



## *THE DARK KNIGHT AT FIFTEEN: AN INTERSECTIONAL RETROSPECTIVE*<sup>1</sup>

Erin Casey-Williams

### ABSTRACT

Characters within *The Dark Knight* access intersectional, systemic privileges linked to the performance of masculinity, whiteness, neoliberal class consciousness, and heteronormativity. Using cultural studies as the framework and intersectionality as the point of departure, this paper interrogates how kyriarchy—a way to understand intersecting layers of privilege—buttresses neoliberal ideologies, especially in the first decade of the 21st century. Hegemonic masculinity is both reinforced and reinvented in a homosocial erotic triangle between Batman, Harvey Dent, and Bruce Wayne, which is subsequently shattered by the Joker, a queer failed masculine subject who fosters intimacy through excessive violence. Even this powerful disruption, however, emerges from the intersecting privileges of a cis white man and contrasts sharply with both the situations of Black characters in the film and lived encounters between Black Americans and the State. Batman’s appropriation of Blackness in his suit, juxtaposed with the undeniable whiteness read on his bared chin, signals a privilege that allows him to act outside the law, reinventing kyriarchal and neoliberal sovereign exceptionalism. Examining *The Dark Knight* through the lenses of cultural studies and intersectionality allows a better understanding of systemic inequality as conveyed through media, which is crucial to undoing conferred dominance and the exploitative hegemony of our world.

*Keywords:* hegemonic masculinity, gender, kyriarchy, Batman, sexuality.

DOI: 10.37536/reden.2024.5.2379

.....

Fifteen years before *Oppenheimer* (2023), Christopher Nolan wrote, produced, and directed “the most successful comic book film ever made” (Dixon and Graham 2017, 18). *The Dark Knight* came out in 2008, the middle installment in a gritty and realistic Batman trilogy, reimagined for the post-9/11 zeitgeist. *The Dark Knight* has inspired abundant scholarship, encompassing engagements with international law (Ip 2011; MacFarlane 2014), ethics (McGowan 2009), religious studies (Bellinger 2013; Fradley 2013), and genre expression (Burke 2016; McSweeney 2020). This paper analyzes *The Dark Knight* through the lens of cultural studies, specifically examining how characters access intersectional,

---

<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank reviewers of earlier versions of this paper for their invaluable insights and numerous first-year students for watching, talking, and writing about *The Dark Knight*.

systemic privileges linked to the performance of masculinity, Whiteness, neoliberal class consciousness, and heteronormativity. This argument extends existing scholarship on the gender, class, sexual, and racial politics of the film and explores how it both buttresses and evolves hegemonic ideology.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kimberlé Crenshaw popularized the term “intersectionality” in 1991 to describe the experiences of women of color who were uniquely oppressed within the American legal system, not only because of gender or race but specifically because of the *convergences* of gender *and* race. Crenshaw was building on the work of writers like bell hooks (1984) and Angela Davis (1983), who exposed the ways Black women were denied full access to either womanhood or Blackness and were subordinated within both second-wave feminism and the Black freedom struggle (Hill Collins 2020). Patricia Hill Collins further elucidated the “matrix[es] of domination” through which individuals are systemically oppressed according to not just gender and race, but also sexuality, gender identity, class, age, ability, and more (Hill Collins 1990). Intersectional theory is offered as an alternative to the additive model of oppression, arguing that unique modes of repression are exercised on individuals with multiple subordinated identities, who are subsequently marginalized by or excluded from full participation in the dominant culture’s institutions, including education, healthcare, government, work, media, etc.

As a concept, intersectionality has been massively influential, as reflected in initiatives to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging on both college and corporate campuses. Its impact can also be seen in how members of the political alt-right weaponize the term to obfuscate systemic inequality and distort the lived realities of individuals (Hill Collins 2020; Keaton et al 2023). As an analytic tool, intersectionality has allowed the critique of cultural practices and social structures related to medicine, reproductive justice, human rights, and social protest. It has additionally enabled the critique of cultural artifacts, as can be seen in recent work on “misogynoir” or the hatred of Black women and its permutations in media (Baily 2016; Young 2022). Intersectional analysis always functions as both inquiry and praxis, meaning that intellectual work must support political action, and vice versa; this allows one to fully describe and thus challenge the inequalities of the current world (Hill Collins 2020, 220). One recent consequence of intersectional theory involves not only analyzing ideologies of oppression, but also the ways hegemonic systems are buttressed through social constructs that often go unmarked because of their perceived universality, like Whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity.

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1992) proposed “kyriarchy” as a tool to understand the intersections of privilege, or how patriarchy, classism, ableism, Whiteness, and more discursively reinscribe ideology (Fiorenza 2006, 119). The term comes from Greek,

meaning “rule of the emperor, lord, slave master, or husband,” and Fiorenza pinpoints its emergence in ancient Greece (and later Rome), when citizens realized their political and social ascendancy required the economic exploitation of others, specifically women and slaves (ibid, 152). What followed was an “Othering” through the construction of social categories like gender, race, caste, and more, which allowed the political and cultural subjugation of individuals based on invented groupings (ibid, 203). Kyriarchy became the social hegemony, a counterpart to the economic dominance of capitalism described by Antonio Gramsci; it was not only exercised with brutal physicality by the powerful, but also internalized by the dominated, “through education, socialization,” and other cultural processes (ibid, 196). Analyzing cultural artifacts and their production can elucidate how “culture gets mobilized to forward the interests and power of the ruling classes” (Wilson 2018, 684); in other words, it can demystify and deconstruct how power is both conferred and exercised. A kyriarchal analysis examines how societal power arises from a confluence of class markers intersecting with gender performance, racial identity, sexual activity, and cultural cachet.

Kyriarchy as an intersectional alternative to patriarchy better accounts for the socio-political system that is alive and well in our modern era, especially in America (ibid, 171). Fiorenza writes that, within a kyriarchy, “every individual is *structurally* positioned within social, cultural, economic, [and] political... systems by virtue of birth,” while also occupying a “*subject position* [that] is variable, open to intervention, and changeable, but also limited by hegemonic structures of domination” (2010, 219). Rather than imagining society as a two-dimensional hierarchy, it can be conceptualized as a multi-dimensional pyramidal network of constantly shifting “nodal points” (ibid). One’s access to the top, or to social dominance, can shift up, down, or laterally depending on identity expression or social association in any given circumstance; importantly, then, one can find themselves simultaneously privileged and subjugated on the basis of different but interlocking elements of their identity. Helpful here is Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualization of the three kinds of capital that structure society—which, in a kyriarchal framework, are three ways to access and exercise social power: economic, which relates to money, income, and inherited wealth; social, which includes any resources and advantages received from people we associate with; and cultural, which refers to class position and includes elements like education, skill, and mannerisms. Kyriarchy helpfully explains how resistance to dominance is often subsumed within a larger hegemonic system: gender rebellion can be co-opted by systems of class and/or racial privilege; racial rebellion can be defanged by systems of educational and/or class privilege; class rebellion can be assuaged by racial and gender privilege, for example.

Kyriarchy can also be understood as the social enactment of neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism began as a set of economic policies but, over the last 50 years or so, has become “a normative order of reason,” an inescapable “governing rationality [that]

transmogrifies every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves” (Brown 2015, 28). Individuals consider themselves economic actors in a sphere of privatization and deregulation, which (ostensibly) guarantees personal freedom (Harvey 2005, 65). Social services and safety nets are gutted to encourage entrepreneurialism, efficiency, and productivity, which results in the monetization of both identity and existence. Neoliberalism turns all interactions into hyper-individualized competitions in which one entity wins (social, economic, or cultural capital) and another loses (ibid; Wilson 2018). This effectively erases systemic inequality and dehistoricizes the individual experience under the illusion of economic meritocracy. Neoliberalism supports many traditional elements of kyriarchy: class status is secured and perpetuated by tax cuts for the rich; education remains out of reach for many given the rising costs of college tuition; the authority of patriarchal figures in politics and the corporate sector are ensured by the circulation of dark money in American elections (Elias & Beasley 2009; Steger & Roy 2021). It becomes difficult to imagine a world outside capitalism, or its current permutations in neoliberal hegemony, which incidentally reinforces traditional systems of dominance while insisting that inequality has been overcome in the democratization of exchange.

Any attempt to increase equity must attend to not only undoing oppression and exclusion but also rescinding “conferred dominance” and preferential treatment awarded to individuals because of their kyriarchal positioning (McIntosh 1989). While class, gender, and race/ethnicity are in some ways distinct, they are also mutually constituted and deeply connected to—in unique and sometimes surprising ways—sexuality, religion, ability, etc. All are significant cogs—though some may be larger or more forceful—within a many-faceted machine of social dominance and individual identity construction that informs the current neoliberal hegemony. And yet, hegemony is always in contestation, is always under threat, and thus always needs to both reinscribe itself and remain mutable. The slipperiness of dominance makes it radically unstable, as seen in cultural artifacts like superhero films (Fischer 2006; Hassler-Forest 2012; Bridges et al 2023). Although superhero cinema reintroduces cultural values previously conveyed in Western cinema—grim courage and determination, loner individualism, and often violent administration of (one’s own brand of) justice—it does so in new and often unexpected ways (Cantor 2016; Burke 2016; McGowan 2009). Superheroes’ inevitable victory over anti-American threats works to reinforce traditional traits into a new neoliberal ideology, and yet neoliberal ideologies can often affect the performance and consequences of these traits.

*The Dark Knight* provides insights into both traditional and unexpected permutations of neoliberal kyriarchy. The year of its release is considered both the pinnacle of neoliberalism and its greatest failure, culminating in the global economic collapse. *The Dark Knight* explicitly responds to the trauma of 9/11 and Bush-era policies regarding torture, rendition, and surveillance (Fradley 2013; MacFarlane 2014; Phillips 2010),

seeming to demonstrate neoliberalism's incompatibility with democracy. While some see Nolan's film as a critique of conservative policies (Ip 2011, 229), others find it to be unapologetically supportive of authoritarianism (Bosh 2016; Zornado & Reilly 2021, 168). Still others see its political ambiguity as a strategy to maximize audience appeal and profit (Burke 2013, 35; Fradley 2010, 19). In any case, it functions as a microcosm of neoliberal kyriarchy, mirroring the shifting priorities and attempts to consolidate power that characterized the times. Given *The Dark Knight's* almost exclusively male cast, the best place to start parsing the kyriarchal elements of *The Dark Knight* is through an understanding of the film's interactions with and constructions of masculinity.

Hegemonic—also called dominant, idealized, preferred, or toxic—masculinity describes the specific behaviors that reflect (local, regional, or global) society's ideal man (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). It is an amorphous but real set of cultural expectations to which boys and men must conform if they want to seem deserving of the privileges associated with their gender identity. Although more complex than traditional social scripts, it often includes elements of them, such as performances of physical strength, aggression, stoicism, and self-reliance. It allows “the winning and holding of [social] power and the formation (and destruction) of other groups in that process” (Donaldson 1993, 644). Hegemonic masculinity is determined within relationships between men, where gendered performances are negotiated through the policing of the self and others and the often violent rejection of subordinate masculinities or associations with femininity (as in the bullying of gender non-conforming children or the practice of “playing hurt”) (Messner 1995; Trujillo 1995). *The Dark Knight* has an almost exclusively male cast, and Bruce's identity is constructed not only in the interactions between Bruce and his father figures—Alfred Pennyworth and Lucius Fox—but also in Batman's encounters with his peers and adversaries, Harvey Dent and the Joker.

## 2. HOMOSOCIAL MASCULINITIES

At the beginning of the film, Batman's crusade against Gotham's organized criminal underclass is drawing to a close, with Gordon on the brink of seizing the “mob's life savings” using Batman's irradiated bills (0:11:09). Batman bends gun barrels, displaying exceptional physical strength bestowed by his cutting-edge, armored suit, (0:09:15). In the first scene featuring an unmasked and unarmored Bruce, he stitches his own wounds alone in his bunker, demonstrating self-sufficiency, physical toughness, and emotion stoicism (0:12:43–0:12:50). His butler, Alfred, approaches and scolds him for sloppiness, incredulous that Bruce was injured by a dog and not the tiger he first suspected. Bruce emphasizes that it was a “big dog,” so as to not besmirch his masculinity; the scene is played as a joke, but when Bruce discards his t-shirt, illustrating a muscle-slabbed back marred by scars and bruises, the film's endorsement of traditional masculine embodiment is quite serious. Most superhero films prominently feature the protagonists' muscle-bound

physique, even if physical strength is not required of that particular superhero (Connell 2020). The fact that Batman's physical strength comes not just from the suit demonstrates that Bruce's body is "the tool of his feats as well as the sign of his belonging" to superheroic masculinity (Roblou 2012, 79).

Such masculinity is initially reinforced not only in Alfred's gaze but also in that of the audience, who see that the chiseled musculature of his armor only reflects what lies beneath: Batman's masculine power is an extension of Bruce's powerful masculinity. A similar scene plays out later in the film with Lucius Fox, who handles Batman's technical needs while as serving as Wayne Enterprises' CEO. When Bruce asks him to engineer a way to be picked up by a plane without it having to land, Lucius smiles at the challenge (0:27:50). He similarly builds Bruce a new suit, admonishing that he should "read the instructions" before playing with its (deadly) features (0:28:17). It is, later, Alfred's idea to use an entire troop of ballerinas as an alibi, a position that only makes sense if women are homogenous, easily controlled, and largely silent (0:28:48). Alfred alludes to his own history supporting British colonialism when hunting a bandit in the forests of Burma, whom he claims is beyond reason and logic (0:54:28). The environmental degradation and violence of such histories is held up as necessary when Alfred indicates that the only way to catch the bandit was to "burn the forest down" (1:39:19). These are the father figures that encourage Bruce's extra-legal heroism and traditional performances of hegemonic masculinity, characterized by physical exceptionalism, sexual promiscuity, and eminent social status. This is further illustrated when Lucius defends Bruce against a lawyer who has discovered his secret alter ego: "You think that your client—one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in the world—is secretly a vigilante who spends his nights beating criminals to a pulp with his bare hands, and your plan is to blackmail this person? Good luck" (0:58:02). However, Lucius and Alfred are not the most central masculine relationships that characterize the film.

Although Bruce is the hegemonically male core of Batman, his public performance takes on the form of a promiscuous dilettante, escorting the Russian prima ballerina to dinner and arriving late to a fundraiser with three objectified, silent women as his date (0:19:40; 0:44:28; Bosch 2015, 47). This is contrasted with Harvey Dent, who is constructed as Batman's mirror as well as Bruce's rival. Like Bruce, Harvey is in love with Rachel Dawes; like Batman, he is uncompromising in pursuit of justice: Gordon tells Batman "I hear [Dent's] as stubborn as you are" (0:11:31). His masculinity is, at first glance, less dominant than Bruce's: his commitment to Rachel is monogamous and he works within Gotham's legal structures as the District Attorney. Yet, in Harvey's first scene, a mob witness fires a gun point-black at him during cross-examination (0:15:15). When the gun jams, Harvey punches the witness in the face, dismantles the gun and stares down the boss who ordered the hit: "If you wanna kill a public servant ... I recommend you buy American" (0:15:25). Unbothered by his brush with death, Harvey responds to threats

with instinctual physical violence, is uncowed by danger, and seems a quintessential patriotic American, conventionally attractive and smug. Although Bruce is poised to mock and emasculate Harvey—"Really, so you're into... ballet" (0:19:45)—he finds himself drawn in by the latter's unwavering support of Batman: "Gotham City's proud of an ordinary citizen standing up for what is right" (0:20:19). While Harvey pontificates about the need for and drives of Batman, Bruce's face shows an explicit softening (0:20:36-0:21:01). Harvey is configured throughout the film as "Gotham's white knight," beloved by the public, the one incorruptible public servant standing for truth and justice (0:17:45, 2:14:52, 2:22:35). He sacrifices himself as a decoy, pretending to be Batman, and the camera angle, pointing at him from below as he raises his chin, reinforces his status as the emergent hero of the film (1:12:07). Harvey is charismatic, confident, and always interested in a lightly competitive game of chance—which he is guaranteed to win because of his father's lucky (double-sided) coin (1:44:14). He is emblematic of a shifting and perhaps equitably hegemonic masculinity, supported by State power and neoliberal competition.

It is not too much of a stretch to find Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men* (1985) relevant to this interaction, as well as to the elision of the female lead (who only appears in 11 of the film's 152 minutes; Kvaran 2016, 220-221). Rachel is the superficial, heteronormative excuse for the men to connect in the truly important homosocial relationship that allows "introjection and incorporation [to form] the link between the apparently dissimilar processes of desire and identification" (Sedgwick 1985, 24). Harvey admires, protects, and identifies with Batman, which leads to Bruce's admiration for and identification with Harvey. It is an erotic triangle one degree removed from Sedgwick's: rather than two men using a woman as the third term to exercise homoerotic desire and construct their own identity, the triangle occurs between Bruce, Harvey, and Batman. In Sedgwick's theorization, there is a "stylized female who functions as a subject of action but not of thought [Batman]; a stylized male who functions as pure object [Harvey]; and a less stylized male speaker that functions as a subject of thought but not of action [Bruce]" (ibid, 32). This monolithically male triangle is poised to "save" Gotham from the criminal underclass and corrupt officials alike. It provides access to a masculinity that is mutually reinforcing and strengthens the dominant kyriarchal class and power structures (ibid, 26).

The Joker disrupts the ostensibly heteronormative but charged homosocial relationship that informs the film's new hegemonic masculinity. Scholars have struggled to identify the appeal and cultural resonance of the Joker. Some see him as a terrorist in his use of violent home videos or his willingness to blow himself up (Klaven 2008; Chang 2008; Stevens 2008; 0:43:09, 0:25:38); others see him as a Satanic figure tempting Gotham's citizens into selfish immorality (Boscaljon 2013; Bellinger 2013). When viewed in terms of sexuality, however, the Joker emerges as a queer subject that "convey[s] and challeng[es] the models of masculinity on offer in the superhero film" (Easton 2013, 39). Unlike Bruce's

billionaire elegance or Harvey's middle-class charisma, the Joker is a garish mashup of butch and femme traits in his custom three-piece suit, dyed hair, make-up, and violent but giggling persona. He is a disabled drag queen performing camp and masochistically wooing Batman's violent attention (1:24:04; Barounis 2013, 317). The Joker tempts Batman to murder him at least twice, but not because it would require Batman to break his personal code (1:22:13, 2:13:06): "Do you wanna know why I use a knife? Guns are too quick... You see, in their last moments, people show you who they really are" (1:33:09-1:33:30). The Joker is desperate to be seen by the object of his erotic obsession: Batman, whose violence inspires him, whose presence "completes" him, and with whom he desires to struggle forever (1:28:07, 2:14:01). If the supervillain "interposes himself in the hero's narrative of finding true love and happiness" (Easton 2013, 42), in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker not only interposes himself within the heteronormative love triangle but within the homosocial one as well.

The Joker's status as a failed masculine subject explains the violence he so gleefully embraces and scholars' associations of him with mass shooters (Race Davis 2014). Just as in the case of mass shooters, no origin story or explanatory trauma is provided for this character: "he is angry and violent for no explained reason" and cannot be "influenced, persuaded, or bargained with" (ibid, 32, 34). Mass shooters tend to resort to violence when they feel their masculinity is threatened or destabilized, and they do it as well to establish bonds with or dominance over other men (Katz 2013, 1:04:10). The Joker's race and apparent nationality also support the association; if he is a terrorist at all, he is a home-grown, domestic terrorist, rising out of Gotham's underworld rather than religious extremism half a world away. Because the object of the Joker's affections—Batman—is so enmeshed in hegemonic masculinity, the only way to draw his attention and achieve intimacy is through violence. This is also why the Joker is so successful in turning Harvey to criminality—hence the complete disruption of the hegemonic, homosocial triangle. By the end of the film, Harvey has not only lost Rachel, but also the continent masculine body that allowed him to obtain social status (McGowan 2009, par. 49). He is now Joker's mirror, rather than Batman's, and he resorts to extreme violence, threatening Gordon's children, to reassert his own (failing) masculinity (2:17:54).

By the film's end, Harvey kills according to his own whims, no matter what his now non-double-sided coin indicates. In the hospital, Dent tells the Joker, "[Heads] You live. [Tails] You die," but later he shoots Batman even when the coin flip comes up heads (1:50:58, 2:19:07). He also tells the corrupt cop Ramirez that she will "live to fight another day," but we later learn there are "five dead, two of them cops" (2:03:35, 2:21:34). Harvey's need to dominate, once obtained through the performance of hegemonic masculinity, is now fulfilled by hyper-violence, especially over Batman—whom he insists on shooting—rather than the monstrous feminized Other of the Joker, whom he allows to live. No longer can Harvey use Batman, or Bruce use Harvey, to construct their masculine identities and

consolidate social power; the homosocial triangle is demolished by violent homoeroticism. The film provides the insight that the suppression of homoerotic impulse and its sublimation into compulsory heterosexuality and homosocial bonds of dominance leads to proliferations of extreme violence.

### 3. KYRIARCHICAL PRIVILEGE

The three male figures at the heart of *The Dark Knight* represent three competing and fraught spaces in the neoliberal socioeconomic system, which shed light on the ways gender dominance is reinforced by and dependent on socioeconomic status in a modern kyriarchy. Bruce is interested in the reproduction of capital, illustrated in his implicit authority over the Wayne business empire. Despite Lucius's nominal role as the company's CEO, Bruce is the one to initiate deals with foreign nationals (only to look at their books) and reassigns whole departments (R&D) without informing Lucius or explaining himself (0:18:55; 0:59:22). In his links to various submissive women and his deferred relationship with Rachel, Bruce is not a traditional patriarchal authority but, instead, a sexual consumerist. Such class markers extend to his alter ego; Batman is a part, or at least uses the tools, of the extremely wealthy, although not in relation to women. He claims the right to pursue vigilante justice because his armor is not cheap "hockey pads" (0:10:29; Barounis 2013, 315). Capital provides a position of extra-legal exceptionalism, buttresses the association of superheroism with masculinity, and involves the protection of property and consolation of wealth—Batman is dedicated, after all, to eradicating the flow of capital to those organized criminals that challenge the status quo.

Harvey, in turn, is symbolic of bourgeois patriarchy in his proposed marriage to Rachel, which will ensure social reproduction, and in his role as a civil servant prosecuting mob peons over theft and petty crime: "The head guys make bail, sure. But the mid-level guys, they can't. They can't afford to be off the streets long enough for trial and appeal. They'll cut deals that include some jail time. Think of all you can do with 18 months of clean streets" (0:40:59; Boscaljon 2013, 55). It is telling that Harvey does not similarly pursue reparations from Batman, even though the latter destroys thousands of dollars worth of public and personal property and is obviously well-funded given his vehicle, armor, and tools. The middle-class, represented by Harvey, respects and aspires to the position of the ultra-wealthy, just as the district attorney Harvey supports and protects Batman's masculinist pursuit of extra-legal justice. Such support can only be explained by the intersection of government with neoliberal ideology, itself strongly inflected by traits associated with Western masculinity: individualism, self-sufficiency, and entrepreneurialism (Eagleton-Pierce 2016, 19). Harvey is the product of a neoliberal middle-class, invested in personal responsibility and suspicious of governmental authorities, as when he dismisses the mayor's cautions and critiques Gordon's specialized unit (0:41:20; 0:17:10). There is a sense that Harvey is "Gotham's true hero" because he is

paradigmatically middle-class, always striving to climb socially (as when he makes reservations at an exclusive restaurant) and consolidate capital (as when he attends Bruce's fundraising dinner), yet uncomfortable associating with the ultra-wealthy one-percent: "Harvey Dent, scourge of the underworld, scared stiff by the trust fund brigade" (0:19:23; 0:43:48).

The Joker represents anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal logic, which adds a layer of meaning to his disruption of the homosocial love trial identified above. During the bank heist at the beginning of the film, he is dressed in threadbare clothes and a stained clown mask, which he trades in for a custom purple suit that, while not necessarily "cheap," is definitely without labels (0:03:56; 0:23:38; 1:24:02). This signals his existence outside the system of commodity fetish where "unbound desire" becomes attached to a commercial object that is "eviscerated of its substance and history, and reduced to the state of marking a difference" (Baudrillard 1972, 81). The lack of labels means the suit is devoid of the social cache and status identification that labels provide. Later in the film, the Joker demonstrates "animosity toward private property" when he burns a 30-foot-tall stack of cash; such material is only useful to send a message (Boscaljon 2013, 55). The Joker's rejection of capital is intersected by his rejection of heteronormativity, continent bodies, and legal order. He wants destruction, not reproduction, of both capital and the State; he wants anarchy devoid of signs and systems of exchange beyond those of violence. But it is significant that even this rebellion is centered in a cis White man, which allows his rebellious class and gender position to be read not only as powerful but ultimately desirable, and explains the Joker's cultural influence (as reflected in the posthumous Academy Award Heath Ledger received for his interpretation, and the character's continued popularity; Heifetz 2021).

Contrast, for instance, the Joker's characterization in the film to that of Gambol, the only Black criminal overlord. Gambol is depicted as vindictive and rageful; he is more offended by the Joker's theft than the other (White) mob bosses (Italian, Chechan) and offers a reward for the capture of "the clown," alive or dead (0:25:43). Gambol is then killed within the first half hour of the film; he is the mobster most easily overcome by the Joker's disruptive rebelliousness (0:31:08). This is not necessarily because he is unable to enact hegemonic masculinity alongside capitalist ambition. In the neoliberal logic of the film, as well as in traditional performances of masculinity, anger toward and punishment of theft is legitimized. His anger instead becomes read as his inability to transcend the emotionality associated with his race. If Black men are read as hyperviolent or criminal, in both media and the wider world, it is a criminality associated with impulse and disorganization rather than logic and control (Collins 2004; Hall et al. 2016; DuVerney 2016).

The other Black men in the film are Lucius Fox, played by Morgan Freeman, and an unnamed prisoner who appears late in the film. Lucius is admired by wide swaths of African-American film audiences because of his economic success in an oppressively White

world and because of Freeman’s “star status”; yet even in that success he serves and is subordinate to Bruce/Batman (Claverie 2017, 160). Perhaps more worrisome, Lucius acts as the film’s moral compass, especially at the end, when he criticizes the surveillance system: “Beautiful. Unethical. Dangerous... This is wrong” (1:55:50–1:56:28). This is similar to the behavior demonstrated by the unnamed criminal later in the film. When presented with the option to blow up a boat of civilians to save his own life, the large, scarred, and tattooed Black man plays on audience expectations of criminal stereotypes: “You don’t want to die, but you don’t know how to take a life... Give it to me and I’ll do what you should’ve did 10 minutes ago” (2:10:06–2:11:25). However, he throws the detonator out the open window before turning away from the suited White warden with a disgusted sneer. Lucius and the prisoner only *seem* to challenge racial stereotypes and traditional figurations of morality; presenting White citizens and traditional heroes are fallible, whereas Black men—criminal or CEO—must be above reproach. Black men can *only* be admired in the world of the film because of their ethical exceptionalism; they must be better than those around them if they are to access any kind of screen time or social capital. It is additionally significant that the Black convict demonstrates his ethical nobility in a willingness to sacrifice his own life to preserve that of white strangers. This act hovers perilously close to Uncle Tom-like Black obsequiousness that characterized earlier cinema, from Cullen’s comforting of Jackson at the end of *The Defiant Ones* (1958) to the sacrifice of Dick Hallorann in *The Shining* (Snead 1994; Guerrero 1993; Coleman 2022).

The moral ambiguity demonstrated by Batman (and, at times, Harvey) becomes a form of racial privilege; White men are admired for breaking the law and transgressing ethical boundaries in a way that is unavailable to people of color (McIntosh 1989). Although certain superheroes have become synonymous with Whiteness (even those whose Whiteness cannot be read on their bodies, like Spider-Man; Tyree and Jacobs 2014, 1), Batman’s indisputable whiteness is legible on his naked chin and mouth. Such only emphasizes his appropriation of blackness, signaled in his suit; the film reproduces racialized color symbolism where whiteness symbolizes innocence and purity and Blackness evil and depravity (Moore 1988, 270). The (ostensible) violence of Blackness can only take the form of heroism when it is centered around and reinforced by Whiteness. If Harvey was Gotham’s White (middle-class, hegemonically male) knight, then Batman is “not our hero. He’s a silent guardian; a watchful protector. A Dark Knight” (2:24:24). Batman’s suit works as an inverse of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), in which Batman can do the wickedness associated with Blackness because his innocence and superior intentions are assumed, due to his white skin. He may exist outside of the legal justice system, but this exceptionalism does not make him vulnerable, as it does Agamben’s *homo sacer* (1998), or poor Black bodies in America (Lamont Hill 2016). Instead, it makes

him invincible—a new and modern permutation of Agamben’s sovereign exceptionalism and neoliberal kyriarchy.

This is the direct and inescapable opposite of the experience of Black and Indigenous People of Color in America. Recent psychological studies reveal most Americans, including but not limited to police officers, are implicitly biased against young men of color, and these biases go beyond typical associations of Blackness with criminality (Hall, Hall, & Perry 2016, 176–77, 178). Americans also perceive Black children as older than they actually are, as in the case of Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old assumed to be in his 20s when killed by a White police officer in Cleveland, Ohio (ibid, 176). Black men are also assumed to be an especially dangerous combination of subhuman and superhuman, evident in Darren Wilson’s testimony about Michael Brown’s shooting in Ferguson, Missouri: “I shoot a series of shots. I don’t know how many I shot, I just know I shot it [*sic*]”; “It looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I’m shooting at him” (Lamont Hill 2016, 12). Wilson also said that holding on to Brown made him feel “like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan” (Hall, Hall, & Perry 2016, 177). When Black men are seen as exceptionally strong, that strength is associated with alien animality; bullets don’t penetrate because Black men are not fully human. This thinking allows the murder of individuals like Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Sandra Bland, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd to be dismissed or diminished because of the victims’ assumed criminality, drug use, or threat to White officers.

Batman in *The Dark Knight* anticipates such ideology except in reverse, illustrating the pinnacle of neoliberal kyriarchy. Batman’s altruistic intentions are assumed (due to his white skin), even when he is breaking the law; any losses of control he exhibits are excused, like his assault on the Joker while the latter is in police custody (1:29:39). Even though this film’s new suit is supposedly lighter weight but less resistant to guns, knives, etc., Batman survives being stabbed, shot, attacked by dogs, and falling several stories in the film’s final scenes; he is never again shown needing medical care (0:28:20; 2:09:19, 2:19:08). Like Michael Brown, Batman is considered in many ways superheroic, and yet his humanity is never in question despite the fact that he is dressed as a literal animal. This superhumanism is extended to any hegemonically masculine figure in the film, as can be seen in Harvey’s ride in the back of a police van through the tunnels of Gotham. Although he is unsecured, and shown being physically shaken, he escapes the fate of Freddie Grey, whose rough ride in the back of a police van had tragically different results in Baltimore, in April of 2015 (1:18:02).

Narratively, Batman and Harvey’s privileged kyriarchal positions protect them from harm. If, as Marc Lamont Hill (2016) argues, to be “nobody” is to occupy an intersectional identity that makes one vulnerable to overt and systemic State violence, as well as State negligence and abandonment, then Batman is not just the inverse of “nobody”; he

becomes the most essential “somebody” (xvii-xix). And, if Black bodies are made utterly vulnerable to State violence because of the intersections of race, class, education, gender, nationality, and religion, then Batman’s privilege must be understood as more than that of just race or class or masculinity. Bruce/Batman occupies the elite class, performs shifting articulations of hegemonic masculinity, and functions with impunity because of the privileges of kyriarchy. His is a continent and able body reinforced by better-than-military equipment and legible in its Whiteness as acting with State-sanctioned (or at least State-permitted) violence. The antiheroism that Batman occupies in the film’s conclusion, which allows him to be seen as a hero precisely because he adopts the appearance of a villain, can only be explained by the concept of kyriarchy. It is a privilege that is intersected and buttressed by class, education, maleness, Whiteness, nationalism, and ableism. If ancient kyriarchy was rule of the emperor, lord, slave master, and husband, then modern, neoliberal kyriarchy is the exceptionalism of hegemonic masculinity, Whiteness, and cultural-economic status; such an intersectional identity allows individuals to transcend State authority and moral imperatives, while remaining appealing to the general audience in both their desired social position and introjected subjectivity.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

As the world—and neoliberalism and its attendant supports in kyriarchy—evolves, we need to keep examining not just the conspicuous absences within media narratives regarding race, gender, disability, and more, but also the ways certain films allow a glimpse into the structures of exceptionality and privilege that characterize society at a given moment. I hope that this paper has allowed such insight; *The Dark Knight*, still a cultural touchstone, will remain a valuable snapshot of intersecting systems of dominance and oppression at a particular moment in the early twenty-first century that remains crucial in the developments and reinscriptions of neoliberal hegemony. Identifying such structures can help dismantle them and evolve the dialectical movement of cinematic history towards equity, inclusivity, and accessibility. Perhaps now, in the wake of #BlackLivesMatter, #OscarsSoWhite, and #MeToo, we can demand more of our media, including representations that envision a society built on networks of shared power and resources, rather than loner individuality and physical invulnerability. It remains to be seen if such a world is possible within the cinematic superhero genre, but it is a challenge worth pursuing.

## WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacre: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bailey, Moya. 2016. "Misogynoir in Medical Media: On Caster Semenya and R. Kelly." *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 2(2): 1–31. DOI: 10.28968/cftt.v2i2.28800.
- Barounis, Cynthia. 2013. "'Why so Serious?': Crippling Camp Performance in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*." *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 7(3): 305–320. DOI: 10.3828/jlcds.2013.26.
- Baudrillard, Jean. 1972. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*. Reprint, 2019. London, UK: Verso.
- Bellinger, Charles K. 2013. "The Joker Is Satan and So Are We: Girard and The Dark Knight." *Journal of Religion and Film* 13(1): article 5. URL: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13/iss1/5>.
- Boscaljon, Daniel. 2013. "The Flip Side of Justice: The Two-Faced Spirit of *The Dark Knight*." *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 14(1): 44–64. DOI: 10.17077/2168-569X.1412.
- Bosch, Brandon. 2016. "'Why So Serious?': Threat, Authoritarianism, and Depictions of Crime, Law, and Order in Batman Films." *Criminology, Criminal Justice Law, & Society* 17(1): 37–54.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook for Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, translated by Richard Nice, 241–56. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Brown, Wendy. 2015 *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books.
- Burke, Liam. 2016. *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi.
- Chang, Justin. 2008. "Review: *The Dark Knight*." *Variety*. <https://variety.com/2008/film/markets-festivals/the-dark-knight-4-1200508584/>.
- Claverie, Ezra. 2017. "Ambiguous Mr. Fox: Black Actors and Interest Convergence in the Superhero Film." *Journal of American Culture* 40(2): 155–68. DOI: 10.1111/jacc.12712.
- Coleman, Robin R. Means. 2022. *Horror Noire: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to the Present*. 2nd ed. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1990. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 2004. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Collins, Patricia Hill and Sirma Bilge. 2020. *Intersectionality (Key Concepts)*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Cambridge, UK: Polity.
- Connell, Daniel J. 2020. "The Simulacrum of Hypermasculinity in Comic Book Cinema." In *Toxic Masculinity: Mapping the Monstrous in Our Heroes*, edited by Esther De Dauw and Daniel J. Connell, 19–33. Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press.
- Connell, R. W. and James W. Messerschmidt. 2005. "Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept." *Gender and Society* 19(6): 829–59. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640853>.
- Connell, Raewyn. 2010. "Lives of the Businessmen: Reflections on Life-history Method and Contemporary Hegemonic Masculinity." *ÖZS* 35(2): 54–71. DOI: 10.1007/x11614-010-0054-z.

- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1991. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43(61): 1241–99. DOI: 10.2307/1229039.
- Davis, Angela. 1983. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Davis, Connor Race. 2014. "The Joker, the Blockbuster, and Mass Shootings: Watching the world Burn." *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* 7(2): 28–35. URL: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol7/iss2/6>.
- Dixon, Winston Wheeler, and Richard Graham. 2017. *Brief History of Comic Book Movies*. London: Palgrave.
- Donaldson, Mike. 1993. "What is Hegemonic Masculinity?" *Theory and Society* 22 (5): 643–57. DOI: 10.1007/BF00993540.
- DuVerney, Ava. 2016. *13<sup>th</sup>*. Los Gatos, CA: Netflix.
- Eagleton-Pierce, Matthew. 2016. "Historicizing the Neoliberal Spirit of Capitalism." In *The Handbook of Neoliberalism*. Ed. Simon Springer, Kean Birch, and Julie MacLeavy, 17–26. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Elias, Juanita and Christine Beasley. 2009. "Hegemonic Masculinity and Globalization: 'Transnationals Business Masculinities' and Beyond." *Globalizations* 6(2): 281–96. DOI: 10.1080/14747730902854232.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1967. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York, NY: Grove Press.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 1992. *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. 2006. *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation*. Ossining, NY: Orbis Books.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler and Laura Nasrallah. 2010. *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christianity*. Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press. Kindle Edition.
- Fisher, Mark. 2006. "Gothic Oedipus: Subjectivity and Capitalism in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins*." *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* 2 (2). <https://imagetextjournal.com/gothic-oedipus-subjectivity-and-capitalism-in-christopher-nolans-batman-begins/>
- Fradley, Martin. 2013. "What Do You Believe In?: Film Scholarship and the Cultural Politics of *The Dark Knight* Franchise." *Film Quarterly* 66(3): 15–27. DOI: 10.1525/fq.2013.66.3.15.
- Bridges, Donna, Clifford Lewis, Elizabeth Wulff, Chelsea Litchfield, Larissa Bamberry. 2023. *Gender, Feminist and Queer Studies: Power, Privilege, and Inequality in a Time of Neoliberal Conservatism*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Guerrero, ed. 1993. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Hall, Alison V., Erika V. Hall, and Jamie L. Perry. 2016. "Black and Blue: Racial Bias and Law Enforcement in the Killings of Unarmed Black Male Civilians." *American Psychologist* 71 (3): 175–86. DOI: 10.1037/a0040109.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hassler-Forest, Dan. 2012. *Capitalist Superheroes: Caped Crusaders in the Neoliberal Age*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

- Heifetz, Danny. 27 Oct 2021. "Why are NFL Players So Obsessed with *The Dark Knight*?" *The Ringer*. Accessed 24 April 2024, <https://www.theringer.com/nfl/2021/10/27/22747463/nfl-players-obsessed-the-dark-knight-joker-heath-ledger-batman>.
- Hill, Marc Lamont. 2016. *Nobody: Causalities of America's War on the Vulnerable, from Ferguson to Flint and Beyond*. New York, NY: Atria Books.
- hooks, bell. 1984. *Feminist Theory: From margin to Center*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 2000. Boston, MA: South End Press.
- Ip, John. 2011. "The Dark Knight and Terrorism." *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 9(1): 209–229. URL: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1574539>.
- Katz, Jackson, Jeremy Earp, and David Rabinovitz. 2013. *Tough Guise 2: Violence, Manhood & American Culture*. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Keaton, Ajhanai, Evan Frederick, Keisha Branch, and Ann Pegoraro. 2023. "Brittney Griner, Intersectionality, and 'Woke Politics': A Critical Examination of Brittney Griner's Return to the United States." *Sociology of Sport Journal*. DOI: 10.1123/ssj.2023-0090.
- Kvaran, Kara M. 2017. "Super Daddy Issues: Parental Figures, Masculinity, and Superhero Films." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50(2): 218–38. DOI: 10.1111/jpcu.12531.
- Lotz, Amanda D. 2014. *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. New York: New York University Press.
- MacFarlane, Jerrod. 2014. "Desperate Times and Desperate Measures: False-Representation and Distortion of Terrorism in Post-9/11 Superhero Film." *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 7(3): 446–55. DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2014.956460.
- McGowan, Todd. 2009. "The Exceptional Darkness of The Dark Knight." *Jump Cut* 51: 1–19. URL: <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc51.2009/darkKnightKant/text.html>.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 1989. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." *Peace and Freedom*. URL: [https://psychology.umbc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2016/10/White-Privilege\\_McIntosh-1989.pdf](https://psychology.umbc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/57/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf).
- McSweeney, Terrance. 2020. *The Contemporary Superhero Film: Projections of Power and Identity*. New York, NY: Wallflower Press.
- Messner, Michael A. 1995. *Power at Play: Sports and the Problem of Masculinity*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Moore, Robert B. 1988. "Racist Stereotyping in the English Language." In *Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study*, edited by Paula S. Rothenberg, 269–79. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Nolan, Christopher, dir. 2008. *The Dark Knight*. Burbank, CA: Warner Bros.
- Phillips, Nickie D. 2010. "The Dark Knight: Constructing Images of Good vs. Evil in an Age of Anxiety." In *Popular Culture, Crime and Social Control*. Edited by Mathieu Deflem, 25–44. Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Group.
- Roblou, Yann. 2012. "Complex Masculinities: The Superhero in Modern American Movies." *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 4(1): 56–91. DOI: 10.3149/csm.0401.76.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 1985. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Snead, James. 1994. *White Screens/Black Images: Hollywood from the Dark Side*. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Steger, Manfred B. and Ravi K. Roy. 2021. *Neoliberalism: A Very Short Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Stevens, Dana. 2008. "No Joke: *The Dark Knight* Reviewed." *Slate*. URL: <https://slate.com/culture/2008/07/the-dark-knight-reviewed.html>.
- Trujillo, Nick. 1995. "Machines, Missiles, and Men: Images of the Male Body on ABC's *Monday Night Football*." *Sociology of Sport Journal* 12: 403–23. DOI: 10.1080/15295039109366799.
- Wilson, Julie A. *Neoliberalism*. Key Ideas in Media & Cultural Studies. Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge.
- Young, Kamila. 2022. *Mediated Misogynoir: Erasing Black Women's and Girls' Innocence in the Public Imagination*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield.
- Zornado, Joseph and Sara Reilly. 2021. *The Cinematic Superhero as Social Practice*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.