Article

B(l)ack By Popular Demand: An Analysis of Positive Black Male Characters in Television and Audiences' Community Cultural Wealth

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Abstract
Often media research interrogating Black male characters featured in television does so from a deficit-based framework. To shift the conversation and showcase affirmative examples of Black male roles in scripted television, the following essay analyzes portrayals in the series *This Is Us* (2016–current), *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2019), *S.W.A.T.* (2017–current), and *A Million Little Things* (2018–current). This work adopts critical race theory and community cultural wealth as mechanisms to examine depictions of Black male television characters to illustrate how each offers various forms of cultural capital, including aspirational and resistant capital, for minority audiences. The portrayals discussed here demonstrate a shift in depictions of Black men in television as characters express nonaggressive idiosyncrasies, display vulnerability, and engage in social support with other characters.

Keywords
Black men, critical race theory, community cultural wealth, television, race

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Over 30 years ago, Omi (1989) emphasized that scripted television creates, reproduces, and sustains stigmas that inaccurately represent the racial and cultural experiences of racial minorities. Likewise, this influential cultural theorist sheds light on the reality that "the necessity to define characters [on television] in the briefest and most condensed manner has led to the perpetuation of racial caricatures" (p. 627). Without a doubt, questioning this reality 30 years ago and even today would be trivial regarding media representations of Black people in general, and Black males specifically. However, with a media landscape that is replete with distinct illustrations of racial minorities, a barrage of media platforms offering varied content, and an impetus toward equity and inclusion (e.g., #OscarsSoWhite), a reimagining of representation of Black men in television may be necessary. Within this essay, a reimagining is addressed by a concerted effort to examine inclusive and favorable Black male characters in scripted television. Thirty years after Omi's work, scholars provide evidence that representations of Black individuals in mass media are distinct and in parity with other racial groups (Cox & Ward, 2019; Dixon, 2017; Tamborini et al., 2000; Tukachinsky et al., 2015). Moreover, scholarship challenges audiences and academics to reinterpret media representation of Black males, concentrating on the varied lived experiences and intersectional identities among the group (Stamps, 2019).

Within this work, an exploration is spearheaded to consider how portrayals counter previous media depictions of Black males in scripted television. The following representations include characters confronting the implications of adverse stereotypes often endorsed and disseminated by non-Black decision makers in media (Tukachinsky, 2015). These depictions provide means for viewers to challenge the historical stereotypes that arguably have inhibited Black men from navigating various social settings. More importantly, these images allow the group to reimagine their identities to be represented as varied and incomparable when society often frames Black men unfavorably (Smith-Frigerio, 2018; Stamps, 2020). Considering this goal, a sample of diverse and progressive Black male characterizations in scripted television are discussed, suggesting that the possibilities exist for minority audiences to view positive portrayals and reap benefits in the form of cultural capital (Yosso, 2002). By applying the theoretical frameworks, community cultural wealth (CCW; Yosso, 2002), and critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1992), the argument is presented that positive Black male characters in scripted television counter characterizations that once vilified the group and offer various forms of cultural capital for minority audiences.

In the subsequent text, a discussion of media stereotyping, specifically, historical and current portrayals of Black male characters in television are discussed. This section is followed by an explication of theoretical frameworks that situate this argument and an analysis from select scripted television programs. Lastly, suggestions for future directions adopting CCW as a tool for

investigating minority audiences' engagement with affirmative media characters are presented.

Media Stereotyping

Scholars have observed that there is uncertainty among individuals regarding their identity and the identities of others (Hogg, 2016). Among persons, there is a resounding attempt to address this frustration using "markers" (i.e., visual traits such as race) to define themselves and others, potentially creating stereotypes to categorize groups (Hogg, 2016). These stereotypes, or broadly held and oversimplified beliefs or ideas about a group, reference arbitrary characteristics and, likewise, are also an inherent feature of cognitive processing used by individuals to make sense of their world. More importantly, as scholars note, stereotypes are often created and distributed via television (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). It is important to note that individuals rely on stereotypes. However, this essay argues that how individuals view distinguishing stereotypes of themselves and in-group members, the systemic way individuals are conditioned to respond to stereotypes, and the potential impact that stereotyping may have regarding one's outlook and hope for the future merit further interrogation.

The process of stereotyping, whether positive or negative, of Black men in television, is not to be understated. The act of consuming television that creates and reinforces stereotypes has received considerable attention as literature repeatedly illustrates how this medium distorts or demeans racial minorities, including Black men (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). Likewise, stereotypes have the potential to create exemplars, or typical examples of representations, which may be adopted or understood as truth among audiences (Brooks & Hébert, 2006). Viewers may rely on media stereotypes related to their own identities to gather information about how society perceives them (Poole, 2014). Research posits that stereotypical depictions may create fear among those individuals being represented due to perceptions of conformity or the promotion of negative manifestations (Martin, 2008; Tyree et al., 2012). The anxiety surrounding such thoughts are known to confirm stereotype threat, and this threat is associated with increased stress and emotional anguish, which undermines individual performance and weakens self-esteem (Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Depictions of Black Males in Scripted Television

Research acknowledges a history of unfavorable portrayals of Black men on television (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017; Gray, 2013). To illustrate, research recognizes Black men in television as nonthreatening and assimilative (Thornton, 2011) and as hypersexualized societal failures (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017). Moreover, hyperstereotypical images in television depict Black men as violent, deviant, buffoonish, and as threats to mainstream society (Jackson, 2006).

Punyanunt-Carter (2008) notes numerous examples of negative stereotypes of Black men in television, including that of the criminal, drug addict, dead-beat absentee father, and uneducated "Sambos," who are fun-loving and the foolish ladies' man with exaggerated speech and gait.

Tyree et al.' (2012) research denotes Black male representation in reality television, further demonstrating the narrative of Black men as sexually aggressive and inherently violent. Their analysis of Black men in MTV's *The Real World* (1992–current) and BET's *College Hill* (2004–2007) showcase depictions that reinforce societal fear of Black males and the ongoing criminalization of Black men and boys. Tyree and associates discuss the explicit characterizations that are dramatized within these programs, including stereotypes such as the joker and the "homo thug," each of whom engages in aggressive behavior, dresses in urban attire, and embodies a rap or hip-hop aesthetic.

Castle Bell and Harris (2017) discuss the character Alex (Michael B. Jordan), a hyperstereotypical Black male in the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television series *Parenthood* (2010–2015). According to the authors, Alex is represented across multiple episodes as a criminally, hypersexual, fatherless man-child. Alex's flaws are front-and-center within the show, creating a central narrative that Alex is aggressive, lacks self-control, and a potential threat to his partner, Haddie (Sarah Ramos). Audiences watch as Haddie's parents worry about her safety by relying on visual and situational cues (e.g., Alex's skin color and where he lives) while disregarding his varied influential identities, including his class status and mental health.

Collectively, these stereotypical portrayals erase the discourse surrounding Black males' varied lived experiences and neglects inclusion regarding Black male identities (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Stamps, 2019). These negative characterizations also create lasting impressions on non-Black audiences, specifically individuals who lack direct face-to-face contact with the group (Abrams & Giles, 2007). These stereotypes may leave Black males vulnerable in navigating situational context (e.g., police encounters) as archetypes are generalized across all Black men (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Matabane & Merritt, 2014). Collectively, the negative stereotyping of Black men in television impacts audiences of varying identities. However, assumptions that positive portrayals may create positive implications for audiences are warranted.

In contrast to the unfavorable representations of Black males in television, scholars also concentrate on nuanced and multilayered portrayals and urge individuals to consider their varied identities within such programming (Stamps, 2019). Depictions of positive Black male characters in television programming date back as early as the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) series *The Jeffersons* (1975–1985) and the American Broadcasting System (ABC) series *Benson* (1979–1986) and includes television programs in the 1990 s (e.g., UPN's *Malcolm & Eddie*) and well into the 2000 s (Gray, 2013). These examples highlight portrayals of Black men as career-driven and of varied class status

(Stamps, 2019). Currently, literature notes characters that represent different features, including the performance of *campiness* (Dexl & Horn, 2017), sexually fluid Black males confronting homophobia (Smith-Frigerio, 2018), and others that focus on mental health and engagment in social support (Luisi et al., 2020).

MacDonald's (2004) work dissects the police drama, *Homicide: Life on the Street* (1993–1999) and illustrates the intricacies of Black men struggling to confront racism and misogyny. Within their work, Black men's rejection of negative stereotypes, including the aggressive brute, reveals how portrayals were neither "tokenistic nor predictable" as intersecting identities, such as class and race, coexist and highlight the spectrum of Black male identities (MacDonald, 2004, p. 223).

Recent work, including critical examinations by Smith-Frigerio (2018) and Luisi et al. (2020), elevate diverse positive representations of Black men in scripted television in FOX's *Empire* (2015–2019) and NBC's *This Is Us* (2016–current). Their collective work examines characters that navigate various types of mental illness and generational trauma. Across these representations, Black men are not framed as problematic or threatening but as complex human beings existing, surviving, and thriving in society. Work by Stamps (2017) takes a different approach comparing previous positive representation to current portrayals of Black male television characters. Their research shows how, over time, Black male characters' awareness and vocal interrogation of social issues and salient ideologies aligned with the Black community have grown more prevalent in recent television programming.

Notably, limited research examines positive media portrayals of Black male characters in television and the potential positive outcomes for audiences. Yet, this small sample demonstrates that Black audiences' consumption and exposure increases self-esteem, feelings of self-worth, and decreases stereotype formation (Jerald et al., 2017; Matabane & Merritt, 2014). To illustrate, Jerald et al. (2017) highlight that for Black viewers, specific attributes such as religiosity and adherence to racial identity impact the relationship between exposure to media representations of the group and positive self-perceptions. These attributes speak to identities (i.e., religion) or learned behaviors (i.e., socialization) that may increase audiences' well-being when encountering Black characters on television.

The characters and shows referenced here are not the first to emerge that validate the existence of positive Black male roles on television. Instead, each example contributes to a rich lineage of positive depictions within television programming that have been limited within the robust literature examining television and Black representation (Stamps, 2020). To build on this literature, this research recognizes additional portrayals, supporting the necessary work of addressing this medium's role in producing and reinforcing Black male identity. Through a reflective analysis, this essay acknowledges examples of positive and diverse Black male characters, including portrayals by actors Sterling K. Brown,

Tituss Burgess, Shemar Moore, and Romany Malco. Each figure demonstrates a range of experiences that represent the nuance characteristics of Black men, and each provides various forms of cultural capital that benefits minority viewers (Yosso, 2005). With this intention in mind, insights from CRT (Bell, 1992) and CCW (Yosso, 2002) provide an opportunity for an assessment.

Theoretical Framework

CRT (Bell, 1992) and CCW (Yosso, 2002) are applied here to offer a lens for scholars to interrogate and challenge deficit interpretations of scholarship. Deficient points of view typically acknowledge problematic systems, and there is mutual agreement that this dialogue is necessary (see Gray, 2013). The application of CRT and CCW uncovers how privilege is embedded within certain types of knowledge, creating preferences for "traditional" research paradigms and theories. However, discussions concentrating primarily on defective structures potentially leave audiences and scholars without the agency to address affirmative points of view related to their identities and lived experiences. By applying both theories, scholars acknowledge cultural practices, skills, networks, and abilities that sustain value rarely recognized in media scholarship. In short, research that is critical of media's conceptualization of racial minorities has an essential place in understanding practices that hinder communities of color; however, scholarship recognizing media as a conduit for positive characterizations also deserve attention (Tukachinsky, 2015). Specifically, these frameworks create an opportunity to examine the complex representation of Black male identity in television, noting that negative images exist, *and* positive and noteworthy examples do as well. The latter distinction contributes to dialogue that is favorable for individuals who often participate in the discussion of positive representation or who may benefit from media consumption of these characters.

Critical Race Theory

CRT (Bell, 1992) recognizes that racism is ingrained in society and challenges the traditional claims of objectivity, color blindness, and equal opportunity often exercised by scholars. CRT argues that these claims are a ruse for the privilege of dominant groups (Delgado, 2001). Likewise, CRT is interested in how individuals speak about race and how it resonates in organizational and institutional settings. The application of CRT initially examined how legal doctrine was (and arguably still is) used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Bell, 1999). Now the same lens includes examinations within various fields, including education, politics, and media (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005).

Yosso and Solórzano (2005) bridge the gap between CRT and racial stereotyping within media and its potential impact on minority groups. Their work

acknowledges how Black, Latino, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Native Americans are often represented in popular media unfavorably and how these characterizations are used among audiences to rationalize beliefs in the subordinate position of minorities in society (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). When viewers are primed with concepts such as welfare, crime, drugs, immigration, or educational deficiency, many individuals racialize these issues by assuming an alignment with minority groups (Bell, 1999).

Considering this application, CRT centers research specifically on communities of color and question racial majority group (i.e., White) practices, including normalizing specific identities as the standard by which all other individuals are evaluated. CRT aims to give agency to individuals who are affected by various "-isms," including racism and sexism, placing the dignity and livelihood of those individuals at the forefront. Likewise, CRT challenges notions of "neutral" research or "objective" researchers and exposes deficit-informed historical accounts that silence and distort the perspectives of communities of color (Bell, 1999).

Community Cultural Wealth

Grounded in CRT, Yosso (2002) defines CCW as an inclusive framework that acknowledges "knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and utilized by communities of color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77). Yosso's (2005) initial adoption of CCW aimed to challenge deficit interpretations of social and cultural capital in racially unequal schooling outcomes. Her work uncovers how White privilege is embedded within the misinterpretations of cultural capital, and CCW outlines cultural knowledge, skills, networks, and abilities developed and cultivated by minority groups. Yosso argues that these cultural resources bolster the groups' resilience and their resistance to various forms of subjugation. CCW disentangles the notion that capital is solely associated with the accumulation of monetary wealth and class status; instead, CCW focuses on the cultural practices that enable racial minorities to navigate society successfully.

Yosso (2002) identifies six forms of capital within the CCW framework. These include linguistic capital (the adoption of multiple languages or cultural communication exercises); familial capital (family, including extended family, and community members who model lessons of caring, coping, and provide moral consciousness); and social capital (the system of various resources that provide critical support to navigate institutions). The remaining three types of capital inform this essay's argument, including aspirational capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. Each of these forms of capital, while previously applicable within intergroup and intercultural context, may be applied to mediated engagement among audiences (see Brooms & Davis, 2017; Stamps, 2020).

Aspirational Capital. Aspirational capital refers to the ability to maintain hope and dreams for the future, demonstrating how resiliency offers possibilities beyond an individuals' present circumstance (Yosso, 2002). Individuals learn about themselves and their communities via storytelling with others who share similar experiences, and this type of capital may be obtained from mediated contact (Park, 2012). Likewise, the literature supports assertions that Black audiences' viewing of favorable Black characters enhances similar types of aspiring outcomes, including increases in well-being and ambition (Dixon, 2001).

Navigational Capital. Navigational capital denotes acquiring the skills of maneuvering through social institutions, primarily understanding the usage of communication patterns (e.g., code-switching) and the historical practices of an organization. Historically, possessing navigational capital infers the ability to maneuver through institutions, including educational institutions, vocational spaces, and social systems. People of color rely on various social and psychological navigational skills to function among structures that uphold inequality and are permeated by "isms," which may promote social stigmas and microaggressions (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017).

Resistant Capital. Lastly, resistant capital refers to knowledge and skills fostered through demonstrating or witnessing oppositional behavior that challenges inequality (Yosso & Solórzano, 2005). For example, Ward's (1996) research illustrates how Black mothers consciously raised their daughters as resistors to racism and sexism by relying on positive affirmations and mirroring strong womanhood. Within this research, Black mothers taught their daughters to assert themselves as intelligent, beautiful, and worthy of respect to resist the barrage of societal messages that devalue Blackness. Similarly, audiences may have the opportunity to see resistance via media depictions of characters engaging in activities, including participating in civil unrest, denouncing injustice, or by witnessing identities that are representative of their group in places that were at one point hostile. For audiences, nurturing this capital via engaging with media characters who demonstrate resistance and who unapologetically embrace their racial identities while confronting harassment can help empower and inspire viewers.

These various forms of capital, while recognized as distinctive in their significance toward positive outcomes, also overlap and may benefit audiences dually. For instance, aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital address mechanisms that center acquiring skills to push through trauma and hardship. These types of capital position individuals to anticipate adverse outcomes and prepare accordingly. Similarly, these examples of capital prompt persons to seek social support within interpersonal and mediated contexts. There are also forms of capital that differ significantly, not only in how they benefit groups but in how they negate from "traditional" forms of capital, including economic and

material wealth. Linguistic capital, for example, highlights how language, both spoken and unspoken, creates a community among racial minorities. A head nod between Black men, demonstrating acknowledgment and recognition, is a form of linguistic capital that combats the often erasure of Blackness in majority-White spaces (Jones, 2017). This empowering act differs from traditional ideas of capital and is also separate from other types of cultural capital recognized in CCW.

Research in the domain of CCW is primarily applied within education and sociology scholarship. However, within this essay, its application is situated to examine and analyze media depictions of Black men and discuss how imagery may provide varied forms of capital for viewers. The adoption of CCW within a mediated context, while limited, is applied across various areas. These examples include audiences' exposure to positive television depictions as affirmative social context, and the use of digital media as sites of resistance to address intergroup confrontation (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Porter, 2013). Outside of mediated context, scholars also apply CCW examining its influence on Black communities. This work uncovers significant benefits that contribute to the racial and gendered group's various forms of acquired cultural capital within spaces that often have a history of oppression or exclusion of Black bodies (Allen & White-Smith, 2018; Burt & Johnson, 2018; Cooper et al., 2017; Jayakumar et al., 2013). For instance, Burt and Johnson (2018) found that interpersonal support and mentorship aided Black men in building aspirational capital in their pursuit of science, technology, engineering, mathematics education. Brooms and Davis' (2017) work underscored Black males' reflections on race and gender to understand how they navigate institutional and organizational settings. One example from findings demonstrates how exposure to positive depictions of Black male television characters in NBC's *A Different World* (1987–1993) influence participants' aspirations and individual beliefs about their prospects in higher education.

Common themes across studies utilizing CRT and CCW and their relationship to Black communities include (a) the identification of forms of oppression and erasure among various organizations and institutions, (b) the recognition and implementation of culturally relevant and responsive action by scholars and participants to combat these practices, and (c) the validation and affirmation of group identities as a form of celebration when presented in social spaces. Building on the literature earlier, the current study incorporates these theoretical frameworks in the examination of favorable representation of Black male television characters. This work situates the historical account of the sizeable negative depictions of Black male characters, addresses the need to relocate the discussion including examples that counter these images, and affirms this with representations in the following text, thus suggesting that minority audiences may nurture CCW through their viewing of varied positive media depictions.

Method

The use of an introspective analysis was adopted to describe meaningful phenomena versus claiming generalization (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Also, introspective analysis allows researchers to examine specific issues to gain a greater understanding of their application in society, highlighting marginalized experiences (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The use of a nonconforming method of analysis provides an opportunity to seek knowledge and new insights from an underrepresented area and, in doing so, contribute to a necessary conversation missing from the discourse. According to our understanding, limited attention focuses on positive Black male depictions in television and the potential benefits for audiences. To address this, a discussion of television characters including Randall Pearson (Sterling K. Brown), in *This Is Us*; Titus Andromendon (Tituss Burgess), in *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*; Daniel "Hondo" Harrelson (Shemar Moore), in *S.W.A.T.*; and Rome Howard (Romany Malco), in *A Million Little Things* are undertaken. Each character was chosen on the basis that (a) the role is a series regular or lead in its program, (b) the show's current critic's rating on the International Movie Database (imdb.com) is above average, and (c) each actor is a seasoned mainstay within the television industry, having appeared in numerous outlets including situational comedies, dramas, commercials, and film. Also, each actor's work is regarded as critically acclaimed among viewers and journalists alike (Caputo, 2018; Ostrow, 2016). Finally, to offer a description of positive Black male characters, this essay adopts Tyree et al. (2012) explanation, including the effort to "portray the Black male with complexity; for example, with his life connected to a broader community, and his personal struggle and triumphs associated with the longer journey of Black history" (p. 473). In other words, these characters are not *perfect* but essential in expanding the spectrum of Black male identity.

For the analysis, every episode of each television program available was viewed by the author. Specific scenes and storylines were watched repeatedly, and notation took place during viewing to capture significant dialogue and engagement among characters. Once note-taking and viewing of the programs reached a saturation point where illustrations were repeated, or character interactions related to the goals of the study were reoccurring, these descriptions were clustered and described later. Within the examples mentioned, descriptive narratives are offered along with the episode and season for that particular show, or dialogue from the specific season and episode is referenced. Episodes that aired before February 2020 from each show were considered for the analysis. The only exception is *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*, which ended its run in 2019. All other shows are currently airing. See Appendix for the list of shows and show information.

Self-Reflexivity

Researchers are encouraged to acknowledge how their experiences and identities are interwoven within the development of their research endeavors (Castle Bell & Harris, 2017). My experience as a scholar of color informs my interest in understanding the role of favorable media representation of Black men and how they may provide cultural and social capital for audiences. This article acknowledges the duality of gender and race in television portrayals with specific emphasis placed on Black men. As a member of an intersectional marginalized community, I recognize that these portrayals are scarce in comparison to the negative stigmas that exist in news, television, and film (Mastro & Stamps, 2018). However, creating dialogue addressing positive representations of Black male identity in television and its relationship to cultural capital is promising. As such, my identities are influential in this endeavor and aimed intentionally in elevating this conversation.

Depictions of Black Male Characters in Scripted Television

Randall Pearson in This Is Us

The NBC's television show, *This Is Us* (2016–current), introduces audiences to Randall Pearson. Randall was orphaned at birth and adopted by a White family. Throughout the series, flashbacks portray Randall's adoptive family's growing pains as each family member adapts to living with and raising a Black child in a White home. The program also shows Randall's birth parents' relationship; specifically, his birth father struggling with losing his son, overcoming drug addiction, and reuniting with his birth son decades later. In the present, Randall is in his late 30 s and is a father and husband to his Black wife and three Black daughters, one of whom is adopted.

Although Randall Pearson is complicated, his representation of Black male identity is equally diverse and multifaceted. Randall is an overachiever, a perfectionist, and a compassionate family man. Randall's counter stereotypical portrayals include his tendencies to nonaggressively, overreact in high-stress situations. Likewise, Randall is portrayed as the moral compass among his immediate and adopted family. During Season 1 of *This Is Us*, Randall deals with the reality of his birth father's cancer and the mounting stress of balancing his family responsibilities and a demanding career. In Episode 15, Season 1, viewers witness Randall's anxiety take front-and-center as he experiences a traumatic panic attack at work (Aptaker et al., 2017). His adopted brother comes to his aid, demonstrating an openness that is rarely portrayed among men in television, especially amongst Black men addressing mental health (Holmes, 2017; Smith-Frigerio, 2018).

This Is Us portrays Randall as a doting husband and father. Unlike documented negative stereotypes of Black men, Randall says, "I love you" and is intimate and vulnerable with his family. Amid conflict, Randall forgives, loves, and accepts his family members. To illustrate this behavior, Randall and his siblings visit their family cabin, and Randall decides to address an issue with his adopted mother, who lied about her knowledge of his birth father and his birth father's attempts at reconnection (Herbert & Briesewitz, 2016). Randall's response is steeped in forgiveness and compassion, and as the episode ends, he tells his adopted mother, "You kept that secret for 36 years. That must have been incredibly lonely." Randall demonstrates sincerity and transparency, offering an example of navigational capital by countering stereotypes such as aggressive brute when addressing conflict (Tyree et al., 2012).

Similarly, during an encounter, Randall's admiration and vulnerability are displayed when he tells his wife, "I know your face, your hands, your soul, better than I know my own. You don't have to censor yourself ever. Not with me" (Fogelman & Olin, 2016). Here, Randall challenges the narrative that strong Black male television characters do not acknowledge their equally strong Black female counterparts while also outwardly demonstrating profemale attitudes (Matabane & Merritt, 2014).

During a pivotal scene in Episode 11, Season 4, Randall sits down with another Black male character, Darnell Hodges (Omar Epps). Darnell opens up about past stressors, including marriage and financial issues, and how therapy helped him sort out his frustrations. The interaction between Randall and Darnell is significant as two Black men engage in social support, display vulnerability, and openly discuss mental health in scripted television (Mar, 2020). Within episode 11, Darnell says to Randall directly, "Look bro, I get it. Us men of a certain shade, we're not used to talking. But that's therapy, right? Talking. It doesn't always have to be that deep. You can just talk about everyday stuff" (Dorsey & Hooks, 2020).

These scenes are examples of Randall demonstrating the spectrum of inclusive Black male identity. The opportunity for audiences to witness Black men as vulnerable, accessible, and receptive to flaws and change, through the character Randall, matters. Randall provides navigational capital portraying the intricacies that surround mental health. Randall offers aspirational capital in the form of constructive engagement with his family and through the handling of his reconnection and reconciliation with his birth father.

Titus Andromedon in Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt

Previous research demonstrates that television presents little interference with the patriarchal order regarding Black male characters on television (Adamo, 2010). However, Titus Andromedon (Tituss Burgess), in the Netflix scripted series, *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt* (2015–2019), disrupts the normalization of

hegemonic Black male identity with flair and exuberance. Titus is an aspiring actor in New York City who is queer and comically quirky. Titus is roommates with Kimmy Schmidt (Elle Temper), and outside of his peculiar brashness and demeanor, Titus is the voice of reason in this unconventional comedy.

Titus unapologetically sings, dances, and moves through space in a way that disrupts stereotypical patriarchal Black manhood (Dexl & Horn, 2017). Burgess' character exposes audiences to a spectrum of Black male identity that embraces fluid gender roles and sexual orientation. Titus departs from earlier television depictions of Black queer men as his portrayal exists in a space that is not centered in middle-class, heteronormative, respectable identities (Dexl & Horn, 2017; Poole, 2014). Titus works multiple jobs and represents a modest or working-class identity. Also, Titus' romantic relationship during Seasons 2 and 3 is not framed as a secondary storyline, avoiding his relegation to a sassy sidekick. Titus on-screen relationship shows his insecurities, a yearning for intimacy, and the comical ways in which he navigates courtship. The relationship ends due to various reasons; however, to get over his ex, audiences experience Titus embody singer, songwriter Beyoncé, and performs several of Beyoncé's music videos from the 2016 album *Lemonade* (Fey et al., 2017). Titus blatantly and explicitly offers audiences resistant capital. Titus does not adhere to expected behaviors and socialization practices but instead embraces an emerging culture of gender fluidity, sexual expression, and a spectrum of identities permitting increased social freedom that was once (and arguably still can be) highly stigmatized.

Titus is an example of Black male identity that is a welcomed departure from historical television characterizations of Black men. This portrayal of Black queer maleness is a shift in media representation that challenges ideas of respectability. Titus, with every performed song and unapologetic pearl clutch, dismantles and disrupts stereotypical expectations of Black male presentation. Likewise, Titus demonstrates not only resistant capital but also aspirational capital for minority queer viewers who rarely see their lived experiences portrayed in television without scrutiny or vilification by other characters on screen.

Daniel "Hondo" Harrelson in S.W.A.T.

Daniel "Hondo" Harrelson (Shemar Moore) appears in the CBS' series *S.W.A.T.*, based on the 1975 television series and 2003 film of the same name. Hondo's character is particularly intriguing as he is a *S.W.A.T.* Sargent, commanding a team of agents in the majority–minority city of Los Angeles during a time of racial divisiveness between communities of color and law enforcement. To highlight this conflict, the pilot episode opens with the original team leader, Buck (Louis Ferreira), fired from *S.W.A.T.* due to accidentally killing an unarmed Black teenager during a shoot-out (Thomas et al., 2017). Hondo's promotion is cause for speculation due to the belief that his new role is correlated to the need

for the tactical team to ease tensions between the Los Angeles community and law enforcement. Within the first episode of the series, viewers watch as tension mimic current social movements (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter). Viewers also see the treatment of the show's main character, who happens to be a decorated Marine and dedicated member of law enforcement, have his promotion and position challenged by his team.

The show depicts Hondo as a skilled and motivational leader. He is compassionate toward community members, supportive of his team in their personal and professional lives, and is affectionate toward his mother and sisters. Throughout the series, audiences see Hondo navigate the streets of Los Angeles, working alongside citizens, and observe Hondo become a surrogate father figure to young men of color in the community. In a series of episodes, viewers are introduced to a father–son relationship that develops between Hondo and Darryl (Deshea Frost). Darryl's father is incarcerated, and after his son witnesses a drive-by shooting, Darryl's father asks Hondo to watch over his son. Darryl, a young Black man, looks up to Hondo as a leader and parental figure. Their budding relationship, and Hondo's awareness of Darryl circumnavigating Los Angeles, leads Hondo to move Darryl into his home and Hondo soon adopts Darryl (Allen & Terlesky, 2019; Rotherham & Teng, 2019).

The relationship between Darryl and Hondo, a storyline interwoven into the major arcs of other episodic narratives, is influential in portraying Black men as protectors of not only family but also their community. Hondo and Darryl's relationship is not without strife as Darryl struggles with finding a job, he is shot, and Hondo steps in during the ups and downs, including Darryl's recovery after the shooting. Hondo's life is again turned upside down when his estranged father moves back to Los Angeles. Hondo decides to reconcile their relationship even though his father left his immediate family when Hondo was a child (Jones-Morales & Gierhart, 2019). This nontraditional generational mix is presented to viewers as complicated, messy, and real. Hondo learns to protect, nurture, and love not only his adopted teenage son but also his estranged father. Hondo's life is not neat, but it is in the complication that viewers witness aspirational ways to navigate life's dilemmas.

Rome Howard in *A Million Little Things*

Rome Howard (Romany Malco), in the ABC series *A Million Little Things* (2018–current), is a commercial director with cinematic dreams. Viewers learn early in Season 1 that Rome is undiagnosed as clinically depressed, and he initially attempts to keep this information from his wife, Regina (Christina Moses). During the opening scenes of the program's pilot episode, Rome digests a large number of pills, determined to end his life via suicide. Rome's plans are thwarted when he receives a phone call, learning that his best friend has just ended his own life by suicide (Nash & Griffiths, 2018). This is the first scene

audiences meet Rome, a Black man, grief-stricken, dealing with depression, and facing issues reminiscent of many human beings.

A Million Little Things offers a Black male character who initially suppresses vulnerability while also distancing himself from emotional intimacy. Rome attempts to embrace a masculine existence that, for many Black men, including himself, seems inaccessible. Viewers' exposure to Rome's battle with clinical depression grants audiences opportunities to acquire aspirational and navigational capital. Audiences witness Rome come to understand his mental health and seek therapy, discuss his emotions with his immediate family, and share these intimate realizations with his wife. Throughout several episodes, Rome openly seeks support from his friends and Maggie (Allison Miller), a clinical therapist, and series regular on the show.

Rome also displays one of the most vulnerable, yet influential engagements on the show as viewers watch the dialytic tensions between him and his father. In Episode 9, Season 1, Rome works alongside his father, Walter (Lou Beatty Jr.), repairing a leak in Rome's bathroom. Walter, at one point, asks Rome for his toolbox, and Rome returns with a small tool kit. Walter looks away in disappointment, and audiences watch Rome face what feels like inadequacies in fitting the prototype of masculinity (Nash et al., 2018). As the men repair the bathroom sink, Walter finds Rome's antidepressant medication in the medicine cabinet. It is at this moment that Rome is at a loss for words. After seeing Rome's prescription, Walter is upset and stoic. Rome attempts to explain his depression and his initiative to get better; however, Walter becomes unreceptive to the conversation. This encounter between the two men does not conclude with a cheerful ending, as Walter exits the bathroom without any verbal reaction toward his son. This scene is reminiscent of capturing the fact that Black men rarely engage in open and vulnerable father–son communication in scripted programming, specifically addressing sensitive topics such as mental illness (Smith-Frigerio, 2018).

In another example, Rome's antidepression medication lowers his libido, and his previous secrecy with his wife about his suicide attempt makes her question their relationship. Regina feels like an outsider as her husband keeps secrets and avoids intimacy with her. Rome, at his best, is a Black male attempting to figure out who he is and what he wants, and this journey began with confronting social stigmas, including seeking therapy and discussing intimacy. In these scenes, which focus on Rome's vulnerability and communication efforts, audiences witness opportunities to acquire navigational capital. For example, what are tools that audiences can reference in confronting issues of mental health and for seeking out professional support? How might viewers begin to engage in conversations concerning mental health with family members? More importantly, how do audiences distance themselves from the social stigmas that could lead to problematic outcomes (e.g., suicide) when aiming to address their mental health?

The characters discussed here are far from exhaustive, but each offers audiences the opportunity to acquire various types of cultural capital via media viewing. Marginalized audiences benefitting from aspirational, navigational, and resistant capital through means of television viewing is not to be understated. Viewing diverse, positive depictions of Black men in television may offer audiences aspirational capital as these depictions showcase successful men in their own right (Brooms & Davis, 2017). Witnessing Black men acknowledge their partners' strength and resilience as well as demonstrate fortitude within domestic settings offers navigational capital to viewers who observe vulnerability within relationships where Black men are active and attentive. Likewise, resistant capital is shown when characters confront societal stigmas, such as seeking out support for addressing mental health or opposing performances of heteronormativity, further dismantling notions of one-dimensional identities and toxic behaviors often associated with Black men. The depictions examined here are not without fault, and not every storyline is seamless. However, this does not belittle the power of television, as it is a socializing agent that allows audiences to see themselves, including portrayals that characterize the good, the bad, and the uncomfortable.

Concluding Thoughts

The framing of Black male characterizations in television as problematic has steep implications. These include viewers' adherence to stigmas and stereotypes of Black men (Mastro & Tropp, 2004), associating Black men with criminality (Dixon, 2017), and decreased support for public policies aimed to alleviate the discrepancies and barriers Black men face (Monahan et al., 2005). It is necessary to challenge negative stereotypes in the media. Also, acknowledging that positive depictions continue to exist within this medium and that there are also benefits to viewers, specifically those from marginalized backgrounds, is profound.

Black audiences consume more television than any other racial group in the U.S., at roughly 44 hours a week (Levin, 2017; Nielsen, 2017); this engagement may contribute to and influence the well-being of Black viewers (Matabane & Merritt, 2014). Thornton (2011) argues that "most popular television privileges white, middle-class audiences as 'ideal viewers,' operating from within the point-of-view of whiteness" (p. 426). Considering this frame of reference, a shift toward recognizing affirming characterizations of Black males in television has the potential to transform and expand the possibilities of discourse surrounding who is seen, how they are seen, and how audiences may benefit in the form of increased well-being when viewing these images.

Limitations

These characterizations and analyses are not without shortcomings. The fictional television characters mentioned in this essay should delineate Black male identity. However, these portrayals, while presenting diverse, positive characterizations, exist within the influence of media organizations that continue to possess power across media platforms, including television. The decisions regarding casting, writing, directing, and the importance of storylines and narratives of each character are associated with decision makers who may not represent audiences' racial identities and lived experiences. Also, many of these fictional characters are situated in majority-White spaces, arguably lacking connection to Black communities. This action potentially locates positive portrayals of Black male identity in television as palatable, nonthreatening, and acceptable to White audiences (Matabane & Merritt, 2014; Thornton, 2011). This begs the question, are Black male positive television portrayals only created from the vantage point of whiteness? This essay does not aim to answer this question but suggests that utilizing a CRT lens allows for future interrogation.

This essay does aim to establish the application of CRT and CCW in race and media research. Further examination is necessary to understand its implementation, including critical engagement and empirical testing. Qualitative analysis using one-on-one or focus group interviews investigating how minority audiences seek out cultural capital via their media engagement is one example. Correlational data or experimental manipulation that assesses participants' media viewing and favorable outcomes such as increased vitality, resistance, or racial esteem are also potential next steps. The continued application of CCW within media scholarship would provide scholars the necessary tools to explore positive outcomes among minority audiences. This area is well suited for continued exploration, and this is just the beginning of an exciting endeavor.

Appendix

Table A1. Television Shows Included in Analysis.

Television shows	Network	Run date (no. of seasons)	Format
1. *A Million Little Things*	ABC	2018–current (2)	Family drama
2. *S.W.A.T.*	CBS	2017–current (3)	Crime drama
3. *This is Us*	NBC	2016–current (4)	Family comedy/Drama
4. *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*	Netflix	2015–2019 (3)	Situational comedy

Note. NBC = National Broadcasting Company.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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