I can’t remember exactly when I first saw Leroy. It was likely sometime during that first season of the television series *Fame*, where the actor and dancer Gene Anthony Ray reprised the role of Leroy that he introduced in the original film version of *Fame* (1980). As a teenager growing up in the Bronx, I had few available examples of masculinity that didn’t play to basic heteronormative assumptions, though there was the transgendered man who lived in the house next to my tenement building, who always elicited hushed tones among my peers and their parents. But indeed by the age of sixteen—my age when *Fame* debuted on NBC in January 1982—I had inherited enough fictions about black masculinity to be able to discern what male bodies my peers and others suspected of being “gay” bodies or quite specifically, gay “somebodies.” My peers and I all needed to maintain a metaphoric distance from those “somebodies” that might not have been ontologically possible—Robert Reid-Pharr remarks in passing that deviancy does not disrupt ontology—hence the clear gesture toward unfamiliarity that the term “somebodies” suggests. We needed language that also efficiently marked those gay “somebodies” as cultural and political strangers (or strangeness to my sixteen-year-old mind). Ironically, my own proclivity for wearing pastel-colored polo shirts with matching hosiery and penny loafers (with shiny new pennies intact), in an era when many of my peers were wearing Kangol hats, unlaced shell-top Adidas, and tightly creased colored Lee jeans, made me a target of the very speculative fictions that I was willing to place on the body of Leroy. Nevertheless, my first reaction to Leroy was, “This cat is gay.”

Though little in *Fame*’s scripts suggested that the character of Leroy was in fact gay (there were clearly sexual tensions between
Leroy and at least two of his women teachers), there were signs that suggested, to borrow from the work of Seth Clark Silberman, a “fierce legibility” about him. Silberman describes “fierce legibility” as a vernacular that “vocalizes black masculine same-sexuality within and around black letters.”

“Fierce,” though, is a term that also resonates beyond the same-sex discourses that Silberman examines. In his essay “The Gangsta and the Diva,” Andrew Ross writes, “Being fierce, in the ghetto street or the nightclub version, is a theatrical response to the phenomenal pressure exerted upon black males.”

Taking into account Ross’s notion of performativity and Silberman’s focus in a vernacular framework, I evoke the term “fierce legibility” in relation to Leroy’s visual legibility — his cornrows, his red “hot pants,” and the lilting sway of his hips — which could mark Leroy as gay. At least this was the case for my then untrained and virginal sixteen-year-old eyes. Indeed, there was a radical quality to Leroy’s queerness, the confirmation of something that was unfamiliar or not quite what it was supposed to be, since, I mean, “He’s supposed to be gay, right?”

Striking, for example, was the way Leroy refused to wear dancing tights throughout the series, choosing instead to wear shorts that always highlighted his muscularity and, ironically, heightened his sexual availability. In another example, when Leroy is confronted by an older brother who challenges his masculinity by demeaning his desire to be a dancer, Leroy responds, “Dancing and working is not what I do — it’s what I am.”

The potential of Leroy’s radicalness was consistently undermined, though, by narrative devices that regularly scripted Leroy as a “post-Black Power ghetto baby.” As such, Leroy easily trafficked in the tropes of the angry, disaffected urban black male — the mainstream visual precursor to hip-hop masculinities — who, of course, per standard neoliberal critiques, possessed all the potential in the world, if he could only let go of his rage and stop blaming whites for his fate. That a teenaged and likely unemployed black male might be enraged in 1982, as Reaganomics threatened to erode the very political and social gains that made a series like *Fame* — with its *Glee*-fully diverse cast — plausible, seemed beyond the scope of the show’s writers. Instead we were
treated to confrontations between Leroy and his white female English teacher, Sherwood (embodying a liberal retreat from the demands of black rage), whose intergenerational and interracial sexual desire for Leroy was palpable in virtually every scene they shared. The combative tensions between Leroy and Sherwood were eventually softened when she discovered that he lived by himself in a walkup tenement in Harlem (where else would a black kid live?), who also worked to support himself, while his mother lived and worked in Michigan. This revelation only heightened Sherwood’s interest, even obsession, with Leroy; and let’s be clear: the cornrolled, “wife-beater”-wearing, full-lipped, doe-eyed Leroy (think Tupac) was the object of everybody’s desire, including the sixteen-year-old who sat in front of his television in the Bronx, watching these dramas unfold.

When Gene Anthony Ray died in November 2003—treated as another obscure figure from a marginal television drama from the 1980s—I was hoping that there would be some confirmation of the queerness that I so willingly wanted to read onto the bodies of Ray and Leroy. In fact, I was consumed by the desire to locate a body, any somebody—queer, black, and male—that could contradict what I was beginning to suspect was the reality that we all were “interchangeable fictions” scripted for the desires of the many who would deny us some semblance of humanity. Ultimately Leroy offered a view of black masculinity that is so seductive, even as a teenager, because it challenged the pervasive and decidedly unsophisticated images of pimps and petty criminals—precursors to the hip-hop thugs and strip-club denizens of the early twenty-first century—that regularly circulated on commercial television in the 1980s. Leroy also contested the uptight stereotypes of bourgeois masculinity that could be found in characters such as Heathcliff Huxtable or Frank Parrish in series like *The Cosby Show* and *Frank’s Place*, welcome as they were in the televisual landscape of the 1980s. As such, I would like to suggest that Gene Anthony Ray’s Leroy represented the foundation for a queering of black masculinity in contemporary popular culture. By “queer” I am alluding not only to the obvious ambiguities associated with queering sexualities—it’s not like there’s
ever been an assemblage of out black gay, bisexual, or trans men on television—but also to queerness as a radical rescripting of the accepted performances of a heteronormative black masculinity. In other words, Leroy represents a black masculinity that was “illegible” to many.

In contrast to Leroy and other illegible black males, the “legible” black male body is continually recycled to serve the historical fictions of American culture (as the state rolls tenuously into a future of continued globalization, terrorism, and privatization). Here black male bodies continue to function as tried and tested props, whether justifying the lynching of black male bodies after emancipation or the maintenance of antimiscegenation laws and Black Codes (well into the twentieth century) to discourage so-called race mixing and limit black mobility. In the contemporary moment we witness the prison industrial complex (where privatization looms large), which warehouses black (and brown) male bodies for nonviolent offenses as part of some preemptive attack on the presumed criminality of those bodies, while simultaneously exploiting the labor of those bodies for the profit of private prisons, a form of mass incarceration that the legal scholar Michelle Alexander has described as the “new Jim Crow.”

In her book *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Alexander recalls leaving an election-night celebration party in 2008, a night on which many claimed a victory for blackness, and black masculinity in particular, in the election of Barack Hussein Obama as the nation’s forty-fourth president—and her mood being tempered by the sight of a black man “on his knees in the gutter, hands cuffed behind his back, as several officers stood around him talking, joking, and ignoring his human existence.” Though Alexander was more concerned about whether President Obama’s victory would dramatically impact the lives of men like the one handcuffed in the gutter, the images of the officers standing over the man suggest, for my purposes, that little will change in terms of the legibility of such men even as the president’s own legibility (and illegibility) establishes him as the most accomplished African American man ever.

As Bryant Keith Alexander suggests, “the black male body is
polemical. It is a site of public and private contestations; competing investments in black masculinity that are historical and localized.”

That the most “legible” black male body is often thought to be a criminal body and/or a body in need of policing and containment—incarceration—is just a reminder that the black male body that so seduces America is just as often the bogeyman that keeps America awake at night. Thus “legible” black male bodies, ironically, bring welcome relief, a comforting knowingness casually reflected in notions like “niggers will be niggers” (a distinctly gendered term) or “they always get away,” whether they are accessed on your iPad, Android, or local Fox News affiliate. Herman Gray acknowledges as much when he writes, “black masculinity consistently appears in the popular imagination as the logical and legitimate object of surveillance.”

A recent study by the Opportunity Agenda, “Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys,” makes an explicit claim—what the authors describe as a “core problem”—about the “troubling link between media portrayals and lowered life chances for black males,” noting “distorted patterns of portrayal” and causal links between media depictions of black males and public attitudes toward those black males. With regard to the distortion of black male images, the report observes that there is a general underrepresentation of black males in mainstream corporate media; that when black males do appear, they are often presented with exaggerated negative connotations; that “positive” associations are limited; and that black men and their issues are always already framed as problems. Such general framing of black men leads to causal links in the public imagination that create antagonisms toward black males, largely instigated by the belief that black men are criminally and violently inclined. In such a context many of the attempts to address the black male “problem” are done so with punitive measures in mind. This dynamic, of course, plays out in every institutional arena from public education, the labor force, and health care (particularly mental health) to, most tragically, the criminal justice system, something that many were reminded of with the shooting death of Trayvon Martin in
February 2012. As such, black men are seemingly bound to and bound by their legibility.

This state of boundedness has not been lost on scholars, critics, and artists. For example, the legal scholar David Dante Troutt considers the implications of black masculinity functioning as a trademark in his provocative essay “A Portrait of the Trademark as a Black Man.” In the essay, Troutt writes about a fictional African American advertising executive named MarCus, who believes that by creating a trademark for himself, he ensures that his “distinctive mark would enter consumption through every entrance and gradually play upon each consumer’s preferences whether known or unknown, disarm their prejudices and reshape their perceptions about race.” Troutt is in part inspired by the examples of figures like Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods, and the late Michael Jackson, some of the most legible individual black men of the twentieth century, who “must overcome the stereotypes of personhood that are deeply ingrained in public consciousness.”

Though Troutt’s character MarCus is most concerned with the ability to “create myself, to name myself in public consciousness . . . and to interpret the meaning of that name” for primarily commercial purposes, the essay highlights the difficulties of challenging prevailing images and meanings of black men, even as the mainstream finds value and, indeed, pleasure and satisfaction in the consumption of those images.

The conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas also takes on the boundedness and legibility of black masculinity, particularly in the context of popular culture and the advertising industry. Thomas began to give serious consideration to the images of black men after the murder of his cousin and roommate Songha Willis, who was killed outside a club in Philadelphia in 2000 after being robbed of his gold chain. These considerations first took artistic shape in the stop-animation film short Winter in America, in which Thomas and Kambui Olujimi replay the murder of Songha Willis using some of the action hero toys that Thomas played with when he was a boy. According to Thomas, the action figures helped “tell a story that’s been told thousands of times before,” highlighting how the everyday violence of black life has
been literally reduced to child’s play.\textsuperscript{12} As the curator René de Guzman writes, the figures “show how violent play is inherent in how boys are raised,” and the film “gives a tone of surreal banality that matches the commonness that the epidemic killings of young black men by their peers has become.”\textsuperscript{13} The banality that de Guzman alludes to is captured by Thomas, who in an interview with \textit{FLYP} magazine admitted, “we didn’t even have to ask whether or not the killers were black.”\textsuperscript{14}

A photo from Songha Willis’s funeral became the basis for a later series by Hank Willis Thomas called \textit{Branded}, in which he deconstructed and exposed the causal connections between popular brands and race. In \textit{Priceless #1} (2004), Thomas uses an actual photo of his family mourning at the gravesite of his cousin, to reproduce the popular MasterCard “Priceless” ad campaign with the affecting ending tag, “Picking the perfect casket for your son: priceless.” In other photos in the series, Thomas links the accessibility of hard liquor—Absolut Vodka in this case—to issues of black-on-black violence and the continued trauma of the Middle Passage. Perhaps the best-known photos from the \textit{Branded} series are \textit{Branded Head} (2003) and \textit{Scarred Chest} (2004), in which Thomas imagines the Nike “swoosh” branded on the bodies of black men. Thomas’s \textit{Branded} series forces audiences to consider the connections between black male legibility and commercial brands, the distinction between a black man with the Nike insignia branded on his body—the property of Nike—and a black man without such markings. Lost in that subtle distinction are the realities of black men and boys whose presumed criminality is largely redirected for corporate profit, or at least the potential of such profit, if we consider the “cradle to pipeline” narrative that has circulated in many black communities (with those few detours to a stadium, arena, and recording studio).

In an interview in \textit{Art Nouveau}, Hank Willis Thomas describes his recent series \textit{Strange Fruit} as a “series of works that is questioning how the media represents and portrays black bodies, particularly with regard to their physicality. To me, popular culture influences the way we as a culture learn and perpetuate
stereotypes about ourselves.” If Thomas’s work aims to disturb the comfort of the prevailing logics about black male bodies, it is a project that I share by suggesting the radical potential of rendering “legible” black male bodies — those bodies that are all too real to us — illegible, while simultaneously rendering so-called illegible black male bodies — those black male bodies we can’t believe are real — legible. Thus the act of looking for Leroy, like the search for Langston before him, might represent a theoretical axis to perform the kind of critical exegesis that contemporary black masculinity demands. As such, Gene Anthony Ray’s Leroy serves as a jumping-off point to examine other illegible black masculinities in the disparate performances of the actor Avery Brooks, the rapper and entrepreneur Shawn Corey Carter (Jay-Z), the actor Idris Elba, the musician R. Kelly, and the vocalist Luther Vandross.

Chapter 1, “A Foot Deep in the Culture: The Thug Knowledge(s) of A Man Called Hawk,” examines the extraordinary television career of the accomplished stage actor Avery Brooks. Well respected as a stage actor and professor at Rutgers University in New Jersey, Brooks was cast in 1985 in the television detective drama Spenser for Hire. The series was based on the popular detective novels by Robert Parker, which featured the character Spenser and his enforcing sidekick Hawk. At the time, the series offered another iteration of the burgeoning black/white buddy films made popular by Richard Pryor and Gene Wilder and perhaps most famously by the Lethal Weapon franchise, which starred Danny Glover and Mel Gibson as police partners. One of the first of such series on commercial television featured Ben Vereen and Jeff Goldblum in Tenspeed and Brown Shoe (1980).

Brooks’s Hawk proved to be a breakout character in the series, in an era that was in part defined by the hypervisual presence of blackness, via conservative deployment of black pathology narratives, alongside the popularity of black crossover stars such as Bill Cosby, Eddie Murphy, Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, and Michael Jordan, who represented distinct performances of blackness that were all marked as either cutting-edge cool or the paragon of black respectability. The popularity of the character
led to Brooks’s own series, *A Man Called Hawk*, which was a mid-season replacement in the spring of 1989. Though the character was entrapped in stereotypes of a menacing black masculinity often on the verge of violent expression, Brooks brilliantly invested the character with the capacity to draw on a full range of black expressive culture, often in opposition to the intent of the show’s writers and producers. As such, Brooks was able to make claims on the capacity of black stereotypes—in this case that of the black male thug—to make critical interventions in our understandings of black history and culture.

Jay-Z (a.k.a. Shawn Corey Carter) could also be charged with making such interventions, though his most legible status as one of the biggest icons of commercial rap music suggests that he is part and parcel of a cottage industry of problematic images of black masculinity. In chapter 2, “‘My Passport Says Shawn’: Toward a Hip-Hop Cosmopolitanism,” I make an alternative claim about Jay-Z / Shawn Carter, suggesting that both entities represent fertile textual sites to extrapolate a cosmopolitan hip-hop masculinity that deftly challenges the prevailing tropes of (black) masculinity that exist in much of mainstream hip-hop culture. My reading of Jay-Z / Shawn Carter is premised on a broad reading of his career arc, beginning with his debut, *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), and extending to his 2011 recording *Watch the Throne* (in collaboration with Kanye West), as well as his transition from “street” entrepreneur to a leading arbiter of mainstream urban culture. I argue that given the rigid constructions of masculinity in mainstream commercial hip-hop and equally rigid policing processes, attention must be paid to oppositional gestures within hip-hop—gestures that, I argue, in some instances become the mechanisms for attempts to “queer” artists who do not conform. As such, chapter 2 is dependent on close textual readings of Jay-Z’s work, particularly in the realm of music video, which I argue offers a richer analytical terrain than lyrical analysis.

It would not be an overstatement to suggest that David Simon and Ed Burns’s series *The Wire* significantly altered the presentation of black men on television. During the HBO series’ five-season run (2002–2007), characters such as Omar (Michael K.
Williams), Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), Snoop (Felicia Pearson), Michael (Tristan Wilds), Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector), Chris Partlow (Gbenga Akinnagbe), and Russell “Stringer” Bell (Idris Elba) offered a compelling read of the performance of black masculinity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Of the series’ many compelling characters, it was Bell to whom I was most drawn because of his performance of what I call the “thugniggaintellectual,” someone who credibly navigates a life of the mind and the life of the street. In chapter 3, in the context of examining Bell’s role as a thinking man’s gangster and the possibilities afforded that mindset, I also examine the threats posed by that role for both the character’s peers and enemies, and ultimately for the show’s primary writer, David Simon. Bell’s ultimate crime was to think and imagine beyond the “block,” which I argue in the context of The Wire functions as the nation; thus Bell’s ultimate downfall in The Wire is premised on his cosmopolitan worldview.

I have long been interested in R. Kelly’s music and career. In many ways his talents as a singer, arranger, songwriter, and producer mark him as peerless among his generation of post-soul musical artists. But Kelly’s career has also been marred by rumors and ultimately criminal charges related to his sexual relationships with underaged females. Though I find Kelly to be a fascinating subject and highly relevant to the focus of this book, I had little interest in examining Kelly’s singular musical genius in light of the child pornography charges against him, for which he was eventually acquitted. In that I was increasingly “legible” as a scholar because of my work as a “black male feminist,” I was in a quandary as to how to write about Kelly as text, when Kelly the person clearly offended my sensibilities as a feminist, as a father of two daughters, and ultimately as a human being.

On cue, Kelly offered me an out, with his twenty-two-episode music video Trapped in the Closet, which was produced from 2005 to 2007. Kelly’s surreal examination of black interpersonal relationships in the era of HIV, down-low sexuality, myriad religious scandals, and ongoing fears of black pathology struck a
chord in me. Chapter 4, “R. Kelly’s Closet: Shame, Desire, and the Confessions of a (Postmodern) Soul Man,” reads R. Kelly’s career in the context of the soul man tradition and the myriad scandals, tragedy, and trauma that have been visited upon the bodies of many of the tradition’s best-known icons, including Sam Cooke and Teddy Pendergrass. As such, I argue that Kelly is an extension of that tradition and that Trapped in the Closet offers an exhumation of that tradition and its deep relationship to everyday black life—the proverbial soul closet, if you will—that helps contextualize Kelly’s role as a witness to and chronicler of black pathology and narratives of black respectability.

Chapter 5 offers a critique of another soul man, the late Luther Vandross. Generally regarded as the most accomplished black male singer of the late twentieth century—I’m making a distinction here from, say, Michael Jackson, who was more of an all-around entertainer—Vandross remained an enigma for much of his career. Though Vandross was referenced in a broad range of African American expression from the mid-1980s until his untimely death at the age of fifty-four in July 2005, little was known about his personal life. The shroud of secrecy that surrounded Vandross’s career was in conversation with the widespread though unspoken belief among his fans that the singer was gay. Chapter 5, “Fear of a Queer Soul Man: The Legacy of Luther Vandross,” reads Vandross’s performance of the “queer” soul man alongside the black macho figures that come immediately before him, most famously in the case of Teddy Pendergrass and the hypersexualized hip-hop–era masculinities that come after Vandross’s emergence as the quintessential voice of black romance. I argue that Vandross succeeded in part because of his willingness to labor on behalf of black respectability at a time when blackness was becoming hypervisible in mainstream culture. Vandross’s career arc was complicated by the dawning of the age of AIDS. Rumors that Vandross had contracted the disease made him its visible black “victim,” and Vandross himself became the primary symbol of black America’s anxieties about sexuality in the post–civil rights era.
I close *Looking for Leroy* with a brief reflection on the figure of the “race man,” as popularized during the previous generation in the work of the actor Denzel Washington and rehabilitated by the rhetoric of the Reverend Jeremiah Wright during the 2008 presidential campaign.