

Scene on Radio

American Made (MEN, Part 8)

<http://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-54-american-made-men-part-8/>

John Biewen: Tim Yu told me, when he was a kid...

Tim Yu: I grew up in the Chicago suburbs, so I grew up in an area that was overwhelmingly white. And so in most cases I was very accustomed to the idea that I was the only Asian kid in my class or I was the only, you know, Asian kid in a room.

John Biewen: He's now a poet and an English professor at the University of Wisconsin. Yu says because he didn't have other young Asian men around him, he never got the memo that he might be perceived in any particular way as a dude of east Asian descent. Until he did.

Tim Yu: And I remember one conversation that I was once having with a friend of mine. And I was, I don't know, I think I was grumbling about how I wasn't dating anyone or something like that – this is, you know, this is late in high school. And my friend said to me, my friend who is white, casually said to me, Oh, well, you know it's, maybe it's because girls don't like Asian guys. [Pause] And I was like, What?! I thought he was just, you know, ragging me. I thought he was just like hassling me. And I said, Oh that's ridiculous. What are you talking about? That's garbage.

[MUSIC]

Tim Yu: And then of course when I got to college, I discovered that people were talking about this *all the time*. I mean I think if you go into any group of undergraduates, you know, Asian American men are always talking about this – the idea that, you know, white women don't find them attractive, and in particular that Asian women would prefer to date white men.

Celeste Headlee: Actually, there's data on this. Several studies on how people behave on dating sites have found that *Asian women* get lots of positive responses from men of all backgrounds. But Asian men trying to date women get fewer responses to their profiles and their messages, compared with white or black men.

Tim Yu: Take that as you will. But it's a fascinating kind of data point illustrating this generally felt idea that out there in the straight dating world that Asian women are seen to be highly desirable by everyone and that Asian men are seen to be undesirable by everyone.

[Music: Kristine Ho, Coldplay's "Yellow" in Mandarin – *Crazy Rich Asians* soundtrack]

Celeste Headlee: But this was the year of *Crazy Rich Asians*. It's not just a Hollywood blockbuster with an all-Asian cast, the first big American movie like that in 25 years. It's something even more rare: a hugely popular romantic comedy with an Asian male lead, played by Henry Golding...

Henry Golding as Nick Young, *Crazy Rich Asians*: The universe has spoken. It wants you over there.

Celeste Headlee: ...and other Asian male characters, occasionally taking their shirts off to reveal some, admittedly, killer abs.

John Biewen: Asian men portrayed as manly and unmistakably hot.

Celeste Headlee: That should *not* be a big deal, as though it's some kind of milestone in cinematic history. The United States has had a substantial Asian population for a century and a half, and many of those men have been as hot as heck.

John Biewen: But it is a milestone.

Celeste Headlee: American culture has portrayed Asian men in a number of stereotyped ways, which we'll look at in a minute. But "leading man masculine" is rarely one of those ways. Why?

John Biewen: Celeste, have you spent time in Asia?

Celeste Headlee: I've never actually spent substantial time there.

John Biewen: I lived in Japan for two years, in my twenties. I've been to China and India. It would be news to anyone in those countries that men from East Asia, or South Asia, or anywhere in Asia, are somehow sexless or romantically undesirable. Here's Tim Yu again.

Tim Yu: These are very distinct American stereotypes, and that they've arisen for particular reasons in American history and culture. And so, right. There are certainly not universal things, and that becomes pretty obvious as soon as you step outside an American context.

Celeste Headlee: Because in our white supremacist society, being a man – or a woman – doesn't carry the same meaning for everybody. Our gender ideas are coded differently depending on your race and ethnicity. And those stereotypes didn't just show up magically, or bubble up organically based on white people's innocent observations about the way, for example, that Asian men appear. These are stereotypes that were manufactured. Man-made, almost literally.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and PRX, it's *Scene on Radio*, part 8 of our season-long series, MEN.

Celeste Headlee: We're exploring masculinity, sexism, patriarchy – how they shape our lives, and what to do about it all.

John Biewen: This time, what it's like to navigate manhood – or, for that matter – to *challenge* traditional notions of masculinity, as a man, if you're not white.

Celeste Headlee: So John, as our reporter on this project as well as co-host, you spoke with a couple scholars – Tim Yu, and also Mark Anthony Neal, author of *New Black Man*.

John Biewen: Yeah. They've thought about these questions. And about the images in pop culture that both shape and reveal our culture's stereotypes about men of color.

Celeste Headlee: Tell us what you learned from those conversations, and then we'll talk.

John Biewen: All right.

[Archival audio: Gong, wind sound, person screaming, heavy music.]

Announcer: Black and white, life and death, good and evil. Two sides of a chess game, two forces in the universe – one magnificent, the other sinister. It is said

that the devil plays for men's souls. So does Dr. Fu Manchu. Satan himself, evil incarnate.

John Biewen: The opening theme from the 1956 television series, *The Adventures of Dr. Fu Manchu*. By this time, the character had been around for decades. There were also a bunch of Fu Manchu movies, from the 1930s to the Sixties. But the white British writer, Sax Rohmer, invented the character for a series of novels published as early as 1913. Tim Yu.

Tim Yu: Fu Manchu in Rohmer's novels is this kind of Asian mastermind who's plotting to take over the world. He's really brilliant, but he's really evil, and his goal is to kind of, you know, rule the world under Asian domination.

[TV show: Gong, music.]

Fu Manchu: You could tell him it was Dr. Fu Manchu who stole the gold, who controls the gold market, who runs the [unintelligible] of guns to deliver these shipments into the hands of other nations willing to pay any price for its possession....

Tim Yu: You know he's got kind of the classic, the Fu Manchu beard, he's always dressed in kind of stereotypical Chinese garb. And maybe the most important thing is that he's always played by a white actor in yellowface. He's always played by somebody who is dressed up to be Asian.

TV show, Fu Manchu: Even the dead can deliver a message....

John Biewen: The white actor in this case, with the bad accent and looking not even slightly Asian except for his costume, is Glen Gordon. Tim Yu cites the critic Frank Chin, who described Fu Manchu as, sexually, both aggressive and kind of effeminate, with his gown and long fingernails.

Tim Yu: And that he's always portrayed as kind of menacing the white heroine in the movies, in a way that is both kind of threatening and repulsive.

John Biewen: So, Yu says, Fu Manchu captures an early model of the unappealing Asian man, one that grew out of American labor and immigration history, and of course American racism. The first big wave of immigration from East Asia came in the middle of the 19th century.

Tim Yu: When primarily Chinese laborers are brought to the United States to help build the railroad. Now of course in that moment, when they're bringing Chinese immigrants over, they're entirely bringing over men, right, they're bringing over male laborers to do the hard manual labor of literally like blasting rocks and you know hammering railroad ties. And in most of those cases, they don't allow these laborers to bring their families over. In most cases these may be men who are married, who have children even, and they're forbidden from bringing their families over.

John Biewen: That's because the railroad companies wanted the Chinese workers to be as mobile as possible, so they could go where the work was.

Tim Yu: Over time this becomes enshrined in laws that actually ban Asian women from coming over. Generally, and this is where we start to see the stereotypes creeping in, generally it's around the idea that characterizes all Asian women as prostitutes or as potential prostitutes.

John Biewen: So you've got thousands of effectively-single Chinese men. Eventually the railroads get built, leaving those men to find other work.

Tim Yu: And white labor, especially, is really threatened by that. And so you see these attempts to keep Chinese men from working in any other kind of area. And a lot of times Chinese men are forced into occupations that would be considered to be women's work, domestic labor. So the Chinese laundry comes out of this era. The idea of the Chinese man as the houseboy comes out of this era. And so you see that because of economics, because of legal restrictions, Chinese men are kind of forced into these quote-unquote feminine roles.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: At the same time, it seems the dominant white male culture wanted to make *sure* East Asian men wouldn't be seen as appealing to white women. So just as white culture demonized black men as rapacious beasts, it did a similar thing to Asian men.

Tim Yu: So if you look at political cartoons from the late 19th, early 20th century that depict Asian men, they're terrifying. And you know I literally often, I will show my students this picture of a cartoon that's an Asian man, he's in the kind of classic Manchu costume. He's got the queue, the long pig tail. You know he's wielding a knife and he's menacing this white woman. And you see the way in which at that period the Asian man is incredibly threatening, and he is a sexual threat to white femininity.

John Biewen: Asian American men have spent more than a century trying to counter that almost subhuman image. During the twentieth century, Yu says, that *menacing* Asian male image was gradually tamed.

Charlie Chan [Charlie Chan in The Scarlet Clue, 1945]: Someone stepped in blood, leave print.

John Biewen: Charlie Chan was the title character in a series of movies in the 1930s and 40s, again played by a white actor, Sidney Toler. Unlike the brilliant but evil Fu Manchu, Charlie Chan is smart and a *good* guy, a savvy detective.

Charlie: I'm afraid, Captain, murderer arrive and depart in car on dock, which just leave.

Captain: And I didn't even look at the license plate.

Charlie: I look.

John Biewen: Tim Yu says Charlie Chan displays a brand of Asian manhood that's non-threatening – above all, you could say, to the tender white male ego.

Tim Yu: ... that is kind of subservient to white masculinity, that is always, that never would think of touching a white woman and so on. And so you get that replaced by this idea of the kind of emasculated Asian man, who cannot possibly be a sexual threat.

Bruce Lee: I said, emotional content. Not anger. Now try again. With me.

John Biewen: Bruce Lee, the American-born, Hong-Kong raised martial artist and actor. In the 1960s TV series *The Green Hornet*, Lee played the sidekick, Kato. But starting in the late 60's, he starred as the lead in a series of iconic movies.

Kid: Let me think.

Bruce Lee: Don't think! Feeeel.

Tim Yu: You know it's not a coincidence that Bruce Lee comes along at exactly the moment when Asian American identity as an idea is beginning to emerge. So here's Bruce Lee, an Asian American guy, who decides very consciously to turn himself into a kind of star.

John Biewen: Lee had a smoldering screen presence. His characters could be lovers and fighters, but especially fighters.

Tim Yu: He's the man. You know, literally.

John Biewen: In the movie *Way of the Dragon*, his character dismantles a guy played by Chuck Norris, and ultimately kills him with his bare hands.

[Movie audio: Music, series of blows and yells.... Norris gasping]

Tim Yu: Now, one could argue that sure, it's still based on a certain kind of stereotype of Asian men. The idea of the Asian man as kind of the martial artist. But at the same time, Lee really in you know in his few really prominent roles does work to expand that and to kind of center the narrative on him and on himself in a way that I think is quite successful in a lot of ways. And so obviously his career and life are pretty short lived. But people often point to him as a moment where there's a potential for shifting that image of Asian masculinity.

John Biewen: Unfortunately, Lee died in 1973, just 32 years old. After his death, at least as far as Hollywood was concerned, things remained bleak for Asian American men for decades. There's lots of white appropriation of Asian culture – guys like Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal become the martial arts movie stars of the 1980s. In the 1984 hit film, *The Karate Kid*, Pat Morita plays the Japanese teacher, Mr. Miyagi...

Mr. Miyagi: Wax on, wax off ... concentrate, look in my eyes.

John Biewen: But the Kid himself, who goes on to win the karate tournament and the Asian American girl, is white. That same year, 1984:

Tim Yu: I don't know if you remember from your viewing of *Sixteen Candles* a character, the character Long Duk Dong.

John Biewen: Oh geez. Yes.

Tim Yu: (laughs) He's an exchange student. I think he's supposed to be from China, although I can barely remember where he's supposed to be from.

[Movie audio: Gong, samisen music]

John Biewen: He is from China, and the soundtrack bangs that gong every time he comes on screen.

Long Duk Dong: Very clever dinner. Appetizing food fit neatly into interesting round pie.

Kid: It's a quiche.

Tim Yu: And Long Duk Dong is just kind of the prototype of that, this is how a stereotypical Asian male character is portrayed. That he speaks with a really heavy, kind of parodic accent. He is constantly chasing after Molly Ringwald's character in this kind of gross and creepy way. But of course he's ridiculous. I

mean, he's not sexually desirable at all. He is, you know, portrayed as silly and kind of repulsive in various ways.

[Movie sound: Gong (again)]

Long Duk Dong: What's happenin', hot stuff?

John Biewen: Long Duk Dong may seem egregiously racist for the 1980s, but things aren't much better a dozen years later in the Coen Brothers movie, *Fargo*. That odd scene where Marge Gunderson meets up with an old high school classmate, Mike Yanagita. It's not clear what the scene is doing in the movie, other than seeming to find humor in an Asian American man having a Minnesota accent of sorts.

Mike: Marge?! (Laughter) Geez! you look great.

John Biewen: Again, this Asian character makes clumsy, unwanted romantic moves on the white heroine...

Mike: I was married, I was married to – you mind if I sit over here? I was married to Linda Cooksey.

Marge: No, why don't you sit over there, I prefer that.

Mike: Huh? Oh.

John Biewen: Until finally, Mike Yanagita winds up crying pathetically.

Mike: (sobbing) You're such a super lady! I've been so lonely....

John Biewen: Given this awful movie history, it's not hard to see why *Crazy Rich Asians* was a big deal for the Asian American community, men in particular.

Henry Golding, CRA: We've been dating for over a year now and I think it's about time people met my beautiful girlfriend. Come on. ...

Tim Yu: People will talk about representation, about seeing themselves on film. But I think it goes deeper than that. I think it's really about, I've never seen people who look like me in some ways get to play these kinds of roles, right? Get to be attractive, get to be seen as sexually desirable in the same way that white actors are shown being all the time.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Henry Golding's character is not only good-looking, he's also a sweet guy, supportive and kind to his girlfriend, and at the same time, just confident and comfortable in his own skin. And yet: the movie presents him as a great catch mainly because of his looks, and his body – and by the way, he *is* crazy rich, usually a clear plus in American culture. Tim Yu compares it all to the thrill that many Asian Americans felt a few years ago over the success of Jeremy Lin, the basketball player.

Tim Yu: Why does Asian masculinity have to be this idea of manhood that's laid out there for us by white American culture? Why couldn't it be something else? I'm still kind of mulling over that, but I think it's worth thinking about what are we trying to achieve when we as Asian men, you know, want to be seen as more manly in some kind of way? Are we in fact adopting a very stereotyped idea of masculinity that maybe isn't very healthy.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: There's one other way Asian Americans of all genders are described: as the "model minority." It sounds positive on the surface but is perfectly consistent with the more recent Asian male stereotypes that are negative and limiting. You can be less than masculine in traditional terms and still be a model minority – meaning you do well in school, you're economically self-sufficient, you don't say much about being oppressed. The "model minority" notion is problematic in several ways. It glosses over the wide differences in the experiences of Asian people, when and why they came to the U.S. and how they're doing economically. It conflates fully assimilated people whose ancestors came from east Asia a century ago with, for example, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees. And, as Tim Yu points out, calling Asians the model minority is not really about complimenting Asians.

Tim Yu: The key thing, I think, if you remember nothing else about model minority discourse, is that the model minority is always being used as a club against

African-Americans. The primary goal in a lot of ways of saying Asians are a model minority is to say, why can't African-Americans do the same?

John Biewen: You guessed it: This is where we make the turn. To masculinity and the black American man.

[Music fades out. BREAK.]

John Biewen: In this season and the previous one on this show, we've said a fair bit about the ways black men have been slandered and stereotyped ever since slave ships started bringing them to North America in the 1600s.

[Music: *Birth of a Nation* soundtrack[]]

John Biewen: In the last century or so of pop culture, you could start with the first real blockbuster movie ever made in the U.S., the deeply racist *Birth of a Nation*, 1915. With its character, in blackface, trying to rape a white woman until she throws herself off a cliff to avoid his clutches.

[MUSIC]

Then, all through the 20th century up to the present, the shuffling Stepin Fetchit, and the countless black thugs, drug dealers, and gangsters on American screens big and small.

[MUSIC: funk guitar, Starsky and Hutch soundtrack]

John Biewen: Another popular trope is the pimp. Like Huggy Bear, played by Antonio Fargas, in the 1970s cop show, *Starsky and Hutch*.

Huggy: I ain't never surprised what goes down in the streets. As a matter of fact, this world. You read the headlines, Starsky. **[fades]**

John Biewen: Could I get you to introduce yourself?

Mark Anthony Neal: Mark Anthony Neal. I'm James B. Duke professor of African and African American studies at Duke University where I also chair the Department of African and African American Studies.

John Biewen: Mark Anthony Neal also hosts a webcast, *Left of Black*, and he wrote the book, *New Black Man*, first published in 2005. Neal says, in the face of black people's oppression in the U.S., and the negative images of black men that the dominant white culture has always sold to itself, a more positive model emerged within the black community. Neal calls that figure the Strong Black Man.

Mark Anthony Neal: Typically, and there are ways in which the Strong Black Man shares certain notions of an American masculinity. So this is a man who, you know, independent, rough and rugged, wouldn't cry in public. But because it's a black man, it's also a black man that's negotiating the forces of racism or white

supremacy in society and trying to maintain a certain kind of performance within that context.

John Biewen: So, counter to the stereotypes, the Strong Black Man is there at the head of his family, providing for his wife and children, however modestly, and protecting them.

Mark Anthony Neal: And when you consider historical issues of black women dealing with issues of sexual violence by white men against them, black children also dealing with these dynamics, and the inability of some black men to really be able to protect quote-unquote “their” women, as it might have been described in a previous era, also goes to this kind of interesting performance of black masculinity.

Fences. Troy: You got something in there to top them pig feet, Rose?

Rose: I’m cookin up some chicken, I got some chicken and collard greens.

Troy: All right you go on back in the house, let me and Bono finish what we talking about, this is man talk.

John Biewen: Denzel Washington and Viola Davis, in the movie version of the August Wilson play, *Fences*. It’s set in Pittsburgh in the 1950s.

Fences, Troy: I’m gonna tell you the truth. I latched on to her and told her, Baby, I don’t want to marry. I just want to be your man. Rose told me – tell him what you told me, Rose.

Rose: I told him if he wasn't the marrying kind then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me. (laughter)

Troy: That's what she told me. N____, you're in my way, you're blocking the view, move out the way so I can find me a husband....

Mark Anthony Neal: Absolutely, kind of quintessential mid-20th century black masculinity. Someone who in the case of both the drama and also the movie, you know, wanted to be a professional baseball player and wasn't able to do that and kind of had to settle on a traditional working-class life. And talks about the kind of options and opportunities he would have had as a white man that, prior to black men being able to play in the major leagues, those opportunities were cut down for him. So the only thing that he really has is his home, right, this place where he can be the man that he needs to be.

John Biewen: That character at the center of *Fences*, Troy Maxson, is the unquestioned patriarch in his home. But he's weighted down. With bitterness about his own stunted opportunities. About his job, in his fifties, hauling garbage...

Troy: I bust my butt, putting up with them crackers every day....

John Biewen: And he holds on stubbornly to his possibly-mistaken beliefs about the best way for his 17-year-old son to navigate the white man's world.

Cory Maxson: How come you ain't never like me?

Troy Maxson: *Like* you? Who the hell said I got to like you?

John Biewen: His burdens make Troy a harsh father.

Troy: A *man* is supposed to take care of his family. You live in my house, fill your belly with my food, put your behind on my bed, because you're my son. Not because I like you, it's because it's my duty to take care of you, I owe a responsibility to you. I ain't got to like you. You understand what I'm saying?

Son: Yes, sir.

Troy: Then get the hell out of my face, and get on down to that A&P!

[Cory runs, screen door opens and closes]

Mark Anthony Neal: There are gender dynamics within black communities that need to be addressed. And part of the way so they need to be addressed is for actually black men to start looking at their own trauma.

John Biewen: In his book *New Black Man*, Mark Neal reflects on how to move past the Strong Black Man, to a masculinity that's more loving and nurturing, more feminist.

Mark Anthony Neal: You know even as a kid I was never the alpha male. There was a part of me that was probably too bit of a mama's boy. So I spent a lot of time with my mother, you know my father was in the house but he worked 12 hours a day....

John Biewen: Neal remembers listening to hours of talk between his mother and other black women in their neighborhood beauty parlor.

Neal: And just paying attention to the conversation and what concerned these black women – this was in the South Bronx...

John Biewen: Later, he highlights the influence of his mentor at the University of Buffalo – another black woman, Alexis De Veaux.

Mark Anthony Neal: When I entered my first class at the University of Buffalo, she was teaching, and you know she's at the time a well-known black lesbian writer, had been an editor at *Essence* magazine, made the transition into the academy. She took my presence in her class as an opportunity to, if you will, build (laughs) a black male feminist, and that's what she did. And one of the ways she did that was to really encourage my curiosity about thinking beyond the boundaries of gender and sexuality and class and other things.

John Biewen: Which primed him, he says, to be more than willing to read other black feminist thinkers: Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks. And to respond to black men who led the way in taking on black male misogyny. Like the social critic Greg Tate. Tate's obituary of Miles Davis in 1991 bluntly criticized Davis, who had admitted in his own writing that he'd beaten his wife, Cicely Tyson.

Mark Anthony Neal: And so in that kind of moment to see someone like Greg Tate kind of come out of the comfort zone of black masculinity to talk about gender and gender violence in a very open way, was important for me to be able to see that. Later when I see someone like Kevin Powell, who was more my contemporary, we're around the same age. And for him to talk about his own bouts with sexual violence against women and physical violence against women, and him openly talking about the fact that he was in recovery from misogyny and patriarchy, those kind of moments were very important because they had been few and far between, particularly amongst heterosexual black men, cis gender black men, we had not seen those kind of narratives.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: So you write in your book, 'One of the tensions throughout this book is the question of how willing I am to undermine my status within the traditional black community by claiming politics that most quote unquote Strong Black Men would consider the politics of a punk ass.'

Mark Anthony Neal: Yeah. I still remember the day in the barbershop. I'm getting a haircut and clearly, you know to the extent you can identify these things, a queer black man walked in. And it was absurd and surreal on the one hand, because he was trying to get a free haircut, trying to get a haircut on credit. (laughs) And when the barber essentially says no, and after the guy walks out he's like, 'We need to get that shit out of here.' And it was clear to me that he wasn't just simply talking about the request for the haircut, right? It was everything from

how the dude was dressed to the boom box that he was, he brought in to, listening to like club music. And I knew at that moment, even as my own politics were shifting that I wasn't going to challenge that narrative in that moment.

John Biewen: Neal says that was more than 15 years ago. Now he'd be more willing and able to speak up. Rejecting homophobia and misogyny – Neal points to a number of encouraging examples of black men finding their way to more flexible and loving forms of masculinity, including in pop culture. Jay-Z, the one-time gangsta rapper, now an involved father showing vulnerability through his music.

4:44, "Kill Jay-Z": You gotta do better, boy, you owe it to Blue. You had no father, you had the armor, But you got a daughter, gotta get softer. Die Jay-Z....

John Biewen: To Terry Crews, the actor and former football player. He went public with his story of being sexually assaulted by a male Hollywood agent, and, in the process, backed the #MeToo Movement and talked explicitly about male dominance. Here's Crews testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Terry Crews: This encouraged me to come forward with my own experience and reflect on the cult of toxic masculinity that exists in our society.

John Biewen: Mark Neal also cites the more complicated and vulnerable black male characters in the cultural work of black women, for example Ava Duvernay's

TV series, *Queen Sugar*. And then ... there's that gigantic movie that laid down a new marker for black representation.

[Audio from *Black Panther*]

Boy: Baba?

Dad: Yes, my son.

Boy: Tell me a story.

Dad: Which one?

Boy: The story of home.

T'Challa: Millions of years ago, a meteorite made of vibranium, the strongest substance in the universe, struck the continent of Africa....

John Biewen: Mark Neal finds what he calls progressive ideas of masculinity throughout Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*.

Mark Anthony Neal: The warm and fuzzy moment for me was at the beginning, and watching the conversation between the dead father, or the soon to be dead father, and his young son who you know becomes Killmonger. For me that was a really amazing and kind of tender moment around black masculinity.

Dad: ...keeping the truth of their power from the outside world.

Boy: Do we still hide, Baba?

Dad: Yes.

Boy: Why?

Mark Anthony Neal: When we think about engaged black fathers, they're in the backyard tossing the football around, right? Learning how to drive, how to fix a car. We don't see black men reading with their sons.

John Biewen: In addition, Neal points to the strong women characters – Shuri, the brilliant scientist, Okoye and the female warriors, the Dora Milaje. And the hero T'Challa's not-so-conventional love interest, Nakia, played by Lupita Nyong'o.

T'Challa: Come on, Nakia.

Nakia: I'm right here.

T'Challa: Stay.

Nakia: I came to support you and to honor your father, but I can't stay. I can't be happy here knowing there's people out there who have nothing.

Mark Anthony Neal: The idea that T'Challa would be paired with a woman who was a thinker and an activist and had her own mind about things, right. Their relationship you know in the early moments of the film that was static, was static because that's what *she* wanted. Regardless of who he was and who he was going to become.

T'Challa: If you were not so stubborn you would make a great queen.

Nakia: I would make a great queen *because* I am so stubborn. If – *if* – that's what I wanted.

[MUSIC]

Mark Anthony Neal: In many ways black men are the canary in the coal mine for the crisis of American masculinity. And I'd like to think those of us who are writing seriously about, and thinking seriously about black masculinity, are tapping into some things that down the road will be helpful for the recovery of American masculinity.

John Biewen: By "recovery," Neal makes clear, he's not talking about a return to some *past* notion of how to be an American man.

Mark Anthony Neal: No. A transition, transformation into something that is much more organic, holistic, healthy, you know, and transformative.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Hey, Celeste.

Celeste Headlee: Hey. So, in listening to all of that, I realized that I was lucky in at least one respect. My black grandfather was a classical composer. So he was an intellectual, essentially. You know, an academic in many ways. And that carried a lot of criticism from other black people who said he was betraying his race by not writing jazz, for example. But it also freed him from the expectations of being what's called the Strong Black Male. Right? He gardened and he cooked and he doted on his wife. But he was able to do that by basically stepping outside the expectations of both his race and his gender.

John Biewen: You know, one challenge in taking apart the patriarchy is male solidarity, this peer pressure among men to be loyal to their brothers, to be loyal to manhood itself. ‘Come on, dude, don’t go all feminist on us, agreeing with these critiques. You’re letting down the team, making us all look bad.’

Celeste Headlee: Right. It’s called the Blue Line when you’re a police officer. I don’t know what you call it among men. We’re seeing a lot of that in men’s reactions to the #MeToo Movement. Guys reassuring each other that this whole thing is going too far and all the feminists have gone crazy. And I just want to linger here for a moment. Because one of the feminists have gone crazy reactions is that women are offended by everything.

John Biewen: Ah, yes.

Celeste Headlee: It’s a really common comment. And just to go back to that movie, *Sixteen Candles* – even though this particular point doesn’t related to the racial part. There’s a rape in *Sixteen Candles*.

John Biewen: Yes.

Celeste Headlee: A young girl is raped. Her boyfriend, she gets incredibly drunk, she passes out in his room, and he says to the guy that’s standing there, “take her, and have fun.” Even puts her passed out into this other guy’s car. This was a blockbuster movie. It’s still referenced over and over and over again, right?

John Biewen: Yeah.

Celeste Headlee: And this is part of what has reassured men for so long is this rape culture which reassures them that what they are doing is totally fine. And okay. And I also should mention, women have been watching that stuff our whole lives, and we are the opposite of “offended by everything.” Right? We’ve tolerated a lot. Just to give you an idea of how silly to me the claim that feminists have gone crazy is.

John Biewen: Right. Thank you for highlighting that. That movie, yes, is not only racist, with the Long Duk Dong figure, it’s deeply misogynistic, in its kind of breezy portrayal – those rapey teenage boys are the good kids in the movie. They’re not portrayed as bad guys.

Celeste Headlee: Yeah, he’s the hero, he’s the heartbreaker.

John Biewen: And that’s the 1980s. This is not...

Celeste Headlee: Ancient history. And this sort of bro-hood. Right? Because here’s this guy and he’s decided he’s not interested anymore so he’s gonna help out his other dude. It’s this male solidarity. He’s gonna help him out by handing his girlfriend off.

John Biewen: Yeah. It's grotesque. So with respect to this kind of male solidarity, Mark Neal talks about the way that kind of pressure to stick together as men is even greater, gets kind of exaggerated among black men, because of the legitimate sense that black men are already under constant attack from the dominant white society.

Celeste Headlee: Yes. And that can lead to really strong tension between black women and black men. And also sometimes between black women of different generations. When black feminist women call out black men on their misogyny, a lot of men in the community, and some black women, usually older women, will try to bring the loudmouths back in line. They'll say 'Our men need our support. By criticizing black men you're doing the work of white supremacists.'

John Biewen: I get that. I can see why that comes up.

Celeste Headlee: It's an understandable reaction. But Mark Neal is right. African Americans cannot let that stop us from dealing with sexism and toxic masculinity within our community. We have to hold our own to the same standards we expect from others, or else we risk falling into hypocrisy. And if bad behavior is not tied to race, that means some black and brown people will behave badly. But then you have Bill Cosby's publicist saying he's the victim of white women trying to make money off of accusing black men. And that's just an echo of Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas who said he endured a high tech lynching. Remember that? I mean, trying to draw attention away from sexual misconduct by claiming racial discrimination.

John Biewen: Yeah. What I hope this episode shows is that, even though all men get tangible advantages and privileges simply from being identified as male, those goodies are not enjoyed equally in a white supremacist society.

Celeste Headlee: I think we can agree no goodies are shared equally in a white supremacist society. The examples you talked about with Tim Yu and Mark Neal show that racism intersects with gender in ways that affect *men* of color, too, not just women of color. Racism has distorted the way men of color are perceived *as men*.

John Biewen: And that applies to other groups we haven't heard about in this episode. Latinos, Native American men. Also religious minorities -- Muslim and Jewish men. Lots of racial, ethnic, and religious groups have their stereotypes that have been tacked onto them by our culture to battle.

Celeste Headlee: Except white men. You guys have the widest latitude for defining who you are. I'm not saying that the accepted definition of manhood is not limiting all by itself, because it very much is. But white guys get more freedom to bend those rules without cost than anybody else. And frankly, John, the concept of anger is a perfect example. Because over and over we see when a man explodes in anger, for example, even what you might see as a fault, is seen as leadership and courage and strength and power. But studies have shown over and over that both men and women, when a woman explodes in anger, see her as shrill, and aggressive, and a harpy.

John Biewen: But if a white man can get away with that, with blowing his stack or having a meltdown, a black man doing the same thing ... it ain't gonna go well for him, right. So that's the kind of thing we're talking about. But on the other hand, I think it's interesting, this whole project has got me reflecting on a kind of privilege that I hadn't thought about before. And that is a different way in which white men in a certain level of privilege have more leeway in the way that we express ourselves as men, and that can also be in a more feminist direction. Starting with the family I grew up in – my dad was a jock and a coach but he changed diapers and was really a pretty gentle, loving, hands-on father, not a violent bone in his body. My mother was overtly feminist. From that to the sorts of environments I've worked in for most of my adult life.

Celeste Headlee: You're saying the Center for Documentary Studies is not full of macho he-men?

John Biewen: Most of my colleagues are women, including my bosses. So I've had the freedom to *not* be all that manly, frankly, in the traditional sense. I think about men or any race or ethnicity whose fathers were more macho. Or kids who grow up in the sorts of neighborhoods where there's pressure to fight to earn respect.

Celeste Headlee: Regardless of how you grew up, or who your parents were, if you lived in a time with a military draft, that's important to remember, you lived

in a time where you didn't have a choice about being a soldier and taking life and all the masculine baggage that comes with that.

John Biewen: Yes, and I think that's another way, of something someone like me has been free of. So there's this certain kind of freedom to be less affected by toxic aspects of masculinity. So I'm pretty comfortable in my skin as a man, but I realize that could be otherwise if I were more constrained in what manhood was supposed to mean for me. Does that make sense? And I'm not saying, I'm not saying I'm free of the toxic aspects of masculinity. I'm not claiming that, and I'll have something to say in a future episode about some aspects of that that have affected me more than some of the things we've talked about. But on that spectrum, a lot of guys have more constraints than I've had. And some of those constraints lead to the toxic, damaging behavior we see out here.

Celeste Headlee: Not to excuse, but to understand.

John Biewen: Yeah, exactly.

Celeste Headlee: And a lot of non-white men, no matter how they carry themselves: our racist society will see them not simply as men but as black men, Asian men, Latino men, Native American men. And what that means is they will not get all of the advantages of the patriarchy that you white guys take for granted.

John Biewen: Yep.

[MUSIC]

John Biewen: Next time: Enough with the binary. A trans reporter tells his story ... of his transition from female-assigned at birth, to ... well, just come back and listen.

Celeste Headlee: Editorial help on the MEN series from John Barth. Music by Alex Weston, and by Evgueni and Sacha Galperine. Music and production help from Joe Augustine of Narrative Music.

John Biewen: You can find transcripts for all of the MEN episodes at sceneonradio.org. The show comes from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, and PRX.