

William B. Hart
 Department of Mass Communications & Journalism
 Norfolk State University
 Norfolk, VA 23453
 wbhart@nsu.edu
 Phone 757 [REDACTED]

The Case of the Two Stereotypes: Bipolarity of Black Masculinity in *Elementary*
 William B. Hart

The inclusion of Lucy Liu as Joan Watson in the cast of *Elementary* may suggest an enlightened U.S. television industry in terms of gender and race. However, is that the case? With most of the attention on Liu and her gender-shifting role as Watson, this chapter suggests we move our scholarly gaze from Liu to another character in the series, Detective Marcus Bell, played by black actor Jon Michael Hill. Turning to a study of the Bell character and other black male characters in the series serves as a test of the U.S. television industry's apparent enlightenment.¹

In general, the topic of race seems to be a moot point for a key cast member and for the creator and lead writer of the series. In an interview with *The Wall Street Journal* Liu was asked about her role in *Elementary*. Liu responded that it was good that she was not playing the negative stereotypical Asian-American roles, for example, the dragon-lady, a character with an accent or the Asian comedic foil. She added that her role in *Elementary* was a “big step forward” and concluded, “I’m just playing somebody who represents anyone else who would be living in America or outside of it, who is just a regular person” (Brillantes). Such a response is a bit problematic for a couple of reasons. First, now that she is playing an apparently race-neutral “anyone” role, this is when she becomes regular or normal? A non-race neutral role would be irregular or abnormal? Second, what about this race-neutral “anyone” approach to casting and story writing? Should race be ignored in television and film? A color-blind Hollywood?

As for the second set of questions on race neutrality, the show’s creator and lead writer, Robert Doherty, appears to have an answer: “As we began the casting process, there was no part on the show that was race-restricted because we all felt very strongly that it was *irrelevant and incidental* [emphasis added]” (Radish). Such a response comes close to the problematic cliché: “I don’t see race, I just see actors/characters.” Furthermore, when asked if the racial and cultural differences between their version of Holmes and Watson would be explored in the series, Doherty responded, “as far as cultural differences go and race, it’s just not going to play into it. *Elementary* is not going to be teaching cultural differences to the audience” (Radish).

Doherty and his writers may not be consciously attempting to teach about racial and cultural differences, but they are. As bell hooks notes “whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of a filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (2). What would an audience, particularly a young audience, be learning about race when watching *Elementary*? A color-blind ideology? In his book *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva argues that the so-called “post-racial” America is not free of racism. He argues also that the color-blind perspectives like “I don’t see race” and “racism is a thing of the past” hinder progress in fighting