contemplating how to more robustly portray the demographic of study.

Maybe I'm delusional for thinking that the life and times of a 6'8" mild-mannered "kid" from South Florida would ever be reflected in these works; especially when myriad stories are already often missing from even the most thorough of research and creative projects altogether. However, I believe it is not my frustration that fuels my request for a

² Big K.R.I.T. - *KING Pt. 2*, accessed June 17, 2022. <https://soundcloud.com/bigkrit/big-k-r-i-t-king-pt-2>; "Big K.R.I.T. - King Pt. 2 - YouTube," accessed June 17, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/>.

more nuanced understanding of Black (College) Men, but it is because I have a first-hand understanding of what it feels like to be disregarded because you're perceived as falling beyond the mythologies of *excellence* and *deficit*.

Reflecting on the sojourn that has led me to this point, in many ways, I am not supposed to be here. Backed by a mere 2.59 cumulative high school grade point average, I started my post-secondary career at the local community college. In all, I've gone from catching sixteen city buses per week to attend college preparatory classes at the aforementioned community college, to now being on the verge of obtaining a Ph.D. While I understand that my trajectory isn't unique, it is because I recognize how commonplace realities such as mine are that I champion for them to not only be told but represented within conventional academic and artistic arenas.

Additionally, reflecting on my own personal struggles with navigating procedural and narrow understandings of Blackness, this study offered a brief glimpse into what existence at the crossroads of Black, Man, and collegian might actually entail. Moreover, via an analysis of the Netflix series, *Dear White People*, a show meant to depict higher education, I examined various ways in which race-gender tropes are portrayed regarding Black (College) Men. Studies like mine matter not because they simply aid in providing a different way of knowing, but because they serve the potential in bringing to light those who have been ignored and/or rendered illegible by domineering social scripts.

As for me, while I've grown to temper my expectations of cultural artifacts and scholarship over time, this journey has also forced me to grow in ways that I thought I never could. Elaborating further, "after all these years I'm still the kid writin' poems, too

shy to eat in the cafeteria.”³ While it took nearly thirty-four years I’m proud to say that I’m finally okay with being this person. As such, finally achieving this level of personal comfort is perhaps just as meaningful as being afforded representation. However, I still look forward to a day when my fellow shy, introverted, awkward peers are not only broadly represented but are personally comfortable within their own tropic performances.

³ Big K.R.I.T. (Ft. Keyon Harrold) – *Drinking Sessions*, accessed July 2, 2022. <https://genius.com/Big-krit-drinking-sessions-lyrics>; “BIG K.R.I.T. - ‘Drinking Sessions’ (Featuring Keyon Harrold) - YouTube,” accessed July 2, 2022. <https://www.youtube.com/>.

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Cheung Hom, Delia. Lewis, Mario. Ramon, Jasmine. Gregory Poku, Shaya: “Grappling with Oppression: Perspectives on Engaging in Discussion with Student Affairs Professionals.” (NASPA Region I & NASPA Multicultural Institute, 2017)

Lewis, Mario. “Racial Battle Fatigue: From Trauma to Triumph.” Black Student Leadership Conference (Northeastern, 2017)

Lewis, Mario. “Microaggressions.” Ongoing workshop series for faculty, staff, and students (Northeastern University, 2016-2018)