

POTENTIAL AND POWER IN BLACK SUPERHERO FILM COMEDIES

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ABSTRACT

This article revisits a small subgrouping of Black superhero comedy films that were critically denounced at the time of their release but which merit reevaluation in light of contemporary calls to move away from an overemphasis on traumatic narratives in twenty-first-century Black films. Whereas films and other media fixated on Black trauma frame their characters' experiences mostly through the abusive and dominant power of individuals and institutions that wield racialized violence, Black superhero comedy films are useful in reframing expectations for the power and potential of their characters. Robert Townsend's *The Meteor Man* (1993), Mike Binder's *Blankman* (1994), and Louis CK's *Pootie Tang* (2001) are films in which the absurdity of the titular heroes, that is the way they stand out against prevailing norms, provides both the characters and their communities with a salvific equilibrium. Functioning in part as parodies of conventional superhero narratives, these films share events such as threats to family and/or community, the acquisition or construction of costumes specific to crime-fighting, and uneasy relationships between the news media and the superheroes saving cities. To varying degrees, all of these elements are played for laughs. The movies also share some of the exaggerated aesthetic conventions of comic books and film/television treatments of superhero stories, further reiterating the relationship between these broad comedies and their source material. However, my particular interest in analyzing the characterizations and plots of these films is in how they positively express the way the Black superhero figure realizes and fulfills his purpose, transcending the schemes and systems of criminals and other powerful figures that would bring him down.

Keywords: superhero, Black cinema, African American, race, comedy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, Sean Yoes of *The AFRO* reflected on “A Golden Age of Black Cinema” that was coming into decisive focus as the decade closed. Lauding trailblazing filmmakers like Spike Lee and emerging talents including Kelvin Harrison, Jr., Yoes argues that for decades many Black films have been beacons of dual success—both artistic and financial—even if the film industry, with its “fiscal intricacies, political machinations and blatant racism make for an often toxic milieu” that is reluctant to recognize the excellence on display (Yoes 2019). Ryan Coogler's superhero film *Black Panther* (2018), whose box office success Yoes cites as implicit evidence that the viability of Black films should no

longer be questioned within that “toxic milieu,” could be seen as a late-in-the-decade triumph that established stratospheric new standards for what a Black film could achieve at the global box office and among film critics and bodies awarding film accolades.

Yet even critics and commentators regarding the film as an unqualified success often praise the film in a way that characterizes Coogler’s achievement through the lens of corporate consciousness and sells short its other features. For example, Mark Hughes from *Forbes* opines that *Black Panther* is “a great film with all of the necessary elements for blockbuster success, with the added benefit of caring about diversity,” observing that the diversity in *Black Panther* “activates large mainstream audiences who might otherwise be tired of watching ‘the adventures of amazing white men who are better at everything than everybody else!’” (Hughes 2018).

Hughes’ assessment of *Black Panther* is couched in progressive ideas, but his treatment of diversity as a kind of value-added modification that motivates an easily led mass audience suggests that the film succeeds largely through its consumers being seen through a cynical industrial process rather than existing as aspirational human beings who could relate to the adventure onscreen. Indeed, as an industrial product, *Black Panther* is a narrative controlled by a global business giant (Marvel Studios, owned by The Walt Disney Company), which means that the narrative possibilities and ideas therein are not likely to take risks potentially damaging to the franchise overall. A much more incisive evaluation of *Black Panther*’s success appeared in 2020 when Shakeena Johnson argued in *The Independent* that the film refreshingly resists an overriding trend of movies throughout most of the twenty-tens, which is that “the most fertile ground for black cinema has been trauma” (Johnson 2020). *Black Panther* is exceptional, Johnson argues, because it features “black people living happy, healthy lives,” a type of film that she specifically “challenge[s] Hollywood to make more of” ... “films that leave us laughing” (Johnson 2020).

This article appends Johnson’s call to action, revisiting a small subgrouping of Black superhero comedy films that were critically denounced at the time of their release but which merit reevaluation in light of Johnson’s challenge and similar contemporary critiques of twenty-first century “Black trauma porn” that have appeared in *The Guardian* (Okundaye 2021), *OkayAfrica* (Nkumane 2020), and elsewhere. Whereas films and other media fixated on Black trauma frame their characters’ experiences mostly through the abusive and dominant power of individuals and institutions that wield racialized violence, Black superhero comedy films are useful in reframing expectations for the power and potential of their characters.

Robert Townsend’s *The Meteor Man* (1993), Mike Binder’s *Blankman* (1994), and Louis CK’s *Pootie Tang* (2001) are films in which the absurdity of the titular heroes, that is the way they stand out against prevailing norms, provides both the characters and their communities with a salvific equilibrium. Functioning in part as parodies of conventional

superhero narratives, these films share events such as threats to family and/or community, the acquisition or construction of costumes specific to crime-fighting and uneasy relationships between the news media and the superheroes saving cities. To varying degrees, all of these elements are played for laughs. As written-for-the-screen superheroes not developed under the DC/Marvel duopoly and produced at low-to-middle-range budgets, these films are more fluid and less beholden to narrative and corporate conventions than much of the current superhero screen stories, and therefore freer to lean into absurd comedy. At the same time, the movies also share some of the exaggerated aesthetic conventions of comic books and past film/television treatment of superhero stories, further reiterating the relationship between these broad comedies and their source material. However, my particular interest in analyzing the characterizations and plots of these films is in how they positively express the way the Black superhero figure realizes and fulfills his purpose, transcending the schemes and systems of criminals and other powerful figures that would bring him down. The most recent of this group of films was released in 2001, which means these films represent a bygone state of the American film industry before both production and box office receipts of comic book and superhero films drastically increased during the past quarter-century (Kidman 2019, 184–85).

There is an overarching optimism within the characters of Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang that positions each one as capable of pursuing his destiny despite institutional corruption and injustice. Whereas so many contemporary dramas and superhero narratives are weighed down by the trauma of overwhelming power imbalances and their violent causes and effects, the comic mode of *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* highlights the characters' potential to succeed as both an emblem and a force of good that becomes a universal cause, vanquishing the threats they face. After reviewing the origins of these films and relevant philosophical, racial, and psychological dualisms, I explore three components of the Black superhero comedy narratives: formative experiences that result in recognition as superheroes, the internal conflicts the heroes face (in conjunction with external threats), and their movements towards a unified consciousness, at ease with themselves and their communities.

As the preceding context for the article involves excellence in Black cinema and the recent overemphasis of Black trauma in film and other media, it is important to assess what qualifies *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* as Black films, and to what degree. As for the condition of having a Black artist at the helm of the production, *The Meteor Man* is the most fully Black-authored film of the group, as Robert Townsend wrote, directed, produced, and starred in the film. *Blankman* exists somewhere in between a Black-authored film and a non-Black-authored film, as the film was co-written by Damon Wayans, who wrote and performed for the groundbreaking series *In Living Color* (1990–1994), a program that featured sketches about skewed superheroes. *Blankman* was directed by a non-Black filmmaker, Mike Binder, but Wayans and *In Living Color* associate

David Alan Grier starred in the film, preserving the authorial intent of their sketch comedy series. Finally, *Pootie Tang* is only tangentially a Black-authored film, as non-Black filmmaker Louis C.K. is credited as a writer and director. However, the film was adapted from a sketch on another Black comedy series, *The Chris Rock Show* (1997-2000), and a writer and director of that series, Black television multi-hyphenate Ali LeRoi, re-edited the film as he superseded writer/director Louis C.K. during post-production. Because of the various involvements of Townsend, Wayans, Grier, and LeRoi, as well as other circumstances involving the contributions of other crew and the contributions of on-screen talent, all three of the films will be considered varyingly Black-authored films for the purposes of the analysis, with an acknowledgment that other perspectives were also involved in significant roles.

2. DUALISMS

The theoretical backdrop for these absurd superhero characters and their (individual and communal) reconciliations includes philosophical, racial, and psychological dualisms. Historically, the earliest of these is Hegel's "Unhappy Consciousness" as articulated in the influential 1807 book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Tom Rockmore characterizes the pathway to the "unhappy consciousness" as flowing from Hegel's observations about the "master-slave relation ... [as] a struggle between two persons locked in an unequal relationship" (Rockmore 1997, 72). The power imbalance at the center of the relationship between master and slave is relevant to any number of Black trauma narratives, but it is the path out of the master-slave dialectic and towards self-realization, beginning with stoicism and skepticism, that undergirds the Black superhero comedies considered in this article. Hegel writes:

In Stoicism, self-consciousness is the simple freedom of itself. In Scepticism, this freedom becomes a reality, negates the other side of determinate existence, but really duplicates itself, and now knows itself to be a duality. Consequently, the duplication which formerly was divided between two individuals, the lord and the bondsman, is now lodged in one. The duplication of self-consciousness within itself, which is essential in the Notion of Spirit, is thus here before us, but not yet in its unity: the *Unhappy Consciousness* is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being. (Hegel 1977, 126)

This "Unhappy Consciousness," which Alberto Moreiras summarizes as that which occurs when "the subject [is] autonomous and sovereign" yet "also knows that [its] particularity and finitude makes a mockery of [its] universal pretension" (2022), figures into *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* as the three mortal men with specific moral codes vacillate between an inherent individual embodiment of those codes and the realization that becoming a universal exemplar of those codes reveals their finitude and limits. Gerard Aching's "ontogenetic reading of the master-slave relationship" involves

examining “the ways in which power and its internalization affect subjects [as] a first step toward appreciating their desire and quests for the freedom of self-mastery” (2012, 917).

The next pertinent dualism is a racial one that is often contextualized within the concept of the master-slave relation within America and at times linked to Hegel’s exposition on that very relation. W.E.B. Du Bois’ “double consciousness”¹ introduced at the beginning of the 1903 text *The Souls of Black Folk* speaks to the conflicted or restricted self-perception of Black Americans:

The Negro is ... gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (Du Bois 1994, 2)

Though each of the protagonists considered here is a Black American character, Du Bois’ racial dualism mostly occurs at the level of subtext, with most of the narrative events in the films suggesting that, ironically, one of the burdens these superheroes need not feel is the “revelation of the other world” (Du Bois 1994, 2) in bifurcated racial terms. Each man exists within a Black-majority or racially integrated community, and racial tension is almost nonexistent in the plots. However, these Black superheroes embody a twoness that separates them from their families and neighbors in such a way that they experience another kind of double consciousness, that of the man in the uniform versus the man out of uniform or the crime-fighter versus the everyday citizen. Each film features scenes during which the once thankful attention of the community becomes a scrutinizing force that suggests these superheroes have not lived up to their potential and they must be cast out or sublimated to a lesser function or place within their society.

The final dualism informing these Black superhero comedies is a more recent psychological framework developed by David Wall Rice, relating to racial identity among African American males. In the Foreword to Rice’s book *Balance: Advancing Identity Theory by Engaging the Black Male Adolescent*, Edmund W. Gordon summarizes Rice’s tripartite “identity stasis” structure in which Black men “orchestrate ... three mechanisms” (2008, xiii) consisting of the “Identity Dilemma Articulation” in which self-representation is a struggle of double consciousness, the “Unadulterated Presentation of Self” as a true self-representation free of doubling or “competing models,” and the “Burden of Proof Assumption” in which self-representation either substantiates or subverts others’ definitions of self (Gordon 2008, xiii). Rice advances this framework in the cause of achieving

¹ For existing writing on double consciousness and superhero/comic narratives, see Michael D. Kennedy’s “Black Panther, White Supremacy, and Double Consciousness,” Shannon Luders-Manuel’s “Black Panther and Double Consciousness,” Jon Fortt’s “Spider-Man and the Black Experience: Nobody Knows Who You Are,” and “Black Lightning Always Strikes Twice!—Double-Consciousness as a Super-Power” by Osvaldo Oyola.

equilibrium, stating that “These components and building blocks ... are exemplars of bifurcated identity constructions that represent the awareness of identities to be negotiated, defiance in the face of negotiation and responsibility of identity assumption respectively” (2008, 7). As superhero characters who also share their communities’ mundane existence, Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang each negotiate their private and public identities while attempting to bring equilibrium to their communities in conflict. All three steps of Rice’s stasis structure are present as the three superheroes negotiate their identities within their communities.

3. TRANSFORMATIONS

The experiences that transform Meteor Man, Blankman, and Pootie Tang into superheroes all play upon innate qualities that exist within their characters’ psychologies and behaviors. In *The Meteor Man*, Jefferson “Jeff” Reed (Townsend) is a musician and a teacher who avoids conflict as a rule. The structure of the film makes clear that Jeff is on a collision course with his destiny as a superhero, as the opening sequence of the film takes place in outer space, with the action of a meteor and an explosion implied to have pending effects on Earth, on Washington, D.C., where the film is primarily set. A shot of the statue of Abraham Lincoln being hosed off at the Lincoln Memorial serves as a subtle inversion of Civil Rights Movement imagery, suggesting that this film takes place in a version of Washington, D.C., in which racial double consciousness is not as pressing an issue as it has been for previous generations of Black Americans.

Despite the post-racial impression of the film, the first act of the narrative includes several variations on having awareness of rules or of attempting to assimilate and meet the expectations of others, as opposed to standing out individually. One supporting character, Jeff’s neighbor Earnest Moses (James Earl Jones), tries on several wigs that seem to be made for someone of a different racial identity than his own and scan as unconvincing as he models them in his apartment. Another character, the rogue Michael Anderson (Eddie Griffin), a friend of Jeff, has invented an audience response device that will measure the way the crowd will respond at his concert, the effect of which would be a minimization of artistic experimentation. An administrator at Jeff’s school tells him to teach “only from the books and not your philosophy on life,” reiterating the responsibility to the outer, imposed rather than inner, personalist standards and codes for individual behavior and leadership. Even the title of a comic book within the plot, the *Faceless Crusader*, rounds out this impression of anonymity, of causes followed through in a way that negates the individual consciousness.

When the destined meteor meets Jeff on the street at night, the phenomenon seems to directly respond to the peril he and his community face: a gang of criminals known as the Golden Lords. Just after Jeff’s dangerous encounter with the Golden Lords, the green meteor appears from space and directly hits Jeff in his body, which graphically absorbs

the foreign object. At this moment, he is both a meteor and a man, another kind of double consciousness that complicates his careful assimilative path. With the powers the meteor grants him, including super strength, X-ray vision, absorption of knowledge through touching books, and the capability to fly, Jeff is no longer able to be a faceless crusader because his powers are so distinctive and heightened above those around him. Although he asks his family to keep his powers a secret, it is not long before his mother has shared the news with the entire community, who gathers to praise Meteor Man and seek his help in protecting them.

Blankman differs from *Meteor Man* because the protagonist, a stereotypically nerdy Darryl Walker (Wayans) is already more conspicuously absurd than Jeff and because the viewer sees Darryl as a child (Michael Wayans) in a sequence where his innate geekiness combines with his love for Batman to portend an unlikely future as a superhero. While watching the classic *Batman* television series, Darryl responds to a laundry detergent advertisement, arguing that “Borax won’t work unless you [include] active enzymes,” marking himself as a geek for the viewer as well as for his less nerdy older brother Kevin Walker. Though Darryl is preternaturally skilled at inventing and amassing knowledge about mechanics and chemistry, his inventions are often an outgrowth of his clumsiness and tendency to act with passion before practicality. He rigs the antenna with kitchen implements to better see *Batman*, but in the process, he floods the house. Like *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman* also includes regular allusions to existing superhero intellectual properties, with the animated credit sequence of *Blankman* paying out in the graphic style of superhero graphic narratives and television series, visual associations that run throughout the film.

Darryl’s transformation into *Blankman* is less spectacular than Jeff’s absorption of a meteor, but his motivation to fight crime is arguably stronger. Men working for mobster Michael “The Suit” Minelli (John Polito) murder Darryl and Kevin’s civic-minded grandmother Eleanor (Lynne Thigpen), and as a result of this loss, Darryl experiences a changing awareness of the effects of criminality in his city, taking up a personal mission to fight crime. His first act of protection, throwing a criminal off of a train to prevent him from further assaulting a woman, occurs without any gadgets or costume, or accouterment that will later be a part of the Blankman persona. After this encounter, Darryl bemoans the effects of crime on the neighborhood and the need to fight back, to which Kevin responds that he cannot just be a vigilante. When Darryl counters that Batman fought back, Kevin again discourages his brother by pointing out, “that was fantasy. He had everything. You live in reality. You got nothin’. You’re no Batman.”

Darryl, however, already possesses resourcefulness and a wellspring of mechanical and scientific knowledge that provide everything he needs to create the tools of a superhero. Though his materials consist of kitchen appliances, flowery fabric from his grandmother’s home, and cast-off electronics and candy tins no one else would think to save,

Darryl can rise to the occasion and become Blankman, named as such because he acts before even considering what he should be called and because another early act of heroism, delivering a baby, leaves him speechless, “blank.” Darryl’s insistence that his identity as *Blankman* is kept a secret conforms to the long tradition of discretion among superheroes as well as *The Meteor Man’s* playful evocation of the impossibility of such a veil.

Pootie Tang (Lance Crouther) is the most absurd of the trio of Black superheroes, in part because he appears to have always, from early childhood onward, been equipped with most of the characterization that marks him as a hero to his community. His transformation is not triggered by an object from space or the effects of urban crime on his family. Every moment of Pootie’s young life is played for laughs, and every constituent of his superhero persona, including his clothes, his manner of speech and movement, and his effect on women, is accounted for within the childhood section of the narrative. Paralleling the way his entire persona appears to have been present from childhood, the cinematic influences for Pootie as a film character have been long-established within popular culture. The memory of Rudy Ray Moore and his character Dolemite doubtless inform the urban hero characterization of Pootie, though *Pootie Tang* subverts the raunchiness of Blaxploitation films like *Dolemite* (1975) by making Pootie conspicuously wholesome and resistant to the city’s temptations.

Pootie Tang is narrated by Trucky (J.B. Smoove), Pootie’s trusted friend, who informs the audience that from an early age, Pootie’s distinctive way of speaking was noticeable to everyone around him, baffling scientists and doctors. Trucky’s words are visually illustrated by a newspaper cover story featuring Pootie as a baby with the headline, “Baby speaks new language.” Trucky encapsulates Pootie’s distinctive speech thus: Pootie is simply “too cool for words.” Not once in *Pootie Tang* does the protagonist (who, crucially, has always been named Pootie Tang and need not adopt a new moniker to be a superhero) speak in any identifiable language, despite most of those around him speaking English. However, this does not create a barrier to understanding in most cases, as the meaning of Pootie’s patois is communicated through the preeminence of his persona (nearly everyone knows and celebrates him) and his equally disarming good-guy actions. Pootie’s crime-fighting technique is a combination of dancing that dodges and deflects bullets and slapping his opponents, usually with a belt gifted to him by his late father Daddy Tang (Chris Rock). In another comic tweak of racialized trauma, Trucky tells the viewer that Pootie can beat his foes “like the LAPD,” reversing the power imbalance that resulted in the real-life trauma of the Rodney King beating.

The belt and Daddy Tang are central to Pootie’s transformation into a superhero. Originally used by his father to discipline him in the home and outside of it, the belt is omnipresent as a tool for correcting behavior. It can appear independently of its wielder. *Pootie Tang* sends up the traumatic scenes that appear in some superhero origin stories

by having Daddy Tang mauled in a steel mill by a gorilla, seemingly a *Mad Libs*-style industrial accident scenario. On his deathbed, Daddy Tang warns Pootie of the toughness of his urban environment, saying, “You got drugs, crime, gorillas” and then hands him the corrective belt, warning him not to let the ladies come between him and the belt.

4. CONFLICTS AND THREATENED IDENTITIES

Jeff’s meteor, Darryl’s grief over his grandmother, and Pootie’s receiving of his father’s belt are moments that usher in new superhero statuses that complicate each character’s life. In the context of Rice’s “Identity Dilemma Articulation,” it could be said that each of these individuals experiences “the realization of a bifurcation of identity that creates a dilemma” (Rice 2008, 55) and that new mechanism is the cost of becoming a superhero. In a sense, each of them temporarily loses the “Unadulterated Presentation of Self” and engages in the “Burden of Proof Assumption” to validate or invalidate the expectations of others in his society.

Jeff, initially an optimistic and cautious school teacher, cannot ignore his newly empowered awareness of how dire the conditions of his community truly are. For example, in a scene set among colleagues at his school, he attempts to defend the goodness of the children they teach. Yet his X-ray vision allows him to see through buildings and to observe the criminal actions that those students are carrying out. His realization of the younger generation’s corruption includes many confrontations with the Golden Lords, a gang that controls two younger factions called the Junior Lords and the Baby Lords.

Meteor Man’s powers remove Jeff’s ability to evade the reality of the streets, which is a central part of his dramatic arc. Before his transformation, Jeff disagrees with his father Ted (Robert Guillaume) about the most effective way to react to crime in the neighborhood. Ted advocates direct confrontation, in his words not “crossing the street” for anyone. Jeff supports conflict avoidance, crossing the street to avoid criminals. Townsend’s script cannily juxtaposes the street-level conditions with the ascendancy of the criminal conglomerate to depict the destructive effects of corporatized criminal power on everyday citizens. The Golden Lords are but one cog in an organization featuring international drug figures, all seemingly run by a white American boss. Though *The Meteor Man*’s primary real-world concern is “Black-on-Black crime” (a recurring phrase within the film), the scenes featuring The Golden Lords illustrate the assimilating tradeoffs that these criminals have chosen to make in order to gain access to the otherwise non-Black power structure. The visible sign of this assimilation is that all of the Golden Lords, Junior Lords, and Baby Lords have dyed their hair blonde.

Meteor Man is a reluctant superhero whose commitment to the crime-fighting consciousness only takes shape late into the narrative after a community leader is attacked. Still possessing his internal conflict concerning the choice to confront or avoid crime, Jeff chooses a Utilitarian approach that would lead to beneficial outcomes for the greatest

number of community members. For instance, when he intercedes in a shootout between gang members and law enforcement officers, he says to them, “Put your weapons down. I want to talk to both sides.” They comply, and that unlikely armistice turns into a kind of alliance by the end of the film. He also uses his power to plant an urban garden with massive, comically oversized vegetables that will feed many—a direct contrast with the toxic and parasitic effects of the Golden Lords.

As a brilliant, geeky inventor, *Blankman*’s Darryl experiences a dilemma between his desire to fight crime and the practical option of self-preservation, as he is not suited for many of the physical confrontations in the film. In becoming Blankman, he navigates this dilemma by leaning into his skill for invention so that his uniform and tools/weapons can make up for any deficiency in fighting skills or strength. In Hegelian terms, Darryl is too stoic and not skeptical enough to meet the reality of the city that he lives in and on whose behalf he fights. That his would-be opponents include mobsters and powerful politicians, his idealized vision of his potential effectiveness is a liability. Three consecutive scenes in the film, taking place before he is officially named Blankman, illustrate his journey into Unhappy Consciousness.

In the first of these, Darryl intervenes as a man beats a woman in an alley at night. When he takes the place of the woman, he is severely beaten, a narrative event that is played for laughs, with the joke turning on Darryl’s being called “Susan” and exclaiming in a high-pitched stereotypically effeminate voice. The threat escalates as Darryl dares the man to shoot him, which happens several times, but his custom-made uniform blocks the bullets. Pointing this out, though, allows the assailant to plan to shoot him in his unprotected head, and Darryl nearly experiences a gunshot to the head, saved only by his brother Kevin’s intervention.

The next scene finds law enforcement officers laughing uproariously at Darryl as he asks to speak with “the Commissioner” in the manner Batman would confer with his longtime ally Commissioner James “Jim” Gordon. Here, Darryl mistakes the kind of crime-fighting alliance that only exists in fiction for a realistic option, and he also assumes that the volition to fight crime allows him to gain entry into the upper echelons of the criminal justice system. The final scene of this type finds Darryl denying in front of a psychiatrist that he fights crime at all, only offering evidence of being a geek but revealing no aspirations to be a hero. He later tells Kevin this obfuscation was necessary to preserve his secret identity.

Pootie Tang’s internal conflict is less complicated because his ever-present distinctive characterization and his powerful belt are efficient in beating back threats such as drug dealers and characters such as Dirty Dee (Reg E. Cathey), who is a street heavy and also (as Trucky informs the viewer) does the dirty work for corporate America, the film’s ultimate villain. In a sense, Pootie is an update of the Jefferson Pierce/Black Lightning graphic narrative character type, which Adilifu Nama describes thus:

When danger appeared or when justice was needed, Jefferson would don an Afro wig attached to a mask, squeeze into a bluish body suit accented with lightning bolts, slide on his buccaneer boots, check his power belt, and then hit the streets as Black Lightning. Dressed to impress, Jefferson would proceed to kick and shock various henchmen and their crime lords into submission. Despite his nearly laughable disco-chic look and the embarrassingly awkward black jargon Jefferson adopted when he became Black Lightning, he articulated a serious set of class and racial politics. (Nama 2011, 25)

A key difference between Pootie Tang and Jefferson as Black Lightning is that Pootie's look and jargon are consistent from childhood onward, never needing to be made more "laughable" because they are already perfectly absurd and therefore effective.

Part of *Pootie Tang's* attention to class politics involves Pootie declining lucrative endorsement deals. Pootie's community image includes public service announcements in which he discourages children from partaking in products such as cigarettes, fast food, and malt liquor. An analyst for LecterCorp, a conglomerate responsible for multiple addictive and toxic products, observes about Pootie, "For the first time someone is getting to these kids, and it's killing us." As a response to Pootie's influence on the youth, the company offers him twenty million dollars for a yearlong endorsement of Pork Chunk cereal with the caveat that he records no more public service announcements. Pootie declines and hits the company ambassador with his belt for saying that the children are no more than "dollar signs."

Therefore, like *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman*, the narrative of *Pootie Tang* involves a *mélange* of antagonists from street-level players to corporate and/or criminal bosses. It is LecterCorp associate Ireenie (Jennifer Coolidge), however, who cleaves Pootie's identity by seducing him and separating him from his belt. The seduction montage is formally distinct within the film, including fragmented shots of a candle being lit and then producing hypnotic smoke against a black backdrop, cut together with footage of Pootie signing away his image and likeness to LecterCorp and losing his belt. The effect of this moment, which breaks the one piece of advice Daddy Tang offered Pootie as he lay on his deathbed, is that Pootie now seems to endorse the toxic products and loses the trust of the public, who now see him as a negative influence on their children.

The cultural conflicts and threatened identities experienced by Jeff/Meteor Man and Darryl/Blankman harness certain aspects of the negative outlook chronicled in *The State of Black America* installments from 1993/1994 which were the years of their films' production and release. *The State of Black America* is an annually released report from the National Urban League, which has been publishing the report since 1976. In *The State of Black America 1994*, Lenneal J. Henderson writes:

African Americans look towards the twenty-first century in a besieged, beleaguered, and beguiled urban milieu. They are besieged by perennial disparity in income, net financial worth, housing, education, employment, health care, and quality of life, and by the ever-increasing encroachment of crime, violence, drugs, and anomie among its young. They are beleaguered

by the ravages of economic decline reflecting economic erosion in America. And they are beguiled by promises of policymakers at all levels of government to address these severe challenges. (1994, 11)

All of the sectors and factors that Henderson summarizes are present in the two films, lending a certain kind of realism to the story worlds and the stakes of the plot. Yet the overriding comical, absurd tone of *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman* means that reality is always secondary to fantasy, which, upon reflection is an important distinction as present-day superhero films “make a conscious turn toward realism, which distances them from the fantastical excesses of earlier superhero films” (McSweeney 2020, 25). The conclusions of the films make clear the filmmakers’ interest in the comically fantastic rather than the grimly realistic.

After Jeff’s uniform is stolen and he begins to lose his powers, he appears to be more at odds with himself than ever before. Having risked his life and reputation, as well as the safety of his family, to become an intervening hero despite his preference for non-intervention, Meteor Man faces being exiled from the community. At this moment, he asks his community members who have chosen self-preservation, “How can you complain when you do nothing?” and later explains to Michael that the “hero factor” is “no pain, no fear of confrontation.” He chooses to face the Golden Lords unadorned by his uniform and uncertain of his powers, completing his transition away from evasiveness to virtuous confrontation. The final battle, which involves a proto-bullet time special effect, martial arts, and runway modeling, is a fantastic spectacle that completes Jeff’s movement toward a unified consciousness and inspires his community to action.

In *Blankman*, Darryl also finds that the higher his profile rises as Blankman, the more blowback he risks from mobsters, law enforcement figures, and the community at large. Despite his foiling a bank robbery that would deplete the finances of city workers, Blankman is not able to save the Mayor or preserve the bank. This series of events makes Blankman a figure of public scorn, to a greater degree than Jeff experiences in *The Meteor Man*. When Kevin reasons to Darryl that he does not have to be a hero and that he should just be like everyone else, Darryl seems to know that he no longer has that option. As in *The Meteor Man*, the concluding events are defined by the comic spectacle, in this case, with Darryl and Kevin confined to a tank that is quickly filling with water. Facing death by drowning, Darryl inverts a popular idiom relating to optimism and pessimism, saying to Kevin that the water tank is not half full, it’s half empty. Darryl’s love interest, Kimberly Jonz (Robin Givens) comments that one of Blankman’s assets is that he maintains his “sense of humor in a time of crisis,” which is another contributing factor to the film’s comical tone.

The final setback of the movie employs this technique reflexively, as Blankman mourns the loss of his beloved robot assistant, J-5 (an anthropomorphized washing machine). His reaction to J-5’s destruction, which is the result of enduring a bomb blast that

would have killed the human characters, is rendered in exaggeratedly traumatic terms. The busy visual approach to the scene alternates between a subjective view of J-5's dying vision, reactions of Kimberly and Kevin (now a Robin-style sidekick called Other Guy), and a God's-eye view in the form of a crane shot that moves upwards to the sky framing Blankman's anguished cry. This moment, which again pokes fun at the conventional traumatic scene origin story for superheroes, sets up a final confrontation with the mobsters that is a showcase for Blankman's absurd tools/weapons, such as a plunger, rocket-powered rollerblades, and motorized nunchucks.

An irony of *Pootie Tang's* plot is that while his superhero identity is generally longer-lasting and more stable than the vacillating hero consciousness of Meteor Man and Blankman, his exile in a time of crisis is also more concrete. After losing his belt and the trust of the public, Pootie is a disheveled figure. Like a shell of himself, he walks the street listlessly as his pants fall from his waist (a parodic literalization of the effects of losing his empowered belt object). The site of his identity restoration is a farm, where the decidedly non-urban milieu allows him to tend to a farm by painting and cleaning farmhouse windows and doing agricultural work. Scenes of him nurturing crops and growing a cornstalk echo *The Meteor Man's* urban garden.

The subsequent death of the corn is played somewhat like *Blankman's* death of J-5, as the corn is anthropomorphized into Daddy Tang, absurdly styled as a large ear of corn. Daddy Tang upbraids Pootie for running away from his problems in the city, and the viewer sees evidence of the unrest that has resulted from his absence. His late mother appears to him as a cow, encouraging Pootie to "teach the world right from wrong" and to "love the world at the same time." In a final revelation, his father discloses that the belt is not special, after all. It is, rather, the goodness in Pootie's heart that makes him special. This vision of his deceased parents is the key to Pootie's unified consciousness. His return to the city to take down an army of corporate-styled clones (Pootie-alikes) is a visual representation of identity stasis as he reclaims his singular standing in the community.

5. CONCLUSION

In this article, I have suggested that the narratives of Black superhero comedies *The Meteor Man*, *Blankman*, and *Pootie Tang* are emblematic of a road not often taken by Black American films, particularly movies more invested in Black trauma or those that elevate social realism above fantasy. The critical opinion of all three works is decidedly low, with even a superhero/graphic narrative expert Adilifu Nama concluding that *The Meteor Man* and *Blankman* are "some of the most questionable cinematic representations of black superheroes ever presented" (Nama 2011, 137) and famous American critic Roger Ebert opining that *Pootie Tang* "is not bad so much as inexplicable" as well as "not in a releasable condition." In retrospect, however, what these films achieve is a form of comic storytelling that seems to respond to the contemporary lack of light-hearted, inspirational

films featuring Black superheroes in a cultural moment fixated on Black trauma. Returning to the success of *Black Panther*, Angela Kinamore identifies “a critical need for more inspiring films and books to be developed and published” as a rebuke to “Ancestors [being] told that they would never be free, and that their descendants would always live in bondage” (Kinamore 2019, 153). By reframing expectations for the power and potential of absurd superhero characters, the three films that are the subject of this essay use comedy to liberate audiences from a persistent mindset of trauma that serves corporate interests and keeps consumers depressed, docile, and uninterested in exploring their own heroic potential.

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