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"You Run This Hard Just to Stay in Place": Representations of Black Masculinity in Contemporary US Popular Culture Productions

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A dissertation to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts by Research (English)

September 2020

Supervisor: Dr Derilene Marco



DECLARATION

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg

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Declaration by SHERREDINE DUNN

I, Sherredine Robyn Jo-Anne Dunn (student number: 2006609), am a student registered for the degree of MA English by research. I hereby declare the following:

- I am aware that plagiarism is wrong.
- I confirm that all the work submitted herewith is my own unaided work except where I have explicitly indicated otherwise.
- I have followed the required conventions in referencing the thoughts and ideas of others using the Harvard method.
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Signature:  **Date: 29 September 2020**

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen an explosion of prominent Black pop culture icons dedicated to representing everyday experiences of Blackness in their work. Such figures include the likes of Jay-Z (Shawn Carter), Kendrick Lamar (Kendrick Duckworth), Ava DuVernay and J. Cole (Jermaine Cole) who, across a number of art forms and genres, have displayed a commitment to telling the stories of Black American males' lived experiences in various forms of diversity and adversity. In addition to documenting these experiences, these figures often highlight matters of racial discrimination in a modern society where many consider racism a painful and shameful legacy, but do not always a present reality. They include issues such as police brutality and racial profiling, amongst others, which are often universal qualities of life for individuals who inhabit Blackness in America. We have recently seen an increase in reporting of issues such as the killing of Black men by American police officers in a number of media forms, embodied by the Black Lives Matter movement. Specific instances, such as the deaths of Trayvon Martin (2012), Michael Brown (2014), George Floyd (2020), and a host of other killings of Black people have sparked nationwide protests in the USA as well as many similar protests in a number of countries outside of the USA. These protests have often been bound by the use of the rallying cry "Black Lives Matter", used to draw attention to the persistence of racial inequality and violence enacted upon Black bodies as a result.

The "about" page on the official website of the Black Lives Matter Foundation, Inc. states that the organisation "was founded in 2013 in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer", and that it is "a global organisation […] whose mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter, 2020: para 1). Most recently, the death of George Floyd after being taken into police custody has inspired renewed public attention to the Black Lives Matter movement, and has sparked protests that started in the USA and spread significantly. On 13 June 2020, CNN reported "from London to Pretoria to Sydney, people took to the streets to express the need for police reform and racial equality. Many held signs that read 'Black Lives Matter', while others kneeled" (para 1). These global protests were accompanied by a number of debates and discussions pertaining to larger issues of systemic violence and discrimination against bodies of colour using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter on various social media platforms. As a result of critiques of a number of

protests, riots, and funding associated with the movement, we saw an emergence in the prominence of the counter hashtag #AllLivesMatter, which "depoliticized and deracialized the specificity of #BlackLivesMatter" (Carney, 2016: 190). In her analysis of Twitter debates taking place in December 2014, following the non-indictment of the officers who killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner, Carney (2016: 182) shows the "ways in which youth of colour challenge dominant ideologies of race through social media". In this manner we can also see the relevance of social media in facilitating global discussions and mobilising people for a cause transnationally, as well as creating a platform for people of colour to add their voices to the debates surrounding racism and race relations.

The fact that instances of racially based police violence are able to ignite global conversations, movements, and protests speaks to the USA's influence on intercontinental discourses relating to contemporary race relations. Artists such as Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, and Beyoncé, all of who have large international fan bases, draw attention to such issues by including them in the work that they release. This work reaches billions of listeners in hundreds of countries across the globe, which makes their music an invaluable vehicle for awareness and representation. The threat of bodily harm at the hands of law enforcement is particularly pertinent to Black males, who are most often vilified and targeted by law enforcement and other structures of control, and is often referred to in the works of these artists. Stereotypes about Black people replace their humanity in the opinions of the people who, as well as structures that, value whiteness, and "serve as justification for violence against Black bodies" (Carney, 2016: 186). Black people are often perceived to be closer to animal than human– "in addition to, and perhaps because of, their image as animalistic, blacks have long been perceived as extraordinarily sexually potent and unrestrained" (Duru, 2004: 1322). This concept is explored at length in DuVernay's *When They See Us* (2019), a documentary that brings to life the stories of five Black teenage boys who were wrongfully convicted of the rape and assault of a white woman. The case is one of the most publicised in recent American history, as its outcome was undoubtedly coloured by race and the perception of Black (African American and Latinx) males in America, even as boys. This project demonstrates the ways in which Black lives do not matter as much as white lives, as well as how Black men are often represented as especially perverse and dangerous. This impacts greatly on the quality of Black American life, especially in comparison to the lives of their white peers.

It is a truth well known that Black people around the globe have endured gross, spectacular acts of discrimination, both throughout their collective histories and, in many places, presently. Their quotidian lives, however, are often marked by acts of violence and bias that are seemingly smaller, or in some cases even subconscious, but far more commonplace. As Delgado and Stefancic (2001: 9-10) state, "by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of colour", even though "lynching and other shocking expressions of racism are far less frequent than in the past". In addition to addressing larger issues such as the American police's tumultuous history of racial prejudice, Jay-Z's music also speaks of the daily injustices endured by Black Americans. His work reaches a large audience, which affords him much power in terms of creating awareness around the effects of a racially biased society on Black communities. Another important by-product of the popularity and acclaim of creatives such as Jay-Z is that they fill gaps in representation in mainstream media forms. They produce work that is relatable to Black youths, and in so doing also pave the way for other young, Black artists such as themselves. American cultural productions that enter mainstream popular culture have an unparalleled reach to communities all over the world. Similarly, the rest of the world has unmatched access to these works. As a result, even though they naturally do not represent an all encompassing experience of Blackness, the messages they send and the narratives they portray are extremely important to Black communities globally, as they have the power to influence the way they are perceived and draw attention to the acts of aggression they experience on a daily basis.

1.1. Background & Rationale

This project serves as something of a continuation of the work I did on the representation of the everyday in selected rap albums for my B (Honours) English mini thesis at the University of the Free State in 2018. My honours paper was the result of my passion for and fascination with work by Black artists that resonate transnationally and truly sparked my desire to pursue this kind of research for my MA thesis. While the work I did for my Honours degree was only able to touch on what is now my major research interest and approached it through the very specific lens of the quotidian, this thesis has given me the space needed to explore and unpack the representation of Black masculinity in major popular culture productions in meaningful ways.

I form part of the global audience that routinely consumes and engages with issues presented in Black American popular culture productions, and am always fascinated by the similarities

in the experiences of Black Americans and much of the rest of the Black diaspora. As a coloured South African woman, I feel that I resonate strongly with the narratives, characters, and experiences explored in the works of prolific Black American artists such as Jay-Z, Ava DuVernay, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, J. Cole, Spike Lee, and John Singleton. As I have had conversations with my family members and black and Indian friends over the years, I have come to appreciate that many of us have had similar experiences growing up in Black and Brown families and communities, such as what Kanye West describes in "Family Business" (2004):

> *Grandma, get 'em shook up*
> *Aw naw, don't open the photo book up*
> *I got an Aunt Ruth that can't remember your name*
> *But I bet them Polaroids'll send her down memory lane*
> *You know that one auntie, you don't want to be rude*
> *But every holiday nobody eatin' her food*
> *And you don't want to stay there 'cause them your worst cousins*
> *Got roaches at their crib like them your first cousins*
> *Act like you ain't took a bath with your cousins*
> *Fit three in the bed if there six of y'all*
> *I'm talkin' 'bout three by the head and three by the leg*
> *But you ain't have to tell my girl I used to pee in the bed*

Hearing a song like "Family Business" (West, 2004) by a black American artist that simply and beautifully describes experiences so relatable to me and other Black South Africans is exceptional to me. Similarly, I feel a resonance with these artists' descriptions of the way Black people are viewed and treated socially and have found many of the experiences of racial discrimination they describe to be extremely relatable to me too. Celebrating Blackness and commenting on issues of social justice are characteristics I am delighted to see explored in many popular culture productions being released by well-known Black American artists, because this work reaches millions of Black people across the globe, like myself, who are finding their voices, and are finally unashamedly taking pride in their Blackness. These aspects form a significant part of the work produced by rap music icon Jay-Z. Concern for pressing social matters that colour the daily lives of Black people forms the golden thread, which links Jay-Z's 4:44 (2017) with Ava DuVernay's *When They See Us* (2019). In addition to the subject matter handled by the two artists, they also share a large fan base and much mainstream attention. Although I doubt that an artist such as Jay-Z would revel in the association with mainstream music, it cannot be denied that his music reaches a larger

audience than that of many, lesser-known artists. Both artists use their platform to shed light on matters that plague the existence of the Black body in America.

> *That's called the Red Queen's race*
> *You run this hard just to stay in place*
> *Keep up the pace*
> *Baby, keep up the pace*
> *You run this hard just to stay in place*
>
> *Legacy legacy legacy legacy*
> *Black excellence baby, you gon' let 'em see* (Jay-Z: 2017).

In the lines referenced above, Jay-Z speaks of life as a Black person as competing in an endless "Red Queen's race". This line references Lewis Carol's *Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1872), in which Alice is made to run by the Red Queen, but remains in the same spot as a result of the landscape being moved with her. The conversation between Alice and the Red Queen is as follows:

> "Well, in *our* country," said Alice, still panting a little, "you'd generally get to somewhere else – if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing".
>
> "A slow sort of country!" said the Queen. "Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!" (Carol, 1872: 32-33).

Jay-Z highlights what is framed as a quality of Blackness – in order to succeed in societies that value whiteness, Black people need to run twice as fast (work twice as hard and be twice as good) in order for their achievements to be considered on par with those of their white peers. Ta-Nehisi Coates points out that Black children are prepared for this from a very young age. Coates (2015: 90) writes that, all his life, he has heard Black parents tell their children to "be twice as good", which is to say, "accept half as much". He also states his belief that white children, "with their tricycles", are probably never taught that, and are, in fact, probably taught to take twice as much (Coates, 2015: 91). The metaphor of the Red Queen's race provides an evocative image of life as someone who does not belong to society's dominant ideology of whiteness. The landscape moves constantly, and keeping up is a struggle. Everything that is achieved is done so in spite of the many obstacles often placed in the pathways of Black people – poverty, racism, and daily instances of discrimination, to

name only a few. Black males also face the additional stigma of their supposed dangerous, criminal nature, as well as the threat of express bodily harm by law enforcement.

Coates (2015: 140) likens this experience to an athlete "who knows the opponent is dirty and the refs are on the take, but also knows the championship is one game away". Rapper J. Cole expresses a similar sentiment in his track "Born Sinner" (2013), employing the metaphor of a student being aided by a tutor in order to prepare for a test: "Don't you worry yourself, I gotta do this for me / They tell me life is a test, but where's a tutor for me?" People who form part of America's most favoured ideologies, such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and masculinity, are given an advantage in the form of social privilege. When all is said and done, everyone writes the same test, which appears to be a fair system on the surface. Certain students, however, have tools and resources to help them perform better, while others (those who do not belong to certain privileged groups) are given very little in preparation for the test. In this regard, Black and Stone (2005: 245) define social privilege as "any entitlement, sanction, power, immunity, and advantage or right granted or conferred by the dominant group to a person or group solely by birth-right membership in prescribed identities", and is "expressed through some combination of the following domains: race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, SES [socioeconomic status], age, differing degrees of ableness, and religious affiliation".

Racial social privilege or disadvantage is naturally tied to one of the most instantly recognisable physical human traits, leading to people of colour often facing discrimination in any number of scenarios. This fundamental disadvantage inherent to brown skin is one of the major focuses of Ava DuVernay's four-part series *When They See* Us, released on Netflix in May 2019. The series tells the story of the Central Park Jogger case, which made headlines in the USA in 1989. On 19 April 1989, a white woman in her late twenties was raped, beaten, and left for dead in the cold. She was discovered by passers-by some time later, and made an extremely impressive recovery considering the injuries she had sustained and the amount of blood she had lost. On the same night, roughly 30 Black boys (mostly Hispanic and African American) were out in the park roughing up and assaulting park-goers, and just generally "wilding", that is to say "intentionally behaving in a crazy manner, causing harm to others, and damaging property" (Byfield, 2014: 611). This phrase was used to describe a new type of crime that white New Yorkers believed to be taking over the city. This logic and rationale would become a key part of the state's construction of the attack on Meili, creating the image that the boys in the park that night were on a reckless, frenzied crime spree.

A number of boys, aged between fourteen and sixteen, were rounded up and questioned without their parents for hours. They would later state that they were not allowed to eat, drink, or rest, and that they were verbally and physically assaulted by members of the New York Police Department and coerced into confessing during this time (Burns, Burns, & McMahon, 2002). The boys were publicly vilified by the NYPD and by prominent public figures, such as Donald Trump, in the media. Mr Trump paid $85 000 to place a full-page advertisement in four major New York City newspapers calling for the execution of the boys ahead of their trials (Burns, 2016). His advertisements started with the words "*BRING BACK THE DEATH PENALTY*", and went on to detail his hatred of the men (who were actually boys at the time) who had perpetrated the horrific attack, effectively demonstrating his belief in their guilt before they could be tried in a court of law. Trump, of course, is now president of the United States of America, and refuses to apologise for the role he played in the public shaming of five young boys – now adults forever affected by that experience – who were wrongfully convicted. In her op-ed for *The New York Times,* Sarah Burns (2016), co-writer and -producer of *The Central Park Five* (2012), notes that Donald Trump did not refer to the boys by name in his advertisements, but that everyone knew who he was talking about when he referred to them as "muggers and murderers", informed only by his "presumption that because they were black and brown teenagers from Harlem, they must have committed a crime" (2016: para 19). Through Trump we are able to see the effect that wealthy, prominent, white New Yorkers have on the course of "justice", as he was able to use his own private funds and considerable reach to influence public opinion of five young boys who had not been legally tried in court. This fact is highlighted as incredibly significant given Mr Trump's subsequent rise to occupy the highest office in the USA as its current president.

The five boys – Yussef Salaam, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, and Korey Wise – were tried and convicted of the rape and assault of Ms. Meili, as well as other crimes including, amongst others, riot and attempted murder. A sixth boy accepted a plea deal and was not charged and tried with the other five boys (Byfield, 2014: 611). The boys served sentences ranging from 6-13 years starting out at a juvenile facility (with the exception of Wise, who, at 16 years of age, was tried as an adult). In 2002, after an encounter with Wise in prison, convicted serial rapist Matias Reyes confessed to the rape and assault on Trisha Meili. The case was re-examined – DNA found at the crime scene was a match for Reyes, and his account of the crime was consistent with the details of the case. In contrast, none of the DNA evidence found at the crime scene matched any of the five young boys, and their

testimonies and confessions were riddled with contradictions and inaccuracies. The Central Park Five were finally proven innocent by DNA evidence and exonerated thirteen years after the crime took place (Hall, 2020: 672).

DuVernay created *When They See Us* in order to memorialise the case, and to tell their side of the story. In an interview with Trevor Noah on *The Daily Show*, DuVernay (2019) states that she chose not to name the piece "The Central Park Five", as was expected, because she considered the phrase a political moniker that dehumanises the five young boys and does not accurately describe their stories since the day they ceased to be boys. She adds that she chose the title *When They See Us* in order to facilitate a broader discussion surrounding why some boys are allowed to "roughhouse and act stupid, and other boys are instantly criminalised", and what America sees when they look at Black men (Noah & DuVernay, 2019). With this in mind, it is also important to consider this project within the context of the rising prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement. What is achieved through the telling of the story of discrimination against five Black boys three decades ago, at this particular moment, is that it highlights the situation as having the potential to repeat itself presently. Once again, this importantly points to racial prejudice as a contemporary evil and not an issue of the past.

1.2. Aim

This project seeks to contribute to the current body of literature by analysing the representation of Black masculinity in US cultural works produced by African American artists Jay-Z and Ava DuVernay, as well as selected rap tracks by a number of Black American artists, over the past decade. The artists whose work I will be analysing enjoy widespread acclaim and form part of popular culture. The idea of a critical engagement with different forms of Blackness is explored, with much emphasis on the importance of representation in mainstream media forms. The two artists whose work this project focuses on make significant interventions in the narratives and public representation of Black experiences in the US. Through this paper, I wish to provide a contemporary analysis of and engagement with Black sensibilities as represented in major popular culture productions privileging the stories of Black males. I have chosen to work primarily on the following literature:

a) *4:44* (2017) by Jay-Z;
b) *When They See Us* (2019, dir. DuVernay); and
c) Selected rap tracks by artists J. Cole, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar.

These texts, the themes they explore, and the social commentary they make will form the body of my thesis. Different images or personas are presented in their works and the works of many other Black artists – for example, Jay-Z embodies the street-smart gangster turned business and family man while DuVernay is the fierce "social justice woman" (DuVernay, 2019), having produced projects such as *Selma* (2014) and *13th* (2016). In this case, Duvernay's reputation as an artist concerned with social justice issues is illustrated in her telling of the stories of the now exonerated Central Park Five largely from their own perspectives. The diversity in these figures allows for emphasis on their visibility and diversity within Black communities, as well as the humanisation of Black males as the multidimensional stories of Black boys and men, their communities, and their experiences are brought to life. The result is that these productions do the important work of challenging "the myth of the bestial black man" (Duru, 2014: 1315).

This project seeks to answer the following research questions:

a) What can we learn from popular culture representations of Black lives in the US over the last 10 years?
b) Are prominent Black American artists and creatives making an effort to reshape the perceptions of Black males through their cultural productions?
c) In which ways do the selected popular culture productions portray Black lives and Black Masculinity?

1.3. Theoretical Framework

Throughout this paper, following the model of South African professor and public intellectual Pumla Gqola (2015: 4), I will take the term "Black" to refer to people of collective African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latinx descent (otherwise termed 'people of colour'). In this manner, the term is employed as more of a political category than a racial one. My use of an upper-case letter B (Black), as opposed to writing it as "black", connotes similar positioning in this thesis. The decision to extend my use of the term Black to African, Caribbean, Asian, and Latinx communities is intentional, and allows me to foreground degrees of similarity in the daily, lived experiences of discrimination of the people of these backgrounds, as they navigate their way through Western societies that favour whiteness, such as the USA. The overarching point I will be exploring is the significance of the popular work produced by Black American artists such as Jay-Z and Ava DuVernay to Black communities and the way they are perceived globally.

While this approach privileges a certain "racial universality" in the themes explored in these works, I will also be using an intersectional approach to explore the many differences in lived experiences of Blackness, especially where they collide with other social identities such as gender, sexual orientation, and religion. In this regard, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (2010) work on intersectionality and the way in which multiple identities of various backgrounds co-exist within all people will be used as one theoretical underpinning of this paper. Crenshaw's work explores the concept that forms of oppression and discrimination, as experienced by a certain individual or group of people (particularly Black women), cannot be considered in a vacuum. An individual does not, for example, exist as Black in one space, as a woman in another, and as a member of the LGBTQI+ community in a third. Those identities, and a myriad of others, form part of the individual every day, in every space. The ways in which those identities collide, and position the subject as a potential victim of discrimination, or inversely as a recipient of a certain social privilege, is the main concern of intersectionality.

The use of the capital B is also inspired by the teachings of the South African Black Consciousness movement, led by Steve Biko (2017) in 1970s apartheid South Africa. The movement used the term as an "inclusive, positive identity and taught that black South Africans could make meaningful change in their society if conscientized or awakened to their self-worth and the need for activism" (Hadfield, 2017: 1). Even though the US context is significantly different to the South African one, I still feel a resonance in the use of this important term. I feel strongly that the work produced over the past few years by artists such as Jay-Z and DuVernay resonates with this philosophy. Representing many different images of Blackness in widely consumed forms of media goes a long way in initiating conversations about the broadness of Blackness, and the ways in which to engage all forms critically. The creators of both of the main texts I will be analysing also often refer to people belonging to other minority groups such as the Latinx community, involving them in the battles they fight to render Black lives and narratives visible. These artists' productions reach Black audiences globally, and, as such, often open doors for other Black creatives to consider experiences of Blackness, and to analyse their own experiences of discrimination wherever they may be.

This thesis is situated in the broader field of Cultural Studies, a contemporary discipline that provides an interdisciplinary set of tools with which I can analyse different text types, such as music and television series'. Different variants of Cultural Studies have come about in the US and UK, and have been expanded upon to encompass bodies of scholarships in a number of different disciplines. Additionally, theoretical fields such as Black Studies or Black Feminist

Studies are classified under Cultural Studies in the UK, for example, but under Social Sciences in the US. Notable scholars include Cornel West, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins. As I will be conducting a literary and discourse analysis of a rap album and made-for-television limited series this work lies on the periphery between English and Media Studies and is resultantly interdisciplinary by nature. A number of Cultural Studies and Social Science disciplines are pertinent to this paper, the most fundamental being Critical Race Theory and Black Studies, as well as theoretical work on Black Masculinity. Theoretical frameworks from the fields of Hip-Hop Studies, Popular Culture and Affect Theory will also be utilised throughout this project. The cultural productions chosen by me for analysis form part of popular culture and have large audiences both globally and within the USA, making their themes important in the perception of Black American males specifically, and Black males more generally.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* (2015) theorises and articulates many of the experiences associated with Blackness, and Black Masculinity in particular, within the American context. It is therefore an important piece of literature for this paper in terms of its value as theoretical framework. Similarly, bell hooks' *We Real Cool* (2004) has proved invaluable in the theorisation of aspects relating to Black Masculinity and fatherhood. Lastly, *In the Wake* (2016) by Christina Sharpe also provides a useful lens through which to view the killing of Black people in America, and its effect on Black Americans.

The two main artists whose work I analyse in this project provide diverse representations of Black masculinity, which is a major reason for my interest in their productions. By making their personal experiences, and by association the experiences of many Black people, the subject of the stories they tell, they position Blackness as valuable and worthy of having its reality explored in a number of art forms. Black people move away from the periphery and become the focal point of these stories, which is an important factor in terms of representation and relatability in mainstream media. Affording space in academic discussions to works that are committed to shedding light on the experience of Black males provides a platform for important conversations on the injustices people of colour face on a daily basis.

1.4. Literature Review

1.4.1. Popular Culture and the Place of the USA

The question of what constitutes popular culture is perhaps best understood through the lens of productions created for mass consumption and engagement, and contains a certain element of consumerism, commodification or commerciality (Hall, 1993: 108 and Crothers, 2017: 17). Popular culture stands in contrast to what is commonly thought to be its antithesis, high or haute culture. High culture productions, such as paintings or sculptures, are often considered more tasteful and meaningful, since they were likely crafted "as conscious acts of creation with no purpose beyond their own existence"; while creations of popular culture, such as movies, television series', and magazines have "no innate value beyond the pleasure it gave those who consumed it" (Crothers, 2017: 17). While popular culture is often considered in relation to artefacts that may be thought of as part of high culture, this necessarily dictates some measure of fluidity, as certain products may, at first, be created as purely a piece of art and then later become commercialised in a number of ways.

This distinction between high and low culture led to the notion that perhaps "shallow" and "inferior" popular culture productions are not worth studying in any academic terms. However, its depiction of the lived experiences of ordinary people often serve purposes that transcend mere entertainment – they can be a form of protest, agreement or cultural celebration and pride. In relation to Black popular culture and its capacity for cultural commodification, Hall (1993: 109) writes the following:

> However deformed, incorporated and unauthentic are the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture, we continue to see, in the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them. In its expressivity, its musicality, its orality, in its rich production of counter narratives, and above all, in its metaphorical use of the musical vocabulary, black popular culture has enabled the surfacing, inside the mixed and contradictory modes even of some mainstream popular culture, of elements of a discourse that is different – other forms of life, other traditions of representation.

The power of representation is far reaching, and seeing one's culture, traditions, heritage, habits, and mannerisms represented in productions that reach millions of people does a great deal for creating pride in the otherness that has felt negative for so long. hooks (1997: 5) states that the "power of cultural criticism and cultural studies has been it's sort of political intervention as a force in American society". I believe that the texts I will be analysing in this project achieve not only this, but are also a measure of reconsidering how Blackness is

viewed and of political intervention outside of the USA. Furthermore, hooks contends that America is obsessed with

> blackness primarily in a commodified form that can then be possessed, owned, controlled, and shaped by the consumer and not with an engagement in black culture that might require one to be a participant and therefore to be in some way transformed by what you are consuming as opposed to being merely a buyer (1997: 21).

While I believe that works that represent Blackness, but were not created by Black people, could easily contribute to this phenomenon, I also believe that the power of works such as *4:44* (Jay-Z, 2017) and *When They See Us* (dir. DuVernay, 2019) lies precisely in their ability to draw the consumer in as an active participant and not merely a buyer.

1.4.2. Critical Race Theory & Blackness

Critical Race Theory is a discipline of academic study, which started in the United States in the 1970s – around the same time that hip-hop music was born. Both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and hip-hop music thus stem from a desire to address a particular set of circumstances that affected the lives of Black Americans in this time and continue to do so today. CRT is a theoretical discipline that received its name from academic predecessors in fields such as history, sociology, and post-colonialism, amongst others, and is still used in various disciplines in order to analyse race-related power structures. The field is primarily concerned with issues of race, racism, and power, what their relationship to each other is, and how it could be transformed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001: 2). CRT has its origins in the legal field, and started as a reaction to the widespread sentiment that the efforts of the civil rights movement were no longer being continued, and that "new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:4). It is also concerned with the little, passive aggressive everyday acts of racial bias that colour the lives of Black people, as well as how certain societal constructs operate to keep existing racial hierarchies intact.

One of the core objectives of the movement, much like that of hip-hop, is to expose, critique, and eventually break down these constructs. This aspect means that, as is the case with conscious hip-hop, CRT often performs an activist function since it not only tries to understand our societal situation, but to change it; it sets out not only to ascertain how society organises itself along racial lines and hierarchies, but to transform it for the better. This requires an inherent "anti-blackness" as a default setting (Sharpe, 2016: 7). Thus, the racism

experienced globally by Black people is not the result of their societies having failed them, but rather a successful attempt at their deliberate dehumanisation. CRT presupposes that racism is "ordinary, not aberrational, normal science, the usual way society does business, the common, everyday experience of most people of color" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001:7), which echoes Christina Sharpe's sentiment of a baseline societal position of anti-blackness. This opinion is reflected in the representations of Blackness that form the main subject of this project, as well as in the works released by a number of significant rap artists in the past decade. For example, Kanye West raps the following verse in the song "Murder to Excellence", from his and Jay-Z's collaborative album *Watch the Throne* (2011):

> *In the past if you picture events like a black tie*
> *What's the last thing you expect to see? Black guys.*
> ***What's the life expectancy for black guys?***
> ***The system's working effectively, that's why.***

West speaks to the danger Black men face by virtue of their Blackness. In *Between the World and Me* (2015: 103), Coates tells his son to remember one thing: "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*". He also reminds his son that "the price of error" is higher for him than it is for his white peers, and that in order for America to justify its attack on the Black body, "the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her own error, real or imagined" (2015: 96). As a result, Black people must always be on guard, and must constantly consider the way in which they undertake mundane acts of living that could get them killed in their own country. Sharpe (2016: 7) frames the disproportionate killing of Black people by American law enforcement as "predictable and constitutive", as opposed to shocking and disgraceful, even claiming that the "ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extra-legal murders of Black people are normative, and for this so-called democracy, necessary".

In order to understand the way racism functions to degrade Black people to the position of subhuman, it is important to analyse the way Blackness has been constructed throughout American history. Black people have always been viewed with a certain level of "assumed inhumanity" (Coates, 2015: 110). The sense of an assumed trait of sub-humanity is also what informs the phrase "Black Lives Matter", indicating that it is a response to Black lives being "devalued relative to the lives of Whites" (Hall, Hall & Perry, 2016: 6). It is this assumed inhumanity that saw white people take what they believed to be their rightful place as slave owner and boss, banishing Black people to the place of subordinate. It is also upon this

premise that American civilisation was built – ironically enough, although Black bodies are not valued on a social level, in this regard they were a "natural resource of incomparable value" in constructing the suburban ideal of the American dream for white Americans (Coates, 2015: 152). This physical strength and its consequent perception as a natural resource for manual labour has also lead to Black bodies being viewed as simultaneously superhuman and subhuman, allowing a Black person to be "perceived as less susceptible to harm, and more invincible to physical blows than a non-black person" (Hall et. al., 2016: 6).

In keeping with the tenets of Critical Race Theory and Black Studies, artists such as Ava DuVernay and Jay-Z present racism as an ever-present aspect of American societies, and work to expose the effects of its workings on Black Americans. *When They See Us* (dir. DuVernay, 2019), for example, does the work that Christina Sharpe (2016: 116) identifies as one of her primary interests – it examines "ways of seeing and imagining responses to the terror visited on Black life", and "the ways we live in and despite that terror". DuVernay (2019) also makes use of hip-hop music – music that represents an important part of Black culture, throughout the limited series. Conscious hip-hop music and Critical Race Theory share a number of similarities, most notably the goal of "radical realignment and societal recognition and change of race and law in America" (Cummings, 2010: 500). Both movements privilege the lived experiences of Black people as they stand in contrast to the technical, legal, and constitutional ideology that all people are born equal. In reality, racism persists as a result of the "contradiction in a professed belief in equality and justice but a societal willingness to tolerate and accept racial inequality and inequity" (Cummings, 2010: 500).

1.4.3. Hip-Hop Studies

The field of hip-hop studies is a relatively young academic discipline, with the actual genre of music having been established only in the 1970s, and the scholarly study thereof starting around the early 1990s (Miller, Hodge, Coleman, & Chaney, 2014: 9-10). Rap music is often labelled as being angry, aggressive, and violent – a view that harbours little consideration for what the genre means to struggling and frustrated members of numerous Black communities around the world. Criticism of a number of aspects of the genre remain important and relevant, as gangsta rap often "reflects a stereotypical black masculine aesthetic," incorporating "the notion of a strong black male–irreverent, angry, defiant and many times violent" (Oware, 2011: 22). Still, hip-hop music has grown into a genre that has solidified its place in the global cultural landscape through the production of topical, relevant and relatable

music, and is now a "global phenomenon" (Jeffries, 2011: 2). Hip-hop icons have become part of popular culture in major ways, granting them extreme visibility in terms of the way they represent Black communities. Their music creates spaces for the social justice issues faced by Black people to enter public discourse and for the opinions of Black Americans to become known. It is hip-hop's legacy of social commentary and intervention that is particularly pertinent to this project. This is how one of rap's greatest exports, Kendrick Lamar, made history in 2018 as the first ever hip-hop artist recipient of the Pulitzer Prize in music. Lamar frequently sells out venues in a number of countries, demonstrating the reach of some of hip-hop's icons.

The genre of hip-hop incorporates all five cultural modes, namely oral (rap), aural (turntablism), physical (breakdancing), visual (graffiti), and mental (knowledge imparted through the music) (Miller et. al., 2012: 13). A series of scholars have written about hip-hop music in the context of Black American culture. One such a scholar is Tricia Rose, whose book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, (1994) remains one of the key writings on hip-hop culture. Rose (1994: 21) describes hip-hop as a "cultural form that attempts to negotiate the experiences of marginalization, brutally truncated opportunity, and oppression within the cultural imperatives of African-American and Caribbean history, identity, and community". It is no surprise then that, although the genre's origin is African American, its form and content are diasporic and it thus often resonates with the oppressed and marginalised across a number of social identifiers such as race, class, gender, and nationality. Hip-hop's spirit of rebellion against and disruption of unjust social practices makes it a movement, a revolution, and way of life; even the language used in rap music rebels against normative linguistic forms such as language standardisation.

In many places in the world this entails the use of a wide range of linguistic forms native to that area and its people, such as the use of Kaapse Afrikaans slang and a number of cultural references in the work of South African hip-hop artists Early B and Youngsta CPT. While this project analyses the work of American hip-hop artists and their reach, much South African hip-hop music and scholarship, such as work by Adam Haupt and Quentin Williams, has influenced how I experience the genre, its impact on me, and my thinking surrounding its potential as a socially conscious vehicle of unification amongst people of colour. The existence of texts such as the book *Neva Again: Hip-hop Art Activism and Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Haupt, Williams, Alim, & Jansen, 2019) underscores both the genre's global significance, as well as its relationship with issues of social justice. Watkins

(1998: 65) describes hip-hop as a social movement, which emphasises its activist capacity and emphasizes the roles of world-renowned socially conscious hip-hop artists. Watkins cites the following aspects in support of his statement:

> First, this particular movement takes place on the field of popular culture, a site not immediately discerned as political, or capable of producing social change. Second, hip-hop is invigorated by the creative labor of a constituency not ordinarily regarded as interested in effecting social change: youth. Third, like social movements in general, hip-hop enables its participants to imagine themselves as part of a larger community; thus, it produces a sense of collective identity and agency.

The origin of hip-hop or rap music is hard to narrow down entirely, but its roots stand firmly in the great African oral tradition of storytelling. Dyson (2004: 61) cites the Sugarhill Gang's 1979 track "Rapper's Delight" as the beginning of the modern history of rap. The song features words being rapped over the beat of a song. In rap's early stages, DJs such as Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc would rap over already existing music, making turntablism one of the core tenets of what would evolve into hip-hop music (Dyson, 2004:61). Slowly, rap music grew to "analyse and describe" the very social and cultural factors that lead to its existence (Dyson, 2004: 61). It was Black music – made both by and for Black people. In contemporary US music production, the genre remains dominated by African American male artists, who most often rap about their ideas of Black masculinity, the experience of being Black in America, and of African American culture more broadly. Black masculinity, and how to navigate life as a Black man in the USA, forms one of the major themes explored in *4:44* (Jay-Z, 2017). The album explores the perception of Black males, as well as newer, more diverse forms of Black Masculinity.

1.4.4. Black Masculinity

Black males live their lives constantly confronted by the gross stereotypes attributed to them. It is immaterial that many of their personalities do not conform to these stereotypes, because they exist in societies that associate certain prejudices with them regardless. They are not considered as individuals, as stereotypes naturally do not allow for much diversity within the stereotyped group. As such, Black men "must still cope with the imposition onto them of qualities that have no relation to their lived experience" (hooks, 2004: 45). These stereotypes are often applied to Black males of all backgrounds and socioeconomic classes, regardless of the fact that many have never acted in ways that reaffirm these biases. In order to survive, even those who have entered the American middle class are pushed "into aggressive passivity, conversation restrained in public quarters, best manners on display, hands never out

of pockets, whole manner ordered as if to say 'I make no sudden movements'" (Coates, 2015: 114).

Black American males are often schooled, from a very young age, on how to react when confronted by a police officer, as is illustrated in *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019). They are taught by their parents to carry their IDs with them, to cooperate fully, not make any sudden movements, and to not attempt to run away. Violating any of these unwritten laws could mean the end of their lives. And yet, even adhering to them strictly could also mean the end of their lives. This is why, when interviewed, an African American mother expressed her joy at learning that the baby she was carrying was a girl, stating "I think it is hard to be a black girl and a black woman in America, but I think it is dangerous and sometimes deadly to be a black boy and black man" (Dow, 2016: 162). The pieces of advice Black boys are given regarding confrontation with law enforcement are necessary for their survival, but "is still, and has been, insufficient to the force that [they] meet in the world" (Sharpe, 2016: 84). American police officers have, for a long time now, had the power to end the life of a Black man who poses no real threat, aside from the fact that he is Black, and that that fact makes him a menace. "At the center of the way black male selfhood is constructed in white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy is the image of the brute – untamed, uncivilized, unthinking, and unfeeling", making his very existence a danger to the society these officers often claim they are protecting from him (hooks, 2004: x).

Similarly, Coates (2015: 144) tells the story of a Black mother whose son had been killed by a white police officer. Her daughter had recently married, and upon the consideration that she could soon be having a baby, the mother was "intensely worried about her daughter bringing a son into America, because she could not save him, she could not secure his body from the ritual violence that had claimed her son". And so, even though many Black men live their lives painfully aware of the fact that law enforcement could at any point erase their existence "for driving, walking, asking for help, and breathing while Black" (Sharpe, 2016: 84), they are simultaneously taught not to reckon with the intense emotions that accompany this knowledge.

hooks (2004: 44) notes that many of the "racist stereotypes attributed to black males are traits that are today considered to be the mark of psychopaths. One of those traits was a lack of emotional responsiveness". The result of this is that Black males are taught not to display emotion, and then crucified for their perceived lack of empathy. This contradiction is forced

upon them even as boys. Black boys are not as easily dismissed under the adage *boys will be boys*, which is frequently used to justify any troubling behaviour on the part of white boys, as Ta-Nehisi Coates reminds his son:

> But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsible for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you (Coates, 2015: 71).

This concept is illustrated most explicitly in the case of the wrongfully convicted Central Park Five, whose potential involvement in "wilding" swiftly translated to their alleged participation in the brutal assault on Trisha Meili. Through *When They See Us,* DuVernay (2019) asks the important questions of how these boys came to be wrongfully convicted of this horrific crime, whether their convictions and even their status as suspects were racially motivated, and what is to stop the very same thing from happening to young Black boys in the year 2019 and beyond.

1.4.5. Affect Theory

The field of Affect Theory lends its concepts to a number of academic disciplines within the Humanities, including Critical Race Theory, Anthropology, Gender Studies, and Philosophy. The terms *affect, emotion, sentiment,* and *feeling,* and the differences or similarities between them, are of particular concern to this field of study. Psychologist Silvan Tomkins, who is considered one of the key figures in contemporary Affect Theory, suggests that "affects have a complex, self-referential life that gives depth to human existence through our relations with others and with ourselves" (Hemmings, 2005: 552). Pertinent to this project is the notion of "affect as critical object and perspective through which to understand the social world and our place within it" (Hemmings, 2005: 548). This perspective must take in to account the role that hierarchy and racism play in invoking emotions or affect in response to where these mechanisms socially position Black Americans. Berg and Ramos-Zayas (2015: 654) contend that

> contemporary studies of affect have […] developed rather independently of the scholarship on race and racialization and outside the purview of critical examinations of 'whiteness'. Yet, […] racialization processes have been integral to, and at times constitutive of, the very conceptions of "emotion," "feeling," or "sentiment" that have historically produced, highlighted, and explained racial difference and served to uphold dominant racial ideologies.

Affect is one of the most important tools used by Black creators of cultural works across media forms, in order to humanise Black Americans, and to elicit a reaction from their audiences. As a result of the multiple individual and collective traumas Black people have faced throughout their histories, their capacity to endure pain, both physical and emotional, is often considered to be much higher than that of their white counterparts. For example, a 2016 study conducted by Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt, and Oliver found that "a substantial number of white laypeople and medical students and residents hold false beliefs about biological differences between blacks and whites", and that "these beliefs predict racial bias in pain perception and treatment recommendation accuracy" (2016: 4296). This results in the widespread undertreatment of Black Americans in relation to white Americans with regards to pain. When Black people are commended for their strength, it is often to normalise the trauma they have experienced, and to make clear the sentiment that they can handle it. The unique perspectives offered in *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) take the viewer on the extremely emotional journey of five young boys accused and convicted of a crime they did not commit as a result of racial profiling. It shows the crippling effects of this structural level of racism on Black families and communities, and the many traumas they suffered through as a result of the vilification of Black men in the USA.

1.5. Research Design and Methodology

This project is qualitative in nature, and will consist primarily of text and discourse analyses of my two main source texts, as well as a brief analysis of other pertinent rap tracks. I will be using a largely narrative model, and customising my approach to the analysis of each of my texts thus employing multimodal tools of analysis. In addition to analysing the content and themes of these texts, I will also pay close attention to the language used to convey their ideas. This research is explorative in nature, and entails the academic discussion of the implications of popular cultural texts that provide a window into the lived experiences of Black Americans broadly and Black American males in particular. In the texts, these experiences are documented by Black individuals themselves in an often informal, relatable language and released across platforms that are far more accessible and widely consumed than the terrain of academia.

Regarding Jay-Z's album *4:44* (2017), my discourse analysis will consist mainly of the tracks "Legacy", "The Story of O.J.", "Smile", and "Kill Jay-Z", along with excerpts from other songs on the album. For DuVernay's *When They See Us* (2019), I will be performing a

textual and visual analysis of key moments in the four episodes of the series. While I will be focusing my analysis on discourse, I feel that much of the series would be lost if I do not address some of the visual aspects employed by DuVernay (2019) to bring the stories of five young boys to life. I will also use interviews conducted with DuVernay to inform my readings of the episodes, as each episode deals with a specific theme in addition to the overarching themes of the series as a whole. This project will comprise three main chapters, each one focusing on one of the major themes explored in these two pieces of literature and a number of selected rap tracks. Although themes such as systemic racism, Black masculinity, and police brutality will be explored throughout the thesis, my analysis of the Jay-Z album will centre around the representations of Black masculinity by this prominent Black male artist, while my analysis of *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) will focus on the perception of Black males in the USA and the real-world implications of this perception.

1.6. Conclusion

An imbalance exists in the subjects of the stories told in books, movies, music, television shows, and academia. Popular culture is laden with stories and images that idealise whiteness and reduce minority characters to harmful and dangerous stereotypes. hooks (1990: 24) states that scholarship fails to "recognise a critical black presence". It is my aim to give due recognition to Jay-Z and Ava DuVernay, among other artists, as I believe that this presence is epitomised by their work – the subject of this project. Studying their work is valuable and necessary in order to engage critically with contemporary forms of Blackness, and particularly Black masculinity, as they are largely presented to the world.

I make no claim that their work perfectly represents all Black people, or that they or their creative works do not subscribe to any problematic and potentially harmful ideologies, be they latent or explicit. For example, many works within Jay-Z's oeuvre (spanning three decades) addresses women in derogatory terms and speaks of their social roles in traditionally patriarchal ways, a characteristic typically associated with rap music. I recognize such instances and approach them with the seriousness appropriate to any work that does not promote the value of equity. I maintain, however, that the work done by these artists is extremely important in filling the gaps in representations of Black masculinity and offering an alternative, positive narrative of Black males and Black people who have, for far too long, remained side-lined in the stories that enter mainstream popular culture and earn global success, popularity, and recognition. Black creatives and intellectuals are frequently

undermined as the literary world is often unwilling to "consider the possibility that we [Black people] might be somewhere writing or saying something that should be listened to, or producing art that should be seen, heard, approached with intellectual seriousness" (hooks, 1990: 24). This project seeks to approach its two main cultural texts with exactly the kind of intellectual seriousness of which hooks speaks.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PERCEPTION OF BLACKNESS IN THE USA

Black people have long lived with gross stereotypes about their backwardness as well as criminal and uncivilised nature imposed upon them, as there exists a "widespread belief that black people, and particularly young, black, inner-city males, are far more prone to violence than white people" (Stark, 1993: 485). Although Americans often believe themselves to be the greatest nation in the world, with the greatest people in the world, Black Americans are no exception to the idea that people of African descent are "incapable of civilisation, prone to crime, lacking in intelligence, generally lazy, and sexually promiscuous" (Glaude, 2016: 42). The traits of uncontrollable violence and intellectual stiltedness are projected onto Black people, and Black males in particular, whether or not they personally identify with them. These stereotypes develop over time, and are further perpetuated by certain racial habits – that is, "the ways we live the belief that white people are valued more than others" (Glaude, 2016: 55). The social ills facing Black people are often spoken of in individual terms, as opposed to being considered within the broader social context of being the result of historic and present, systemic bias.

Prominent Black creatives, such as Jay-Z and Ava DuVernay, are in the business of illustrating and articulating the effects of such pervasive discrimination on the quotidian lives of Black individuals, Black families, and Black communities alike. Much of this is achieved through the use of affect, resulting in these artists contributing to filling the current gap in the existent "grammar within the dominant order of being/truth/knowledge/freedom with which to speak or think Black feeling" (Palmer, 2017: 51). The capacity of Black people to feel the same range of authentic and valid emotion as white people is often overlooked. Failure to ascribe this very basic human characteristic to Black people, or perceiving it as incredibly limited in Black people, is a function of an overarching, racist set of ideologies, and denigrates them to the position of subhuman. The racial habits practiced in daily activities send the clear message that Black people are less than human, be it in overt or veiled manners. This concept is explored at length in Princeton professor Eddie. S. Glaude Jr.'s *Democracy in Black: How Race Still Enslaves the American Soul* (2016), *viz.*:

> Racial habits are formed by the outcomes we see in the world rather than by the complex processes that produced those outcomes. We see black and white sides of town and internalize certain assumptions about what that separation means, but rarely are those assumptions informed by the history of

> deliberate policies that created a dual housing market and residential segregation. We see double-digit black unemployment and infer things about black people from this statistic, but we rarely invoke the history of unfair labor practices, the exclusion of black people from labor unions, or the dual labor market that tracked certain folks to certain jobs (2016: 57).

At their core, these perceptions are informed by the belief that simply being born white makes you better than the people who are not. In this regard, Coates (2015: 55) considers the possibility that "perhaps being named 'black' was just someone's name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah". Societies that value whiteness rely on this definition of Blackness in order to assert their superiority, for something may only be considered superior in relation to something else. Glaude (2016: 31) refers to this notion as the value gap, and defines it as follows:

> no matter our stated principles or how much progress we think we've made, white people are valued more than others in this country, and that fact continues to shape the life chances of millions of Americans. The value gap is in our national DNA.

He goes on to explain how America's democratic values are indelibly intertwined with a tradition of white supremacy. Although that phrase is often associated with unapologetic extremists and obnoxious racists, Glaude (2016: 30) contends that it extends much further than that, becoming simply "a set of practices informed by the fundamental belief that white people are valued more than others". The value gap colours the lives, experiences, and interactions of Black Americans daily. This happens both in terms of the tragic, spectacular acts of violence that make news headlines (such as police harassment and brutality), as well as in the everyday, mundane acts of living such as shopping on the "white" side of town, or taking a walk in your suburban neighbourhood, or meeting a friend for a milkshake. The value gap ensures that the many mechanisms put in place to ensure that Black people live out their lives as second-class citizens operate optimally.

This means that formal systems do not fail Black people every time they are discriminated against, but that they are succeeding in precisely what they have been equipped to achieve. Sharpe (2016: 7) describes this kind of bias as "predictable and constitutive", as opposed to appalling or outrageous, even stating that the "on-going state-sanctioned legal and extra-legal murders of Black people are normative, and for this so-called democracy, necessary". Coates (2015: 103) echoes this sentiment as he tells his son never to forget that "In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body – *it is heritage*". Thus, instead of reading America's discrimination against Black people as a betrayal of good, founding, American values, it

needs to be understood that those values have always dictated that non-white Americans be relegated to the role of second best. As Glaude puts it, "inequality and racial habits are part of the American Idea. They are not just a symptom of bad, racist people who fail to live up to pristine ideals" (2016: 9). He goes on to state that America's claim to being one of the best nations in the world is unfounded – "We keep treating America like we have a great blueprint and we have just strayed from it. But the fact is that we've built the country true. Black folk were never meant to be full-fledged participants in this society" (2016: 38). Therefore, we see a major disconnect between the legal policies of a number of institutions and the lived experiences of Black people, both in the USA and beyond.

Regardless of the plethora of ways in which Black Americans have been systematically oppressed, dehumanised, and devalued, much emphasis is often placed on individual accountability. As a matter of fact, many white people believe in the existence of a kind of "reverse racism", which is taken to mean discrimination against white people instead of against Black people. This belief equates "black rage in the face of debilitating inequality" to "white anger over the loss of white privilege" (Glaude, 2016: 89), and leads many to view any kind of affirmative action or retribution for Black people as an unnecessary hand out for lazy people. The same people commonly see America's race issues as something of the past, and not a present reality, since all Americans are now *legally* considered equal. As a result, Black people face a lack of empathy, both generally and for the social issues they face in particular. Glaude (2016: 62-63) cites a study done at the University of Milano-Bicocca, in which the biophysical responses of white participants watching a video of a needle or eraser touching skin was recorded and analysed. They found that the participants reacted differently to the perceived pain of white people in the video than they did to that of the Black people in the video. This is because of the false belief that, as a result of them having suffered decades of racism, oppression, and hardship, Black people have a much higher threshold for pain than other people. It is not necessarily true that they just blatantly disregard Black pain, but that they simply do not believe that it is being experienced to the same degree that white people would experience the exact same incident. This notion, coupled with the fact Black people made "particularly easy targets, given their positions as voiceless slaves or 'free persons of color' in a society sensitive to and separated by race" (Savitt, 1982: 332), is what led Black Americans to also become human test subjects in medical experiments across the country in the 1800s.

Palmer (2017: 34; 41) states that "not all bodies are imbued with the same capacities for feeling, movement or sensation", rendering Black bodies opaque, their opacity functioning as "a precondition for exclusion and anti-Black violence". As evidenced in the study cited by Glaude (2016), "the opacity of blackness is intimately tied to the unthinkability of Black suffering, in particular, and Black feeling more broadly" (Palmer, 2017: 42). Black affect is thus often thought of in ridiculous, irrational terms, resulting in tired stereotypes such as that of the angry Black woman or the violent Black man. While white people are socialised to feel very little empathy for Black people, they are also simultaneously taught to fear them. These two inaccurate perceptions of Blackness – that they have a higher tolerance for physical and emotional pain, and that they are inherently dangerous – work together to present Black people as not quite human in the minds of non-Black individuals. White fear, which is "the general frame of mind that black people are dangerous, not only to white individuals because they are prone to criminal behaviour, but to the overall well-being of our society," aids in the persistence of racial discrimination (Glaude, 2016: 74).

White fear leads *all* Black people to be perceived as dangerous or criminal, even when there is no just cause to make these assumptions about individual people. It dehumanises Black people, and instead replaces their humanity with the threat of danger. They are treated with suspicion in almost every scenario (consciously or subconsciously, albeit it to varying degrees), and can do nothing to be free of it, as they have done nothing to earn it. This kind of fear informs many of the interactions white people have with Black Americans, which is why stories of women guarding their handbags, or crossing the street, or locking their car doors when they see Black people approaching, are so commonplace. Thus, "intimate fears about encounters with individual black people become broader concerns about a general threat to the very fabric of society," and turns all people who may be drafted into the category *Black* into outlaws (Glaude, 2016: 75). These fears are heightened still when it comes to the way in which Black males in particular are perceived, as they possess the added masculine characteristic of physical strength.

2.1. Black Masculinity and Stereotyping

Whatever negative qualities are commonly associated with Black people as a whole are often amplified in relation to Black men. Their masculinity, coupled with the fact that they are Black, makes of them an extraordinary threat in the eyes of white Americans. The physical strength of Black males is what made them most valuable to slave owners, and is what is now

cited as a reason to fear them. After slave rebellions became more common in the early nineteenth century, a "deep and pervasive fear and paranoia about possible revenge" gripped the USA, and, today, "the idea of weaponized black folk, talking about violence or self-defence, or calling for rebellion or revolution, has continued to scare the hell out of white folk" (Glaude, 2016: 86). Accompanying the idea of the Black man as the violent criminal is the myth of the feared, sexually aggressive and potent Black male. As Duru (2005) explains, the myth stems from the days of slavery in the US. Despite the fact that attacks by slaves on white women were fairly uncommon, Black males were severely punished, and even killed, for supposedly desiring, looking at, or touching white women. As a matter of fact, "sexual assaults during slavery were overwhelmingly carried out by white slave masters against black female slaves" (Duru, 2005: 1318). Still, the fear of the sexually unrestrained Black man persisted.

Duru (2005) explains that the USA has a rich history of taking extreme measures in order to protect white people, and white women in particular, from the supposed bestial Black man. Upon the abolition of slavery, white Americans were forced to live in what they perceived to be "a society in which blacks reverted to their 'savage instincts,'" and "sought to develop post-slavery means of controlling blacks. So, without the legal right to chain and beat blacks, to frighten and subjugate them, the institution of lynching gained hold" (Duru, 2005: 1319). Although lynching by hanging is the most well-known method, lynching can take various forms; however, all forms ultimately constitute extra-legal mob justice. The most infamous case of lynching, that of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till, illustrates that the myth of the bestial Black man was never limited to adult males (Duru, 2005: 1320). Till was mauled and killed by two white men, his body being deformed and most unrecognisable afterwards, after allegedly whistling in the vicinity of one of their wives.

In the early 1900s, movements against lynching slowly started to gain traction, and increasing numbers of Black males accused of sexual assault were afforded the opportunity to stand trial. These males were spared the wrath of the angry white mob in terms of not being physically attacked, but they did not necessarily receive fair trials. Much pressure was still put on juries and court officials to convict and exact harsh punishments on Black males accused of sex crimes, with very little evidence needed in order to do so (Duru, 2005: 1320). This bias rang true throughout 1900s, and, towards the end of the century, resulted in the wrongful conviction of five Black boys who were widely demonised by their country. Alleged sexual assaults or rapes of white women have a history of being treated with extreme

severity in the United States, with treatment being even more extreme in the case of a Black perpetrator. For example, in the years between 1930 and 1967, the state executed 36 percent of black men convicted of raping white women, while executing a mere two percent of rape convicts when any other racial combination of convicted rapist and victim existed. Notably, no rapist of any race has ever been sentenced to death for raping a black woman, sending an unmistakable signal that rapes of white women have historically been deemed more tragic in America than rapes of black women (Duru, 2005: 1323).

A number of inferences can be made from this legacy, the first being that white women are valued more, and considered purer and more deserving of protection from males than Black women. These fears were personified in the frenzy surrounding the case of the Central Park jogger – a case in which five young Black boys stood accused of sexually assaulting a white woman. These boys (and they were, in fact, boys), aged between fourteen and sixteen, became the face of the extremely dangerous, violent, and sexually aggressive criminals the nation already believed Black males to be. Ava DuVernay created the Netflix limited series *When They See Us* (2019) in order to expose the now infamous trial for what it is –

> The true legacy of the Central Park case is the illumination of the festering existence of racial hatred and virulent stereotyping traceable to the days of chattel slavery. Indeed, the Central Park rape case has exposed the extent to which American society is only narrowly removed from its most shameful days (Duru, 2005: 1318).

In highlighting the role that racial bias played in the conviction of the five boys and retelling their stories thirty years after their arrests, within the contemporary context of the Black Lives Matter era, DuVernay (2019) succeeds in calling into question how much has really changed in terms of race relations.

The series was also created in order to illustrate the effects of racial discrimination and an unjust legal system on people, families, and communities of colour. Both during the trial and in its aftermath, they were simply referred to as "The Central Park Five", with little consideration given to them as individuals, or to how the negative media attention affected their families. In one of the series' most touching moments, a young Kevin Richardson (played by Asante Blackk) tearfully asks, "why they doing us like this?" to which Raymond Santana responds: "what other way they ever do us?" (DuVernay, 2019). This interaction illustrates Santana's understanding that everything they are facing, and have yet to endure, is as a result of them being Black. Santana's response invokes The United States of America's

legacy of vilifying Black people and persistently treating them with suspicion, of attaching the characteristic of sexual aggression to Black males of all ages, of particularly extreme outrage at the assault of a white women when that assault is allegedly perpetrated by a Black male, and of assuming the guilt and criminality of Black people before they are tried fairly and despite significant evidence to the contrary.

So overwhelming was the evidence of these boys' non-involvement in this particular crime that they did not believe they could be convicted of such a serious offense when they had no knowledge of the incident. The facts of the case all pointed away from them – none of their DNA matched samples taken from the scene and from the victim's rape kit, and their testimonies contradicted not only the testimonies of the other boys, but also of known details of the assault, for example what the victim was wearing or where in the park the attack took place. However, their "coercively gathered false confessions" were ultimately used against them during their trials (Byfield, 2014: 611). In showing the journey of these young boys and the hardships they faced as a result of being accused of a crime they did not commit, DuVernay presents an image of Black boyhood that is not often highlighted in mainstream popular culture. She shows them not as the crime-hungry, dangerous men the media painted them to be, but as scared and confused boys who navigate the legal system with extreme ignorance of the lengths state officials are able and willing to go to in order to incriminate them.

DuVernay makes a concerted effort to represent the lived experiences of Black people in her creative work. Much like the work of DuVernay, the musical content of Brooklyn-born rapper Jay-Z, one of hip-hop's most prolific artists, does much the same thing. Jay-Z has released thirteen studio albums and has been in the entertainment industry for three decades. Born Shawn Corey Carter, he was raised in Brooklyn's Marcy housing projects and faced a number of obstacles throughout his childhood and adolescence, much of which he raps about in his music. He is open about his past as a drug dealer, as well as his brushes with the law, and often raps about these aspects of his youth. These experiences make him relatable to many Black youths who face similar struggles, and afford him a certain level of credibility. As such, the rapper has become a cultural icon. His cultural icon status and global reach makes his representation of Black masculinity, through his work and his persona, particularly powerful and far-reaching. His extreme visibility and popularity also cause his work to carry significant cultural weight.

Thirty-odd years after the start of his career in the entertainment industry, Jay-Z has managed to create a brand that extends to realms far outside of his work as a rap artist – as he puts it, "I'm not a businessman, I'm a business, man" (Kanye West & Jay-Z, 2005). Jay-Z has amassed a fortune of over $1 billion (the first hip-hop artist ever to achieve this), with business ventures including "liquor, art, real estate and stakes in companies like Uber" (O'Malley Greenburg, 2019). His humble beginnings, commercial success as a hip-hop artist, and his corporate success outside of rap has made him a role model to many young African Americans. Producer Swizz Beatz said the following of Jay-Z's accomplishments and his role as an African American icon: "It's bigger than hip-hop […] it's the blueprint for our culture. A guy that looks like us, sounds like us, loves us, made it to something that we always felt that was above us" (O'Malley Greenburg, 2019). While Jay-Z's persona stands as an example of what could be for African American males, it is important to note that he remains much of an aspirational figure since most Black males or even Americans in general, are not able to achieve billionaire status in their lifetime. While the feat of financial freedom and intergenerational wealth is not particularly common, Jay-Z's career shows that it is, in fact, possible.

Due to the autobiographical nature of his music, Jay-Z's public persona and the person he portrays as a character in his music often bleed into each other. Thus, his personal and professional achievements are important considerations when contemplating the ways in which his music, as well as his very existence, presents a new image for what Black masculinity has the potential to be. While this is in no way the only blueprint for what the contemporary Black male *should* be, it certainly goes a long way in constructing Black manhood as complex and encompassing much beyond the stereotypes commonly attributed to it. In keeping with rap music's relationship with social consciousness as one of its major driving forces, Jay-Z often uses his music as a platform to highlight social issues faced by many Black Americans. His latest solo album is a testament to this fact. *4:44*, released in June of 2017, is his thirteenth studio album. Although the album did not win any of the awards it was nominated for, it was considered for a stellar eight awards, the most of any album, during the 2018 Grammy awards. Regardless of it not having won any awards, it still garnered much critical acclaim and public attention, as it highlights issues of racism, divisions within Black communities, faith, homosexuality, Black excellence, and infidelity, amongst others.

The fact that "America's urban centers in general and low-income minority communities in particular, are replete with poverty, police brutality, drug abuse, educational inequality, high dropout rates and violence" (Richardson & Scott, 2002:175) instils in Black youth the knowledge of the likelihood of either not living to see the age of 25, or them being incarcerated by the time they reach this age. They are told by various people, many being authority figures such as schoolteachers, policemen, or even older family members, that they would be dead or locked up by the time they turn 30, as illustrated by a number of references in the work of Black artists. Surviving your twenties is often celebrated as the impressive feature it is represented to be. In "Murder to Excellence" (2011), Jay-Z expresses the sentiment with the line "And they say by 21 I was supposed to die / so I'm out here celebrating my post-demise". References to the fear of not making it to thirty, or to the celebration of having done so, are fairly common in rap music:

> *I asked her where she wanna be when she 25*
> *She turned around and looked at me and she said "alive"* (Jay-Z & West: 2011).

> *1985 I arrived*
> *33 years, damn I'm grateful I survived*
> *We wasn't s'posed to get past 25*
> *Jokes on you, motherfucker, we alive* (J. Cole: 2018).

> *Aw yeah, fuck the judge*
> *I made it past 25, and there I was*
> *A little nappy-headed nigga with the world behind me* (Lamar: 2015).

This knowledge of their vulnerability, often on a level that surpasses the physical, is something that is shared between many subjugated peoples across the globe. This is why Jay-Z's music has managed to resonate with the oppressed in "any number of geographical locations around the world" (White, 2011: 81). In so articulately and poetically telling his real life story, Jay-Z invariably tells the stories of all these people who can relate in terms of "social background and life chances", who might look at his life as a testament to the possibility of escaping "the dead end poverty of lives lived in not so quiet desperation" (White, 2011: 82). It is what makes of him a global icon, having traversed many worlds on his own terms. He has managed to remain both popular and relevant over a span of three decades, having produced more number-one albums on Billboard magazine's chart than any other solo artist in history. In successfully transitioning from drug dealer to rapper to business

mogul, he has not only proven that he is able to control how he represents himself, but has also managed to construct a "compelling new model of black masculinity" (White, 2011: 85).

This model put forth by Jay-Z challenges the way in which Black males are commonly perceived on a number of levels, the first being to demonstrate the capacity to change. Mainstream popular culture has often projected onto Black males "the trait of unchecked primitive violence, [where] white-supremacist culture makes it appear that black men embody a brutal patriarchal maleness that white men and women (and everyone else) must arm themselves to repress" (hooks, 2004: 47). Although Jay-Z admits that he has previously played into this role thrust upon Black males, he also displays a range of emotions and sensibilities not stemming from rage or rooted in violence in his later years. This trait of primitive violence is commonly associated with Black people, and is often a function of considering the emotional reaction of Black people to the number of obstacles they face as a result of their race, without considering these emotional reactions in relation to their cause. Next, Jay-Z's proven business savvy and success regardless of his lack of formal training challenges the notion that Black males are especially "lacking in intellectual skills", and are certainly "more body than mind" (hooks, 2004: 32).

2.2. Normalisation of Violent Masculinity

> 'Either I can beat him, or the police'. Maybe that saved me. Maybe it didn't. All I know is, the violence rose from the fear like smoke from a fire, and I cannot say whether that violence, even administered in fear and love, sounded the alarm or choked us at the exit. What I know is that fathers who slammed their teenage boys for sass would then release them to streets where their boys employed, and were subject to, the same justice… I know that we were afraid of those who loved us most. Our parents resorted to the lash the way flagellants in the plague years resorted to the scourge (Coates, 2015: 16-17).

Throughout *Between the World and Me* (2015), Coates explores the many different forms of violence that Black children are subjected to throughout their lives. The first is the violence used by parents and older family or community members as a measure of discipline. Much of this discipline is enforced out of a fear of the child's safety out in the world. Next, he explores the extreme violence of the streets that is so commonplace in many Black neighbourhoods both in America and outside of it. Surviving meant learning to enact violence yourself, yet, at the same time, being violent could just as easily bring you harm. He recalls two incidents: one in which his father beats him for allowing a boy to steal from him, and another in which his father beats him for threatening his ninth-grade teacher. He notes the irony – "Not being violent enough could cost me my body. Being too violent could cost me

my body" (2015: 28). This results in a great deal of mixed messaging about the place of violence in Black communities. While parents would not necessarily like for their children to be perceived as violent, teaching them to never resort to violence, even if targeted, could very easily compromise the physical safety of the child. Thus, children are left to use their own discretion as to when a situation requires a violent response, and often make the wrong decision. In some cases, this decision can be deadly.

In the track "Kill Jay-Z" (2017), Jay-Z explores some incidences of violence from his past, as well as his motivation for perpetrating them. He makes it clear that an important part of his journey as a celebrity and role model involves being honest with his fans and acknowledging his mistakes and chequered past, as well as offering advice for how to recover from that and build a different life. In his memoir / autobiography titled *Decoded*, Jay-Z describes how he views his past, and the role it plays in his life story: "I finally had a story to tell. And I felt obligated, above all, to be honest about that experience" (2010: 17). "Kill Jay-Z" (2017) sees him reflecting on this philosophy, rapping the lines "you know you owe the truth to all the youth that fell in love with Jay-Z". The track then goes on to explore his infidelity, the fact that he sold drugs to people he was meant to care for, an incident that ended in him shooting his brother, and his assault on Lance "Un" Rivera, a rival record producer, in 1999.

Jay-Z turned himself in and pleaded guilty to stabbing Rivera during an altercation at a Times Square nightclub, and was given three years' probation (Heos, 2009: 26). The issue at the centre of the incident was the rumour being circulated that Rivera had bootlegged Jay-Z's fourth studio album, *Vol. 3… Life and Times of S. Carter* (1999), before its official release date. This type of violence is often considered characteristic of rap music and the lifestyle it represents – "Gangsta rap gained notoriety, in part, due to its misogynous themes, encouragement of hypermaterialism, violent lyrics, and the behaviour of some of its artists" (Richardson & Scott, 2002:177). However, Richardson and Scott (2002:177) argue that the violence portrayed in rap music reflects a general culture of fascination with violence prevalent in different forms of entertainment produced in the US, and that these violent acts are "symptoms of far more complex and multifaceted issues than commonly acknowledged".

> *Fuck Jay Z, I mean, you shot your own brother*
> *How can we know if we can trust Jay Z?*
>
> *Crazy how life works*
> *You got a knot in your chest, imagine how a knife hurts*

You stabbed Un over some records
Your excuse was "he was talkin' too reckless!"
Let go your ego over your right shoulder
Your left is sayin', "Finish your breakfast!"

In the song "Kill Jay-Z" (2017), Jay-Z references both the incident with Un, as well as an incident from his youth during which he shot his brother. His brother recovered from his gunshot wound and never pressed charges, so Jay-Z was never prosecuted for the assault. He employs the imagery of an angel on one shoulder telling him his violent reactions are the result of his ego controlling him, while the devil on his left shoulder encourages him to handle situations violently so as to ensure that a message is sent to his victim. White (2011: 86) attributes this phenomenon to the rapper's ability to "complicate the lives and struggles of young black males whom others are quick to read as no more than two-dimensional". Jay-Z specialises in the double entendre, creating multiple layers of meaning informed by the keenest observation and deepest introspection, "often trying to deepen his understanding of his own existential predicament and that of others who identify with him" (White, 2011:84). Keen observation and introspection are not traits readily associated with Black males, as they are often represented as simple and two-dimensional. Jay-Z, however, acknowledges internal struggles he has faced while trying to "do better", and ultimately sends the message that violence is not the answer, pointing out the misguided reasons many of these violent acts are perpetrated. The following excerpt from the *4:44* (2017) track "The Story of O.J." indicates that the rapper acknowledges and even addresses violent incidents as being the result of "complex and multifaceted issues", as Richardson and Scott (2002:177) suggest:

I told him "please don't die over the neighbourhood that your mama rentin'"
Take your drug money and buy the neighbourhood
That's how you rinse it

In these lines, Jay-Z points out that dying or being injured in a turf war is futile, especially considering the fact that most residents are renting spaces that actually belong to someone else. He then suggests that using your ill-gotten gains to buy (at least parts of) Black neighbourhoods and improve the quality of life for its residents is a good way of cleaning 'dirty money'. Jay-Z and Kanye West further denounce this type of Black-on-Black violence in the track "Murder to Excellence", from their collaborative album *Watch the Throne* (2011). The chorus of the song states, "The paper read 'murder, black-on-black murder'/ paper read 'murder, black-on-black murder' again". The repetition of these lines throughout

the song emphasises the frequency with which these murders occur. In verse two of the song, West raps the following of his home city, Chicago:

> *And I'm from the murder capital where they murder for capital*
> *Heard about at least three killings this afternoon*
> *Looking at the news like "damn I was just with him after school"*
> *No shop class but half the school got a tool*
> *And a "I could die any day"-type attitude*
> *Plus his little brother got shot reppin' his avenue*
> *It's time for us to stop and redefine black power*
> *Forty one souls murdered in fifty hours*

West points out the grave reality that much of Chicago's Black youth is constantly aware of the fact that habitual violence could claim their lives at any point in time – if not by one of their own, then by law enforcement. In *Between the World and Me* (2015: 103), Coates reminds his son of the fact that "the price of error" is higher for him than it is for his white peers, and that in order for America to justify their attack on the Black body, "the story of a black body's destruction must always begin with his or her error, real or imagined" (2015: 96). As a result, Black people must always be on guard, and must constantly consider the way in which they undertake mundane acts of living that could get them killed. Jay-Z and Kanye West (2011) point out this threat of bodily harm inflicted by law enforcement, as well as many other ways in which the lives of Black people are endangered or diminished due to discrimination, as a reason that they cannot afford to also endanger each other, and as a reason to condemn what is often referred to as black-on-black violence –

> *This is to the memory of Danroy Henry*
> *Too much enemy fire to catch a friendly*
> *Strays from the same shade nigga, we on the same team*
> *Giving you respect, I expect the same thing*
>
> *If you put crabs in a barrel to ensure your survival*
> *You're gon' end up pulling down niggas that look just like you*
> *What up, Blood? What up, cuz? It's all black, I love us*

The concept of Black-on-Black violence, however, presents as problematic in that it points to "blackness rather than poverty, economics or class" as the characteristic used to understand violence inflicted upon Black people by Black assailants (Wilson, 2005: 4). The racial classification of this violence constructs the image that race is the overriding factor in such instances, and broadly allows it to be seen as "one more marker of a failing and problem

people who had become dangerously discordant and self-destructive" (Wilson, 2005: 4). Thus, the denouncement of violence within Black communities without reference to the socioeconomic circumstances that birth it, amounts to an oversimplification. In the second verse referenced above, Jay-Z speaks to the infamous Blood-Crip gang rivalry in much the same way. The Bloods and The Crips are The USA's most notorious, predominantly African American, rival gangs, although members of other minority racial groups also sometimes pledge allegiance to either crew (Covey, 2015). So infamous are they that they have "come to represent the archetype of what it means to be a street gang", and are the "iconic representation of what a street gang is and what it should be" (Covey, 2015: 1). The formation of gangs, as well as the violence that accompanies their struggles with rival gangs, has become almost characteristic of life in many low-income, minority neighbourhoods. As such, gang violence and affiliation are often referenced in rap music.

Jay-Z uses the metaphor of crabs in a barrel, also often referred to as crab mentality, to illustrate what he perceives to be Black Americans pulling each other down in order to uplift themselves, for various reasons, both gang-related and otherwise. When crabs are placed in a barrel, or another similar container, they often sabotage one another's efforts to escape the container by pulling each other down and attempting to escape by climbing over the crab they have just caused to slide down. The metaphor creates the evocative image of a frenzy of crabs intertwined with one another, moving about but not really going anywhere, agitated and unthinking. He discourages rivalry between groups of African Americans by ending the verse off with a reference to the friendly greetings associated with both Bloods ("What up, Blood?") and Crips ("What up, cuz?"). In the last line, he states "It's all black / I love us", reiterating his belief that Black communities should all support and uplift each other, and be proud of their Blackness. Similarly, J. Cole references the act of pledging allegiance to The Bloods or The Crips in the track "Window Pain (Outro)", from his 2018 album *KOD*:

> *Niggas bang in the Ville, I always thought that shit was strange*
> *How you claim Blood or Cuz when that was just a LA thing?*
> *I don't mean no disrespect towards your set, no, I'm just sayin'*
> *That it seem like for acceptance niggas will do anything*
> *Niggas will rap any gang, niggas will bust any head*
> *Niggas will risk everything, point him out and then he dead*
> *Shootin' up where his granny live, "blaw, blaw!", his granny duck*
> *He don't give a fuck, he's on Henny and Xanny'd up*

In the above verse, J. Cole states that he believes a sense of acceptance and belonging to be the fundamental reasons people choose to claim membership to a gang. He explains that the youth who choose to do so are often under the influence of drugs or alcohol when they undertake gang-related attacks and "risk everything" in order to join and be part of the gang. Descormiers and Corrado (2016: 1341) describe violence as "central to the gang culture and lifestyle", and refer to these violent acts as gang members earning the "right to belong" in the same way that Cole describes it as earning acceptance. He speaks to the concept of belonging, a topic not often breached by figures that value traditional masculinity, and thereby approaches the issue of this violence with far more insight than the kind of destructive ideology used in the phrase Black-on-Black violence. Jay-Z also sends the message that the odds are already stacked against the prosperity of the Black American, and that they themselves cannot afford to contribute to one another's downfall. He urges Black people to re-examine the violent acts they undertake, which have become a part of life in certain Black neighbourhoods. While "emotionality has historically been written as a characteristic of the feminine" (Palmer, 2017: 45), rappers such as Jay-Z and J. Cole speak of Black people in sentimental, almost emotional terms. In this way, they neglect to play into the traditionally masculine traits of being hard and unfeeling, and pave the way for many young, Black males who look up to them to emulate this behaviour without reading it as a sign of weakness or femininity.

2.3. Blackness Reimagined: Uplifting Other Black people

Although the "encouragement of hypermaterialism" of which Richardson and Scott speak (2002:177) is undeniably present in Jay-Z's work, *4:44* (2017) stands out as an album that speaks about wealth in an entirely different way to the lavish "photo shoot fresh, looking like wealth, I'm about to call the paparazzi on myself" (Jay-Z and West, 2011) manner employed elsewhere in his oeuvre. Having been able to seemingly effortlessly move from the streets of Brooklyn as a drug dealer to stages across the globe as a performer to corporate boardrooms as Roc Nation CEO, Jay-Z is afforded both respect and a certain level of credibility across all three realms. One of the major themes of the albums is the creation of generational wealth and the importance of supporting other members of the Black community in this endeavour. Although such references are littered throughout the album, one major example of this is the track "Legacy" (Jay-Z, 2011). The song opens with his eldest daughter, Blue, asking "daddy, what's a will?" followed by an outline of the kind of ventures Jay-Z wishes to undertake with his billion-dollar fortune both while he is alive and after he has passed:

Take those moneys and spread 'cross families
My sisters, Hattie and Lou, the nephews, cousins and TT
Eric, the rest to B for whatever she wants to do

She might start an institute
She might put poor kids through school

My stake in Roc Nation should go to you
Leave a piece for your siblings to give to their children too
TIDAL, the champagne, D'ussé, I'd like to see
A nice peace-fund ideas from people who look like we
We gon' start a society within society

He starts off by spreading his fortune throughout his own family, referring to sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews, siblings, and his wife. Next, he speaks of his stake in his record label, Roc Nation, which should go to Blue (the "you" to which he refers), and her siblings, twins Rumi and Sir. The intention is for them to have something to give to their own children one day, so that the wealth is passed down from generation to generation. As Beyoncé puts it in their collaborative song "BOSS" (2018): "Ain't nothing to it, I boss so I bought my momma a whip / My great great grandchildren already rich / That's a lot of brown chi'r'en on your Forbes list". He goes on to mention a number of his business ventures, including the music streaming service TIDAL (both *Lemonade* and *4:44* were released exclusively on TIDAL), the champagne brand Armand de Brignac, and the cognac brand D'ussé, his stakes in which his children would all likely inherit. Lastly, he speaks of his desire for his fortune to be shared by means of philanthropy, hoping for an institute or peace-fund idea for Black communities, the people who look like him and his children. Further on in the song, he notes that his parents were unable to start the chain of generational wealth, and he now takes that responsibility upon himself for his children and extended family. He acknowledges that his mother did, however, attempt to secure his financial future in the best way she was able to, by using her own money to buy him some bonds. He expresses his gratitude for this, and incorporates it as a manner of acknowledging that he is continuing a familial legacy of sacrificing what you have for your offspring, and as a desire for all Black families.

Generational wealth, that's the key
My parents ain't have shit, so that shift started with me
My mom took her money, she bought me bonds
That was the sweetest thing of all time, uh

In the bridge of the song, Jay-Z uses the metaphor of the Red Queen's Race (noted earlier in this dissertation) to highlight what he essentially constructs as a quality of Blackness – in order to succeed in societies that value whiteness, Black people need to run twice as fast (work twice as hard and be twice as good) for their achievements to be considered on par with those of their white peers. Everything that is achieved is done so in spite of the many obstacles often placed in the pathways of Black people – poverty, racism, and daily instances of discrimination, to name only a few. Keeping the same position is difficult enough, let alone steadily moving forward. This track highlights his desire to use the wealth he has acquired to help other Black people overcome these obstacles, which, to him, will be the true measure of success. In the song "BOSS" (The Carters, 2018), he raps the lines "Over here we measure success by how many people successful next to you / Here we say you broke if everybody else broke except for you". This idea is further propagated through the sampling of Donny Hathaway's "Someday We'll All Be Free" from the album *Extension of a Man* (1973). Once again, we see a denouncement of the kind of crab mentality that pits Black people against one another through the idea that only a select few can be successful, and that those few will always be the exception and not the rule.

In his and Beyoncé's collaborative *4:44* (2017) track "Family Feud", Jay-Z stresses the importance of ownership, and of supporting and uplifting fellow members of Black communities. Mention is made, once again, of the Black-owned companies he is affiliated with – Armand de Brignac and TIDAL. He also criticises other Black people who, either intentionally or mindlessly, support white capital gain instead of making a conscious effort to support similar Black-owned business ventures ("Y'all still drinkin' Perrier-Jouët, huh"). Further on in the song, he proves that he puts his money where his mouth is, stating "I'll be damned if I drink some Belvedere while Puff got Cîroc" (2017), referencing Sean "Diddy" Combs' ambassadorship, and part-ownership of the vodka brand.

> *We did that, black-owned things*
> *Hundred percent, black-owned champagne*
> *And we merrily merrily eatin' off these streams*
> *Y'all still drinkin' Perrier-Jouët, huh*
> *But we ain't get through to you yet, uh*
> *What's better than one billionaire? Two (two)*
> *'Specially if they're from the same hue as you*

The last two lines in this verse are another reference to Sean Combs, who is also a hip-hop artist turned business mogul with a net worth of several hundred million dollars. During the past few years, the two artists have been pitted against one another in an apparent race to become hip-hop's first ever billionaire. Jay-Z squashes rumours of a rivalry by stating that they are not in competition, and that both of them being Black billionaires certainly trumps him attaining this goal on his own. Oware explores how Black males "interact with other black males in potentially empowering and caring ways," questioning if there are instances in which "black male rappers deliberately and intentionally express affection, gratitude and even vulnerability towards other black males" in hip-hop musical content (2011: 26). The track "Family Feud" makes a persuasive argument for the empowerment and caring Oware refers to, displaying a sense of brotherhood and support between two of hip-hop's most influential artists.

This sentiment is once again expressed in Black pop culture icon Pharell Williams' 2020 track "Entrepreneur", on which Jay-Z features, rapping the line "For every one Gucci, support two FUBUs". This is a reference to the Black-owned apparel company, whose name is literally an acronym for the phrase *For us, by us*. Jay-Z also raps the lines "Black Twitter, what's that? When Jack gets paid, do you?", referencing Twitter CEO and billionaire Jack Dorsey. This sends the message that financial gain is paramount and does not at all reference the powerful ways in which Black people have been able to leverage social media platforms such as Twitter in order to "challenge dominant ideologies of race" and even mobilise communities to organise protests (Carney, 2016: 182). The music video of the song, however, showcases a number of Black entrepreneurs and business owners and broadly encourages support of such ventures and a celebration of the beauty of Blackness ("There will be no sunny days if Black went away"). Another instance in which Jay-Z expresses "a broader and more complex range of emotions and feelings than typically discussed and analysed in rap music" (Oware, 2011: 27) is his 2011 song "Murder to Excellence" with Kanye West, in which he once again shows support for his fellow big-name Black entertainer Will Smith, as well as for Oprah Winfrey. The track also simultaneously does the important work of criticising the lack of representation at the higher levels of America's entertainment industry:

> *Now please, domino, domino*
> *Only spot a few blacks the higher I go*
> *What's up to Will? Shout out to O*
> *That ain't enough, we gonna need a million more*

2.4. Black Fame and "Making It"

One of the most important songs on *4:44* (2017) is "The Story of O.J.", in which Jay-Z criticises former professional American footballer O.J. Simpson for not being as supportive of other notable Black Americans, and for trying to distance himself from Blackness once he achieved mainstream fame and fortune. The interlude to the song states "O.J. like 'I'm not black, I'm O.J.'", followed by a sarcastic, if-you-say-so comment, "…okay" (Jay-Z, 2017). Once considered the pride of the Black American population in the 1980s (and during and after his contentious murder trial), Simpson fell from grace after various run-ins with the law. In what became the most publicised criminal trial up until that point, Simpson was tried for the murder of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simpson, and her friend, Ronald Goldman. The prosecution produced evidence of domestic abuse during his marriage to Ms Brown, as well as evidence of his DNA at the crime scene, and the DNA of the victims at his home (they were murdered on Ms Brown's property). The defence, in turn, argued that the Los Angeles Police Department personnel assigned to this case were driven by a volatile mix of racial hatred, greed, and fear of repeated failure in high profile cases, and therefore they directed their attention exclusively to O.J. Simpson and bolstered the considerable circumstantial evidence by cross-pollinating blood and fibre evidence in trekking back and forth between O.J. Simpson's house and the crime scene (Lassiter, 1996: 70).

Ultimately, Simpson was acquitted of all charges. He still, however, spent time in prison for unrelated charges pertaining to a 2007 Las Vegas robbery (Pitts, Giacopassi, & Turner, 2009: 215). His criminal history aside, Jay-Z uses the example of O.J. Simpson to critique the many divisions that exist within Black communities. These are the lyrics to the chorus of the song:

> *Light nigga, dark nigga, faux nigga, real nigga*
> *Rich nigga, poor nigga, house nigga, field nigga*
> *Still nigga, still nigga*

The repetition of the pejorative term in every second word of the chorus draws attention to the way Black people are viewed by America. Jay-Z makes the point that, although Black people try to find internal ways in which to establish a hierarchy (skin colour, socio-economic standing, and perceived intellectual capacity, amongst others), their most defining factor, the one that is constantly used to value them, is that they are Black. The point being made here is that playing into colonial hierarchies put in place to create rifts within Black communities can only be to the detriment of the collective. Otherwise put, "perhaps being

named ‘black’ was just someone’s name for being at the bottom, a human turned to object, object turned to pariah” (Coates, 2015: 55). As such, nothing that Black people do will be sufficient to elevate them to a status equal to that of white people, and so their attempts to distinguish themselves from other Black people are futile. Instead of distancing themselves from other Black people in an attempt to be perceived as better than them, or above them, Jay-Z articulates a new message – whatever Black you are, you need to support other Blacks and be proud of your Blackness. As he puts it – “too much enemy fire to catch a friendly” (Jay-Z & West, 2011).

I read this criticism of a Black public figure displaying a degree of shame in being associated with Blackness as Jay-Z contending that Blackness instead be fully embraced and celebrated. This is a positive message to send to all his young, Black supporters who may have been made to feel ashamed of their Blackness, either consistently or at some point in their lives. O.J. Simpson is an important figure as a Black man who was so widely celebrated as a football legend across racial boundaries. His relation to race is also significant as his infamous murder trial was undeniably racially charged and exposed many of the existing systems of bias against individuals of colour operating within the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The case polarised America, with the trial having both “reinscribed racial separation” and simultaneously having “provoked strong solidarity within Black and within White communities” (Grabe, 2010: 44). A study conducted by Grabe (2010: 45) explored the representation of O. J. Simpson in the media ahead of his trial and found that Simpson was “clearly shown as the guilty and evil force who was psychologically unstable and became so enraged that he took revenge on his former wife by brutally murdering her and Ronald Goldman”. Regardless of whether Simpson did in fact commit the crime, he was portrayed as guilty long before a conclusion was reached in the legal trial, in the same way the exonerated Central Park Five were portrayed in the media ahead of their trials. In his critique of O.J. Simpson, Jay-Z once again sends the message that Black people cannot attempt to distance themselves from one another or from Blackness, because, as is evidenced by the O.J. case, the default position of “bad Black” is quickly reverted to both with little evidence and regardless of what this person represented before he allegedly did the thing in question.

CHAPTER THREE

BLACK PEOPLE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

DuVernay's limited series *When They See Us* (2019) affords viewers the unique opportunity to experience the story of the Central Park Five from the perspectives of the young men who were named as perpetrators. The case has become infamous as one of the most publicised and well-known in recent public memory. Even so, in comparison to the wealth of resources on the subject across different media forms, few accounts of the incident and its aftermath include the points of view of the five men who were wrongfully convicted of this violent crime as young boys. Another such piece is the 2002 film *The Central Park Five* (Burns et al., 2002). While *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) is listed as a TV drama, *The Central Park Five* (Burns et al., 2002) is a documentary. Both pieces succeed in uncovering the trauma experienced by these five boys and their families, both during the trial and beyond it. DuVernay (2019) describes one of the major driving forces behind her desire to tell this story as an attempt to humanise the boys who, in having been unjustly forced to navigate the USA's criminal justice system, had their youth stripped away during a case in which it is still hard to believe they were convicted.

The series was released on popular online streaming platform Netflix. This means that it was instantly accessible to viewers across the globe and thus succeeded in sparking a broader public conversation around contemporary race relations, both in the USA and outside of it. The fact that it was, from its initial release, made available on an international platform, is key in understanding the global impact of the piece, as well as how it managed to enter the realm of international public discourse. Yusef Salaam told Heather Finn of *Good Housekeeping* (2019: para 2):

> In the beginning, there were so many articles written about us […] But when we were found to be innocent 13 years after we were accused, there was no public outcry in the same way that there was a public outcry when they thought that we were guilty. In many ways this [series] has restored that kind of public outcry […] and it's overwhelmingly positive.

This fact speaks to the disconnect between a theoretical belief in justice and a "societal willingness to tolerate and accept racial inequality" of which Cummings (2010: 500) speaks, and is particularly pertinent given the significance of the USA in terms of the production of

mainstream, globally accessible popular culture works. The plain truth is that the USA's extraordinarily successful and established entertainment industry decides which stories are to be told, and which will be immortalised as a result, indicating that "American pop culture is clearly a global phenomenon" (Crothers, 2017: 2). *When They See Us* (2019) forms part of a larger franchise of work produced by Black creatives that tells stories of embodying Blackness, and all the beauty and burden that accompany it, contributing to the archive of the lived experiences of Black people being brought to life within the realm of popular culture.

Over the past three decades, the case of the now exonerated Central Park 5 has experienced times during which it has received heightened public attention and media coverage. The first, and unparalleled, is the period between April 1989, when the assault took place, and December 1990, when all five of the boys had been convicted of the attack on Trisha Meili. In June of 2002, the case once again dominated headlines when convicted rapist, Matias Reyes, confessed to the rape and assault of Trisha Meili thirteen years prior. An encounter with Korey Wise in Auburn prison had left Reyes feeling guilty that Wise was struggling with being incarcerated for a crime he committed himself (Stodghill, 2002). In his confession, he stated that he had acted alone in the attack on Meili, as had been the case in all of his other known assaults. His DNA also matched samples recovered from the crime scene – the same samples that the prosecution failed to connect in any scientific terms to any of the five boys convicted of the rape. In December of 2002, upon the recommendation of Manhattan District Attorney Robert Morgenthau, the convictions of Yusef Salaam, Kevin Richardson, Korey Wise, Raymond Santana, and Antron McCray were overturned by Justice Charles Tejada (Saulny, 2002). At the time of their exoneration, Santana was incarcerated for drug charges unrelated to what happened in the park in 1989. With his 1989 conviction now overturned, he was subsequently resentenced as a first-time offender for the drug charges and released with time served.

The following year, the New York City Police Department conducted an internal investigation in which they found no wrongdoing on the part of any of their employees during the Central Park Jogger case, despite the fact that it resulted in the wrongful conviction of five young boys. Despite Reyes' confession, the DNA match, and the decision to overturn their convictions, the city maintained that they were likely guilty, with prosecutor Linda Fairstein stating that Reyes' DNA match "does not exonerate the other five, who by their own admissions participated in her attack by holding her down and striking her to the ground" (Stodghill, 2002). Soon after, Trisha Meili, formerly known as the Central Park

Jogger, in order to protect her identity, made her name public when she published a memoir titled *I am the Central Park Jogger* (2003). More than a decade after they brought a suit against the city of New York for their wrongful convictions, the five men once again made headlines in 2014 when the case concluded in their favour and they were compensated in the amount of $41 million, the largest in New York City history (The Guardian, 2014). After the release of *When They See Us* (DuVernay) in May of 2019, the case experienced a revival of sorts, and was catapulted back into the public domain. This remains one of the great triumphs of the series, as this revisiting of the case led members of the public to push for those involved in the wrongful conviction of the five boys to face consequences in ways they did not when the men were exonerated.

Renewed outrage was widely expressed and targeted specifically at Linda Fairstein, head of the Manhattan District Attorney's Sex Crimes Unit, when the charges were brought against the Central Park Five back in 1989. Petitions began to circulate to have her removed from the boards of various non-profit organisations, as well as her alma mater, Vassar College (Ly, 2019). In addition, Fairstein's career as a writer of mystery novels was curtailed by her publisher, E.P. Dutton (Ly, 2019). In response, Fairstein wrote an op-ed for the Wall Street Journal, titled *Netflix's False Story of the Central Park Five: Ava DuVernay's Miniseries Wrongly Portrays Them as Totally Innocent – And Defames Me in the Process* (2019). In it, she asserts her belief that DuVernay's dramatisation of the case is "so full of distortions and inaccuracies as to be an outright fabrication" (Fairstein, 2019: para 2). She is currently pursuing a case of defamation against Netflix, DuVernay, and *When They See Us* (2019) writer Attica Locke (BBC, 2019). Elizabeth Lederer, lead prosecutor in the case of the Central Park Five, also resigned from her teaching post at Colombia law school following backlash from the release of the Netflix miniseries (Ly, 2019).

Thus, on a pragmatic level, the series has achieved a number of purposes. Firstly, it has achieved the kind of "public outcry" Salaam describes as lacking in the response to their exoneration in 2002. Secondly, it has, to some degree, ensured that those who played a role in the miscarriage of justice that was the case of the Central Park Five be held accountable for their actions. While the five boys have suffered devastating consequences over the past three decades, those involved in the orchestration of their suffering are finally forced to reckon with the effects of their actions in tangible ways – a direct result of the series "moving people to action" (DuVernay, 2019) and at least partially righting a wrong, as DuVernay aimed to do. In her words,

> Entertainment serves all kinds of purposes. I love horror, I love romance, I love action but to be able to create something with my collaborators that is actually gonna move people to action, move people to evaluate what they think and how they behave in the world was our goal (DuVernay, 2019: para 7).

In demanding that establishments that supported those involved over the past thirty years rethink their allegiance, this kind of public action also calls into question the institutions of which those people were a part in 1989; institutions that allowed them to convict five young boys of a crime they did not commit, strip them of their youth, and destroy their lives. Lastly, the Black woman-led team responsible for the series has produced a piece that serves as an affective account of the story of five young Black boys formerly misrepresented to the world. It allows them the chance to control the narrative and for the viewer to experience the story from their perspective, an opportunity they were not afforded thirty years ago. In so poignantly representing the story of how racial bias and profiling impact the lives of young Black males in the USA, DuVernay (2019) uses the series to denounce both past and present state-sanctioned racism.

Shortly after the release of *When They See Us* (2019), the five exonerated men, the cast of the series, and its director, Ava DuVernay, sat down for an interview with Oprah Winfrey. The interview was released via Netflix as an hour long special titled *Oprah Winfrey Presents: When They See Us Now* (2019). Each of the cast members, who play the Five at the ages they were when the incident occurred, shows a deep respect for the trauma experienced by the five boys accused of this horrific and violent crime. Winfrey asks the men whether the $41 million settlement they received after the charges against them were vacated can, to any extent, compensate for the time they spent in prison. Each was compensated roughly $1 million for each year that they were wrongfully incarcerated (Weiser, 2014). All five responded with a resounding “no”. *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) tells the story behind their responses. Each of the four parts focuses on different aspects of their journeys, as well as different themes. DuVernay develops each character fully and offers the viewer a far more realistic and well-rounded portrayal of Black boyhood than had been offered to the public throughout the case of the Central Park Jogger. The first episode shows their lives before the night of 19 April 1989, and the events that followed immediately after, which led to their arrest. We see them vilified both in the media and by the New York Police Department (NYPD) in the period leading up to their trials, with many of the gross stereotypes long associated with Black males being invoked to speak about them and the case. In the second episode, the focus is on their trials and the ways in which they were

physically separated, in contrast to how they were often lumped together and portrayed to the public as a crime-obsessed wolf pack that had chosen Trisha Meili as their prey. We see the beginning stages of Korey Wise's extreme isolation from the other boys, being tried, sentenced, and incarcerated as an adult on the notorious Riker's Island at the age of sixteen. After their trials, Korey would have no contact with any of the other boys for the duration of their prison sentences.

Part three gives the viewer a glimpse into the struggles faced by the families of the boys, both during their incarceration and after their release. We are offered a window into the hardships the men face after their release as a result of them being registered as sex offenders and branded rapists, epitomised by the way Raymond's stepmother treats him in his own home. We also see how their socioeconomic circumstances further compound their struggles. Drawing attention to socioeconomic inequality in various forms constitutes a major theme in many of the cultural productions released by Black entertainers and creatives, such as DuVernay and Jay-Z. Although Jay-Z is relatable by virtue of his past, him never having been arrested or harmed as a result of his status as a drug dealer, and then entirely transcending all of the circumstances he describes in his music to become a successful, billionaire rapper and businessman certainly distances him from the struggles and experiences of the average Black American male. As a result, he often emerges as an aspirational figure rather than one that represents a realistic opportunity set for young Black youths living in the kind of conditions he describes having grown up in. The telling of the stories of the five boys in *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) also serves the purpose of representing the more likely scenario of Black boys ending up in the criminal justice system if they affiliate with any aspect of criminality, to whatever degree. As we see with the Five, once this happens, the already limited course of possibilities could then become completely stunted.

Wise remains behind bars on Riker's Island long after the others are released, a particularly devastating fact in light of the revelation that, in his role as friend and protector, he only accompanied Yusef Salaam to the station to look out for him. Korey never returned home, as he was interrogated and held as a suspect, and his family was unable to post his bail while awaiting trial. The fourth part focuses on Wise and how he had to learn to navigate incarceration at an adult facility. Due to the sensationalism of the case, he is not well liked and struggles to keep himself safe. He is brutalised so often that he opts to ask for solitary confinement and then a transferral, which means he is now further away from his family and

will see them even less. Through her illustration of Korey's story, DuVernay further comments on the effects of socioeconomic standing on prisoners of colour throughout the incarceration period. Wise is released after nearly twelve years behind bars, having stopped appearing before the parole board and maintaining his innocence throughout. Finally, the viewer sees Matias Reyes confess to attacking Trisha Meili, and, along with the rest of the country, the men hear and react to the news of their exoneration.

3.1. Targeting by Law Enforcement

DuVernay (2019) starts off the series in the same way the ordeal started out for the Five – with them simply being young boys. Antron is home with his father, having lunch and talking about baseball. Kevin is walking through the neighbourhood returning from his trumpet lesson with his older sister, Angie. Korey is with his girlfriend, who confronts him about staying away from school. The opening is particularly powerful because it shows the boys as exactly that – boys. They are not making trouble or engaging in any illegal activity, but simply going about their lives as young boys living in Harlem, on break from school. This contrasts greatly with the first public images of the boys after the rape, which took place in Central Park. The juxtaposition created through these opening shots and the images of the newspaper covers, with headlines such as *Wolf Pack*, quickly begins to paint a picture of how powerful and all-encompassing media portrayals can be in the eyes of the public. Soon, through such headlines and reporting, the young men become symbols of the "criminal menace that white New Yorkers felt had captured their city" (Dahl, 2009). For example, on 21 April 1989, the Daily News' front page read "*WOLF PACK'S PREY: Female Jogger Near Death After Savage Attack by Roving Gang*" (Morales, 1989), stated as fact before the boys were tried.

Then begins the sequence of events that will change their lives forever, stealing their youth and turning them into five of the most hated people in America as they head to Central Park. Once they get to the park, the boys witness and at times participate in the antics of the older boys in the group and are present when park-goers are taunted, threatened, harassed, and assaulted by the group, albeit in different capacities. Still, their presence and involvement, to whatever degree, should never have translated into their involvement in the brutal rape and assault of Trisha Meili. When the police show up, everyone scatters. The young boys, even the ones who are innocent of the crimes perpetrated by certain members of the group, recognise that encounters with law enforcement rarely end well for Black people. While some

manage to evade the police, others are not successful. Kevin and Raymond are among the boys apprehended by police and taken to the police station. What comes of their trip downtown is aptly explained in Coates' description of what it means for a Black male to be apprehended or even just stopped by the police: "these officers had my body, could do with that body whatever they pleased, and should I live to explain what they had done with it, this complaint would mean nothing" (2015: 76). In the encounter that leads to his arrest, an officer hits Kevin with his helmet, an act of police brutality defined as "a form of unwarranted physical violence perpetrated by an individual or group symbolically representing a government sanctioned, law enforcement agency as opposed to an individual perpetrator who only represents themselves" (Bryant-Davis, Adams, Alejandre, & Gray, 2017: 853). As if to perfectly illustrate Coates' point, an adult Kevin Richardson describes how other police officers laughed at him when he told them that the injury on his face was the result of one of their fellow officers assaulting him (Burns et al., 2012). In an epic display of betrayal by law enforcement, the injury unlawfully inflicted upon him by a member of the NYPD would later be presented to the other boys as proof that he was involved in the attack on the jogger, convincing them that it was sustained while she was trying to fight him off. Later, they would convince Kevin to state, on tape, that Meili had scratched him. This fact is then used against him in his trial regardless of the fact that none of his DNA is found on the victim, not even underneath her fingernails.

At the precinct we see the unfolding of events that lead to the boys being considered witnesses and then suspects in the rape and assault of the Central Park Jogger. Linda Fairstein, head of the Sex Crimes Unit, announces that they need make a statement to the reporters waiting outside, a moment which foreshadows the extreme media attention this case would receive, as well as the role the media would play in pressuring police to hastily form a theory and timeline, and arrest suspects.



Figure 3.1: The boys and their families are hounded and slandered by the media from the moment they are announced as suspects (DuVernay, 2019).

She instructs her officers to go to Harlem and round up any young, *Black*[1] males believed to be in the park the previous night. We see her attempting to gather all the pieces of the various crimes that took place in the park on the night of Meili's attack and come to the conclusion that the group of boys out "wilding" *had* to have been involved in the attack – "They're not witnesses, they're suspects. To think we were gonna release these animals to family court" (DuVernay, 2019). This moment is significant, as we see that even members of law enforcement harbour dangerous and destructive biases about Black males; Fairstein draws upon the stereotype of the bestial Black man to speak of five young boys who had just barely become suspects. Moreover, Fairstein's words and actions as a white woman, who is also pursuing justice for a white, female victim of a horrific sexual assault. This once again points to the legacy of white women being perceived as needing extreme protection from Black men, illustrating the fact that "interaction between Black men and white women has been at the center of violence and resentment between the two race groups for centuries" (Grabe, 2010:38).

[1] I have italicised the word *Black* here in order to emphasise both the specificity of Fairstein's instruction, as well as the contempt with which she issues it, having already linked the boys to the attack on the jogger with very little evidence of their involvement.

At the first mention of a rape, Antron's mother becomes visibly fearful and emotional. With the background blurred, we see her stand up and move towards her son, reaching out as if to try and physically shield him from the vile accusations being levelled at him. Linda McCray's reaction embodies disgust at the implication that her fourteen-year-old son could be involved in such a gross and violent sexual act, and illustrates the panic of a parent whose young child is now being accused of sexual assault. Once she leaves, her husband speaks to an officer in confidence, who lets on that Bobby has been incarcerated before. We are given insight both into Linda's immediate panic as well as what would soon become Bobby's major driving force in convincing his son to lie about his involvement in what happened to the jogger. He wants to prevent his son from suffering the same fate as him and genuinely believes he is acting in Antron's best interests in convincing him to say what he believes the officers want to hear. His panic is informed by the knowledge that entering the criminal justice system as a Black man would alter his son's entire life trajectory, and makes a decision he believes will spare Antron the trauma of going through what he experienced himself. Bobby's choice and Linda's reaction are perhaps best contextualised by the following excerpt from *Between the World and Me* (Coates, 2015:82- 83):

> Black people love their children with a kind of obsession. You are all we have, and you come to us endangered. I think we would like to kill you ourselves before seeing you killed by the streets that America made. This is a philosophy of the disembodied, of a people who control nothing, who can protect nothing, who are made to fear not just the criminals among them but the police who lord over them with all the moral authority of a protection racket. It was only after you that I understood this love, that I understood the grip of my mother's hand.

The officer convinces him to talk to his son alone, which Bobby reads as his opportunity to control what happens to his son, and gladly does with the aim of training Antron to follow the course of action he believes will best protect him. Antron is in a lose-lose situation; if he tells the truth, he risks angering both his father and the police officers. If he lies, he risks implicating himself in a crime he had no involvement in. When Antron states that he does not think he should lie, his father loses his temper, throws a chair into the wall and screams at his son, thereby asserting his dominance and backing Antron into a corner (DuVernay, 2019):

> Tron, these police will mess us up! They're not playing! They're not. Look… when the police want what they want, they will do anything. Do you hear me? Anything. They'll lie on us. They will lock us up. They will kill us. I ain't gonna let them kill my son. But you don't know nothing about that yet. But you *will* do what they say. You will go along. Do you understand me? [screaming] Do you understand me?



Figure 3.2: Antron McCray's father pressurises his son to say what he believes will allow him to return home (DuVernay, 2019).

Bobby's reaction reveals the generational trauma of a Black father who knows what it means for a Black man to have been dehumanised and made small by the law, and who would do anything to protect his son from experiencing it first-hand. Gordon, Nichter, and Hendrikson's belief that the "unique sociocultural experiences of Black males […] often influence Black male development and can continue to impact Black males in future generations especially as it relates to their roles as fathers" (2013: 154) is illustrated in this interaction. Bobby's experience with being on the wrong side of the law, and dealing with law enforcement as a Black man more generally, is thus seen to have a significant impact on the way he parents Antron. The psychological interpersonal trauma Bobby experienced after having survived an experience that threatened "his life or bodily integrity" (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017: 852) is beautifully and devastatingly illustrated by the character's distant, bewildered looks as he is forced to relive his harrowing experiences. This performance reveals the effect that these instances still have on him as they are seen to overwhelm his "ability to cope by creating feelings of hopelessness or intense fear" (Bryant-Davis et al., 2017: 853), which have a direct bearing on his reaction to the possibility of his son having to

go through what he has experienced. We later see that the manifestation of this intergenerational trauma has devastating effects for Antron.

The chaos of the interrogation scenes mimics the confusion, fear, exhaustion, and various stages of bargaining entered into by the boys, who just want to go home after a long and confusing day. They are fed names and information; they make up their confessions up as they go along. Officers subtly correct them and add information, taking selective notes before Assistant District Attorney Lederer begins to tape their confessions. The camera jumps between scenes of officers screaming in their faces, assaulting them, them crying and begging to go home, them explaining to their family members that they had made a deal of some sort, a deal in which each of them believe that they have implicated only the others and not themselves in exchange for finally being able to go home. The use of camera angles is interesting in these scenes, as it sets up and significantly contributes to how we, the audience, view the young men in a hostile situation. The camera angles, close-ups, and close quarter shots in the interrogation rooms also aid in pitting authority against vulnerability. The repetition of questions and the confusion, which we see clearly in the boys' responses over time, elicits an affective experience of feeling for the young men.

Going home and avoiding further interrogation thus becomes an attractive short-term reward for the boys. A study performed by Cauffman, Shulman, Claus, et al. (2010) show that adolescents are "more sensitive to immediate rewards and less sensitive to long-term negative consequences", indicating that, in this case, the boys would in all likelihood have been greatly enticed by the promise of putting an end to their time at the precinct, and "insufficiently attentive to the long range implications of confessing" (Malloy, Shulman, & Cauffman, 2014: 182). Admissions of guilt are so significant that their existence tends to impede the consideration of other relevant and important evidence in an investigation (Malloy et al., 2014: 181). The police officers and detectives working on this case know this, of course, and employ a number of tactics to pressure the boys into confessing, illustrating the power of police officials and debunking the sentiment that they are neutral, care only about facts, and are merely upstanding citizens enforcing the law.

At times throughout the series, Assistant District Attorney Elizabeth Lederer emerges as something of an ally within the NYPD, often butting heads with Linda Fairstein. Fairstein is only concerned with justice for the victim. Ironically, she is unable to see that, largely because of her actions, soon the jogger will no longer be the only victim in this case. Noble as

her quest for justice for victims of sex crimes may have been, Fairstein becomes obsessed with being the hero, seeing herself as a saviour in the fight against gender based violence and being blinded by her desire to appear to have solved a horrific crime that she fought for control over. This is echoed in the way she is often centred in the frame and has stern, unsympathetic facial expressions in much of her interaction with both members of defence and law enforcement, displaying her authority. Lederer points out that, before the description of the rape by the five boys, there are moments where their stories align. Thereafter, it is as if they are telling five different stories. In reality, they were. The details of what they were saying in their confession tapes were bits and pieces of information fed to them by officers and detectives, and not what they saw or did themselves. Fairstein expresses concern over the fact that she is the one who needs to face a jury with what she describes as "a stack of wildly conflicting statements, no physical evidence, no weapon" (DuVernay, 2019). In the end, however, she has a job to do, and sets out to find a way to strengthen the people's case against the five boys. While she may have been a cog in a malevolent machine, powerless to stop its destruction, her complicity is highlighted, as she becomes the very tool used to seal their fates in court.

Each of the boys also had different responses from their families. While Yusef's interrogation is interrupted by his mother before he signs a statement or tapes a confession, Korey continues to be interrogated without an adult present, since he is sixteen years old. His mother is shown struggling to find him, constantly on the phone and moving between police stations. When she eventually makes her way to the correct station, she is confronted by journalists hungry for any details of the case not reported on before. Unfortunately, she is too late. Wise had already been assaulted by police officers and had been forced into making a statement. In a touching moment, he laments, "I just came to look after Yusef" (DuVernay, 2019), indicating that he was not even meant to be there. The other four boys are brought together in a holding cell, where they see each other for the first time since the arrests. Kevin explains how he got the scar on his face, and Antron admits to witnessing the cop hit him with his helmet. The reality of what they have done to each other – sold each other out because they were all so afraid – sets in, and their shared distraught is palpable. Later, they all admit to lying about each other, and Salaam points out "they made us lie" (DuVernay, 2019), with "they" referring to the NYPD. The boys, in an act of what they believed to be self-preservation, had offered each other up to America's mass incarceration system.

The first part ends with the announcement that five suspects have been arrested in the Central Park Jogger case, an announcement New York City had been waiting for following the fallout of the gruesome attack that left a woman in critical condition. The boys are led out of the precinct in handcuffs. It is dark out and they are surrounded by journalists and photographers, waiting to catch a glimpse of them. We cut to what each of them was doing on the afternoon before that fateful night in Central Park, bringing the viewer back full circle and reminding them of the normalcy of these boys' lives before they went to the park on 19 April. Additionally, we are taken on a journey of how they were roped into confessing to a crime they had no knowledge of before they were apprehended by law enforcement. They keep their heads down, cowering and fearful of a city that now hates them for a crime they did not commit. As the viewer, we get the sense of impending doom as DuVernay (2019) shows us the very last time they were ever allowed to just be boys, highlighting the heinousness of what is to come.

3.2. Racial Prejudice in Trial and Sentencing

Part two of *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) focuses on the trials of the five boys accused of assaulting and raping the Central Park Jogger. The Five continue to be slandered in the media ahead of their trials, epitomised by the words we hear at the very start of the episode, written by Pete Hamill (1990: n.p.) of the New York Post:

> Details didn't matter because there was no script. They were coming downtown from a world of crack, welfare, guns, knives, indifference, and ignorance. They were coming from a land of no fathers. They were coming from the wild province of the poor and driven by a collective fury brimming with the rippling energies of youth, their minds teeming with the violent images of the streets in the movies. They had only one goal: to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape. The enemies were rich. The enemies were white.

This excerpt from Hamill's article (1990) illustrates how this case was undeniably tainted by racial prejudice. Hamill draws on many tired and racist stereotypes formulated over the years (crack addicted, state dependant, ignorant Black folk with no fathers) in his description of the five boys. While, for example, Korey's mother did sell crack cocaine out of their home and Antron's father did leave his family, Hamill's words effectively reduce the boys to nothing more than this image he presents of them in the name of setting the scene for how these boys came to enact such a violent attack on Trisha Meili. The boys were public enemies long before they could be tried in a court of law, and this episode references one of their most powerful and vocal opposers: Donald Trump. Trump, in his then role as real estate magnate

and private citizen, went on air after publishing full page advertisements in four major New York City newspapers calling for the return of the death penalty in this case, to speak about the boys. The series does not dramatise Trump's role, but instead incorporates actual television footage of his words, allowing him to speak for himself:

> You better believe that I hate the people that took this girl and raped her brutally. You better believe it.
>
> And I think sometimes a black may think that they don't really have the advantage or this or that, but in actuality, today, currently, it's a great... I've said on occasion, even about myself, if I were starting off today, I would love to be a well-educated black, because I really believe they do have an actual advantage today (Duvernay, 2019).

When Yusef Salaam's mother is confronted by members of the press asking her opinion on Donald Trump calling for the death penalty for her son, she breaks down. Both her and her son publicly begin to sob, and embrace one another as they are confronted with how much the people of New York City hate these boys. Trump's role in vilifying the now exonerated Five is highlighted, reminding the world of the character of the man who became the president of the USA twenty-seven years after his civic contribution to this case. To this day, he refuses to apologise for the advertisements or to admit that the five boys whose death sentences he advocated for were innocent of the attack on the jogger.

The state took a number of steps to swing the outcome of this trial in its favour. Lederer expresses concern over the fact that each of the boys' tapes implicates the other four boys in the rape, but not themselves. So, in an effort to downplay how heavily conflicting the statements of the five boys are, the state makes the decision to split them up in their trials. They group Yusef, Antron, and Raymond together, while Korey and Kevin are tried together. The aim, as described by Fairstein in part two of the series, was to match stories that are closest to each other in terms of the way they are presented in the confession tapes and police notes. This would achieve the desired result of not drawing attention to how different all five statements were, and of convincing the jury that these boys, in specific combinations and capacities, were responsible for this crime. The boys' defence teams were also not informed of a sock containing traces of semen found at the scene of the crime ahead of their trials. The DNA from the sock was not a match for any of the five boys – Fairstein proposes that this be explained by suggesting there may have been a sixth assailant (who mysteriously does not appear in any of the confession tapes) who was not caught. She also suggests that Lederer "pretends the sock doesn't exist", since the defence is unaware of it. In portraying this

instance, DuVernay effectively comments on the fact that they had stopped investigating the crime, and instead decided on the boys and honed in on them as suspects, pursuing their guilty verdicts in a vacuum. In this way our attention is also drawn, once again, to the fact that officers of the law are not just neutral investigators of crime making their cities safer by pursuing criminals, but that they have the power to influence who become suspects, and how those suspects are presented.

When Lederer protests and proclaims that that would be crossing a line, Fairstein explodes and asks her "What line? There is no line for the victim!" Fairstein is portrayed as deeply passionate about her work and invested in serving justice for the victims of sex crimes, which are shown to be on the increase in New York City in 1989. Noble as this pursuit may be, it was not achieved through the proper channels, nor did it in this case result in the conviction of Ms. Meili's true, lone attacker. Ironically enough, it was the NYPD's haste to make significant strides very early on that led them to implicate the five boys within days and relentlessly pursue them as suspects without conducting a thorough investigation of this specific attack. As a result of what Fairstein constructs as an unrelenting pursual of justice for the victim, the actual perpetrator remained on the streets of New York, terrorising five more women, and killing one while her children listened from another room, until he was finally arrested two months later (Burns et al., 2002). True justice for the Central Park Jogger would have been chasing and capturing the perpetrator of her gruesome attack, and not creating victims out of boys innocent of the crime.

During the trials of the first three boys, two park goers harassed by groups of boys of colour on the night of the rape are called in as witnesses. The first testifies that they were grunting and making animal sounds, which terrified her. This description plays well into the image the prosecution wishes to project of the boys. Indeed, historic interactions between Africans and Europeans indicate that "blacks have been perceived as only narrowly removed from the animal kingdom", often described as "brutish, bestial or beastly" (Duru, 2004: 1318). The second witness states under oath that none of the three boys in the courtroom is the man that he identified in the line-up while his assault was being investigated. In an attempt to rouse shock, horror, and anger in the jury, Trisha Meili is called as a witness even though she is unable to recall the events of that night. The boys, however, pray that she would. Facts that point to their innocence begin to emerge – the technician who tested DNA from Meili's rape kit lets on that he also tested semen from a sock found at the scene of the crime. He reveals that the test from the rape kit was inconclusive and cannot be linked to any of the five boys,

and that the semen found on the sock contained DNA from one person only. It was not a match for any of the five boys. Raymond puts the rape at the wrong place, something that happened frequently throughout the boys' interrogations. The three boys are offered a plea deal and have to make a collective decision – they could accept it and receive a reduced sentence compared to what it would be if they proceeded with the trial and it went poorly for them, or they could reject it and proceed with the trial, risking a loss. Yusef states that he does not believe they should admit to something they did not do, and the others agree to continue with the trial. All of the boys would go on to maintain this stance throughout their prison terms, refusing to lie by admitting that they were involved in Meili's attack even when doing so may have resulted in the reduction of their prison terms.

The truth was unable to save them, as they were relentlessly pursued as suspects without law enforcement exploring any other possibility. Given this fact, Korey's time on the witness stand also greatly harms his case. When Lederer instructs him to read a statement, he tells her that he cannot read very well and becomes irritable when she continues to push him. Korey repetitively asks what her questions, such as whether he skipped school on the day of the attack, have to do with his case. He breaks down, refusing to answer her questions, stating that he is doing so because answering questions is what got him there in the first place, coming across to the jury as unstable and unhinged. This image aligns well with the way the boys were portrayed ahead of their trials – evil men on a crime spree through the park, terrorising innocent people, destroying everything in their wake and having "only one goal: to smash, hurt, rob, stomp, rape" (Hamill, 1990: n.p.). What was portrayed in court as the loss of temper of a dangerous man unable to keep his emotions in check or his animalistic urges at bay, DuVernay (2019) constructs as the understandable and heart-breaking fear, confusion, and frustration of a young boy on trial for a crime he did not commit, powerless to get himself out of a situation law enforcement put him in. Korey's emotional response reflects a situation Black people often find themselves in: Black anger,

> in response to the psychic (and physical) violence of anti-blackness, has no audience– instead, it is received as irrational, a sign of 'craziness' and Black infrahumanity. As such, unable to be externalized, it morphs into an 'imploding anger'. The metaphor of implosion is particularly apt here because it points to ways in which Black feelings, rather than serving as a mode of intersubjective relationality, function to further alienate the Black from the surrounding world. This self-alienation is emblematic of Black life, as the world works to consistently negate Black being… (Palmer, 2017: 43).

In one of the most moving scenes, we see a similarly emotional reaction by Korey. When the guilty verdict is announced as to the counts of assault in the first degree, sexual abuse in the first degree, and riot in the first degree at the end of his trial, he becomes incredibly agitated. The guilty charges come after he has been acquitted of the charges of attempted murder in the second degree and rape in the first degree, resulting in a false, momentary glimmer of hope that his innocence has been proven, and that he will not be serving any jail time. We see the change in his facial expression as he realises what is happening, panic taking over his body, and we are forced to look on as helplessly as all of the community members in his corner, knowing that the effects of institutionalised racism are about to change this boy's life forever. Upon the announcement of the three guilty verdicts, the courtroom erupts in protest, the camera moving between scenes of Korey's supporters in the courtroom and the boy himself, who becomes more anxious and upset as each verdict is read. The viewer watches in horror as Korey's fate is spelled out in court – as the first guilty verdict is delivered, we see a catatonic Korey shot from the back, his lawyer's hand slowly being rested on his shoulder in a display of solidarity and crushing defeat. In this way, the scene acknowledges the people who remained in his corner throughout the trial (his mother, protestors and supporters, and his lawyer), regardless of the vitriol aimed at them because of their support of the boys. Unfortunately, all of them were powerless to stop the inner workings of the criminal justice system once the boys were earmarked as suspects.

After all of his verdicts have been delivered, Korey directs his fear, confusion, and rage at Elizabeth Lederer, yelling "You liar! You lied on me!" (DuVernay, 2019) and, "in response to the […] violence of anti-blackness" (Palmer, 2017: 43) visited upon his life, charges at her until guards restrain him. The self-alienation of which Palmer (2017:43) speaks is powerfully illustrated through Korey's realisation that members of law enforcement have led him to the point of facing jail time for someone else's crime. The scene draws attention to how, under extreme scrutiny, the boys could not do anything right. It therefore criticises how, instead of Korey's emotional outburst being read as a scathing indictment of betrayal of a vulnerable and unwitting citizen, it is instead read as irrational and "a sign of craziness" (Palmer, 2017: 43) and further harms his image. Had he had no reaction, he would have been portrayed as a callous sociopath, yet hating the person who contributed greatly to his downfall is also seen as illogical, since much of America believed they had only themselves to blame. Fairstein and Lederer's roles in the framing of the boys once again becomes apparent, highlighting the shortcomings in the criminal justice system and drawing attention to how a system that is

meant to protect all of its citizens habitually fails those belonging to certain racial and socioeconomic classes.



Figure 3.3: Korey is restrained by guards as he reacts to his guilty verdicts and directs his anger at Lederer (DuVernay, 2019).

The fourth and final part of *When They See Us* (2019) focuses on Korey's experiences, because he was much worse off in terms of the circumstances of his incarceration than the other boys. We are given a window into the psychological trauma he, and to an extent the other boys, experienced. DuVernay's creative choices and an epic performance by Jherrel Jerome bring the viewer into the life of a prisoner in solitary confinement. Korey spends much of his time thinking back on his life before prison, at times torturing and overwhelming himself with thoughts of the events that led him there. The camera is positioned to show a bird's eye view of his small cell, revealing him lying in foetal position, bundled up, vulnerable, and defeated as a reflection of his mental state. The air-conditioning system in his cell is turned off and Korey strips naked in an attempt to escape the unbearable discomfort, once again illustrating his vulnerability. It becomes clear that the level of harassment Korey received before entering solitary confinement was so unbearable that he felt he was better off suffering the psychological trauma of isolation, which is so severe that is has been linked to high rates of suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and future criminal activity

(Birckhead, 2015:10). To keep himself sane, Korey imagines an alternate universe in which he elects to stay with his girlfriend instead of going to the park on that fateful night in April 1989. In his fantasies, he is young and free and tells his girlfriend that they can do whatever she wants to do. She tells him where she wants to go and he closes his eyes and opens his cell door to Coney Island, where he rides the rides, wins her a stuffed animal, and kisses her. In theory, what Korey is imagining is meant to be a reality for every American teenager. Instead, he wakes up to his reality as a Black boy in America, imprisoned for the brutal assault of a woman perpetrated by a criminal who could still be walking the streets of New York City.

From the beginning of the series, we experience a number of instances in which the boys are treated as criminal men. This speaks to the adultification of these young Black boys, which "comprises contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities" (Burton, 2007: 329). For example, although they are minors (with the exception of Korey), the boys are questioned and manipulated with extreme aggression, unable to protect themselves from self-incrimination. As the boys are now in a situation even most adults would struggle to navigate without seeking legal counsel, they are privy to "precocious knowledge […] witnessing situations and acquiring knowledge that are advanced" for their age (Burton, 2007: 336). Additionally, research indicates that "Black boys are perceived to be older" (by an average of at least four years older than their actual age, according to a study cited by the authors) and less innocent than White boys", suggesting that "force typically used on adults may be perceived as appropriate for a 14-year-old Black teenager" (Hall et al., 2016: 5).

The boys are clearly seen to experience this phenomenon, while other instances of their adultification can further be seen in the actions of the character of Linda Fairstein, who describes them as animals, is angered by Lederer's reluctance to incriminate the boys, never displays any desire to protect them as children, and encourages harsh treatment of the boys by law enforcement officers. The series explores the effects of and criticises racialised adultification by providing a detailed, affective narrative of the consequences thereof not only on the lives of five young boys, but also in terms of the cultural ramifications that accompany such a well-known case. Another example of this is shown using the character of Roberts, a guard, who takes a liking to Korey and brings him reading material, playing cards, and a chia pet. Roberts is shown to be Korey's ally, looking out for and protecting him as a father figure.

Korey tells Roberts that he likes it when he calls him "kid", highlighting how differently Roberts treats him, in contrast to how he is portrayed to the rest of the country. Roberts treats him as a boy who needs protecting like any other child, and not as the dangerous man he is made out to be throughout his trial.

3.3. Effects of Socioeconomic Context

The boys' and their families' socioeconomic context significantly contributes to this case. Outside their apartment building, Raymond Santana's father tells him that there is "too much trouble on the corner", and suggests that he goes to the park instead. Their socioeconomic circumstances thus play a substantial role in the reason for Raymond being in the park that night. His father recognised the dangers his son could have faced hanging out on the streets of Harlem, and decided to send him somewhere he believed would be safer for him. Coates (2019: 23), who was also a teenager in the late 1980s, describes the danger of which Santana's father warned –

> today you can approach any black person raised in the cities of that era and they can tell you which crew ran which hood in their city, and they can tell you the names of all the captains and all their cousins and offer an anthology of all their exploits.

Raymond Santana Senior states that he has lived with the guilt of encouraging his son to go to Central Park ever since April 1989, which he only did because he did not want Raymond getting into any trouble "on the corner" (Burns et al., 2012).

In another instance, some of the boys apprehended by police in Central Park produce a list of names of other boys who managed to evade the cops. The "army of blue" descends upon Harlem in search of the boys on the list and any other boys who may have been in the park that night. Among them is Yusef, who is out with Korey, when officers stop them and ask for their names. Before taking Yusef, the officer asks Korey whether he wants to go downtown with his friend, to which Korey agrees, stating that Yusef's mother will kill him if he does not. Through this we are able to see that Korey and Yusef were friends who genuinely cared about one another's wellbeing and had been taught to look out for each other as a result of their circumstances, and that they were never just two members of a gang linked only by their criminal desire to attack and destroy, as they were publicly portrayed. Korey's noble attempt to protect his friend thus makes him vulnerable to exploitation. At the station, Raymond's father arrives with his elderly mother, but soon states that he needs to go to work once he learns his son is not yet able to leave. Raymond Santana Senior is thus shown to be so fearful

of losing his job and so much in need of the money that he is unable to skip work and stay at the precinct to ensure his son's protection. Not realising the trouble Ray could find himself in without his father's presence and guidance, he leaves his Spanish-speaking mother at the station and heads off to work, a situation Raymond may never have found himself in had they not needed the money as much as they did. Kevin's mother is called into the station, but leaves shortly after arriving, as she is unwell. Her leaving voluntarily gives the officers the right to continue questioning him without the presence of a parent or guardian, which continues for a number of hours until his sister comes to collect him.

Unfortunately, the considerations of raising a Black son in an America, where being a Black male is dangerous or deadly, transcends even socioeconomic factors. A study conducted amongst middle and upper-middle class Black families shows that, although they "had more resources than their lower-income counterparts, they felt limited in their abilities to protect their sons from the harsh realities of being African American boys and men in America" (Dow, 2016: 162). While their families' upwardly traversing economic classes may significantly improve the opportunities available to young Black boys, and shield them from certain social ills, it does not stop them from being subjected to the experiences of racism universal to Black manhood in America. Even so, socioeconomic standing greatly affects the set of opportunities afforded to a child, as well as the resources they have access to. Throughout the trial, the boys' lawyers highlight inconsistencies in their fabricated version of events (in the confession tapes), though none of the boys are necessarily equipped with a particularly impressive legal team. Most of the defence team was not accustomed to taking on high-profile cases involving serious crimes, and did not necessarily specialise in criminal law, a direct result of the fact that the boys' families were unable to afford the kind of legal counsel that may have been able to do a better job of demonstrating their innocence beyond a reasonable doubt.

From the moment Korey makes the decision to accompany Yusef to the police station, he enters the criminal justice system and is not given any reprieve. His family does not have the money required for his bail, and he consequently has to remain in holding until his trial, unable to spend a last few moments with his family, in an environment that is familiar and comforting to him, imperfect as it may be. Once his trial is over, he is taken directly to Riker's Island. As a sixteen-year-old, Korey is imprisoned with adult males and brutalised both as a result of his age and his status as a sex offender. The fact that the woman he is accused of raping is white only compounds this fact. Korey Wise's story mostly brings to the

fore the effects of socioeconomic status on the journey of a child offender through the trial and incarceration process. Systems put in place to protect are rendered inaccessible to him because they only illicit more abuse – for example, we see that he is advised not to go to the infirmary because he will be construed as a snitch and further targeted. He requests a transfer and is moved to Attica prison, but is not spared any victimisation there and opts for requesting solitary confinement. Being in solitary confinement plays on his mind, and his extreme isolation is exacerbated by the fact that his mother is unable to afford the trip to and from Attica to visit him, resulting in him going without visitation for extended periods of time. She is also unable to give him any money for the commissary.

Thus, Korey is denied inmate privileges that could have helped him navigate the trauma of being put on trial and then imprisoned in an adult facility for a crime that somebody else committed as a result of his family's socioeconomic positioning. Ultimately, being Black is what got Korey questioned and tried in the first place, endangering his body, and being impoverished is what contributed greatly towards breaking his psyche once he was in the system. Contact points between the boys' race and socioeconomic class cannot be overlooked, as the combination of the two has a direct bearing on their quality of life both in prison, and once they are released – "White children are proportionally over-represented among the more advantaged segments of the child population, while children of historically disadvantaged racial minorities and America's 'new' immigrants make up disproportionately large shares of the economically deprived" (Lichter, Zhenchao, & Crowley, 2006: 8). While the other boys manage to stay out of legal trouble, Raymond Santana returns to prison on drug-related charges. Santana's story represents roughly 60% of American ex-convicts, who are rearrested within three years of their release (Petersilia, 2003), a disproportionate percentage of them being Black ex-prisoners who are released into "communities with differing levels of economic inequities that potentially constrain their ability to pursue conventional lifestyles" (Reisig, Bales, Hay, & Wang, 2007:427). All of the men struggle to build a life as ex-convicts upon their release, and their initially limited options are made further unattainable by the circumstances into which they are released.

When the men finally learn of their exoneration, it is not through any official communication from the city of New York, but through friends, family members, colleagues, and the media. Similarly, the series draws attention to the fact that they are not exonerated as a result of a desire to rectify the wrongs of a broken system, but as a result of the lone attacker coming forward. It thus criticises the system as it currently operates, since it relies on the conscience

of criminals who have succeeded in their transgressions being assigned to someone else, or the discovery of new evidence, to revisit cases that were grossly mishandled in the first place. Had it not been for the unlikely confession of Matias Reyes thirteen years after the crime, the Five would never have had their names cleared, and would all still be carrying criminal records from the attack perpetrated by Reyes. We see how their lives have changed, all the while being aware of how the case of the Central Park Jogger still weighs on them.

When They See Us (DuVernay, 2019) makes a concerted effort to amplify the voices who continued to fight instances of systemic racism and support its victims, and to highlight their messages and showcase the work they do to protect Black Americans from the perils of racism. In the final scenes of part four, activist Nomsa Brath introduces the men during a rally in Harlem after they were awarded the settlement of $41 million. The camera moves between the grown men and their parents standing in the crowd, overwhelmed with emotion. We see the men embracing one another in a display of camaraderie, and catch glimpses of the adult relationship between Korey and Yusef, who still share a close bond despite the traumatic series of events that transpired since they were teenage friends. Bonded by the trauma visited upon their bodies by an unjust system that has perpetuated the persistence of racial bias and oppression, the men stand before Harlem hand in hand as the camera slowly moves across, highlighting them as five individuals and not as the Central Park Five. This happens often throughout the series and is very significant, as their grouping together served to present them as a lawless gang through the erasure of the unique individual. Their individuality is not glossed over, but rather celebrated in the series.



Figure 3.1: The Exonerated Five stand before Harlem community members (DuVernay, 2019).

With their faces centrally positioned and taking up most of the frame, each of the actors who play the boys as teenagers are shown on screen, followed by intimate shots of each of the real life exonerated five men and accompanied by a short message on their lives presently to close off the series: see the five images from *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) below. This structure draws attention to how much time has passed since they were convicted, how much time they lost being punished for someone else's crime, as well as the loss of innocence experienced in detail by the viewer throughout the series. In so doing, DuVernay (2019) protests the racialised adultification of young Black males, mourning the lost youth of these five boys and criticising the persistence of systemic racism in America – it led to the public lynching of Black people in the early 1900s, to the unfair trials and disproportionately longer sentences handed down to Black people since then, to the national vilification of the Five in 1989, and to the targeting of Black males and their widely assumed criminality and suspicion by members of law enforcement presently.


ANTRON McCRAY is happily married and a proud father of six.
He resides with his family in Atlanta, Georgia.
He was the first of the accused men to leave New York City.


RAYMOND SANTANA JR. is the proud father of a teenage daughter, Melleah.
He currently resides in Georgia where he founded an apparel company,
Park Madison NYC, named after his beloved hometown.


YUSEF SALAAM resides in Georgia and is married with ten children.
He is a published author and public speaker,
advocating for policy change in the criminal justice system.

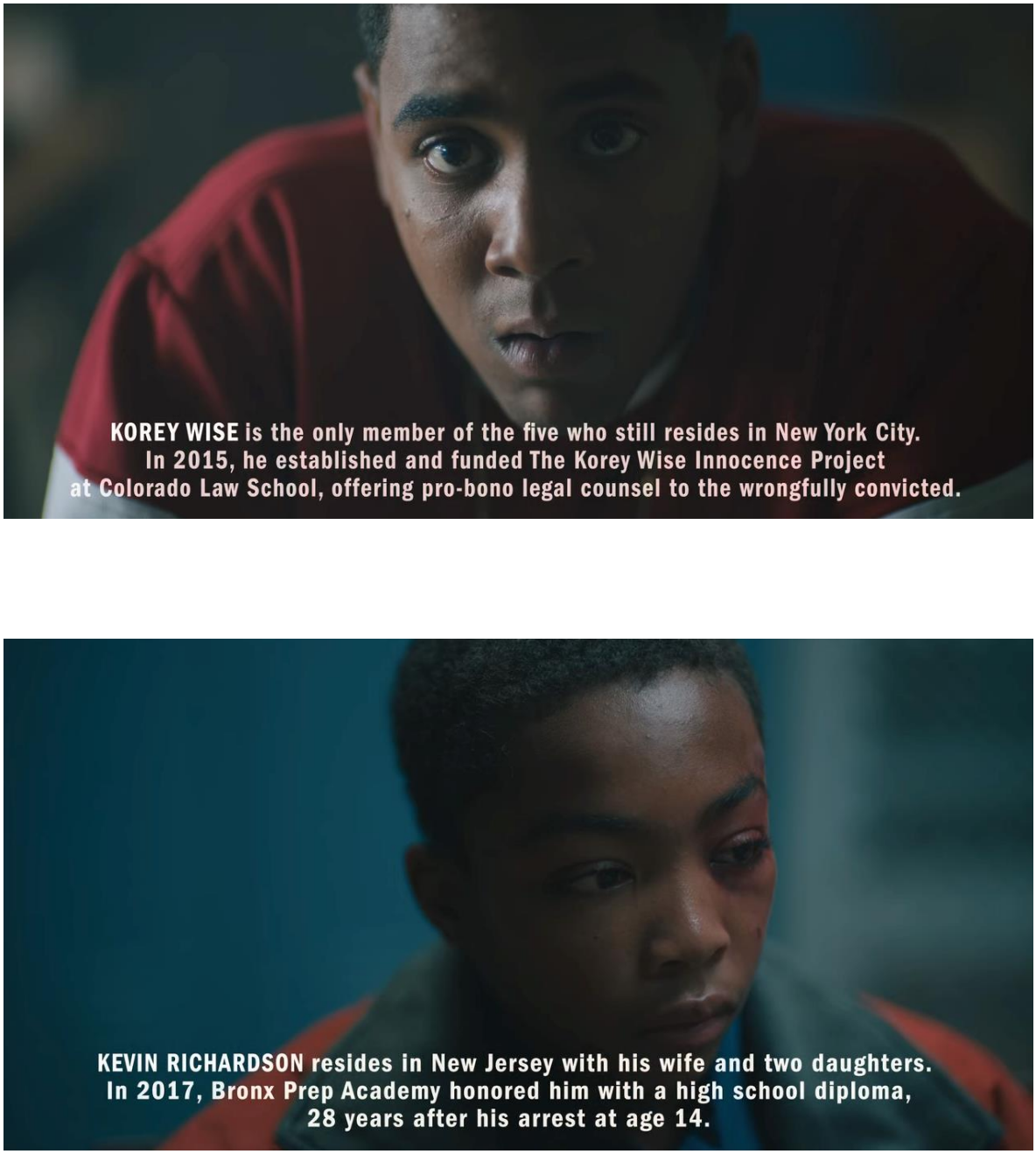


Figure 3.5: The Five after their exoneration

The popular culture productions of Black American creators such as DuVernay is critical in its reach. The release of *When They See Us* (2019) via a global platform such as Netflix made it instantly accessible to people across countries and continents, sparking a global discussion around racial injustice and its persistence today. While spurred on by events in the USA, this discussion extended to an analysis of the lived experiences of racial discrimination of people of colour in many countries where they share spaces with white people. Therein lies the

power of American cultural productions and current affairs – work created outside of this space rarely sees this kind of global reach, which is why an analysis of this kind of work becomes relevant to issues of race beyond the USA. Additionally, this medium is more accessible to far more people than academic writings on racism and white supremacy, as popular culture is the "primary pedagogical medium for masses of people globally who want to, in some way, understand the politics of difference" (hooks, 1997: 2). In much the same way, the current wave of Black Lives Matter protests happening in a number of countries across the globe were inspired by the killing of George Floyd while in police custody. As a result of the centrality of America and its race dynamics, pressure started to mount from all over the world for the officers involved in his death to be held accountable, and the incident inspired a global wave of protests against racial injustice. This phenomenon illustrates both the international ramifications of race relations in the USA, as well as the significant impact of its popular culture productions in igniting important conversations, which lead to actions and thereby fosters positive change.

CHAPTER 4

BLACK FAMILY LIFE

The white, heterosexual, nuclear families shown on classic American sitcoms such as *Full House, The Brady Bunch* and *Married… With Children,* are traditionally presented as the ideal family structure, while "the absent man, the absent father, has been the constant sign folks point to when they want to critique black families" (hooks, 2004: 95). Black males have become synonymous with absentee fatherhood, which is largely a function of the broader societal message that the work of active, present parenthood should fall to mothers. Black women are often the nucleus of their families, undertaking much of the parental responsibility on their own. Throughout the albums *Watch the Throne* (2011) and *4:44* (2017), Jay-Z presents an alternative to the absent Black father figure who contributes to family life by providing materially, if he in fact features at all. The notion that mothers are or should be responsible for the active and emotional facets of parenting, while fathers are responsible mainly for providing for the family, is challenged by the personas put forth by both Beyoncé and Jay-Z in a number of ways. Similarly, we see the impact of a present father through the relationships Antron McCray and Raymond Santana have with their fathers in *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019). More specifically, we see the trauma inflicted upon Antron's father when he realises that his actions have negatively impacted his son's life, as well as the devastation Antron faces when his father subsequently abandons the family. While Antron struggles to forgive his father for deserting him when he needed him the most, DuVernay (2019) does a beautiful job of representing the pain that informs Bobby McCray's decision to leave and constructing the character as three dimensional, instead of as the stereotypical deadbeat dad.

4.1. Absent Father Figures

> *My wife in the crib feedin' the kids liquid gold*
> *We in a whole different mode*
> *Kid that used to pitch bricks can't be pigeonholed*
> *I cooked up more chicken when the kitchen closed*

The above verse speaks to one of the important ways in which Jay-Z has transformed the representation of Black masculinity through his work. The line "kid that used to pitch bricks can't be pigeonholed" makes it clear that he has made a conscious effort not to be defined by

his past as a street-smart drug dealer. He acknowledges that piece of his history, but expands his identity as he introduces the image of the family man, the one who walked away from that life (closed the kitchen), but still found a way to build a fortune in order to provide for his family. In 2012, Jay-Z became a father when he and his wife, fellow music mogul Beyoncé, had their first child, a daughter named Blue. In 2017, the year *4:44* was released, they became a family of five after Beyoncé gave birth to twins, Sir and Rumi. What is significant about both Jay-Z and Beyoncé's later work is that they represent their family structure in a way that makes it clear that they both see it as their job to provide for their family materially and build a legacy for future generations of Carters to come. The notion of Black legacy is thus something the pair actively and consistently engages with. Simultaneously, they also make it clear that the role of active, conscientious parent is one that they both need to embody. In *When They See Us* (2019), we are not given any insight into why Raymond Santana Senior is raising Raymond Junior on his own, but we are provided with a compelling, realistic alternative image of a Black father acting in the best interests of his child through the decisions he makes for the child.

Jay-Z's own father left the family when he was a young boy, and he and his three siblings were raised primarily by their mother, Gloria Carter. This is not an unusual family structure in the neighbourhood Jay-Z grew up in, since it is estimated that "over half of all African American children will grow up in a female-headed household" (Whitaker, Whitaker, & Jackson, 2014: 230). In *When They See Us* (2019), Korey, Kevin, and Yusef are also raised by single mothers, and Antron's father abandons his family during their trials. While homes with both a mother and father are often presented as the family structure to strive for, hooks (2004) argues that the mere presence of a father is not enough, particularly when that figure is staunchly patriarchal, emotionally withholding, or even violent. She contends that, although these are not the kinds of white fathers portrayed in popular television shows – who are instead "kind protectors and providers who gave their children unconditional love" – "the presence of overwhelming research and data about the patriarchal white nuclear family" (2004: 95) indicates otherwise. The truth is that men in general have not been conditioned to be loving, present fathers to their children, but have rather been taught to focus on providing, if anything, and leave much of the day to day business of parenting to mothers. Much of the active parenting fathers do pertains solely to disciplining children, and stepping in when a situation is deemed beyond the control of the mother.

Two-parent homes (consisting of a mother and a father) are habitually presented as the ideal family structure, with children growing up in homes that do not reflect this feeling as though they are lacking, when the ideal family structure should simply consist of a loving, healthy home (hooks, 2004: 96). This can be achieved by single parent households, same-sex households, multiple households within a family, and any other possible family structure. "Fathers who are not present all the time can still be a loving presence" (hooks, 2004: 96), which is a sentiment Jay-Z expresses as his wish for himself as a parent in the event that he and the mother of his children were to split. In the 2011 track *New Day*, Jay-Z vows to be a loving and present father even before he has any children of his own. He speaks of how his father left their family, and promises to break the cycle by never repeating the actions of his own father.

> *And if the day comes I only see him on the weekend*
> *I just pray we were in love on the night that we conceived him*
> *Promise to never leave him even if his mama tweakin'*
> *'cause my dad left me and I promise never repeat him*
> *Never repeat him*
> *Never repeat him (Carter & West, 2011).*

In addition to making reference to breaking the cycle of absent fathers, Jay-Z also calls out older Black males who are, or in the case of Bill Cosby, were, seen as role models, claiming that they never accepted him and, by extension, members of the younger "hip-hop generation". On *Family Feud* (2017) he raps the following lines:

> *Al Sharpton in the mirror taking selfies*
> *How is him or Pill Cosby s'possed to help me?*
> *Old niggas never accepted me.*

The reference to Bill Cosby here is important. Once the image of the educated, loving, middle-class Black family man embodied by Dr. Huxtable on *The Cosby Show*, Bill Cosby has subsequently fallen from grace following disturbing allegations of sexual assault by a number of women. The cultural implications of this development cannot be understated. *The Cosby Show* was a wildly successful American sitcom, created and produced by Bill Cosby, which aired from 1984-1992, and enjoyed favourable ratings throughout its entire eight-year run. The show centred around the Huxtables, an upper middle class African American family living in New York. Critics hailed the show for its portrayal of a wholesome African American family devoid of tired stereotypes, and for being one of the first sitcoms to feature

an all-Black cast. However, in a study conducted amongst members of the Black middle class, Inniss and Feagin (1995) note among participants a general opinion that, although the show is well-received, they do not experience it as very realistic. One important point raised by many participants as an issue they had with the show, is that it did not adequately tackle race relations in the USA in the 1980s, and hardly explored any difficulties that Black people in the USA would realistically have faced. What this did was that it "allow(ed) Whites to excuse institutional discrimination and to become desensitised to racial inequality" (Gates, 1992), citing the Huxtables as an example of what is now possible in America for Black people, even though they did not reflect the reality of most Black Americans' lived experiences. Nevertheless, *The Cosby Show* did indeed present a positive alternative conceptualisation of Black fatherhood through the character of Cliff Huxtable, who was a fun-loving, present father.

In calling Bill Cosby *Pill Cosby*, a play on the fact that many of his accusers stated that he drugged them before assaulting them, Jay-Z points out his disappointment, or even rage, at the reality of having lost what was once considered the ideal representation of everything Black fathers could be when not confined to gross stereotypes. While the character of Dr Huxtable portrayed a positive image of a Black father, Cosby's subsequent fall from grace has shamefully undone much of the good that may have been achieved through the popularity of *The Cosby Show*. This seems to prove that he was, in fact, never all that different from the stereotypes readily associated with sexually violent Black males, and instead serves to prove their validity. Jay-Z also calls attention to another leader and father figure in Black communities – Reverend Al Sharpton. In 2007, Sharpton led a march to three major record companies in New York City to call for more decency in hip-hop lyrics. He claimed that he was not calling for censorship, but rather for hip-hop artists to protect the image of Black Americans, and made specific mention of the frequency with which rappers use the words "nigga", "ho", and "bitch". In the track *Say Hello* from his 2007 album "American Gangsta", Jay-Z addresses Al Sharpton:

> *And if Al Sharpton is speaking for me*
> *Somebody give him the word and tell him I don't approve*
> *Tell him I remove the curses*
> *If you tell me our schools gon' be perfect*
> *When Jena Six don't exist*
> *Tell him that's when I'll stop saying bitch*

Jay-Z criticises Sharpton for denouncing hip-hop as indecent when Black Americans are facing issues that he implies need more urgent attention. He makes mention of the schooling system that fails many African American youths, as well as issues of institutional racism which manifest in the disproportionately longer sentencing of Black Americans, indicating clear disparities in the sentencing of criminal defendants of different races (Etienne, 2006; Hall, 2020). Hall (2020: 673) notes that this kind of discrepancy stems from "the assumed innocence of white criminal defendants", the same kind of racist ideology that led to the outcome of the case of The Central Park Five, a "product of prosecutorial hegemony traditionally ascribed to race" (Hall, 2020: 673). In this track, Jay-Z speaks to this social justice issue by referencing the Jena Six. The Jena Six were six Black teenagers from Jena, Louisiana, who were convicted in the assault on a white scholar from their high school in 2006. The case was racially charged, as the six cited, amongst others, incidents of nooses hanging in trees in the schoolyard, as the reason for their attack. The hanging of nooses invokes the painful history of the lynching of Blacks, particularly in the southern American states, and was taken as a racist reaction to a Black boy sitting under the tree, formerly "perceived largely as the domain of white students" (Holt & Major, 2010: 582). The three white boys responsible for the hanging of the nooses were suspended from the school, which initiated "a series of conflicts between blacks and whites," including the incident in which the Jena Six attacked Justin Barker (Holt & Major, 2010: 582). The subsequent sentencing of the six teenagers was widely protested by Black Americans who felt it was too harsh (Barker was able to attend a school ring ceremony later the same day, but the six boys were charged with attempted murder), particularly in light of the sentencing white people had in the past received for similar crimes, and the sentencing white people had received in a number of the run-ins related to the same incident at the school.

Jay-Z draws attention to the case of the Jena Six in order to illustrate the kinds of issues facing Black Americans, which influence their lives far more negatively than his use of expletives in his music, and indicates a form of dialoguing with older Black males concerning ways in which he feels they are failing Black communities. Him calling out Bill Cosby and Al Sharpton as father figures and representations of the generation that came before him displays his belief that they do not occupy the moral high ground, and that they are not fit to judge his generation of Black men. He thus expresses a sentiment often explored in rap music, which is that he has very few role models to look to. Rapper J. Cole speaks of this concept in his song *No Role Modelz* (2014), in which he refers to the *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*

character Uncle Phil (played by James Avery) as the only father that he ever knew. Cole raps: "No role modelz and I'm here right now, no role modelz to speak of". Both Jay-Z and J. Cole point out the fact that they have had to learn to navigate life as a Black man with very few role models to look to as a result of the absent father figures in their lives, and produce work that points to their desire to break the cycle and change this fact for the next generation.

In *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019), we experience the intimate details of a father leaving his family and the effect this has on them. In a poignant scene just before Bobby McCray is to take the stand, Antron confronts him about his absence from the trial until then. He tells his father that nobody is blaming him for what happened, to which Bobby emotionally responds that he blames himself, his face and demeanour laden with the shame of his inability to safeguard his son when it mattered most; with the implosive guilt of having intimidated him into incriminating himself. The scene exposes the fragility and vulnerability of a parent who has failed to protect their child, and stands in contrast to Bobby's overt exertion of power when he forced Antron to lie. He takes the stand to explain the events that led to his son's false confession. He outlines his conversation with Antron and makes it clear that his son wanted to tell the truth, and that he instructed him not to. He states that Antron is a good boy who can be trusted. Experienced ADA Lederer capitalises on this assertion and asks McCray if he means that Antron's words can be trusted. He confirms, and she says, "Well, fortunately, we have his words. On tape" (DuVernay, 2019). Recognising this for the major setback that it was and almost admitting defeat, Antron solemnly turns to his lawyer and says "Thank you, Mr Joseph. I know you did your best" (DuVernay, 2019).

This incident would, in all likelihood, also have affirmed Bobby's belief that his family may be better off without him as he hurt his son's image during the trial. Through Bobby McCray, DuVernay (2019) constructs this father figure as complex and never simply dismisses him as a deadbeat or absent father, while simultaneously illustrating the devastating effects of his absence on his son. This urges the viewer to consider the cause and not just the outcome in relation to Black parents. She also emphasises the fact that, while Black parents are often criticised for their parenting choices, much of their decision making is rooted in the kind of love Coates (2015: 82-83) speaks of – characterised by a kind of obsession and willingness to do anything not to see their children persecuted by their own country. We see this in Sharon Salaam's reaction to watching the footage of Trump speak about the boys. She asks her friend: "What is a black?", referencing how Trump referred to Black people. Her friend responds, "I don't know. But, hell, maybe he's right. Sometimes you gotta ask yourself, when

is the white man gonna get a break in this country?" (DuVernay, 2019), after which they both start laughing. As viewers, we get a clear sense that they are laughing out of frustration, anguish, and near defeat. In disbelief, a distraught Sharonne Salaam says with a far-off look in her eyes, "They want to kill my son. That devil… that devil wants to kill my son. You gonna take out an ad about killing my son? They gonna have to come for me first. Better yet, I'll come for him" (DuVernay, 2019). This scene provides the viewer with a sincere look at the impact that this case had on the families of the boys as they suffered through the trauma of not only fearing for the freedom of their boys, but also fearing for their lives. In many ways, each family lost a son when the boys were imprisoned. This was further compounded by the fact that the loss they were mourning was widely and publicly celebrated as a victory against a wave of crime that had gripped the city. In addition to the loss of a family member, their lives were also affected in many other ways. For example, in part two of the series we see that Yusef's mother struggles to keep a job because her employers let her go once they found out who her son was. Both Jay-Z and DuVernay present Black family life as beautiful, although in need of serious introspection, as opposed to merely corrupt and dysfunctional.

4.2. Heteronormativity and the Role of Women

Jay-Z fantasises about raising a son, and about being the kind of father that he never had growing up. He manages to reconcile the hardened criminal he once was with the caring father-figure he vows to become. Perhaps because he grew up as a young boy without his father, he makes specific mention of having a son to impart his life lessons to. In this regard, hooks (2004: 98) emphasises that "Boys, especially, need adult men to be role models to teach them how to negotiate the patriarchy in ways that are not soul damaging, to show them how to work around the system, and to create healthy alternative self-concepts". In having spent a number of years negotiating the patriarchy to try and achieve exactly this, it is clear that Jay-Z has indeed found some ways to "work around the system". As a result of the social construction of the role of the mother comprising that of the loving caregiver, the role of the father

> is characterized to be that of a financial provider and disciplinarian. Boys are socialised to be serious and stern, and taught that to show warmth and sensitivity is a sign of weakness. As such, fathers traditionally have little involvement and responsibility on the child-rearing front (Garcia & De Guzman, 2017: 3).

The misguided belief that the work of parenting is more the responsibility of mothers than of fathers allows for the normalisation of absent fathers, and wounds children in the process. bell hooks (2004: 98-99) believes that,

> until black people of all classes are able to place value on the active participation of black males in parenting, black boys and young men will continue to believe that their purpose is simply to sire children, that they prove their manhood in a patriarchal sense by making babies, not by taking care of them.

This concept is very much linked to Black masculinity as often represented in terms of fatherhood – eager to conceive a baby, absent when it comes to parenting one. The notion of producing children as a way to prove manhood naturally presents a number of problems – the most apparent being that simply being the biological father of a child does not a good parent make. In conceptualising the kind of relationship he wishes to have with his child before that child is even born, Jay-Z demonstrates a kind of mindfulness in a lot of Black fathers that is not often acknowledged. Although he emphasises being able to provide for his family for generations to come in a material sense throughout the albums *4:44* (2017) and *Watch the Throne* (2011), he also explores much of the smaller, everyday acts of being a present father, proving that he does not wish to fit solely into the persona of "dad, the provider". The year after the track "New Day" (2011) was released, Jay-Z became a father to a little girl, and six years later, had the son he dreamed of sharing certain experiences with –

> *I just wanna take you to a barber*
> *Bondin' on charters, all the shit I never did*
> *Teach you good values so you cherish it*
> *Took me 26 years to find my path*
> *So my only job is cut the time in half*
> *So at 13, we'll have our first drink together*
> *Black bar mitzvahs, mazel tov, mogul talk*
> *Look a man dead in his eyes so he know you talk truth*
> *When you speak it, give your word, keep it*

Throughout the album *4:44* (2017), Jay-Z addresses his infidelity in terms of how it affects his self-image as a father and partner. He now has three children and still performs the work to repair his marriage and keep his family together after being unfaithful to his wife of nine years, and partner of several years before that. In the title track, he describes the shame he would feel if his children ever found out about his affair – "And if my children knew / I don't even know what I would do / If they ain't look at me the same / I would prob'ly die with all

the shame". Of course, the insertion of the word "if" is moot here, and perhaps points only to his thoughts before his infidelity became public knowledge. The Carters lead very public lives, and his children will undoubtedly find out at some point since the whole world knows about it. His use of the notion of shame in this context elucidates an interesting concept here – that the indignity of people finding out and of his children seeing him in a different light is what causes him to hang his head in shame, when a sense of shame clearly did not prevent him from being unfaithful to his wife.

Both this track and "Kill Jay-Z" are rife with confessions of mistakes he has made as a father and partner, mistakes that he sorely regrets. However, as White (2011: 86) points out, a significant part of the personal narrative Jay-Z has constructed centres around "carrying the weight of regret, the ability to live with the consequences of bad choices and continuing to move forward". In the verse below from "Kill Jay-Z" (2017), he expresses his desire to "do better" for the sake of his daughter, and offers a glimpse into his thoughts on raising a girl instead of a boy. He attributes his hardened persona to the absence of his father, having built up metaphorical armour in order to deal with the emotional neglect and detachment from the person who was meant to be his male role model. He then reprimands himself for this outlook, stating that he has to "get softer" now that he has a daughter:

> *And you know better, nigga, I know you do*
> *But you gotta do better, boy, you owe it to Blue*
> *You had no father you had the armour*
> *But you got a daughter, gotta get softer*

Indeed, it is certainly true that the world is different for girl children than it is for boy children, and that these nuances need to be accounted for in the process of conscious parenting. Females are disproportionately targeted as victims of gender-based violence, as well as a myriad of other crimes as a result of the fact that they are seen as easier targets than males. In terms of normative conceptions of the feminine, women are also traditionally considered to be more sensitive, more emotional, and more vulnerable. However, the notion that only girls really need a "softer" father who is able to reckon with emotions and display affection is entirely misguided. Boys also need to be taught, particularly by the male role models in their lives, that "empathy is courage", and need influences who "model manhood as emotionally attached" (Kimmel, 2008: 218). In "4:44" (2017), Jay-Z admits that he found it difficult to empathise with the way his wife sees life until his daughter was born ("It took for my child to be born / To see through a women's eyes").

The idea of Black fathers "softening up", or viewing women in a different light once they have daughters, is often expressed in rap music. There exists a major disconnect in the way female relatives are thought of, and the way in which other women are spoken of. If this breakthrough is not experienced through the prism of fathering a daughter, it is sometimes through a relation to mothers or sisters. This ideal is inherently patriarchal and deeply sexist, as it dictates that the value of a woman be measured in relation to the role she plays in the lives of other people, (most often men) as their mother, sister, daughter, or partner. This means that any basic human dignity afforded her is done so out of respect of the understanding that she is somebody's mother, somebody's sister, somebody's daughter, somebody's wife. Consider the following verse from Kanye West's song "Violent Crimes", from his 2018 album *Ye*:

> *Niggas is savage, niggas is monsters*
> *Niggas is pimps, niggas is players*
> *'Til niggas have daughters, now they precautious*
> *Father forgive me, I'm scared of the karma*
> *'Cause now I see women as somethin' to nurture*
> *Not somethin' to conquer*

The concept that Black men can only truly respect and empathise with women (Black women in particular) once they have a daughter of their own is extremely damaging, because this respect is dependent on more than one variable: firstly, *if* they have a daughter, and secondly, *if* they will in fact change their treatment of women once they experience the world through the eyes of their daughter. The tone of "Violent Crimes" (2018) stands in stark contrast to the *Watch the Throne* track "That's My Bitch" (2011), in which multiple reference are made to women and their bodies belonging to their male romantic partners, such as the line "Get ya own dog, ya heard? That's my bitch" being offered as a response to people looking at the male persona's girlfriend's breasts. Both *Ye* (2018) and *4:44* (2017) are albums released after the artists became fathers to girl children and indicate a clear shift in how females are viewed and spoken of. This illustrates the problematic issue of Black women often finding themselves in the position of having to negotiate different forms of oppression, and perhaps feeling as though they need to sacrifice aspects of their identities in order to celebrate the progression and successes of Black males, who do positive work on the race front, while simultaneously creating content that is informed by misogynistic and patriarchal values, and perpetuate existing systems of violence and discrimination against women. As Crenshaw (1991: 1242) states:

> The problem with identity politics is […] that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences. In the context of violence against women, this elision of difference in identity politics is problematic, fundamentally because the violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class.

In "4:44" (2017), Jay-Z describes an incident that occurred at the very start of his romantic relationship with Beyoncé, on her 21st birthday: "I said 'don't embarrass me' instead of 'be mine'/ That was my proposal for us to go steady / That was your 21st birthday / You matured faster than me, I wasn't ready". The concept of girls maturing faster than boys is often used as a way to negate problematic male behaviour, much like the sexist adage "boys will be boys". Considering their twelve-year age gap, Jay-Z was already in his thirties when Beyoncé turned 21. It seems almost ridiculous to excuse this kind of behaviour on the basis that she "matured faster than him", considering it comes from a man twelve years her senior. This incident forms a large part of Jay-Z's journey of reflection and introspection throughout the song – he goes on to apologise not only to his wife, but also to all the women whose emotions he toyed with because he "was emotionless" (2017). He implies that his emotional absence and neglect was the reason for his wife suffering multiple miscarriages, and tells her:

> *I apologize 'cause at your best you are love*
> *And because I fall short of what I say I'm all about.*
> *I apologize, our love was one for the ages*
> *And I contained us*

Although he has, in the past, largely played into the persona of the unapologetic and hardened gangster, here he offers an alternate model of masculine strength: to acknowledge mistakes, admit to the ways in which you have hurt the people you claim to love, and actively try to be a better person both for them and for yourself. Although the couple is usually infamously private about their marriage, Jay-Z considers it his responsibility to be truthful about his personal journey, which includes his role as a husband. Through this track, we see his remorse for the womanising ways he perpetuated or even advocated for in the past, and in a way criticises a broader culture of womanising in rap music. The trope of the womaniser is pertinent to the representation of Black masculinity, particularly with regards to the stock image of the rapper. The release of Beyoncé's album, *Lemonade* (2016), preceded the release of *4:44* by a year, and speaks largely to Jay-Z's infidelity, in particular with the lines "He only want me when I'm not there / He better call Becky with the good hair" from the track "Sorry". Jay-Z references this line in the *4:44* track "Family Feud" (which features Beyoncé), stating "I'll fuck up a good thing if you let me / leave me alone Becky". This public

confession of adultery followed the controversy surrounding a 2014 incident in which leaked elevator security footage showed his sister in law, artist Solange, assaulting him at the Met Gala. Jay-Z raps the following line on the track "Kill Jay-Z" (2017), which confirms both that he instigated the incident, and that he was unfaithful to his wife:

> *You egged Solange on*
> *Knowin' all along, all you had to say you was wrong*
> *You almost went Eric Benét*
> *Let the baddest girl in the world get away*
> *I don't even know what else to say*
> *Nigga, never go Eric Benét!*

The mention of Eric Benét in this verse references the singer's infidelity while married to African American actress Halle Berry in the early 2000s. Although Jay-Z included content about the mistakes he made in his marriage and admitted to being unfaithful to his wife, the prevailing message is that he is remorseful, and that they have reconciled – hence his use of the word "almost" in "almost went Eric Benét". Jay-Z's infidelity has certain cultural ramifications, stemming from the fact that Beyoncé is often viewed as the ideal woman (calling her "the baddest girl in the world"), as well as the fact that, as a couple, they are often viewed as the picture of Black excellence – "other than the Obamas, the Carters are [viewed as] the premiere example of a successful black heterosexual marriage" (Holtzman, 2017). The implication here is that, at the time, Halle Berry was viewed in a similar light, and that Eric Benét passed up the chance for them as a couple to be viewed in the same light as the Carters are now.

The fact that Jay-Z and Beyoncé are often viewed as role models amongst young, Black Americans places a certain amount of pressure on the relationship and for them to act in a way that that lives up to their public image. Admitting to Jay-Z's indiscretions thus shattered the rose-coloured glasses and humanised the couple. In terms of her husband's adultery, the trajectory of Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) follows a rollercoaster of emotions – from the sombre suspicion of "Pray You Catch Me", through the sheer rage and resentment of "Don't Hurt Yourself" and hopeful tone of "Love Drought", and finally to the healing, acceptance, and renaissance of "Sandcastles" and "All Night". By the end of the album it is clear that she has chosen to stay with him despite his betrayal, an act hotly debated because of the kind of feminist rhetoric the artist has pushed over the past decade. The catchphrase repeated throughout the couple's song "Family Feud" (2017) is "Nobody wins when the family feuds",

alluding to the fact that they have reconciled and are working on their marriage for the sake of their family. Although Jay-Z's adultery plays into stereotypes of Black husbands, I do believe that the aftermath and how he handled the situation still challenges this stereotype. The persona presented in *4:44* (2017) appears to be genuinely remorseful for hurting his family in that manner, and displays a keen sense of introspection and emotion not often associated with Black males.

Similarly, the *4:44* (2017) track "Smile" centres around the theme of sexual orientation, with specific focus on Jay-Z's mother, Gloria Carter. For the first time, Jay-Z publicly states his mother's sexual orientation, referring to her as lesbian. He speaks of the many years she lived a lie, pretending to be straight, even having four children with a man, so as not to elicit judgement and prejudice against herself and her family from community members, and criticising the need for her to have done this in the first place:

> *Mama had four kids, but she's a lesbian*
> *Had to pretend so long that she's a thespian*
> *Had to hide in the closet so she medicate*
> *Society shame and the pain was too much too take*
> *Cried tears of joy when you fell in love*
> *Don't matter to me if it's a him or a her*
> *I just wanna see you smile through all the hate*
> *Marie Antoinette, baby, let 'em eat cake!*

In this verse, Jay-Z illumines the fact that his mother not feeling as though she was able to be her true self caused her to self-medicate. Homosexual people still face varying degrees of prejudice throughout the world, even in countries where homosexuality has been decriminalised. Homosexuality is also often denounced as immoral or unnatural within religious spheres – The Carters were raised in the Christian faith, as Jay-Z's paternal grandfather was a pastor (Jay-Z, 2017). While many Black churches may not actively encourage discrimination against homophobic individuals or communities, they often do perpetuate a number of homophobic ideologies. Ward (2005: 495) explains that the fact that "enslaved blacks sought refuge and found freedom in the literalness of scripture", which causes them to also interpret scripture literally and denounce homosexuality. Rap music is notorious for its promotion of the hypermasculine, a trait often expressed through deeply homophobic rhetoric. Hypermasculinity refers to "the exaggeration and distortion of traditionally masculine traits" (Ward, 2005: 496), which includes heading a heterosexual romantic relationship and having a female partner to dominate. Homosexual couples do not

conform to this structure in obvious ways and are therefore not seen as "real men". The issue of homophobia is certainly not limited to rap or hip-hop music, but rather is reflective of an anti-queer society that values the dominant ideology of heterosexuality.

In addition to the derogatory ways in which women are often spoken of in gangsta rap, we also see frequent displays of vitriol towards gay men. Eminem, for example, is known to employ the slur "faggot" in his lyrics, having come under fire for *still* using it in his 2018 album "Kamikaze". In a 2013 interview with Rolling Stone Magazine, explained his use of the slur: "That word, those kinds of words, when I came up battle rappin' or whatever, I never really equated those words to actually mean homosexual". He speaks to the fact that the word is often used to insult and degrade even heterosexual men who are perceived as weak or feminine, and not always as a reference to someone's sexuality in particular. He also references the kind of latent participation in homophobia that Hall (2012) believes is a form of self-preservation. This speaks directly to the valuing of the masculine over the feminine in ways that transcend sexual orientation. The prevalence of slurs is not the only way in which hip-hop music expresses sentiments of homophobia. While slurs are an outright expression of the belief that homosexuality is wrong, or that homosexuals are both repulsive and inferior, the thematic content of many artists who do not necessarily employ pejoratives is nevertheless homophobic. An example of this is the phrase "no homo", which is commonly used as an unnecessary preface to someone making a positive comment about or to someone of the same gender. The use of this homophobic phrase is criticised by comedy trio The Lonely Island in their 2011 satiric song *No Homo,* in which they dramatise and over-use the phrase in order to illustrate its ridiculousness.

Although the use of homophobic slurs is both less common and less acceptable nowadays, it was a regular feature in rap music (gangsta rap in particular) during the 1990s and early 2000s. Jay-Z is no exception to this, having used homophobic pejoratives in his lyrics in the past. In the track *Heart of the City (Ain't no Love)* from his 2001 album "The Blueprint", Jay-Z raps the line: "Gotta move carefully 'cause faggots hate when you gettin' money like athletes". This line is a far cry from *Smile,* in which he denounces prejudice against LGBTQI people, and encourages them not to live their lives in the shadows for fear of persecution. Considering Jay-Z's significant reach both within the hip-hop community and beyond, the track plays an important role, albeit belated, in the move away from homophobic content in rap music. Through including a track that is essentially a celebration of his mother's coming out as lesbian, he rejects the aspect of traditional masculinity that dictates that he find people

who do not conform to traditional gender roles and sexual orientation off-putting. Additionally, he discards the macho tradition of not viewing female relatives as grownups who engage in adult romantic and sexual relationships.

In *Smile*, he explains how he cried when he found out his mother was in love with someone, regardless of the gender of that person ("don't matter to me if it's a him or a her"). In the last two lines of this verse, he references the infamous phrase associated with Austrian princess Marie Antoinette, "Let them eat cake" (although no definitive proof exists that she did in fact say it). Queen Marie Antoinette and Prince Louis XVI of France were known to be living in extreme opulence during the period just preceding the French revolution, often throwing extravagant parties featuring extensive feasts. At this time, many of the French people were living in poverty, struggling to make ends meet and on the brink of starvation. The tale goes that when confronted with the fact that the people had no bread to eat, Marie Antoinette displayed how out of touch she was with the plight of the commoner by responding with "Qu'ils mangent de la brioche", commonly translated as "Let them eat cake". The anecdote thus stands as a "monument to the arrogance and insularity of ruling elites" (O'Connell, 2012: 61). Jay-Z employs this phrase as a way to critique the insularity and arrogance of the people in their communities who are opposed to homosexuality for whatever reason, and encourages his mother to finally enjoy being free, and to enjoy the new love that she has found. The inference in these lines is that, as the Queen is said to have been dismissive of the poverty in which many of her people were living, Jay-Z wants his mother to be similarly dismissive of the people displaying hatred towards her as a result of her sexuality. At the end of the song, Gloria Carter explains her life "in the shadow", and explores the many reasons she chose to hide her sexual orientation for so many years in a spoken word-style poem. She is listed as a feature on the track, and can be heard speaking the following during the outro:

> *Living in the shadow*
> *Can you imagine what kind of life it is to live?*
> *In the shadows people see you as happy and free*
> *Because that's what you want them to see*
> *Living two lives, happy, but not free*
> *You live in the shadows for fear of someone hurting your family or the person you love*
> *The world is changing and they say it's time to be free*
> *But you live with the fear of just being me*
> *Living in the shadow feels like a safe place to be*
> *No harm for them, no harm for me*
> *But life is short, and it's time to be free*

Love who you love, because life isn't guaranteed
Smile

In speaking of his mother and his relationship with her in this manner and featuring her on this track, Jay-Z also encourages an element of support and space to be one's authentic self both within the family environment and in Black communities more generally. Through the situation with his mother, he also draws attention to the reality of many Black women often dedicating their entire lives to their families and making decisions that would benefit them best, often at their own expense. Gloria Carter's outro best articulates the weight of this fact, describing her former life as one that was characterised by the dim obscurity caused by her fear of openly being her true self. While I have problematised ways in which Jay-Z has addressed or referred to women, femininity and homosexuality before, I would like to draw attention to certain aspects of the contemporary model of Black family life and relationships presented by the rapper in the *4:44* (2017) album. I believe that he critically engages with issues concerning a lack of male role models in Black families and communities, and makes a compelling case for the kind of deeper issues his generation of men are interested in despite accusations by people like reverend Sharpton that they are corrupting the image of Black America. While I believe that DuVernay does this too, I also appreciate her alternate portrayal of the difficulties Black fathers face, as well as their capacity for deep love and commitment to their families. This capacity is demonstrated by Jay-Z in the ways he speaks of parenting and fatherhood in his work, ultimately presenting a positive image in his capacity as role model to millions of Black fathers across the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

As things currently stand, the USA remains divided on issues of race, particularly in light of the possibility of Donald Trump's re-election as President in November 2020. Much has transpired since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, including multiple government mandated lockdowns across the globe, and numerous protests and riots against the killing of unarmed Black men by American police officers. These have become global issues as the novel Coronavirus' disproportionate impact of communities of colour again exposed existing inequities, and race-based incidents inspired a number of demonstrations against racism and white supremacy in countries such as England, South Africa, and Australia. The pandemic has also, once again, highlighted the significant place of the arts in modern society, as most of the affected countries' people were either homebound or restricted in terms of activities they were allowed to undertake, and unable to go out and gather socially in order to curb the spread of the virus. Many people turned to the enjoyment of series, films, and music to fill this void, particularly those who faced lockdown alone.

We are currently experiencing an unparalleled production of popular culture works by notable Black American creatives with a vast global reach, who are able to help shape the perception of Blackness given the extreme visibility of mainstream American popular culture productions. We are also currently experiencing unmatched easy, instant access to these works, as well as access to public platforms that transcend geographic location on which to discuss their significance and debate their themes. These works are meaningful in their power to explore narratives that have been historically underrepresented, such as nuanced depictions of Black masculinity. I have identified the analysis of positive representations of Black masculinity and Black family life in mainstream popular culture productions as a gap in the current literature and attempt to contribute to filling it with this project. I do not claim that the work of Ava DuVernay, Jay-Z, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, Beyoncé and J. Cole necessarily accurately represent all aspects of Black masculinity and family life. However, I am extremely grateful for the ways in which they engage critically with the many variations of Black masculinity, instances in Black boyhood in which children are habitually failed by systems meant to protect them, and the idea of contemporary Black family life as intertwined with Black masculinity in less traditional ways, and not separate from it.

In my chapter on the perception of Blackness, I discussed how traditional depictions of Black masculinity and Blackness in general persist today, and, as a result of their racist and colonial origin, play a defining role in the persecution of Black individuals and the instances of discrimination they face on a daily basis. I have also discussed the ways in which the texts I analyse present an alternate, more detailed representation of what it currently means to be a Black man or boy in America, and what can be done both by Black communities and societies at large to expose and tackle institutions that conflate Blackness with inferiority, criminality, and suspicion. I believe that productions such as *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) and *4:44* (Jay-Z, 2017) offer an alternative, positive conception of Black males and the roles they play in their communities, and send the important message that Black people need to support one another and unite to overcome the many barriers to success that they face both in the USA and beyond.

Next, I explored how these dated perceptions of Blackness and Black masculinity influence the way Black individuals are treated by law enforcement, and consequently colours how they view systems of protection as systems of oppression that are not designed to protect all citizens equally. I have tied this inherent bias to issues that Black bodies disproportionately fall victim to – racial profiling, police brutality, targeting by law enforcement, wrongful conviction and vulnerability to self-incrimination by way of socioeconomic status. The timing of the release of *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) within the context of global Black Lives Matter protests highlights the aspects of racial bias present in current law enforcement systems, and makes the viewer realise that, while the now exonerated Central Park Five were unjustly targeted thirty years ago, their story could easily be repeated in the year 2020. The power of the series – to give the viewer a glimpse into the perspectives of the Five and their families, and lead members of the public to call for action in this and other miscarriages of justice – is one of the great achievements of the series. For these reasons, and more, I believe that *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) is an important cultural artefact.

In my final content chapter, I explored the depictions of Black family life in the chosen pop culture texts. While Black families are often depicted as dysfunctional and lacking at best, I argue that the creators of these texts make a concerted effort to present a more realistic and nuanced portrayal of Black families and the struggles they face, while simultaneously critiquing ideological systems, such as patriarchy, misogyny, and broader issues of socioeconomic inequality, that get in the way of Black boys having positive male role models while growing up. They also make important conceptual interventions in how males are being

raised, and positively portray the beauty of Black fatherhood. In so doing, being a present, protective, and loving father or father figure is modelled as an important part of Black masculinity, and the ideal Black family and community life to strive for is presented as one that is safe, supportive, and proud of its Blackness.

This project is impeded by a number of limitations that fall outside the scope of what I was able to explore. Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the limitations in my analyses of the intersections between race and gender in the popular culture productions I have focused on. I believe that the study of the representation of Black women in popular culture productions such as *4:44* (Jay-Z, 2017) and *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019) is important and have spent some time doing this, but have dedicated my efforts primarily to the representation of Black masculinity. Next, I recognise that I was not able to present as well rounded a multimodal analysis of the texts as I may have liked to. While I have focused much of my attention on the analysis of discourse, I felt that far too much would be lost in not exploring any visual elements in *When They See Us* (DuVernay, 2019), as the series' use of evocative visuals forms a major part of its impact. I have woven certain pertinent visual elements into my discussions on *When They See Us* (2019), but am aware that more can be done in this regard. Similarly, I was unable to devote attention to the music videos that accompany the rap tracks I have analysed and believe that their inclusion could be very valuable for future study. In terms of this project, I have excluded the music videos from my analysis and focused on the music itself as the primary text and medium of communication by its creators.

I believe that this project underscores the value of exploring positive representations of Black masculinity, Black family life and Blackness in a world where they are very often criticised, problematized, looked down upon and treated with suspicion. While the texts I have analysed draw attention to the many burdens Black individuals and communities bear as a result of their race, they simultaneously celebrate and promote pride in Blackness. I see this as an extraordinary gift to every viewer and listener of colour who has, in any way, been made to feel that their Black heritage is something to be ashamed of and that they would be well served by distancing themselves from it and striving to emulate whiteness in every possible sphere of their lives. I end this thesis enthusiastic about the potential for future study laid out here, inspired by the beauty of Blackness and thankful for the privilege of exploring Black love, childhood and family life in ways that will allow me to engage critically with different forms and colour my hopes and ideals for the future in all the best ways.

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