REPRESENTING RACE, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY IN EMPIRE: (COUNTER)HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY, BLACK FATHERHOOD, AND HOMOSEXUALITY IN PRIMETIME TELEVISION

Robert A. Humphrey

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

August 2016

Committee:

Angela Nelson, Advisor

Becca Cragin

Jeffrey Brown
As a site of representational African-American culture, the television program *Empire* works to deconstruct many of the normative prejudices about masculinity and sexuality in the national community broadly, and in the Black community specifically. To do so, the series ties in issues of homosexuality with the traditionally heterosexist genre of hip-hop/rap music. Given that hip-hop is conventionally a Black, male, heterosexual space, it is significant that *Empire* creates a narrative around issues of masculinity and sexuality within this genre by prominently featuring someone of a marginalized group (i.e., the gay community) as being heavily entrenched in this particular music scene.

Additionally, many of the ways in which *Empire* also deconstructs hegemonic ideals is through the portrayal of the character Lucious Lyon, who actually upholds hegemonic norms of masculinity and sexuality. It is when Lucious’s heteronormative hypermasculinity is juxtaposed with other characters that much of *Empire*’s cultural commentary comes through. While this can be seen in his interactions with women and his colleagues, a clear social critique of Black fatherhood is represented in Lucious’s interactions with his three sons: Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem.
Dedicated to my friends and family,

and to all my fellow television enthusiasts…
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee, Dr. Angela Nelson, Dr. Becca Cragin, and Dr. Jeff Brown, for being amazing people with exceedingly patient and understanding souls. Without your feedback and encouragement, this process most certainly would not have been possible. Also, I owe a thank you to the other Popular Culture faculty at BGSU, as I became a better student and scholar under your guidance and teaching.

I would also like to thank my family. Thanks for the support, but mainly thank you for sympathizing with me when random people would frequently ask me what my thesis is about, listening to me stumble over an unintelligible explanation, and watching a somewhat defeated expression come over my face when they would simply reply, “Oh, Empire. I keep meaning to watch that show.”

Finally, thank you to my fellow Popular Culture MA (and POPC adjacent) classmates/friends for being an empathetic support system. As someone who generally does not like people, I actually like you all—a lot. I swear!
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Synopsis of <em>Empire</em></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter Summaries</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>A REVIEW OF LITERATURE REGARDING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Black) Fatherhood</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Black) Men and (Black) Masculinity</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Black) Male Homosexuality</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>(DE)MASCULINIZING HIP-HOP: QUEERING HYPER-HETERO MUSIC AS CULTURAL COMMENTARY IN <em>EMPIRE</em></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>“WE KING LEAR NOW?”: (RE)PRESENTING BLACK FATHERHOOD IN <em>EMPIRE</em></td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucious and Andre</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucious and Hakeem</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucious and Jamal</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I.
INTRODUCTION

With some obvious exceptions, it has long been said that finding a mass audience for a television series that has a predominantly Black cast is difficult to do—so difficult, in fact, that many networks pass on shows with predominantly Black casts for fear viewership will be poor. Because of this, certain television networks, such as BET, TV One, and Centric, were established to produce Black entertainment that was frequently passed on by more mainstream networks. Series with predominantly Black casts have been exceedingly popular before. Shows like *The Cosby Show* (NBC, 1984-1992) and *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979) come to mind. However, while *The Cosby Show* did a lot to advance societal ideas of Black people and the Black family, specifically, the series has, and continues to be, criticized for whitewashing the Black American experience\(^1\) and for not depicting the many struggles Black people face in America—struggles that still exist even if they are upper-middle class with professional jobs, like the characters of Heathcliff and Clair Huxtable were. Alternatively, *Good Times* so frequently depicted struggles faced by Black families, that the series perpetually represented Black people as societally downtrodden. In addition, instead of representing ways the characters were trying to better their social standing, *Good Times* often focused on the character of J.J. Walker, representing him as the buffoon simply for laughs.

When *Empire* (Fox, 2015-present) premiered, based on its premise and the history of television, I certainly did not expect it to succeed. It was relegated to a mid-season premier rather than a Fall premier, and, on paper, seems like a series that would severely limit its

---

audience as it has a predominantly Black cast and focuses on a genre of music (i.e., rap/hip-hop) that is not always favored or enjoyed by the majority of the preferred primetime television 18-49 year old demographic. However, the show did succeed, and in doing so, it changed many of the issues critics have talked about with past series. It depicts a talented and wealthy Black family who have succeeded, yet still face societal struggles despite economic success. The series resonated with audiences and, because of this, made history. The series premier garnered Fox its highest rated premier in three (3) years, and Empire’s premier tied for the highest-rated debut of the 2014-2015 television season. The series it tied was How to Get Away with Murder (ABC, 2014-present), a series with a diverse cast and a Black female lead. Perhaps these are signs of a more accepting and progressive television landscape. In terms of freshmen series, it had the highest-rated first-season finale in a decade of any network and had thirteen (13) consecutive weeks of viewership growth (continuing growth from the Pilot episode into the beginning of the second season), which is virtually unheard of in the modern television era.

The premise of the series has a variety of texts on which it is based. Many note the similarities it has to William Shakespeare’s play King Lear. The play is even explicitly referenced in the Pilot episode of Empire. There are certainly influences from the play, but some have noted Empire more closely relates to the 1960s play The Lion in Winter. Aside from the

---

3 Ibid.
family’s name being Lyon, Jefferson Grubbs summarizes the play to point out the close similarities, saying that *The Lion in Winter*

also deals with an aging English king and his three children. But in this case, the children are sons instead of daughters [like in *King Lear*], and matters are complicated by Henry II’s [the equivalent of Lucious Lyon] estranged wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine [the equivalent of Cookie Lyon]. The marriage between Henry and Eleanor has deteriorated to the point where Eleanor has been virtually imprisoned in a tower. She’s released after 10 years [much like Cookie is released from prison after many years], just in time to join her family for Christmas, when Henry is deciding which of his three sons will inherit the throne. Henry favors his youngest son, John (just like Lucious favors youngest, Hakeem), while Eleanor favors the oldest, Richard the Lionheart. (This is a slight departure from *Empire*, since on the show Cookie favors middle son, Jamal.)

Even co-creator Danny Strong has acknowledged that the series is greatly influenced by both Shakespeare’s *King Lear* and *The Lion in Winter*. The series is based on both historical and modern literature; it is simultaneously a family drama and workplace drama, all the while being a musical and a soap opera. *Empire*’s boundaries of genre are blurred, which, based on an analysis

---


by Adam Rogers, marks it as the epitome of the “all-genre” genre that currently exists across media.\(^8\)

**Synopsis of Empire**

First airing on January 7, 2015, on the television network Fox, *Empire* is centered on Lyon family patriarch and hip-hop mogul, Lucious Lyon, and his company Empire Entertainment, and the series explores dynamics of power, love and hate, and family—all placed against the backdrop of the musical world of rap and hip-hop. As the founder and CEO of Empire, Lucious loves his company—arguably more than he loves anything, or anyone, else. After he is diagnosed with the terminal disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (a.k.a. ALS), Lucious tells his three sons, Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem, that he will choose one of them to take his place as the head of Empire but that he needs time to choose. In doing this, Lucious (knowingly) begins an internal familial struggle among his sons to become Empire’s new CEO.

Lucious’s oldest son, Andre, believes he is best equipped to become the new CEO of Empire. Not only is Andre Ivy League educated, but he is also Empire’s CFO. He has a mind for business and is one of his father’s primary advisors, which Andre believes should make him the easy choice to take over the company. However, Andre knows that he has an uphill battle in becoming the head of Empire. Unlike everyone else in his family, Andre has no musical ability whatsoever and the only thing Lucious truly appreciates about his family is their musical ability. Lucious does not believe Andre can properly run Empire without being musically gifted. Also, Andre is married to Rhonda, who is White, and her race has caused mild, if sometimes repressed, tension in the family. Finally, Andre has bipolar disorder, which occasionally causes him to have manic episodes.

Jamal, Lucious’s middle child, is arguably the most fit to take over Empire. Musically, Jamal is the most talented and has the best temperament when dealing with others. However, he repulses Lucious because Jamal is gay. This causes extreme tension in their relationship, as Lucious willingly fails to acknowledge Jamal’s boyfriend and frequently says his son’s sexuality is a choice. Because of this tension, Jamal is closest to his mother, Cookie, who is recently released from prison after nearly two decades, serving time for selling drugs that she and Lucious used to deal. Cookie, who has a great ear for music, helps Jamal produce his music since Lucious often takes little interest in Jamal’s music.

Andre and Jamal both believe, with good reason, that Lucious will choose his youngest son, Hakeem, to head Empire. Hakeem produces music that Lucious appreciates and invests (both time and money) in most. This is likely because Hakeem’s music is very similar to the music Lucious made when he was a recording artist. Also, Hakeem is similar to Lucious in personality, e.g., both enjoy going to clubs, both are womanizers, both present themselves as hypersexual, etc. However, after Lucious learns that he does not have ALS but rather a treatable disease, Lucious retains control of Empire and the relationship between he and Hakeem deteriorates when Lucious believes Hakeem is attempting to ruin Empire. In addition, we learn quite early in the series that Lucious takes his love for his company very seriously.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter Two, “A Review of Literature Regarding Social Constructions of Identity in the Black Community,” I place a variety of scholars (including bell hooks, Patricia Hill-Collins, Raewyn Connell, and Ronald L. Jackson II, amongst many others) in conversation with one another as a way to provide a foundational background on issues surrounding fatherhood, men and masculinity, and male homosexuality. Further, I discuss the ways in which these topics are
constructed in the Black community specifically. The function of this chapter is to provide historical and contemporary knowledge on these topics, as written by others, as the remaining chapters in my thesis discuss the specifics of these topics and the ways in which they are represented by characters in and the narrative of *Empire*.

In Chapter Three, “(De)Masculinizing Hip-Hop: Queering Hyper-Hetero Music as Cultural Commentary in *Empire,*” I explore the (often negative and harmful) dynamic between the genre of hip-hop and its relation to homosexuality and the LGBTQ community. Part of the chapter deals with these concerns on a broader level, examining the genre as a whole and how those in the genre talk about, perceive, and represent people in the LGBTQ community. I then focus more closely on the ways in which *Empire* as a series deals with these issues, primarily looking at the characters of Lucious, as an example of someone representative of the hegemonic norms of hip-hop, and Jamal, as an example of someone from the LGBTQ community who is succeeding and breaking barriers within this genre.

Also in this chapter, I provide a discussion on the VH1 reality television series *Love & Hip-Hop: Hollywood,* the surface-level connection being it, like *Empire,* is a television series that deals with hip-hop. However, the discussion of the series goes deeper in that there are gay cast members on the series who are deeply entrenched in hip-hop. Further, *Love & Hip-Hop: Hollywood,* aired a special entitled *Out in Hip-Hop*—also discussed in Chapter Three—where a panel gathered to discuss issues of LGBTQ treatment and visibility in the rap and hip-hop world. Therefore, engaging with the reality of *Love & Hip-Hop: Hollywood* and *Out in Hip-Hop* allows me to provide a commentary on the fiction of *Empire,* and how both series deal with the issue of homosexuality in the hip-hop genre.
In Chapter Four, entitled “‘We King Lear Now?’: (Re)Presenting Black Fatherhood in Empire,” I take a close look at the way Lucious is portrayed as a person and father within the series. Much of my discussion revolves around the fact that Lucious embodies many hegemonic norms of masculinity and sexuality—including aggressiveness, extreme violence, and frequent expressions of disgust toward homosexuality—and how that tends to often have negative effects on his children. Within the chapter, I also discuss how Lucious, on one hand, breaks from the norm of absent Black fathers, yet on the other hand completely fulfills the absent Black father stereotype through his emotional absence.

The chapter is primarily divided into sections devoted to Lucious’s individual relationships with his sons. Within his relationship with oldest son, Andre, I mention the issue of parentification, or the reversal of parent/child roles. This analysis is focused on Andre frequently acting as protector over his father, beginning when Andre was a child and continuing into his adulthood. I also examine Andre’s struggle with bipolar disorder, as well as his quest for the validation he often seeks from his father.

With regard to Lucious’s relationship with Hakeem, I mention that in the beginning of the series, their father/son relationship is clearly the closest and most solid when compared to Lucious’s relationships with Andre and Jamal, or Hakeem’s relationship with Cookie. This stems from the fact that Lucious sees much of himself in Hakeem—both in terms of behavior and music. I then move toward discussing how, as the series progresses, their relationship becomes strained at best and violently threatening at worst.

Chapter Four concludes with an examination of Lucious’s relationship with his middle son, Jamal. I begin by discussing Lucious’s loathsome treatment—primarily verbal, though sometimes physical—of Jamal, simply because Jamal is gay. I mention the ways in which
Lucious pretends to care for Jamal or help Jamal, but it frequently comes with the caveat of revoking who he is as a person. Ultimately, I discuss a “positive” turning point in their relationship, but this turning point is marked by violence. Given that any semblance of a positive relationship forms between the two out of mutual violence toward others, it is not shocking, as I note, that their relationship again becomes extremely toxic, arguably dissolving to a point much worse than their initial relationship.

Chapter Five is the conclusion of the thesis. It is a summation of the previous chapters in my thesis and the main issues I put forth. In the conclusion, I also briefly situate *Empire* in the context of its cultural significance. I point to specific examples of other cultural texts to illustrate the ways in which *Empire* has had such a profound impact of popular culture in such a short amount of time.
CHAPTER II.
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE REGARDING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF IDENTITY
IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY

This chapter is a review of literature of various works by scholars who have written about social constructions of identity related to fatherhood, masculinity and sexuality broadly, and more specifically how these identities are constructed, represented, and expressed throughout the Black community. In providing research by a number of different scholars, a clearer and more solid foundation can be formed regarding the background of these identities, as my discussion in the following chapters about *Empire* and the characters in *Empire*, is primarily grounded in analysis of these identities as depicted in the series.

(Black) Fatherhood

When compared to motherhood, the social construction of fatherhood has often tended toward the negative end of the spectrum. Though certainly not always the case, according to Stephanie Coontz, “paternal absence has always been the norm.”\(^9\) This paternal absence can manifest in several ways, be it through a father who is a blatant abandoner, a father who spends more time working than in the home, or a father who is emotionally absent, amongst other things. Regarding emotional absence, Coontz quotes therapist Deborah Luepnitz as suggesting, “fathers’ *emotional* absence may be more difficult to contend with than their physical absence, since, like all ambiguous losses, it cannot be easily acknowledged and grieved.”\(^{10}\) In the series *Empire*, the patriarch of the Lyons family, Lucious, perfectly fits this description, as he is


\(^{10}\) Ibid, 223.
physical present but quite emotionally absent, and his emotional absence causes harm in his sons’ lives. I discuss this problem, Lucious’s emotional absence, at more length in chapter four.

With regard to present fathers, hegemonic norms of what it means to be a father and man often bleed over into their parenting, specifically as it relates to their sons. Rebecca Feasey says, “We are told fathers socialise their sons in line with hegemonic masculinity in the knowledge that a range of male eyes (be they teachers, coaches, bosses, peers, friends or workmates) will watch and judge them.” She continues by saying that fathers “are keen to position their sons as strong and powerful young men so that they themselves continue to be judged as the dominant male, and therefore positioned quite literally as the patriarchal father.”

The idea of the absent Black father is nothing new and, according to bell hooks, much of this ties into their ideas of their place within patriarchy, as she says that Black men and boys “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.” And, on top of this, as Dominique Mack mentions, Black fathers are often not there to care for their children because they are imprisoned. The blame for this should be carefully placed, as it is not always the fault of the Black father for his imprisonment and, therefore, his absence is beyond his control.

Another prevalent construction of Black fatherhood is that Black fathers attempt to essentially force heterosexuality onto their sons. In discussing research findings by Michael LaSala, Edward Wyckoff Williams notes that Black fathers are not as willing as White fathers,

\[12\] Ibid.
or not willing altogether, to discuss homosexuality with their Black sons,\(^\text{15}\) this stemming from the extreme stigmatization of homosexuality, especially male homosexuality, within the Black community. While there is definitely truth to some of the social constructions of Black fathers and Black fatherhood, the many negative attributions frequently work to undermine Black fathers and their role(s) in society. However, recently more scholarship and research about the positives of Black fatherhood has emerged, with Charles Blow, citing findings from a report by the Centers of Disease Control saying, “black fathers [are] the most involved with their children daily, on a number of measures, of any other group of fathers,”\(^\text{16}\) and he reiterates the fact that the lack of involvement of Black fathers is often rooted in their disproportionate incarceration,\(^\text{17}\) often for crimes they did not commit or crimes for which they were more harshly punished than their White counterparts.

Many of these social constructions of (Black) fatherhood get represented across various media, especially across the omnipresent television. Tammy Brown conducted an interview with actor John Amos, who portrayed the character of James Evans—a financially struggling Black father, trying to support his wife and kids—on the hit 1970s series *Good Times* (CBS, 1974-1979). In this interview, Amos speaks to the many ideas and/or misconceptions of Black fatherhood the series represented. Brown quotes Amos as saying

Well I’d like to think that those folks who saw *Good Times* that that helped
destroy that misconception that all black men, particularly black fathers, have had


\(^{17}\) Ibid.
to shed, which is: one, we don’t love our children; two, we’re never responsible fathers, and that most black fathers are absentee fathers. That was one of the reasons that it was the producers and quite frankly the network’s obvious intention to perpetuate negative stereotypes about the black community because that’s all they were comfortable with was their own misconception…

Amos clearly expresses his intent to do the best he could to shed the negative stereotypes of Black fathers with the character of James Evans. To some extent, Good Times succeeded in showing a present and loving father. However, the show still relied on stereotypes of Blackness as a whole, because those representations are easier to write and attract an audience, and it was Amos’s expression of displeasure with these representations that ultimately led to his firing.

**(Black) Men and (Black) Masculinity**

Defining what masculinity is specifically is difficult. Working with Judith Butler’s idea of gender, Bryant Keith Alexander notes that masculinity is performative. Raewyn Connell, understanding that masculinity is complicated to define, describes it this way “‘Masculinity,’ to the extent the term can be briefly defined at all, is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture.” Homi Bhabha, as quoted by Alexander, says, “masculinity…is the ‘taking up’ of an enunciative position, the making up of a

---

psychic complex, the assumption of a social gender, the supplementation of a historical sexuality, the apparatus of a cultural difference.”

Men are often classified and analyzed “in groups rather than as individuals” because of the standardized conception that “all men [are] supposed to conform to an ideal of masculinity.” Because society tends to homogenize ideas of manliness and masculinity, this leads to an analysis by Jack Halberstam, who says, “…as a society we have little trouble in recognizing [masculinity], and indeed we spend massive amounts of time and money ratifying and supporting the versions of masculinity that we enjoy and trust; many of these ‘heroic masculinities’ depend absolutely on the subordination of alternative masculinities.”

Furthermore, Halberstam states, “that excessive masculinity tend[s] to focus on black bodies…” In Empire, we can see how this ties directly into Lucious, as he both applies this to his life and embodies the stereotype Halberstam discusses. He spends money and (initially) favors and gives attention to the son that supports his idea of what masculinity is. But his son, Jamal, who presents an alternative masculinity (i.e., a counterhegemonic masculinity via his homosexuality), Lucious not only subordinates it, he outright rejects it as being any form of masculinity at all. (I provide further analysis of this in the following chapters.)

One of the hegemonic norms of masculinity is violence. As Connell writes, “violence becomes important in gender politics among men. Most episodes of major violence … are transactions among men. Terror is used as a means of drawing boundaries and making

---

21 Alexander, “Queer(y)ing Masculinities,” 69.
23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 At the time of this publication, Halberstam published under the name Judith Halberstam.
exclusions, for example, in heterosexual violence against gay men.”\textsuperscript{27} This draws a connection to Alexander’s writing, as he is trying to both queer masculinity and query masculinity. To queer masculinity, Alexander says, “is in many ways to challenge the constructedness of a masculine ideal that is heavily invested in hetero-male performativity, even when that performativity is homosocial in nature and reifies its potency in relation to a presumed opposite.”\textsuperscript{28} And, according to Alexander, to query masculinity is to invite “reflections on the sometime destructive results of a hegemonic masculinity rooted in power and dominance, but also ways in which the heterosexual logic that is dominated by masculinity claims a particular authority over the social order and even penetrates the relational dynamics of queers.”\textsuperscript{29} Alexander, himself, is not only writing this on masculinity, but he is writing this from the perspective of a Black male.

While many of the hegemonic norms of masculinity also apply to Black masculinity specifically, there are differences—some nuanced, some not—that arguably make those hegemonic norms much more damaging for Black men. For example, while the expression of violence by men, broadly, is not necessarily surprising, in hegemonic terms, the expression of violence by Black men, specifically, is a simple expectation of their characteristics. In her discussion of violence, Connell says

\begin{quote}
Violence can become a way of claiming or asserting masculinity in group struggles. This is an explosive process when an oppressed group gains the means of violence—as [witnessed by] the levels of violence among black men in contemporary…[America]. The youth gang violence of inner-city streets is a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{27} Connell, “The Social Organization of Masculinity,” 261.
\textsuperscript{28} Alexander, “Queer(y)ing Masculinities,” 66.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
striking example of the assertion of marginalized masculinities against other men, continuous with the assertion of masculinity in sexual violence against women.\textsuperscript{30} This perceived natural violence of Black men has led some scholars, like Mark Orbe, to write that people consider “Black men [to] possess an inherent anger triggered by a past, present, and future of racism.”\textsuperscript{31} This connects directly to something hooks says, which is that some authors writing on the topic may or may not view Black male violence as justified based on the history and existence of being victims of racism,\textsuperscript{32} and that Black men, specifically, prior to the sixties, had to work “over time to counter racist sexist stereotypes that represented them as beasts, monsters, demons.”\textsuperscript{33} In a discussion of justifications based on histories of repression and marginalization, with regard to the ways people socially construct homosexuality, Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund say, “same-sex desire, or queerness, is a monstrosity that cannot be entirely repressed, emerging in displaced forms of cruelty, brutality and violence.”\textsuperscript{34} Though they are not saying homosexuality is monstrous, it is those who construct it as monstrous that can cause people to act out in a brutal or violent way. Within the context of Empire, Lucious constructs Jamal’s homosexuality as monstrous through his expressions of disgust and repulsion, and it is this monstrous construction that becomes somewhat of a catalyst in Jamal becoming violent (discussed further in chapter four). Based on the analysis from Orbe, hooks, and Edwards and Graulund, the question could be asked, “Because of his Blackness and

\textsuperscript{32} hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, 47.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
homosexuality, is Jamal’s occasional acts of violence grounded in a form of (perhaps questionable) justification?"

Even though possessing bodily strength is generally considered natural, because of the social construction of the Black man as violent, when Black men are naturally strong, it is somehow turned into something sinister, even when there is no reason to believe that that Black man poses any sort of threat. According to Mosse, “[Black men’s] strength [is seen as] barbaric, without order or direction, displaced into an overflowing sexual energy menacing white women.”\(^{35}\) Often, hooks notes, violence enacted by Black men is directed toward women.\(^{36}\) And, hooks continues stating that when this violence is directed toward Black women specifically, it is seen as “the most acceptable form of acting out.”\(^{37}\) Much of this can be attributed to the stereotype that Black women are angry. Because the “angry Black woman” stereotype persists, that (supposed) anger causes people to believe that somehow Black women “warrant” or “ask for” violence to be enacted against them.

Black men, according to hooks, are brought up believing “that a real male is fearless, insensitive, egocentric, and invulnerable,”\(^ {38}\) and that, along with these characteristics, Black men cultivate an abusive personality from childhood. It is a defense. Taught to believe the world is against them, that they are doomed to be victims; they assume the posture of victimizer. First embracing the ideals of patriarchal masculinity that make domination acceptable, they then draw upon misogyny and sexism to

\(^{36}\) hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 56.
\(^{37}\) Ibid, 57.
\(^{38}\) Ibid, 61.
experience their first use of violence, psychological or physical, to control another human being.  

Because of these ingrained ideals and characteristics that are instilled from childhood, hooks comments that “Black males are unable to fully articulate and acknowledge the pain in their lives. They do not have a public discourse or audience within racist society that enables them to give their pain a hearing. Sadly, black men often evoke racist rhetoric that identifies the black male as animal, speaking of themselves as ‘endangered species,’ as ‘primitive,’ in their bid to gain recognition of their suffering.” Going into even further detail about the idea of Black males as “endangered species,” Ronald L. Jackson II says

The indisputable and tragic reality is that Black males have been pathologized and labeled as violent/criminal, sexual and incompetent/ineducated individuals. It is this prevalent set of stereotypical depictions of Black masculinity as a stigmatized condition or of Black males as an “endangered species” that makes it extremely difficult to theorize Black masculinities in the same ways as White or other marginalized group masculinities. Black masculinities are first and foremost cultural property communicated in everyday interaction as manifestations of Black identities.

This is the epitome of marginalized masculinity. Out of all of this develops some of the cultural conditioning, via a White-supremacist society hooks mentions, that causes Black men to see themselves as violent—a reaction to not being able to properly express their pain—which can

39 Ibid.
manifest into actuality, as it can become easy for Black men to see their role as being an actual perpetrator of violence if that is what they are constantly conditioned to believe.

Obviously, claiming that all Black men possess an inherent anger and/or violence is a vast overgeneralization. However, when Black men do express some form of anger and violence because of their place within patriarchal society, it is difficult not to understand at least some of it, because, as hooks says, Black men have experienced, and continue to experience “white-supremacist subjugation” and are regularly depicted as “uncivilized brutes.”\(^ {42}\) Black men are not only made less than—they are, even worse, dehumanized within the hegemonic confines of a patriarchal society, straddled with crippling stereotypes and obstacles that make it infinitely more difficult to progress ahead, thus creating a perfect storm for expressions of anger and violence. The problem comes when the violence is misdirected, which then leads to the harmfully stereotypical representations.

Along these similar lines of construction, it can be just as psychologically negative for Black men who openly express none of the characteristics of hegemonic Black masculinity. hooks says

Black males who reject racist sexist stereotypes must still cope with the imposition onto them of qualities that have no relation to their lived experience. For example: a black male who is scrupulously honest may have to cope with co-workers treating him suspiciously because they see all black males as con artists in hiding. Nonviolent black males daily face a world that sees them as violent.\(^ {43}\) She continues by saying that regardless of expression, Black men are almost always characterized one way and that “by projecting onto black males the trait of unchecked primitive

---

\(^{42}\) hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 48.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 48-9.
violence, 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.\textsuperscript{44} We can sadly see this in practice in everyday life via the countless killings of unarmed Black men by civilians and law enforcement officers alike. However, the problem, as hooks notes, is that many Black men and boys have consciously or subconsciously accepted the role of violent male that dominant society has ascribed to them,\textsuperscript{45} unwilling or unable to question and/or fight against this negative attribution. Similarly, Jackson says, “Blacks become complicit with negative inscriptions of their bodies when they uncritically adopt structures designed to demean or essentialize blackness…. Such is the case with the brutish personae of the thug, ruffneck, and pimp, each of whom attempts to retrieve agency only to become complicit with patriarchal inscriptions that deny others their dignity and respect.”\textsuperscript{46}

Discussing Jackson, Toniesha Taylor and Amber Johnson say, “black masculine identity has been conditioned by Western hegemonic contexts and inscribed through discourse, resulting in a script.”\textsuperscript{47} So, essentially, Black (stereotypical) identity was created by, and continues to exist because of, White dominance over social constructions. Taylor and Johnson’s observation connects to the aforementioned analysis by Orbe. Taylor and Johnson go on to say that many people, including—and, maybe especially—Black people, learn what it means to be a Black man from various media outlets, including hip-hop,\textsuperscript{48} which ties directly into Empire. Hip-hop is a

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 51.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 114.
genre in which Lucious lives, and much of what he believes is formed around it. Taylor and Johnson say that certain outlets, like hip-hop, have a tendency to trivialize Black male identity by creating an either-or existence for what it means to represent Black masculinity.\textsuperscript{49} Again, we can see Lucious ascribing to this “either-or” idea of Black masculinity, especially regarding his son, Jamal, and Jamal’s sexuality—a topic discussed at length in chapter four.

One of the most well established stereotypes of Black men, and something that becomes an immediate measure of Black masculinity, is hypersexuality. Patricia Hill-Collins says that “For far too many Black men, all that seems to be left to them is access to the booty, and they can becomes depressed or dangerous if that access is denied. In this scenario, Black women become reduced to sexual spoils of war, with Black men defining masculinity in terms of their prowess in conquering the booty.”\textsuperscript{50} Because Black men are frequently marginalized within society, left with few, if any, options for social advancement, many times they believe, according to Hill-Collins, that the only thing that allows them power in a rigged social economy is sex. The result of the mass depiction of hypersexuality linked to Black masculinity, Hill-Collins says, is that “Images of Black men often reduce them not only to bodies … but also to body parts, especially the penis.”\textsuperscript{51}

One thing hooks suggests is that there is a repression of artistic expression for Black boys by both Black fathers and Black mothers because it is “viewed as a threat to the assumption of a patriarchal masculine identity if a boy is emotionally expressive and creative…”\textsuperscript{52} However, the opposite is at work in Empire, which is significant because this is a point at which Lucious

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid, 324.
\textsuperscript{52} hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, 94.
breaks from the normative ideals of (Black) masculinity. Not only does he encourage his sons to be musically creative and expressive, but he is too. Furthermore, he frequently tells Jamal and Hakeem to put everything, their emotions, feelings, and experiences into a song. That said, the argument can be made that this type of artistic expression is acceptable because it takes place in a space that is traditionally seen as hypermasculine and hypersexual, thus existing within borders of hegemonic Black masculinity.

More specifically, Black masculinity within the structures of the musical genres of rap and hip-hop are worth discussing a bit more, not only because rap and hip-hop are at the core of Empire’s narrative, but also because rap/hip-hop is such a prevalent musical genre within the Black community that it has a great influence over the social behaviors and understandings of those who listen to it. According to Herman Gray, Black masculinity, within contemporary rap and hip-hop, is romanticized through the depiction of the original gangsta, or “OG.” In Empire, Lucious Lyon, as a character, comes to stand in for this romanticized depiction of Black masculinity, as we see his decades-long struggles and successes in the hip-hop community, positioning himself as an “OG.” (This is discussed further in chapter three.) Lucious becomes somewhat of an icon within this community (both through his popularity as a performer and as an executive of a hip-hop record label), and, as Gray notes, “Black heterosexual masculinity is figured in the popular imagination as the basis of masculine hero worship in the case of rappers.” Consequently, this is one of the primary reasons why much of Lucious’s character and his interactions with other characters is very much driven from a place of hegemonic Black, heterosexual (hyper)masculinity—much to the detriment of those around him—especially his three children, and, even more specifically, his son Jamal.

---

54 Ibid.
(Black) Male Homosexuality

Traditionally, the construction of homosexuality within society and the media has been negative or not fully formed in representation. Edwards and Graulund say that homosexuality and same-sex relationships have a tendency to be constructed as “demonized [and] grotesque forms of behaviour.” And, perhaps most damaging, with regard to family, Edward Wyckoff Williams says, “But for all the attention placed on the experiences of gay youths among their peers, the truth is that the pathway to wholeness and self-acceptance begins at home. And it’s also where the seeds of self-hatred and doubt are first sown.” Williams continues his discussion of gay acceptance within the family, and specifically within the Black family, by saying, “More than 90 percent of black gay youths listed ‘family acceptance’ as the main factor that could actually make their lives more bearable. But for young African-American males in particular, that acceptance is too often a distant dream.”

When it comes to the representation of homosexuality on television, Feasey says, “A brief examination of the only gay male character that appears more than momentarily in the series reveals the way in which the programme reinforces longstanding cultural stereotypes.” Specifically referencing Blackness and homosexuality in the media, Hill-Collins says, “Representations of gay African American men depict them as peripheral characters, often in comedic roles that border on ridicule.” In addition, according to Mark Cunningham, when it comes to televisual representations, “some attempts to curtail the obviously offensive depiction of homosexual Black males of years past have been made. Yet even these efforts prove

---

56 Williams, “Black Parents, Gay Sons and Redefining Masculinity.”
57 Ibid.
problematic, as more recent depictions find these men to be gay in name only and not fully
developed characters.\(^6^0\) While this is typically the norm for television and gay characters, this
is not the case with *Empire*; the character of Jamal is fully developed. Rather than succumbing
to the oppression he may feel (especially at the hands of his father), he is written as a character
who rises above and conquers obstacles he faces, arguably becoming the Lyon most sought after
for their music, therefore he is represented as someone not will willing to be content with their
marginalized place in society; he is represented as someone willing to fight for what he know he
deserves. We see him in numerous same-sex relationships, ultimately becoming someone
unashamed of expressing who he truly is, even in an environment that traditionally is
unaccepting of his sexuality, thus he is not written as a meek gay man. He plays a main role in
the narrative of the series rather than a peripheral character, and he is not used solely for comedic
purposes but rather is represented as a normal, flawed human being. His expression of talent and
strained familial relationships—primarily with his father—open a door for the viewers to cheer
him on to success. Though there are undeniable flaws in his character, both as he is written and
portrayed, he is still arguably one of the most successfully depicted gay characters on television
in recent years.

Michael LaSala’s research, as synthesized by Williams, finds that

[Y]oung black boys—both gay and straight—feel tremendous pressure to grow up
and become *strong black men* who are ‘armored to battle racism and social
barriers with a veneer of hypermasculinity.’ That masculinity, [LaSala] says, is
characterized by toughness, control, poise, emotional stoicism and a

\(^6^0\) Mark D. Cunningham, “Nigger, Coon, Boy, Punk, Homo, Faggot, Black Man: Reconsidering
Established Interpretations of Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality Through Noah’s Arc,” in
*Watching While Black: Centering the Television of Black Audiences*, ed. Beretta E. Smith-
hyperheterosexuality—always eager to prove one’s manhood through female conquests and outward expressions of strength.

For gay African-American boys still suffocating in the closet, those expectations are particularly acute. Simply by virtue of who they are, they feel they’re rejecting ‘black masculinity’—and thereby betraying the already victimized and denigrated image of black men in American society.  

Baldwin Bradshaw writes, “There seems to be an unspoken expectation that black gay men have to choose between being either gay or black. There is little room between.” Much of this stems from the hypermasculinity expected of Black men and the troubling idea that being gay automatically excludes you from being masculine in the traditional sense. This becomes an important source of tension within Empire between Lucious and his son, Jamal, discussed at length in chapter four.

The homophobia, especially as it relates to Black gay males that seems to run rampant within the Black community is particularly problematic because it takes males who are already marginalized for being Black and further marginalizes them. This is a problem Hill-Collins addresses. She states, “Within straight Black male culture, special derision is saved for Black representations of ‘punks,’ the males who were sexually conquered by other men.” She goes on to further say “Black manhood has become juxtaposed to the Negro faggot in contemporary Black cultural production.” The late filmmaker and gay rights activist Marlon Riggs noted that,

---

61 Williams, “Black Parents, Gay Sons and Redefining Masculinity.”
64 Ibid.
“Because of my sexuality, I cannot be black. A strong, proud ‘Afrocentric’ black man is resolutely heterosexual, not even bisexual. Hence, I remain a Negro. My sexual difference is considered of no value … Hence, I remain a sissy, punk, faggot. I cannot be a black gay man because, by the tenets of black macho, black gay man is a triple negation.”65 I would argue that much of the homophobia straight Black men express toward gay Black men is rooted in concerns over power and privilege. As I previously stated, hegemonic society has subjugated and marginalized Black men. Because of this, Black men attempt to regain any form of power and privilege they can. One way straight Black men attempt to regain social power is through the understanding that, because of their heterosexuality, they occupy a place of privilege over Black gay men regarding normative hegemonic sexuality. So, homophobia becomes an unfortunate byproduct of some straight Black men’s endeavors to find a more advantageous and powerful position, rather than the standard peripheral and subjugated position, within hegemonic society.

Regarding sexuality as it pertains to hip-hop, Jackson writes, “When examining sexuality in hip-hop music and film, it is axiomatic to decipher representations of subject and object, elite and subaltern, but also the internal contradictions attendant to these inscriptions.”66 Though this could be read as explicitly referencing Black male heterosexuality and Black female heterosexuality—with the Black male being represented as subject, elite, and the Black female being represented as object, subaltern—somewhat more implicitly it can be directly linked to the ways in which Black male homosexuality is also represented within hip-hop. Since the derision of homosexuality within rap and hip-hop often comes from the belief that homosexuality is equivalent to feminization, it is therefore positioning gay males as females in the minds of Black

65 Ibid.
men and rappers. It is somehow unthinkable that a man can be a man, or masculine, and also gay. And, even more, because of the hypersexuality within hip-hop, gay men are further subordinated beyond their equivalence to females. While both women and gay men are considered the subaltern in hip-hop, women are still seen as valuable for their sexuality. Since their sexuality serves no purpose to the hyperheterosexual males in hip-hop, (Black) gay men are seen as completely invaluable, thus cementing their position as (traditionally) wholly marginalized within the musical space of hip-hop.
CHAPTER III.

(DE)MASCULINIZING HIP-HOP: 

QUEERING HYPER-HETERO MUSIC AS CULTURAL COMMENTARY IN EMPIRE

The musical genre of hip-hop has frequently been labeled as homophobic, and, honestly, it is not difficult to see why. Between the anti-gay lyrics perpetuated by a number of artists, or simply the public rhetoric against homosexuality (with terms like “pause” and “no homo”) by many of those ensconced in this musical community, questioning and challenging hip-hop’s acceptance of homosexuality is both valid and necessary. However, with LGBTQ visibility and acceptance gradually increasing, hip-hop is forced to face these issues, and one of the cultural texts that is currently working to successfully progress queer acceptance in this particular musical genre is the television program Empire. Both normatively heterosexist and hegemonically masculine, hip-hop predominantly creates a space where certain people feel unwelcome and are treated as such. Empire, which is highly representative of a society that is entrenched in the Black and hip-hop cultures, effectively combats these concerns and works to deconstruct many of the normative prejudices about masculinity and sexuality that plague this genre of music. Empire has characters, namely Lucious, who come to stand in for normative ideas of hip-hop, and has other characters, namely Jamal, who works to subvert those harmful norms of hip-hop, which is seen especially in the music of the series. And, we can begin to see that the fictitious world of hip-hop in Empire bleeds into the real world of hip-hop, and vice versa. In looking at some of the current rhetoric surrounding homosexuality in hip-hop, it becomes clear why those involved with Empire really have to capitalize on the platform in which they have to break down the negative and harmful beliefs that run rampant within much of the hip-hop community.
Before delving into the ways in which *Empire* deals with issues of homosexuality and hip-hop in a fictional universe, it is important to first discuss the relationship hip-hop has to homosexuality in the real world, especially in the present since that is the era in which *Empire* is tackling this issue. The hip-hop community has historically had problematic ways of dealing with issues surrounding homosexuality, even issues as minute as a word or phrase that could slightly be perceived as having homosexual implications. This can be seen in the use of the phrase “no homo,” which, as Joshua R. Brown notes, “arose in the 1990s as a discourse interjection in the hip-hop music scene,” and, as he later notes, functions similarly to “an earlier term, ‘pause,’ which achieved the same result.” He points to its use in the lyrics by artists such as Jay-Z and Lil Wayne. While the term or phrase may have changed, the anti-gay meanings throughout much of hip-hop have remained the same. The prevalence of the phrase “no homo” in hip-hop sets up an implication that there is something wrong with being gay and that any perceived homosexual innuendo needs to immediately be shut down as “not homosexual” for fear that someone may question your sexuality. The term “no homo” also puts on display the fragile masculinity of not only those in the hip-hop community but also those within dominant society broadly, as the term has become somewhat colloquial amongst teenagers, as discussed by Brown.

The use of “no homo” in hip-hop has reached a point where, as Brown references, it is even used in lyrics when there is not any threat of interpretation for non-heterosexual interaction. He points to the Lil Wayne song *Lollipop*, and says that it “starts out with no homo, even though the subsequent lines address a male-female interaction [quoting the lyrics]: Uh huh,

---

68 Ibid, 301.
69 Ibid, 300.
70 Ibid, 299.
no homo. / She said ‘he so sweet, make me wanna lick the wrapper’ / So I let her lick the wrapper.”

One thing Brown potentially misses is that Lil Wayne’s use of “no homo” here is standard for the traditional use of the term in hip-hop, as I believe the ambiguity Lil Wayne is attempting to clarify is “he so sweet.” It does not matter that the lines clearly address a male-female interaction. In slang terms, especially within the Black community, if a guy is “sweet,” it is a way to imply that he is gay. The term “sweet” can be used similarly to “fruity,” which, as Tricia Rose criticizes, the word “fruity” is a way to hint at a man’s “possible homosexuality [and] as a way to emasculate [him],” and that, “This sort of homophobia affirms oppressive standards of heterosexual masculinity.”

So, the use of “no homo” in Lollipop is likely being used to distance Lil Wayne from that connotation of “sweet.” Despite this, however, Brown’s broader point still stands, which is that hip-hop has started using “no homo” outside of its original intent, for no reason. Homophobia and anti-gay rhetoric are so embedded in this genre, that now the threat of homosexual innuendo does not even have to be present for artists to feel the need to use potentially homophobic terms in their music, just in an attempt to create as much distance as possible between them and something about which they have negative opinions.

But the troubles members of the LGBTQ community face within hip-hop extend to greater concerns than a simple word or phrase but rather to a collective cultural zeitgeist within the world of hip-hop. In describing the relationship hip-hop has to homosexuality, Marc Lamont Hill says:

[M]uch of mainstream hip-hop culture reflects a collective fear, disdain, and outright hatred of gay and lesbian bodies. Moreover, these homophobic

---

71 Ibid, 303.
sensibilities translate into concrete forms of oppression, violence, and
discrimination for those who openly identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual,
transgender, or questioning. It is this homophobic sensibility that often protrudes
from the work of some of hip-hop culture’s most celebrated figures.73

Based on this, we can understand that people within the LGBTQ community would feel less
than, to say the absolute least, from those within hip-hop culture. The use of the term “no homo”
implying that there is something wrong with being gay becomes a slightly less important concern
when hip-hop on the whole, as Hill points out, has a tendency to encourage full-on fear and
outright hatred for those in the LGBTQ community. Also, when these messages are being
spoken by hip-hop artists in positions of power on a large, (inter)national scale, potentially deep,
psychological issues for those on the receiving end of these messages becomes a real,
unfortunate threat.

In an attempt to combat some of the harmful, anti-gay rhetoric that occurs within hip-hop,
the most recent season of VH1’s reality program Love & Hip-Hop: Hollywood featured a gay
male couple—Miles and Milan, who are both rappers. At season’s end, there was a panel
discussion, titled LHH: Out in Hip Hop, with Miles and Milan, as well as an extensive and varied
group of others, to discuss the reception of a gay couple in the hip-hop community and the
history of homophobia that has plagued the genre in the past and present. During the panel, out
BET/hip-hop executive Buttahman said, “Hip-hop is still very much a boys club” and that you
are no longer perceived as “one of the guys” if you come out as gay.74 Buttahman’s statement
clearly brings up the hypermasculine issue facing hip-hop’s acceptance of homosexuality. As he

73 Marc Lamont Hill, “Scared Straight: Hip-Hop, Outing, and the Pedagogy of Queerness,”
74 LHH: Out In Hip Hop, 2015, http://www.vh1.com/shows/love-and-hip-hop-hollywood/lhh-
out-in-hip-hop-full-episode/1738400/playlist/.
has implied, the majority of those within the hip-hop community still operate under the fallacy that a man’s masculinity (or, perhaps more accurately, performance of masculinity) is directly linked to sexuality, and that if you are gay then you are not masculine and therefore cannot be viewed as a guy, or “one of the guys.” Buttahman later notes, regarding lyrics in hip-hop, that if a straight rapper wants to go on the attack against another straight rapper, one of the first things of which they will make use is the word “faggot;” he says that words in hip-hop are specifically used as weapons. ⁷⁵ The employment of homophobic and/or gender/sexuality inverting terms and phrases is something that occurs in Empire, and will be revisited later.

Also on the Out In Hip Hop panel was legendary rapper DMC. There was one thing in particular that he said which greatly resonated with the crowd. In an attempt to shine a light on the harsh realities of the treatment of homosexuality in hip-hop, DMC says, “With hip-hop, we use disrespect as a false form of power. In hip-hop, we disrespect the hell out of our women, so what do you think they’re gonna do to gay men?” ⁷⁶ Here, by DMC’s own words, we can see that hip-hop places gay men in an inferior position to women, a group of people hip-hop already views as inferior. So, essentially, hip-hop doubly subordinates gay men. In the (antiquated and problematic) hierarchy of hip-hop, gay men rank below those who are seen to be only useful for their bodies and nothing more. In this culture, gay men have nothing of value to those in dominance, and are thereby seen as completely worthless.

Transitioning from the world of reality to the world of fiction, perhaps of any character in Empire, Lucious Lyon is arguably the one that is the most representative of someone directly associated with and a part of the hip-hop scene, as many of the homophobic elements of hip-hop previously discussed can be attributed to him. However, while Lucious is set up as an exemplar

⁷⁵ Ibid.
⁷⁶ Ibid.
for the masculine, heterosexist norms of hip-hop, *Empire* uses other characters—specifically, Lucious’s own children, especially Jamal—to fight against those harmful norms in order to create a narrative around a more inclusive, progressive hip-hop community. But it is first important to understand how Lucious represents the typical hip-hop artist with typical hip-hop ideals. On a somewhat simplistic level, Lucious’s background is very similar to that of many hip-hop stars. Comparable to the stories of famous rappers from RZA\(^77\) to Jay-Z,\(^78\) the audience is told in the Pilot episode that Lucious grew up on the streets, and by the age of nine, he was selling drugs just to feed himself. He says the only thing that really kept him alive was the music in his head.\(^79\) By giving Lucious such a stock life background for hip-hop artists, the show is immediately establishing him as a character traditionally associated with this genre.

Luscious also represents norms of the hip-hop genre, like hypermasculinity and hypersexuality. The second episode of the series, titled “The Outspoken King,” opens with a Lucious Lyon music video. In the music video, he is driving an expensive car with an attractive woman in the passenger seat. He is being chased by the police until he approaches a police blockade in an attempt to stop him. Once he is stopped, the camera focuses on the large, pushed-up breasts of the woman, Lucious gives the officer an acknowledging look (that indicates he [Lucious] is about to engage sexually with the woman), and the officer says, “Okay, let him through [the blockade].”\(^80\) This clearly plays into the hypersexual, heterosexual norm of the hip-hop genre and uses the woman simply as an object. It also places Lucious in a position as sexual being, emphasizing his manhood and masculinity—things that are prided and praised within the hip-hop genre.

\(^{79}\) Lee Daniels, “Pilot,” *Empire* (Fox, January 27, 2015).
\(^{80}\) Lee Daniels, “The Outspoken King,” *Empire* (Fox, January 14, 2015).
Another way the hypermasculine is represented in hip-hop is through violence. Near the beginning of the same episode, we are informed that a shooting has occurred and that the suspect has informed people that he was influenced by the violent lyrics of someone named Kidd Fo-Fo, a rapper on the Empire record label. Lucious, however, does absolutely nothing to condemn or distance himself from Kidd Fo-Fo’s lyrics, instead publicly declaring that he fully stands behind him and that he thinks rap “is an expression of somebody’s life experience.”

Lucious holds true to the point that Jasmin S. Greene makes: “Rap music is the one place where black men are allowed to express their true feelings, their angst, anxieties, and anger about being a black man in white America.” Lucious definitely lives this, and there is nothing wrong with that. After the shooting incident, Lucious goes on a cable news-like program to show support for Kidd Fo-Fo and his lyrics. While it makes sense that Lucious would support one expressing their life in their lyrics, as a businessman, Lucious’s unwillingness to condemn extremely violent lyrics is somewhat shocking and proves his devotion to this hypermasculine genre of music. The interviewer even implicitly mentions Lucious’s devotion to problematic norms of hip-hop by saying, “Your own lyrics are even more inciting than the ones that you’re defending.” Lucious’s only response to this whole situation is, “Well, anything that expresses the First Amendment is healthy for our country. If artists are supposed to thrive, they need to have the freedom of speech.” Again, this point that Lucious makes is perfectly valid, but the irony in it reveals how he is representative of hip-hop ideals. This is an obvious contradiction because Lucious will not allow his gay son, Jamal, to exercise his freedom of speech in publicly speaking who he is without punishment. Lucious not only disapproves of his son’s sexuality, but is fully convinced

---

81 Ibid.
83 Daniels, “The Outspoken King.”
Jamal’s career, and Empire Entertainment, will fail because of Jamal’s sexuality. The support of violence and violent lyrics, and the lack of support for and criticism of Jamal’s sexual identity (and other LGBTQ characters in the show), displays how Lucious is a character that fully embodies hip-hop and some of its problematic ideals.

While *Empire* is certainly grounded in hip-hop music, many of the songs within the series are not rooted in the problematic traditions of the genre. The musical elements of *Empire* that have arguably been noticed most by the larger, general audience are the socially conscious lyrics to some of the songs that are so pervasive throughout the series—songs which advocate for social change. Many of these songs actually have meaning behind them; they transcend simply having a catchy beat to get people hooked. In the pilot episode of the series, Jamal Lyon—the gay son of patriarch and Empire Entertainment executive Lucious—sings a song titled “Good Enough.” While Jamal is singing “Good Enough,” one can listen to the lyrics and understand that it is clearly directed toward his father—a subtle (or perhaps not so subtle) attack of Lucious, and, since Lucious represents traditional norms of hip-hop on the whole, it can also be read as an attack on hip-hop, specifically—based on the lyrics—hip-hop’s lack of acceptance of homosexuality. In “Good Enough,” Jamal sings:

I give you all of me
But it still ain’t enough to make you happy
I give you everything
And still don’t measure up

Lucious is not accepting of his son’s homosexuality, and this song clearly is Jamal’s response to that. When he sings, you can hear the pain and anguish in his voice. He has given his father all
he can and has no more left to give, yet Jamal is still not good enough in Lucious’s eyes. Later in the song, he sings:

I try to show you that I’m strong
Why do I even bother?
‘Cause it’s the same old damn song
And you call yourself a father

I just want you to look at me
And see that I can be worth your love
I just want you to look at me
And see that I can be good enough, good enough

Here, Jamal is explicitly calling out his father. Specifically, he is calling him out in a way that clearly indicates Lucious does not deserve the title of “father.” Also, Jamal’s use of the word “strong” is an implication of an all-encompassing strong—physically strong, mentally strong, emotionally strong, etc. However, because Lucious is homophobic in his thinking, to him nothing about Jamal can be “strong” because Jamal is gay. In Lucious’s realm of thinking, strong equates to masculine and masculine, according to Lucious, certainly does not equate to gay, therefore strong and gay are two things that cannot coexist. On the other hand, perhaps the most troubling thing is that Lucious cannot view Jamal as being worthy of his love, and, further, Jamal just wants to be seen as “good enough” by Lucious. Those two words imply that Jamal knows Lucious will never be fully accepting of him but that he just hopes his father can come to a place where Jamal’s homosexuality is not an obvious issue for Lucious. He is not begging to be seen as the perfect, ideal, or even preferred son Lucious wants, just a son who is “good
enough.” This plea, however, is not just to his father—it is also to the hip-hop community broadly since Lucious, as stated earlier, comes to stand in for some of the traditional ideals of hip-hop.

One of the most pivotal scenes to date in *Empire* is when Jamal publicly comes out as gay in the episode “The Lyon’s Roar.” Up to this point, Jamal has been told by his father that if he comes out it would ruin Jamal’s career and potentially Empire Entertainment. Part of this stems from Lucious’s own reservations about his son’s sexuality. The other part of this stems from Lucious’s knowledge that hip-hop is generally homophobic and unwilling to embrace an openly gay artist. Further, the way in which Jamal comes out is quite fitting. He decides to sing the song “You’re So Beautiful” at a white party hosted by Empire with a large amount of people in attendance. This song is one of Lucious’s hit songs from the past, and he has allowed Jamal to perform it. However, Jamal, without Lucious’s knowledge, decides to change the lyrics to reflect who he truly is. The specific lyric Jamal sings, which is a clear change from Lucious’s original version, is, “Say it’s the kind of song that makes a man love a man.” The irony is that just prior to the performance, Lucious advises Jamal to “Tell your truth in the music.” Jamal’s public coming out, however, is certainly not what Lucious intended or wanted; Lucious was implying that music is the truth, as Jamal mentions just before he performs. He also says before the performance that he is happy to use his father’s music to explain some of his truths to everyone. This is clearly his form of revenge on his father for Lucious’s lack of acceptance, but at this moment, everyone in attendance, including Lucious, just thinks Jamal is about to proudly pay homage to his father. However, after he does sing that lyric, of the hundreds of people in attendance, it is clear that absolutely no one cares that Jamal is gay—except for Lucious.

---

Everyone in the crowd is singing along, smiling, and dancing. Lucious, however, is stone-faced, clearly shocked and angry. By changing that one lyric in “You’re So Beautiful,” Jamal manages to shatter his father’s notion that an openly gay artist would not be accepted in hip-hop, considering that the crowd is clearly accepting of Jamal’s admission. In addition, because nobody in this crowd of hundreds openly has a problem with Jamal’s homosexuality, this scene is also Empire’s way of normalizing something in a musical space where it is traditionally seen as not normal. It is a way to provide a commentary that the general populace has become more accepting of homosexuality, and therefore the hip-hop community needs to move toward that same acceptance.

To say that there have not been some steps in the right direction within hip-hop is a bit unfair, however. Jamal’s coming out can be linked to the coming out of actual hip-hop artist Frank Ocean, as noticed by Clover Hope. Similar to the way in which Jamal used song lyrics to come out, the beginning of Ocean’s coming out, as Hope notes, started when critics analyzed his lyrics about loving another man on his hit album, Channel Orange. For the most part, Ocean’s revelation about his relationship with another man was generally accepted. The problem is that aside from Ocean, it is difficult to find another out hip-hop artist that is as critically and commercially successful. The parallels between Jamal Lyon and Frank Ocean seem to be Empire’s way of creating a fictionalized retrospective of Ocean’s life, drawing the audience’s minds back to Ocean in an attempt to say that it is viable to be out and successful in this traditionally heterosexist genre of music.

---

Arguably one of the most emotionally stirring musical moments is when Jamal participates in a rap battle (in the episode “Who I Am”), though Jamal’s performance is a more melodic, R&B freestyle, in contrast to his opponent’s more traditional rap freestyle. By this point in the series, Jamal has already publicly come out as gay, and because of this, his opponent, who goes by the stage name Black Rambo, makes sure to feminize Jamal as much as possible. This is a technique referred to as “lyrical outing,” according to Hill. Hill says:

In addition to rhetorically attacking and ridiculing openly gay and lesbian people, hip-hop artists also police the sexual boundaries of the culture by “lyrically outing” ostensibly straight MCs. … By having the threat of lyrical outing as a legitimate and likely possibility, queer MCs are … silenced during potential rap battles. … In many instances, lyrical outings are performed merely in order to gain the upper hand in a rap battle, rather than to create genuine speculation about another person’s sexual identity.\(^\text{86}\)

Because Jamal is already out as gay, the threat of exposure is nonexistent, but this still does not stop Black Rambo from “lyrically outing” him. He uses phrases like “No time for lil homos,” “You rockin’ pink tutus,” and “I know a bitch that look just like you / Toes out, butt out, chest out like you,” toward Jamal.\(^\text{87}\) He (negatively) calls out Jamal’s homosexuality, associates him with the hegemonically feminine color of pink, and says he looks like a woman. However, it is through the employment of this standard hip-hop strategy that Empire, again, is setting up a scenario in which to invert the norms and have a character that is homosexual (Jamal) triumph in this hypermasculine space that uses non-hetero sexuality as an attack. Jamal’s response to Black Rambo is:

So what? I’m gay.

It don’t matter.

God ain’t made you no better than me.

When I pray, He still answers.

Maybe you need to get on your knees.

No weapon shall prosper. No weapon shall prosper.

Your sin ain’t no better than my sin.

Your skin ain’t no better than my skin.

So point all the fingers you want.

Bitch.

This response by Jamal is quite layered. On the surface, Jamal is stating that he and Black Rambo are complete equals, despite the difference in their sexuality. He is clearly combatting the idea that people within the LGBTQ community are worthless in the hip-hop community.

Likewise on the surface, Jamal is making explicit links to religion, saying that he is also equal to those within certain religious sects that condemn him and his sexuality. The treatment of homosexuality in the Church, specifically the Black Church, is one that was brought up for discussion during the Out in Hip Hop panel. Because Black artists in hip-hop also have strong ties to Black Churches (the panel notes that this is an institution that often works as a second family to Black people), the harmful beliefs from one can spill over into the other. So there was a call for more acceptance on the part of both, something Jamal is directly speaking on in his battle response.

In his battle response, Jamal also repeats the phrase “no weapon shall prosper.” Aside from being directly linked to religion—as it is a phrase that comes from the Bible in Isaiah
we can think of his use of the word “weapon” as being indicative of words as weapons. This draws on what Buttahman said during the Out in Hip Hop panel about words like “faggot” being used as weapons, and explicitly references the issue of lyrical outing. By Jamal saying, “No weapon shall prosper,” he is saying that regardless of what people say, especially the words in which they choose to speak about him and his sexuality, like Black Rambo did, Jamal will always rise above it. We can read this as Empire’s commentary that there is no place for homophobia in this genre, as those who identify as homosexual can and will come out on top.

But in his response, Jamal also uses lyrical outing. Other than his outright use of the word “bitch”—a term most people, especially a male in a hypermasculine, hyper-heterosexual genre of music, would take offense to when used in this context—Jamal also sings, “Maybe you need to get on your knees.” Because Jamal says this after he references prayer, Jamal is seemingly saying that Black Rambo needs to get on his knees and pray as well. However, when Jamal sings this, he also winks. He is clearly alluding to this in a manner that is directly linked to lyrical outing. He is equating getting on one’s knees to the act of oral sex. Furthermore, because Jamal is telling Black Rambo to get on his knees in front of Jamal, he is making it an attack that specifically brings concerns about homosexuality into this hetero space.

While Jamal is performing, we can read the reactions of Black Rambo as the struggle of acceptance vs. rejection that those normatively entrenched within the hip-hop community express. At first, Black Rambo looks in awe of what Jamal is doing and saying while he is singing, and Black Rambo clearly knows that he is losing the battle. His eyebrows are slightly raised and his eyes are open and looking at Jamal in a way that expresses shock and appreciation. He also glances to the audience and quickly back at Jamal, then again quickly glances to the

88 LHH: Out In Hip Hop.
audience and back at Jamal, in a look to the audience that is acknowledging his defeat at Jamal’s hands. With this, Empire subtly shows an acceptance of homosexuality in that this “hard” rapper who was just insulting Jamal for being gay is now silently admiring what he is doing. However, by the end of the battle, Black Rambo is shaking his head, knowing he has been defeated, with a look of disgust on his face. He starts to look off to the sides or down at the ground rather than at Jamal, like he was in the beginning of the battle. He is so embarrassed he lost to a “homo” that he is unwilling to even respect Jamal in that moment. So, while at one moment his face is reading acceptance of Jamal, at another moment there is still this obvious anger that he was just defeated by a “homo.” The show sets up this struggle quite well, but displays that there is willingness to accept homosexuality within this musical space. Empire is able to provide a critique about this “lyrical outing” element of hip-hop by using it in a subversive way (i.e., having an openly gay male employ it during a battle) and showing that someone who is marginalized in this community, from the actions that are displayed to the words that are used, can succeed and be supported (as shown by the crowd wildly cheering after Jamal finishes).

In a second season episode titled “My Bad Parts,” Lucious’s youngest son, Hakeem, participates in a rap battle with Lucious’s new rap protégé, Freda Gatz. In a few of her rhymes, Freda uses lyrical outing, or simple phrases that challenges his masculinity, as a weapon to defeat Hakeem. One way she challenges Hakeem’s masculinity is by implying he is less of a man than his mother, Cookie, by rapping, “Okay, we all know your mommy was a hustler / But you not, you crazy if you think you really touchin’ her.” Also, Freda employs more explicit lyrical outing when she raps, “Your brother the man, and he put on a nightgown.”89 Because of Jamal’s sexuality, Freda links him to something hegemonically feminine (i.e., a nightgown), but

89 Sanaa Hamri, “My Bad Parts,” Empire (Fox, November 18, 2015).
she is stating that Hakeem is still less of a man than his gay brother. This is, of course, problematic because of the way in which it implies one’s sexuality and gender identity/performance are inseparable from one another. However, “lyrically outing” Hakeem goes a step beyond a simple, commonly used hip-hop attack. Within such a heterosexist musical genre, there is a stronger implication in Hakeem’s situation because of the issue of “gay by association” within the hip-hop community, another problem discussed by Buttahman on the Out in Hip Hop panel. Because Hakeem is quite close to and accepting of his brother, attacks of homosexuality onto a heterosexual artist—in this case, Hakeem—can have larger repercussions within hip-hop. Again, this is where Empire provides a message of a more forward-thinking hip-hop by simply having Hakeem (a great example of a talented, modern-day MC) brush off the “gay by association” implication and become representative of non-hetero acceptance.

Because Empire is making excellent strides (even if they are not perfect strides) to increase acceptance and visibility of homosexuality in the hip-hop arena, there has been mild backlash, which is to be expected based on the way many people deeply entrenched in the genre view and talk about homosexuality. The proliferation of homophobic lyrics in hip-hop point to a clear example of the mindset of some within the genre and why there has been some pushback to actively accept homosexuality within this community. Empire creator Lee Daniels (a Black, gay man) has revealed that he and Jamal’s portrayer, Jussie Smollett, have both been on the receiving end of death threats. Rapper 50 Cent has even been a vocal critic of the show’s representation of homosexuality. According to 50 Cent, the slight ratings decline in season two (after record breaking, week-to-week ratings increases for the duration of season one) was due to too much

---

90 LHH: Out In Hip Hop.
“gay stuff.” 50 Cent is not new to using anti-gay language, so it should not be shocking that someone so entrenched in hip-hop and so representative of some of the damaging norms associated with hip-hop would go on the offensive about a show that is attempting (and succeeding) to break down those barriers for LGBTQ in the hip-hop community. When questioned about 50 Cent’s comment, his ex-girlfriend, actress Vivica A. Fox, responded with “rhetorical outing” by implying that 50 Cent and fellow rapper Soulja Boy are gay. In an attempt to regain his heterosexuality and masculinity, 50 Cent’s response referenced his sexual life with Fox, playing on the idea that hypersexuality links one to hypermasculinity.

With the character of Lucious Lyon, *Empire* reifies the hegemonic norms of masculinity and homophobia associated with hip-hop, but the reification of hip-hop normative ideals are only built up in order to be torn down, primarily through Lucious’s son, Jamal. The series has done this quite successfully, and is a key factor in gradual acceptance of LGBTQ identities in hip-hop. Hip-hop superstar Timbaland, who produces all of the original music for the series, was guilty of holding some homophobic beliefs prevalent in hip-hop. Lee Daniels recounts a story where Timbaland was shocked by two male characters kissing and would not allow his children to watch that particular scene. However, since then, Timbaland has admitted that he has come full circle and now has a completely different, much more positive opinion of the LGBTQ community. *Empire* is also having an effect on the music world more broadly. The soundtrack

for the first season debuted at number one on the Billboard 200 chart, beating out Madonna’s album, Rebel Heart, for the top spot. Additionally, during the 2015 Billboard Music Awards show, stars Jussie Smollett and Bryshere Y. Gray performed songs from Empire as their characters from the show (Jamal and Hakeem, respectively) on the BBMA stage. This gives credence to Empire’s musical significance since, in a somewhat atypical move, television network ABC—the network airing the Billboard Music Awards—allowed such promotion for rival network FOX’s show. However, given the cultural and musical phenomenon that Empire was and is, it only made sense to incorporate it into the Billboard Music Awards’ live telecast. While it is impossible to truly say what kind of impact Empire will have on the world of hip-hop in the long run, the show has certainly had a huge impact in progressing hip-hop’s relationship toward an acceptance of homosexuality, if only for being a significant catalyst in opening up a much needed discussion with regard to this issue.

---


CHAPTER IV.

“WE KING LEAR NOW?”: (RE)PRESENTING BLACK FATHERHOOD IN EMPIRE

*Empire* works to construct and reinforce normatively held negative stereotypes of Black fatherhood in an attempt to break down those same societal stereotypes in order to provide a commentary on the ways society views Black fathers. The character of Lucious is representative of the stereotypical Black male (he is aggressive and violent) and Black masculinity (he is disgusted by homosexuality), as well as the stereotypical Black father (he is emotionally absent from his children). But, to some extent, he is also more of a caricature because of his peculiarities. His character is somewhat extreme in his actions, often resorting to unnecessary and extreme violence to solve (or “solve,” depending on how you view the situation) problems. Violence, as bell hooks states, is the will of patriarchal masculinity, and Lucious is the embodiment of patriarchal masculinity, so it is natural that he enacts violence whenever he wants. Because of his violent tendencies, Lucious is, simply put, a bad guy (e.g., he murders one of his best friends and Cookie’s cousin, Bunkie, in cold blood in the first episode of the series for the sake and protection of his money and business). Because of his actions (killing his friend, treating his children—especially Jamal—like second-class citizens, allowing his now ex-wife to singlehandedly go to prison for a crime in which he, too, had a part in committing, amongst many other scenarios), I make the argument that we are not meant to connect with Lucious like we are the other characters (e.g., Cookie or Jamal). By seeing how ridiculous Lucious is, we also see how ridiculous these stereotypes of Black fatherhood and masculinity are that Lucious tends to embody. We distance ourselves from the character of Lucious, and psychologically and/or subconsciously we simultaneously distance ourselves from the hegemonic norms he represents.

---

97 hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 49.
Also, in analyzing Lucious’s three sons—Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem—Empire shows that you can be successful and make something of yourself without a physically present mother and without an emotionally present father. In doing this, the series breaks down the overvaluation patriarchal culture puts on two-parent families, an issue that bell hooks addresses in her book We Real Cool. Lucious, though he is physically present in the lives of his sons, is still representative of the stereotypical distant Black father. We see this in various interactions with his three sons and the ways in which he is emotionally distant from and emotionally abusive toward them and how this psychologically damages them, which connects to a point that hooks makes about Black boys being conditioned to be victims of emotional abuse at home. Lucious fulfills this unfortunate role by criticizing and berating his children and putting the needs of his company over the needs of his sons. As the series progresses, it becomes clear that the only “child” Lucious cares about is his company, Empire Entertainment. Lucious actually kills for Empire, and, in a second-season episode, Lucious is on the verge of killing one of his actual sons for what Lucious perceives to be a betrayal of him and Empire.

**Lucious and Andre**

Lucious is a man who appreciates music—a talent his two youngest sons possess. Unfortunately for his oldest son, Andre, he does not have the musical gene that runs throughout his family. Instead, he was blessed with a mind for business and has an Ivy League degree to back it up. The problem is, while Lucious is fine having Andre on the board of Empire, he does not really appreciate what Andre brings to the table. Patricia Hill-Collins notes that “street smarts is an important component of Black masculinity.” While Andre is abundant in book

---

98 Ibid, 103.
99 Ibid, 86.
smarts, he is lacking in street smarts, and even though he is relatively normative in other masculine ways, his lack of street smarts diminishes his stock as a Black male, two things Lucious highly values. Therefore, Lucious does not always appreciate Andre’s intelligence, however necessary they are for the administration of Empire. We see this lack of appreciation in one particular scene where Lucious’s youngest son, Hakeem, wants a staggering budget for his music video. Andre, being the financial voice of reason the company desperately needs, notes that if they spend the kind of money Hakeem wants to spend on his music video, then it could cause a huge problem with auditors. Lucious, however, only sees the importance in Hakeem’s song—which he thinks is great—and says to Andre, “Dre, if you can’t find the money for this (i.e., Hakeem’s video), I really don’t know what purpose you serve.” With that simple sentence spoken by Lucious, it becomes immediately evident what Lucious values. The budget Hakeem wants for his music video could bring financial disaster to Empire in the form of the IRS closely monitoring the company’s money and Andre understands this. But when Andre voices his justified concerns to his father, Lucious does not want to hear anything Andre has to say because it is in direct conflict with Lucious’s primary focus—putting out Hakeem’s music. Given all of Lucious’s unsavory business dealings, he should want to do everything possible to keep auditors away from the company’s financial dealings, but Lucious shows he does not value Andre’s opinion enough when it conflicts with his own, even if Andre is simply doing what is best for the business.

The relationship between Lucious and Andre is interesting in that the core of their relationship is structured around parentification, as there is an inversion in the father/son roles,

---

where Andre acts more like a parent to Lucious instead of the other way around. Simply defined, parentification refers to role reversals in which a child takes on caregiving responsibilities typically expected from the parent, where there is a failure to preserve the typical boundaries between parent and child, such that the child becomes responsible for meeting the parents’ needs rather than the parent serving the child’s needs.\footnote{Emily Baggett, Anne Shaffer, and Hannah Muetzelfeld, “Father-Daughter Parentification and Young Adult Romantic Relationships Among College Women,” \textit{Journal of Family Issues} 36, no. 6 (2015): 761.}

Inklings of this can be seen in the aforementioned scene, where Andre is offering advice to help his father and Lucious responds like a child hell-bent on not listening to reason but rather demanding to have his way. In this inverted father/son role, Andre frequently acts as a deus ex machina figure for Lucious—he all too often has to come in and save his father from some trouble or clean up some mess Lucious has made, legal or otherwise.

This father/son role inversion even more clearly demonstrated in a flashback example. Lucious and young Andre (probably 12-years-old, roughly), in this particular flashback, are in a room together—Lucious working on music, young Andre playing with toys—when sirens sound outside their apartment building. The police are there to raid Lucious’s home. After Lucious runs out the room, seemingly to stall the police, young Andre takes his father’s gun and hides it in his toy box.\footnote{Rosemary Rodriguez, “False Imposition,” \textit{Empire} (Fox, January 28, 2015).} As a child, he is protecting his father. There is that inversion again. He hides the gun without being told to, without a glance indicating for him to do this, nothing like that at all. The implication, then, is that this is not the first time he has protected his father from potential danger. Later, returning to the present day, Andre protects his dad when Lucious is being investigated for the murder of his friend and relative, Bunkie. When Lucious is questioned...
by law enforcement officers, Andre provides a false alibi for him. Andre provides this false alibi for his father without even really knowing what he is covering up; it is just pure instinct for him to do it at this point. Andre simply senses that his father is in some sort of trouble and he takes it upon himself to lie to the authorities because he has grown up assuming the role of parent and protector to Lucious, doing whatever needs to be done to save his father from trouble.

During the series, we are shown some of the struggles Andre has with mental health disease, specifically bipolar disorder. Andre’s mental disability is compounded by the fact that he frequently feels left out of his family. After he finds out that Empire could be in trouble because of his father’s failing health, Andre has a complete breakdown, screaming at his family, hyperventilating, and ultimately, ending up in the shower with the water on while completely clothed, looking as if he is separated from reality. Following his breakdown, Andre attempts suicide in his father’s recording studio, putting a gun to his head and playing Russian roulette. When the gun does not fire he lets out a loud, anguished scream. Andre’s suicide attempt can be directly linked to his feelings of being left out of his family. Earlier in this episode, Lucious announces that he, Cookie, Jamal, and Hakeem will work together on recording a song for a legacy album. But because Andre lacks any musical ability or knowledge, he is completely excluded from Lucious’s family venture. Also, in this episode, Andre attempts to become temporary CEO of Empire, in case something were to happen to Lucious, but Lucious forbids this from happening. Because the events leading up to Andre’s suicide attempt were directly related to some form of antagonism on the part of his father (Lucious’s outright prohibition on Andre becoming temporary CEO of Empire; Lucious voluntarily excluding Andre—and no other

104 Ibid.
105 Sanaa Hamri, “Our Dancing Days,” Empire (Fox, February 18, 2015).
106 Strong, “The Lyon’s Roar.”
family member—from participating on the family legacy album), to some extent, Lucious was a significant catalyst in his own son’s attempted suicide.

Despite all of this, Lucious still does not truly care about the mental disease from which his son suffers. Ultimately, Andre has a violent outburst in which he openly expresses he is surprised to hear Lucious acknowledge him as his son. Andre, knowing what his father did to Bunkie at this point, also calls Lucious a murderer in front of several people who are in the room. This outburst leads to Andre being committed to a mental hospital. Clearly Andre is aware that his father only uses him whenever he needs something, mainly for the benefit of Empire. Attempting suicide in his father’s recording studio could be seen as the ultimate revenge, since Andre knows that had he actually killed himself, his father would find his body in a place that Lucious holds sacred. And when he openly calls his father a murderer, this can be seen as Andre verbalizing that he is tired of constantly protecting his father and carrying the weight of Lucious’s crimes, which are clearly exacerbating Andre’s mental health disease.

Andre is frequently seeking appreciation, validation, acceptance, etc. from his father, though it is very rarely given. At one point, Andre says to his wife, “He’s always loved them more than me (i.e., Hakeem and Jamal). Even Jamal, who he hates.” Going back to Hakeem’s music video, Andre knows the budget is way too high, yet, in a bid to please his father, Andre somehow comes up with the money. It is not until Andre comes up with the money that Lucious tells Andre he appreciates him. While certain and obvious tensions exist between Lucious and his other two sons, Hakeem and Jamal, the one thing he has always appreciated about them is their musical talent. Andre feels so left out and so desperate for control of Empire, that he has a tendency to sabotage his brothers when an opportunity arises. He and his wife, Rhonda, plot

---

together, posting a video online of Hakeem’s girlfriend with another woman, and also set in motion a robbery (which turns extremely violent and nearly fatal) of the studio where Jamal is recording—though not with the intent to have him killed.\textsuperscript{108} Even though Andre is the best and most logical person to take over Empire Enterprises for his father, he knows he is realistically last in line simply because he does not possess any musical ability and, therefore, he is rendered almost useless to Lucious. The only time Andre even feels remotely valued is when he does something beneficial for Empire and his father acknowledges it. The thought of losing the only source (Empire) of validation he receives from his father is too much for him to bear, especially given his mental state. So, however convoluted it might be, fraternal sabotage is really the singular option Andre sees as a viable way to retain that source of approval his father gives him.

I am admittedly hesitant to pass blame to one person for another’s actions. However, the argument could be made that if Lucious treated Andre like a son rather than Andre being viewed as his father’s guardian and if he acknowledged the value and importance of Andre’s work, then possibly Andre would not feel the need to enact such sneaky and dangerous tactics against his brothers. Andre is highly ambitious, much like his father. However, his mental health issues sometimes cloud his judgment. Lucious very rarely, if ever, shows legitimate concern for the struggles with which Andre suffers. Instead, he alienates Andre by not making him feel as if he is part of the family. Showing concern, love, and appreciation for his son go beyond Lucious’s understanding of fatherhood, so Andre is left to seek love and appreciation from his father by any means necessary, even if those means are detrimental to his well-being or the well-being of others.

\textsuperscript{108} Singleton, “Dangerous Bonds.”
In the beginning of the series, Hakeem is clearly closest to his father (as opposed to his mother), and, similarly, Lucious favors Hakeem over his other two sons. (Though this dynamic changes over the course of the first season, this is how the audience is introduced to their relationship.) The two are extremely similar. Much like his father, they both perform and value the same style of music, both are full of bravado and, perhaps most notably, Hakeem can exude hyperheterosexuality in the form of excessive womanizing. Hill-Collins says, “[S]exual prowess grows in importance as a marker of Black masculinity.”109 Hakeem’s hyperheterosexuality and constant sexual advances toward women increases his identity as a stereotypical masculine Black male, norms his father values and embodies. However, perhaps one of the most important reasons, I argue, that Hakeem is so close to his father is because of a form of natal alienation. Cookie—Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem’s mother—went away to prison when Hakeem was an infant and had no communication with her. Andre and Jamal were old enough to know what was happening at the time, but Hakeem was not. To him, it was a simple abandonment and, in the beginning of the series, he treats his mother in a way indicative of this. Perhaps one of the most clear and telling examples is when Hakeem, quite confrontationally, calls his a mother a bitch to her face. She proceeds to hit him with a broom for being so disrespectful.110 Lucious as the physically present father and Cookie being away in prison is clearly subverted from the norm of Black fathers being the abandoners and Black single mothers raising their children. Obviously, Cookie’s imprisonment was not a voluntary abandonment, but Hakeem, at this point, is too attached to his father—the parent that was physically present—to understand that. At this point in the series, Hakeem is so close to his father that he only begins to show his mother some

110 Daniels, “Pilot.”
semblance of forgiveness and respect once Lucious tells Hakeem that he needs to have a relationship with his mother.

Though Lucious seems to be close to Hakeem, it is really only because he values Hakeem for his musical abilities. During one scene, the two meet up. Lucious tells him he needs to get his act together instead of wasting his time on “bitches and booze,” to which Hakeem responds that he is working on new material. Lucious then says, “You ain’t worked a day in your life, and you know that. You’re spoiled. But I got some new heat for you, some stuff that I wrote. We gonna go in and record it, and we gonna put some candy on this thing. You feel me?”\(^\text{111}\) They shake hands and call it a day. Here we see how Lucious only takes pride in Hakeem for his music. He tells him he needs to get his act together so that he can make music. Even though Hakeem is a womanizer and frequently participates in underage drinking to the point of drunkenness, rather than “getting his act together” for his health and emotional benefit, Lucious only says he needs to do so in order to make music, because to Lucious, music is the only thing Hakeem needs in his life and is the only thing of value.

Even though Hakeem is certainly the most wild and outrageous son, frequently causing controversy (e.g., getting drunk at a restaurant and being recorded saying that President Obama, a supposed friend of his father’s, is a “sellout”\(^\text{112}\)), he is still seen as Lucious’s favorite child because Lucious considers Hakeem the most musically talented and the most like him—both musically and in personality. Despite their close relationship, Hakeem wants to become his own artist rather than someone living in the shadow of his father’s musical legacy. This can be seen clearly when Hakeem and his girlfriend, Tiana—another well-known recording artist under Empire’s label—are walking a red carpet. An interviewer mentions Tiana by name but refers to

\(^{111}\) Ibid.
\(^{112}\) Daniels, “The Outspoken King.”
Hakeem as “the son of music industry legend, Lucious Lyon,” to which Tiana replies, “He has a name.” The desire for Hakeem to be seen as an individual, separate from his father will ultimately cause a rift in their relationship.

As I have mentioned, Hakeem and Lucious are quite similar, so Hakeem’s desire to want to separate from his father points to an interesting implication. According to bell hooks, Black patriarchal fathers—which Lucious very much is—attempt to bridge any sort of distance by being critical of mothers. Even though Lucious initially told Hakeem he needs to form some sort of relationship with his mother, once Hakeem starts distancing himself from his father, Lucious begins warring with Cookie because Hakeem becomes much closer to her, especially regarding a working relationship. This is problematic because Hakeem is supposed to be Lucious’s musical protégé. However, despite his efforts to persuade Hakeem to return to Empire, Hakeem stays away from his father. Because Hakeem chooses to remain close to his mother and distance himself from his father, the implication is that Hakeem is attempting to distance himself from the patriarchal norms his father represents and that he, too, represented at one time.

Lucious, valuing music over anything, puts the final nail in the coffin with his relationship with Hakeem when he decides to pay Camilla, Hakeem’s (other, much older) girlfriend, to leave Hakeem’s life forever since Lucious sees her as a negative distraction to Hakeem’s music and a main factor in causing Hakeem to separate from him. Once Hakeem finds this out, as well as some of the other underhanded things his father has done, their father/son relationship implodes rather quickly. When it comes to his children, Lucious values

---

113 Singleton, “Dangerous Bonds.”
114 hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 106.
control over love; Hakeem being Lucious’s “favorite” was really always contingent upon 
Hakeem doing what his father wanted him to do. So when Hakeem consciously separates from 
the control and manipulation his father has over him, Lucious retaliates.

One way in which Lucious retaliates against Hakeem is by replacing him on Empire’s 
roster with a female rapper named Freda Gatz. A rap battle is orchestrated between Freda and 
Hakeem.\textsuperscript{116} With this rap battle, Lucious hopes Freda will destroy Hakeem (lyrically, 
emotionally, career-wise), sending his son a message that he is nothing without Lucious. But 
Hakeem also takes this moment to send the clearest message yet that he wants nothing to do with 
his father. At the end of the battle, when Hakeem raps the line “Bullet to the last name Lyon,” 
he proceeds to take a sledgehammer and smashes a large sign that displays the name “LYON” in 
lights.\textsuperscript{117} This is the most blatantly symbolic way Hakeem can convey to his father and to 
everyone, that he not only wants absolutely nothing to do with Lucious, but that he does not even 
want to be considered a Lyon anymore because of his father’s past actions. Since Lucious 
legally changed his last name to Lyon when he was younger and built an entire legacy around 
that name, that name means an immeasurable amount to Lucious. Consequently, watching 
Hakeem fully disassociate from it and literally dim the Lyon name and empire enraged Lucious.

Lucious eventually takes his and Hakeem’s back-and-forth relationship to an extreme 
point of no return, after Hakeem has taken over Empire with help from Camilla. In the episode 
“Death Will Have His Day,” after Hakeem has betrayed Lucious by taking over and becoming 
CEO of Empire, Lucious demands to talk to Hakeem. They meet at a dark, secluded location. 
Lucious has Hakeem stand in the same exact spot in which Bunkie stood the night Lucious shot 
and killed him. Lucious tells Hakeem what he did to Bunkie, including that Hakeem is now

\textsuperscript{116} This rap battle is discussed in chapter three of my thesis. 
\textsuperscript{117} Hamri, “My Bad Parts.”
standing in the same spot the murder happened and he tells him all of this while holding a gun for the added factor of threat. After Lucious tells Hakeem he killed Bunkie, Lucious says to him, “You see, that’s how much the empire means to me. And if you think you’re gonna be the CEO of my company, I will stop at nothing to take it back.” He then gives Hakeem the chance to kill him first, saying the best way to take the throne of Empire is to kill him. Lucious proceeds to inform Hakeem that if he does not kill him there, the next time Lucious sees Hakeem, he will kill him in order to take back the throne. Here, Lucious makes explicit that not only will he kill for Empire (and has already killed for Empire), but that he would actually kill his own biological son for Empire—his favored “son.” When it comes to maintaining or regaining control of Empire, nothing is off limits. It is also interesting that, according to Lucious’s philosophy, the only way for someone else to become CEO is through the death of Lucious. That is how attached he is to his company. Threatening death to his son in this moment is clearly reverting back to Lucious’s default way of dealing with situations—violence. Apparently, when you play the game of thrones, Empire edition, you also win or you die.

**Lucious and Jamal**

Of his three sons, Lucious easily has the most tense and strained relationship with his middle child, Jamal. Much of this tension comes from the fact that Jamal is gay. According to Kimberly J. Chandler, Black men consider their authenticity as Black men to be determined by their hypermasculinity and anything that Black men conceptualize as homosexual and/or feminine is wholly devalued. Because Lucious strongly embodies traditional Black

---

masculinity—and is entrenched in a world (i.e., the hip-hop world) that is so hypermasculine and hyper-heteronormative—not only does Lucious not approve of Jamal’s sexuality, he is actually disgusted by it.

In the first episode of the series, Lucious and Jamal are having a conversation. Lucious asks Jamal, “How’s that roommate of yours, the one with the dreads?” As he asks the question, Lucious is walking to a different part of the room, away from Jamal. He also is not looking at Jamal at all while asking, indicating a lack of real interest in what he is asking his son. The audience can only see Lucious’s profile, which is turned away from his son, and his facial expression appears completely blank. Jamal responds to his father’s question by saying, “I’m seeing Michael now, dad. You met him twice.” When Jamal says this, Lucious stares at him very blankly, and his mouth is just slightly agape. It is not so much a look of surprise as it is a completely emotionless look—an emotionless look that implies all of Jamal’s boyfriends, past and present, mean nothing to him. After Jamal answers his question, Lucious responds with “I’m sorry.”120 As he says this, he once again looks down rather than actually looking at Jamal, and, similarly to how he asked his initial question, when he says “I’m sorry,” it is said as flatly as possible. Lucious’s flat tone and lack of eye contact are highly indicative of his insincerity. This entire exchange gives the audience an excellent glimpse into how Lucious feels about his son and him being gay. He uses the word “roommate” instead of boyfriend or partner, which displays a lack of respect of and an unwillingness to acknowledge both Jamal’s sexuality and Jamal’s relationship. He also is oblivious as to whom Jamal is even dating, as he mistakes Michael for someone completely different. It does not matter to Lucious that he has met Michael twice. Based on how Lucious views Jamal and Michael’s “situation,” Michael is not worthy to

---

120 Daniels, “Pilot.”
be remembered by Lucious. Their relationship simply does not deserve appropriate respect in Lucious’s mind. Even when he says, “I’m sorry,” his voice is extremely monotone and unapologetic, implying that it is more of a platitude he is uttering rather than a sincere apology for the mix-up he has just made.

After his insincere “apology,” Lucious continues his conversation with Jamal directly addressing the issue of Jamal’s sexuality: “Look, Mal, this is the last time I’m gonna have this talk with you. Your sexuality—that’s a choice, son. You can choose to sleep with women if you want. I’m saying this to help you, ‘cause I know, eventually, you’re gonna release another album.”\textsuperscript{121} It is somewhat complicated to know completely whether Lucious is just a horrible person toward his son, or if he is actually woefully ignorant. However, it is difficult to think that Lucious simply does not understand since Jamal has been open with his sexuality, therefore he should be able to understand the situation more clearly. It seems that Lucious is just unconcerned to actually fully accept his son. Also, he may say he wants to “help” Jamal, but that help is only so Lucious can have what he wants (i.e., the continued success and positive image of Empire) and that “help” comes at a cost—the stripping away of who is son actually is.

Lucious’s harsh treatment of Jamal is nothing new. It has been going on since Jamal was quite young. In the first episode, one of the most heartbreaking and saddening moments the series displays involves Jamal. In a flashback, where Jamal is probably around the age of four, he is at home with his parents and other extended family members. Jamal puts on pink high heels and a head scarf and comes walking out from a back room dressed in the aforementioned items in front of all the family. Some family members look at him in disbelief, while others shake their heads. Lucious sees his son dressed like this, charges toward him, yells at him,

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
viciously grabs him and picks him up, and says he looks like a little bitch—all while Cookie is chasing after Lucious trying to stop him. The flashback stops at this point, but picks up again later in the episode.

In the second half of this flashback, Lucious carries Jamal outside. Young Jamal is screaming, but Lucious does not care to hear his son’s screams. He instead puts him in a trashcan. He literally throws his son away, implying that Jamal is nothing more than trash. After Cookie hits Lucious and says, “Are you out of your damn mind,” Lucious responds with, “It ain’t right.” At a later point in the episode, back in present day, Lucious says to Cookie that he is ashamed of Jamal and that shame is solely because of his sexuality. bell hooks writes, “There is only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men; that emotion is anger. Real men get mad. And their mad-ness, no matter how violent or violating, is deemed natural—a positive expression of patriarchal masculinity.” Lucious sees his violent anger as natural and acceptable for something he views as “unnatural” and “unacceptable” (i.e., Jamal’s sexuality). Therefore, Lucious willingly, frequently, and unapologetically acts out of anger instead of love in his role as father.

The use of language really plays a big part in Empire. In front of family, Jamal plays and sings a song that Lucious tried to record and perform earlier in his career, but it did not suit his voice or style. After the song was reworked and modernized by Jamal, with help from Cookie, Jamal decided to record it for his upcoming album. When Lucious hears the song, he has a newfound appreciation for it, but instead of complimenting Jamal, he says that Jamal would be an amazing arranger. (This is really a backhanded compliment, and Lucious knows it. He completely undercuts what Jamal actually wants to do in the music industry, which is play and

---

sing, not arrange.) Jamal notes that Lucious could not make the song work in the past and asks, “Tell me, how does it feel that your little girl could do something that you couldn’t? You washed up.”[^123] Here, Jamal inverts the traditional inverse-gendered attack so common in hip-hop and refers to himself as a little girl rather than his opponent, his father.[^124] Due to Lucious’s embedded heternormativity, Jamal knows that his father would consider it a much bigger insult to be called less than a girl (and also with the acknowledgement that this “girl” is his son) rather than someone calling Lucious himself out of his gender or sexual identity. This is a play on the concept of lyrical outing I discuss in chapter three.

Also within this scene, as Jamal leaves after this blow up, Lucious refers to Jamal and Michael as a “sensitive punk and his bitch,” respectively.[^125] The work “punk,” especially in the Black community, as Tricia Rose has written about, is seen as extremely emasculating.[^126] The only way for Lucious to attempt to bounce back from the verbal attack Jamal just laid on him is to, in turn, use negative, feminized language to refer to Jamal—in this case, a “sensitive punk.” And, in an attempt to even further rebuild his own masculinity, Lucious refers to Michael as the sensitive punk’s “bitch,” which implies that Lucious also did not father the most feminine male in that relationship. Clearly this is beyond problematic, as Lucious uses horribly derogatory language to refer to his own son and his son’s boyfriend, but this becomes representative of how Lucious treats Jamal throughout the series simply because of Jamal’s sexuality.

Later within this same episode, Lucious and Jamal have another encounter that further displays Lucious’s lack of understanding and lack of unconditional (and even conditional) love for Jamal. Lucious visits Jamal at his apartment and they have a conversation about the way

[^123]: Sanaa Hamri, “The Devil Quotes Scripture,” Empire (Fox, January 21, 2015).
[^124]: I am using “opponent” here in the sense of a rap battle in hip-hop.
[^125]: Hamri, “The Devil Quotes Scripture.”
[^126]: Rose, Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America, 151.
Lucious has (negatively) treated Jamal—not just earlier that night, but all of Jamal’s life. Jamal, discussing his father’s treatment of him as a child, tells Lucious, “You beat me because you hate me. And you always will…” Lucious responds in his typical way, by saying, “I don’t hate you. I don’t know you. I didn’t bring any women into this world, and to see my son become somebody’s bitch? I don’t understand you!” Lucious, yet again, is attacking his son in his usual, offensive way. Lucious equates homosexuality to femininity and, likewise, equates gay males to females. So, instead of actually acknowledging his son as his son, he says “I didn’t bring any women into this world,” calling his son out of his gender and insulting him the only way he knows how. He openly says he does not understand Jamal, but instead of actually trying to understand and accept Jamal, Lucious just wants Jamal to essentially be like him—the embodiment of heteronormativity. Tired of being disrespected and, to an extent, owned by his father because of the luxuries Lucious provides for him, Jamal takes a stand and gives up his apartment (the most notable luxury Lucious pays for), telling Lucious, “My obedience is no longer for sale.” Despite the argument they just had, Lucious is convinced that Jamal will return to the apartment. This ties into a point hooks makes, which is that “patriarchal thinking tells men that … all a father needs to do is give money,” using material support to replace emotional support. Knowing that there is only one thing that can truly get his message across to his father, Jamal makes a statement to his boyfriend that he is going after Lucious’s business, fully aware that the loss of Lucious’s great love (Empire) will hurt him the most.

At one point in the series, a woman named Olivia shows up with a little girl named Lola. Olivia is Jamal’s ex-wife—a marriage Lucious arranged for his son in order to keep Jamal’s sexuality a secret. Olivia claims Lola is Jamal’s daughter. Acknowledging it is certainly a

---

127 Hamri, “The Devil Quotes Scripture.”
128 hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity, 111.
possibility since they did have sex once, Jamal lovingly accepts Lola into his life. He plays with her, sings to her, reads to her—everything a father should do—and he does it all without complaining. As John Bradshaw posits and hooks chronicles, “all parents who have not worked through their own childhood trauma will reenact it on their own children.” However, this is not the case with Jamal, who has the complete opposite approach to fatherhood than Lucious does, which was to traumatize Jamal whenever he felt necessary. Jamal’s parenting style is much more similar to Cookie’s than Lucious’s. Parentally, even though Cookie was in prison for most of Jamal’s life, he has always been more influenced by and connected to her. Prior to prison, she is the one who would protect Jamal from a violent Lucious. During prison, Jamal is the one who would talk to his mother while Lucious sat in the waiting room. And after her release from prison, Cookie is the one who believed in and encouraged Jamal the most in his music career. Since Lucious is frequently aggressive towards Jamal and displays no love for him, it is reasonable to see that Jamal’s fathering style would be antithetical to that of his father’s. Because of Jamal growing up and constantly dealing with Lucious’s fathering style, Jamal is able to be an exponentially better father to a child he just met than Lucious is to the children he has known since their births. In a somewhat ironic moment, Olivia’s ex-boyfriend, who abused her and Lola, track them down at the Lyons’s in an attempt to take her and Lola with him. He points a gun at Jamal for trying to intervene and raise Lola as his own. Lucious steps in to protect Jamal, and does so by confessing that he is in fact Lola’s actual father. So, Lucious’s one positive, fatherly act (i.e., protecting his son from being killed) comes with the

---

129 Hamri, “Our Dancing Days.”
131 Hardy, “Sins of the Father.”
confession that he is actually a horrible father because he abandoned his daughter and lied to his son, allowing Jamal to believe that he was actually Lola’s father.

Despite a generally strained and hostile relationship, Lucious and Jamal grow closer in their father/son bond during the first season. Their relationship grows and strengthens, problematically so, when both turn their hostility and violence away from one another and direct it toward common enemies. The clearest example of this is when Lucious and Jamal find out that Lucious’s rival, Billy Beretti, the CEO of Creedmoor—Empire’s competitor—is attempting to poach Hakeem from Empire’s label to his label. Jamal seeks out Billy at a party. When Jamal finds him, he dangles Billy over the side of a high-rise building, inches away from death. Lucious sees Jamal doing this and, instead of trying to stop him, simply walks away. Not only is Jamal physically threatening Billy, but he is also verbally threatening him, demanding him to sign over music rights and contracts to Lucious. When Billy claims Jamal will not drop him over the edge, Jamal aggressively responds by saying, “My daddy thinks I will. He thinks I’m a killer. I think he’s right.” The fact that Lucious walks away is a clear indicator that he condones what Jamal is doing. It does not matter that Jamal is on the verge of killing someone since Jamal is acting violently on behalf of Empire and what Lucious wants. Overall, Jamal’s actions are acceptable to Lucious. Also, in Jamal’s response to Billy, we can see how Lucious is having an influence on Jamal’s logic and decisions. He openly says that his father believes him to be a killer, obviously something with which Lucious would not—and does not—have a problem, since he is also a killer. But it is his last statement that is most telling. When Jamal agrees with his father’s thoughts by saying, “I think he’s right,” Jamal is showing how Lucious has negatively influenced him. Making an observational analysis, bell hooks explains that Black men who watched their

132 Mario Van Peebles, “Die But Once,” Empire (Fox, March 18, 2015).
fathers be abusive, Black men who condemned and hated the actions of their fathers, once they matured into manhood, became not unlike their abusive fathers. Jamal was certainly one of the most passive characters up to this point. However, despite being one of the more passive characters and while he is not acting like the kind of father that Lucious is, becoming more involved in and around Lucious’s world of idealized violence led Jamal to believe that he might actually have a killer instinct within him, making him unable to control his own actions with regard to himself.

This violence allows Lucious to view Jamal as a man, which is the part of their relationship that is most problematic. In discussing masculinity, Sarah Kornfield says that the phrase “girlie-men” “not only demonstrates that our culture recognizes different types of masculinity as more or less powerful but also highlights that feminine contamination lessens masculine power. That is, to be ‘girlie-men’ is necessarily less powerful than being ‘men’ in…[the] U.S. culture’s discursive logic.” As mentioned, Lucious frequently thinks of and calls Jamal a girl, and since Lucious equates violence with masculinity and can only view Jamal as a man if he is hegemonically masculine, when Jamal acts out this extreme violence, he is finally seen as acceptable in the eyes of his father for embodying his idea of and dominant culture’s idea of masculinity. Jamal’s act of violence brings them so close together, that it is really this action that allows Lucious to decide that Jamal should be the one to lead Empire Entertainment. Jamal’s display of hegemonic masculinity, linking it to Kornfield’s statement, has allowed Lucious to also see him as more powerful. Therefore, not only does Lucious finally accept his son when Jamal becomes a violent individual, but Lucious also views violence as a

---

necessary mean to retain control. Consequently, he rewards Jamal’s violence by putting him in charge of his company because he has displayed the masculine power necessary for this position.

The link between violence and Black males is one that is regularly perpetuated throughout society. Discussing the bodies of Black men and their depiction in Western ideologies, Patricia Hill-Collins notes, “The combination of physicality over intellectual ability, a lack of restraint associated with incomplete socialization, and a predilection for violence has long been associated with African American men.”135 We can see these standards of normative masculinity not only being employed by Lucious, but also being glorified and rewarded by Lucious. This is really the “positive” turning point in the father/son relationship between Lucious and Jamal, despite how harmful it might be. As discussed, Lucious never really cared about Andre’s intellectual capabilities, unless they were directly helping Lucious—and even then he did not really value Andre’s book smarts. Lucious usually finds a way to get what he wants through violence, so when Jamal—the son Lucious has previous called “weak,” “woman,” “a bitch,” etc.—finally embodies the characteristic of violence, something Lucious problematically links to masculinity, Lucious actually accepts Jamal because he is finally viewing him as a masculine male.

Regardless of the (troublingly) positive father/son relationship Lucious and Jamal built, because it was such a tenuous relationship, it should come as no surprise that it quickly crumbled—arguably crumbling worse than it had been in the past, crumbling to a point of irreparability. As I said earlier, we can look at Empire Enterprises as Lucious’s fourth son, and really the one “child” about which he cares most. This is exemplified early in the series when

Lucious tells Jamal that it would hurt Empire’s image if Jamal comes out as gay. The interest and well-being of his business is what matters to Lucious, not the interest and well-being of his actual son. So, when, in season two, Lucious walks into his studio to find Jamal in a situation that he perceives to be sexual—even though nothing sexual is occurring—Lucious becomes enraged. In this particular scene, he refers to Jamal’s homosexuality as an “unnatural way of life” and says that he has attempted to “tolerate something that is intolerable to [his] nature.” But he follows this up with perhaps the most vitriolic thing he has ever said to Jamal, which is, “You ain’t nothing to me but a disappointment. And the day you die from AIDS, I’m gonna celebrate.” In this moment, Lucious goes to the lowest place possible to criticize, chastise, and condemn Jamal. While he has said terrible things to Jamal in the past, this stinging remark was the harshest because Lucious says he has always told Jamal to keep his private life (i.e., the “gay stuff”) out of the studio, and since, from Lucious’s perception, Jamal brought his private life into his studio Jamal was “defiling” the one thing which Lucious values, prides, nurtures, and loves most—Empire, his fourth “child.”

**Conclusion**

In the lives of his three sons, Lucious Lyon might have been a physically present father, but he was an emotionally absent (and abusive) father. For Lucious, the needs of his actual sons never matter; the needs of his “son” (i.e., Empire) are always most important. He is selectively loving toward his sons, and that “love” always comes at a cost. Tracking Lucious’s relationships with Andre, Jamal, and Hakeem across the series to date, at one point or another he has a strong, solid relationship with each of them. But that strong, solid relationship only exists when Lucious believes one of his sons can do something beneficial for his beloved Empire (e.g., when Andre

---

136 Daniels, “The Outspoken King.”
takes initiative and manages everything according to Lucious’s standards or when Jamal turns into the person Lucious wants him to be for the sake of the company or when Hakeem is writing and performing hit songs under Empire’s music label). However, when Lucious has no use for his children, or when he thinks they are not acting in the best interest of Empire, he has no problem rapidly turning on his children—completely excluding only Andre from a family project and expecting Andre to cover up his murders, saying despicable things to Jamal, including his admission he will celebrate when Jamal dies from a horrible disease, and pointing a gun at Hakeem’s face and threatening to kill him. It is precisely these actions that help the audience distance themselves from Lucious as a character, father, and person. He so boldly displays the hegemonic norms of Black men, Black fatherhood, and Black masculinity in such an extreme way, that it easily highlights how ridiculous and how harmful these perpetuated stereotypes are. The series *Empire* and Lucious Lyon as a character illustrate something bell hooks describes as Black males uncritically accepting patriarchy.¹³⁸ Lucious is the epitome of hegemonic Black masculinity as dictated by patriarchy. Further, in *Empire*, the damage that a patriarchal present father can cause can end up being overlooked due to a lack of understanding that sometimes absence can be best.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ *hooks, We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, 104.
¹³⁹ Ibid, 102.
As a television series, Empire is helping society move toward the idea of a new Black masculinity—one that is more open and accepting. Much of this work is through the depictions of the characters of Lucious Lyon and Jamal Lyon. Lucious is extremely representative of the hegemonic norms of Black masculinity, including violence and hyperheterosexuality. He enacts both physical and emotional abuse toward his gay son, Jamal, who has endured Lucious’s abuse since he was a child. This also shows Lucious as embodying the normative idea of Black men being homophobic. Lucious’s hyperheterosexuality is often a result of his hop-hop mentality. Not only is this represented in his own hip-hop music videos where he objectifies women and makes sexual innuendos, but it is also represented in the way he operates his business through the favoritism and promotion of his womanizing son, Hakeem.

It is through the character of Jamal, however, and the dichotomization with his father, that we begin to see a positive commentary on and progression of Black masculinity. Through Jamal’s public declaration of his sexuality, via his music, he is used as a catalyst for change in the hip-hop community, working to alter the heterosexist norms that are persistent in the genre. There has been acceptance of the character of Jamal, both within the story world and the real world. Within the show itself, some degree of acceptance of a gay male in the space of hip-hop is shown, as several people want to work with Jamal because of the quality of his music. Some examples include characters that are hip-hop record producers and even his own brother, Hakeem, who very much aligns with the standard ideals of hip-hop. And there are real world examples of this as well, like Timbaland, who I have previously mentioned held homophobic
beliefs prior to working on the series, but grew toward an understanding and acceptance after being educated once he began producing music for Empire.

Jamal can also be seen as a sympathetic character, mainly due to the way his father treats him for being gay. Because the character of Jamal can be seen as sympathetic based on the way he is treated for his sexuality, this can be understood as a significant step forward in acceptance of marginalized sexualities. In the real world, acceptance for the character of Jamal is so significant, that Jamal’s portrayer, Jussie Smollett, said in an interview that people frequently tell him they are inspired by the show because of his character, and said he has been told that the character of Jamal has helped others come out to their families. Further, Billboard ranked Jamal the number one most likable character on the series, and the popularity and acceptance of the character of Jamal has led to Smollett himself being given a recording contract with Columbia Records. This shows how the series is helping to change mindsets about sexuality—especially Black, male sexuality—and the progression made by society.

Similar to how Empire uses the character of Jamal to promote change in the normative ideas of masculinity and sexuality within hip-hop, the series, too, uses Jamal to combat against the hegemonic norms of Black fatherhood that his father represents. Lucious’s portrayal of fatherhood is detrimentally tragic. Since his ultimate concern is always Empire, his concern for his sons fell by the wayside. Lucious unconditionally loves Empire; he conditionally loves his

---

sons. He willingly puts the good of his company over the good of his children, creating extreme emotional turmoil in his relationship with his sons. However, because of Cookie’s influence and Lucious’s harsh treatment, Jamal is able to be a more nurturing, attentive, patient, and understanding father-figure to Lola than Lucious ever was to any of his sons. In portraying the character of Lucious so negatively and the character of Jamal sympathetically—mainly when compared to Lucious—the series allows for a commentary of unconditional Black acceptance to come through. Because of the positive depiction of a Black, gay male character like Jamal, it is not unreasonable to say that *Empire* will have a favorable effect on the intersection of masculinity studies, queer theory, and race theory moving forward.

The representation of Lucious’s tragic fatherhood is based in reality. *Empire* creator Lee Daniels, who is Black and gay, experienced quite harmful treatment at the hands of his father, which Daniels then put into the series. One of the prime examples is the scene in which Lucious puts young Jamal in a trashcan. Daniels said:

> When I was [five-years-old], my earliest memory was walking down the stairs in my mother’s red high heel shoes, and my dad—he’s a cop—is down playing cards with the boys and it was not pretty—at all. He put me in a trash can and he said that I would never be nothing. He said, “You already have it bad, boy, cause you’re Black—now you’re a faggot too.” … When I came out it was because I loathed my dad so much—I couldn’t understand how you could, with an extension cord, beat a 45-pound kid just because he’s aware of his femininity.¹⁴³

Even though Daniels’s father died in the 1970s, Daniels’s success can sometimes be difficult for him to enjoy because of his father’s words: “It’s always when things are really good for me that I feel I’m not worthy of it. … You feel like, ‘I’m nothing.’ It was what my father told me I was.”

Daniels’s critical representation of Black fatherhood and masculinity, as depicted through the character of Lucious, based on the way his father treated him for being gay, is most likely a cathartic release for Daniels. Through Daniels’ potential catharsis, the audience can begin to see that the depiction of Lucious is actually to help us learn something, via his extremism, about parenting and acceptance.

Despite the words spoken to Daniels by his when he was a child, Daniels certainly did make something of himself. In addition, while one can look to Daniels’s cinematic successes as proof—including his two Academy Award nominations for Best Achievement in Directing and Best Motion Picture of the Year for the film *Precious* (2009)—one really need not look further than the success and cultural impact *Empire* has made in such a short period of time since its January 2015 premier. *Empire*’s popularity within the medium of music is vast. As I previously mentioned, the soundtrack for season one debuted at number one on the Billboard charts and actors from the series performed as their characters on the 2015 Billboard Music Awards. Furthermore, actors from *Empire* performed songs from the series on the 2015 BET Awards as themselves to a cheering crowd, and, during his performance, Jussie Smollett used that platform to praise the United States Supreme Court ruling on *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized marriage equality across the country, a ruling that occurred just two days prior to the

\[144\] Ibid.
performance at the BET Awards.\textsuperscript{145} The series has also influenced other television programs. In an episode of \textit{The Carmichael Show} (NBC, 2015-present), entitled “Kale,” the patriarch of the Carmichael family, Joe, is trying to decide who will take over his role as head of the family when he is gone, to which his oldest son, Bobby, responds, “Dad’s trying to \textit{Empire} us.”\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Empire} was also parodied in an episode of \textit{RuPaul’s Drag Race} (Logo, 2009-present) entitled “RuCo’s Empire.” In the episode, contestants, dressed as characters from the series, wrote and performed in skits loosely based on the plot of \textit{Empire}, which were then guest-judged by Tasha Smith, who plays Carol Hardaway, Cookie’s sister, in \textit{Empire}.\textsuperscript{147} Given the cultural impact that \textit{Empire} has had in just two short seasons, as the series continues to move forward and garner more attention and accolades, the ultimate height of its significance in popular culture is, at present, rather unimaginable.

\textsuperscript{146} Michael Zinberg, “Kale,” \textit{The Carmichael Show} (NBC, September 2, 2015).
\textsuperscript{147} Nick Murray, “RuCo’s Empire,” \textit{RuPaul’s Drag Race} (Logo, March 21, 2016).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Caulfield, Keith. “‘Empire’ Soundtrack Debuts at No. 1 on Billboard 200 Chart, Madonna Arrives at No. 2.” *Billboard,* March 17, 2015.


Cunningham, Mark D. “Nigger, Coon, Boy, Punk, Homo, Faggot, Black Man: Reconsidering Established Interpretations of Masculinity, Race, and Sexuality Through Noah’s Arc.” In


http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/06/being_gay_isn_t_the_antithesis_of_becoming_a_strong_black_man.html.


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAWO9EW33dw.