

# Bulletproof Love: LUKE CAGE (2016) and Religion

## ABSTRACT

There are many ways to think about religion and popular culture. One method is to ask where and when we see what might be commonly understood as “religious tradition(s)” explicitly on display. Another is to think about superhero narratives themselves as “religious”, using this term as a conceptual tool for categorizing and thereby better understanding particular dimensions of human experience. This article takes a variety of approaches to understanding religion in relation to the recent television series LUKE CAGE (Netflix, US 2016). These approaches take their hermeneutical cues from a range of disciplines, including studies of the Bible; Hip Hop; gender; Black Theology; African American religion; and philosophy. The results of this analysis highlight the polysemic nature of popular culture in general, and of superhero stories in particular. Like religious traditions themselves, the show is complex and contradictory: it is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence. Depending on the questions asked, LUKE CAGE (2016) provides a range of very different answers.

## KEYWORDS

African American, superhero, violence, Marvel, popular culture, gender, television, Netflix

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Annual conferences of large academic societies are typically, by their very nature, slow to respond to current events. The logistics in putting together such meetings are incredibly complex, the result being that the planning of sessions begins up to a year before the meeting takes place. To its credit, the American Academy of Religion (AAR) has been sensitive to this issue, and has endeavored to open up ways in which scholars can offer analyses of more recent phenomena. At the November 2016 meeting of the AAR in San Antonio, Texas, for example, several sessions were offered in response to the results of the U.S. presidential election that had taken place just slightly more than a week earlier.

With this sense of timeliness in mind, members of the AAR's Religion, Film, and Visual Culture (RFVC) group approached the director of the annual meeting, Dr. Robert Puckett, about scheduling a last-minute roundtable discussion of the first season of the superhero series *LUKE CAGE* (Netflix, US 2016), released in October 2016.<sup>1</sup> Not only is Luke the first Black superhero to be featured in his own comic book *and* his own television show, but the Netflix portrayal of him in a hoodie, being shot at by police (fig. 1), was clearly meant to resonate instantly with critically important, and deeply troubling, of-the-moment occurrences. He is, in the words of *Rolling Stone*'s Rob Sheffield, "the first Black Lives Matter superhero".<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 1: Film still, "DWYCK", *LUKE CAGE* (2016), S01/E09, 19:10.

- 1 In this regard the authors would like to thank Dr. Syed Adnan Hussain (of St. Mary's University in Halifax), one of the members of the Religion, Film, and Visual Culture group, for the inspiration to propose this session.
- 2 Sheffield 2016.

Puckett, a self-proclaimed Marvel nerd, agreed to the session, which came to feature six scholars from several groups within the AAR in addition to RFVC: Anthropology of Religion; Black Theology; Critical Approaches to Hip-Hop and Religion; and Religion and Popular Culture. Many of the participants had never encountered one another before, and so the roundtable became an opportunity to cross disciplinary lines, to bring together a diverse range of voices and perspectives, and to meet some seriously excellent people.

The diversity of our roundtable panel fit well with one of our broad critical aims, which was to demonstrate that there are many ways to think about religion and popular culture. One starting point is to ask where and when we see what might be commonly understood as “religious tradition(s)” explicitly on display. Regarding superhero narratives, this question invites us to analyze ostensibly religious images and tropes in various media incarnations including comics, film, and television. Such analysis could include, for instance, identifying characters modeled on religious archetypes, such as Jewish messianic figures, Buddhist arhats, or Anishinaabe tricksters. It could also include allusions to religious texts such as the Qur’an, the Bhagavad Gita, or the Bible.

Another direction we might take would be to think about superhero narratives themselves as “religious” in some way. Following after theorists such as Jonathan Z. Smith, Talal Asad, and Tomoko Masuzawa, if we regard “religion” as a conceptual tool that scholars use to categorize and thereby better understand particular dimensions of human experience, we can begin to recognize the ways in which superhero narratives (and the worlds they create) may serve some of the functions typically reserved for “the religious.”<sup>3</sup> This hermeneutic can illuminate aspects of such narratives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

This article takes a variety of approaches to understanding religion in relation to *LUKE CAGE* (2016). Doing so highlights the polysemic nature of popular culture in general, and of superhero stories in particular. Like religious traditions themselves, the show is complex and contradictory: it is both progressive and reactionary; emphasizes community and valorizes an individual; critiques and endorses Christianity; subverts and promotes violence. Depending on the questions you ask, *LUKE CAGE* (2016) provides many, many different answers.

## “SENSATIONAL ORIGIN ISSUE!”

The character of Luke Cage was created in 1972 by two white men, Archie Goodwin and John Romita, Sr., in the spirit of the Blaxploitation films of the time. He first appeared in *Luke Cage, Hero For Hire #1* (fig. 2), written by Goodwin and Roy Thomas, and drawn by George Tuska. Born Carl Lucas, Luke is framed by his old

3 Smith 1982; see also Asad 1993; Masuzawa 2005.

friend Willis Stryker, ending up in Seagate Prison. He is tormented by a sadistic white guard, Albert “Billy Bob” Rackham, and volunteers for an experiment run by Dr. Noah Burstein in exchange for early release. Rackham sabotages the experiment in an effort to kill Carl, causing an explosion. But as is the way in comics, things go bizarrely awry – Rackham is killed instead and Carl emerges from the wreckage with super strength, breaking out of prison and changing his name to Luke Cage. Cautious about whom he can trust, he makes few close friends; an early one is Claire Temple, who helps Luke when he’s hurt and who dates him for a while.

All of these details are repeated in the 13-episode Netflix series, which unlike the original comics was made by Black artists, including creator and showrunner Cheo Hodari Coker. Despite some of the big picture similarities to Luke’s original incarnation, these artists made many changes to his character, bringing him into the 21st century and out of white stereotypes. He is much quieter, and more thoughtful and reserved; instead of shouting bombastically and punching supervillains, he reads books and eschews violence. Pointedly unlike his comic book self, the Netflix Luke refuses to be paid for helping people, preferring to earn his living as a janitor in Pop’s barbershop. Changes were also made to his childhood: no longer raised in Harlem by a police-detective father, Luke is now from Georgia and the son of a philandering preacher. In the television show, therefore, he is an outsider in Harlem, working to help people he has only recently come to know and love. Claire, too, undergoes important shifts as her character is translated from the comics: she is now a Hispanic nurse, instead of a Black doctor (fig. 3).



Fig. 2 (l.): John Romita Sr., cover artwork, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #1 (June 1972)  
© Marvel Comics.



Fig. 3 (r.): George Tuska, interior artwork, *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* #2 (August 1972)  
© Marvel Comics.

The reasons why Harlem needs Luke's help are laid out in two main story arcs: the first seven episodes of the series focus on local gangster Cornell "Cottonmouth" Stokes and his cousin Mariah Dillard, a corrupt local councilwoman. Together they unsuccessfully attempt to recover first from the betrayal of an underling during a weapons deal with a rival gang, and then from the crippling damage that Luke inflicts on Cornell's organization. As Luke's vigilante activities against Harlem's criminal world gather steam, he finds himself the focus of a police investigation, led by Detective Misty Knight.

The second arc of the series begins when Mariah kills Cornell in a rage over his accusation that she "wanted" the sexual abuse she suffered as a young girl. At this point the mysterious "Diamondback" – Cornell's powerful unseen supplier – emerges from the shadows. He reveals himself to be Willis Stryker, who is not only Luke's childhood friend and betrayer but also, it turns out, his half-brother. During the final six episodes Mariah gradually steps into her dead cousin's crime-boss shoes, while Diamondback repeatedly tries to kill Luke for what he sees as the unforgivable sin of being the publically "accepted" son, rather than the one whose origin was a shameful secret. Luke finally defeats a supersuited Diamondback in a street battle, and ends the series by giving himself up to the police as an escaped convict.

## "DISHWASHER LAZARUS"

Our consideration of religion and *LUKE CAGE* (2016) begins with this question: what kind of a hero is Luke? The second time that we see him use his powers, it is to protect a young boy when one of Cornell's henchmen, Tone, shoots up Pop's barbershop (E02; fig 4).<sup>4</sup> When the shooting is done, Luke does not charge out of the shop to punish the gunman; he instead stays to help the injured and check on Pop, who tragically has been killed. Much of *LUKE CAGE* (2016) focuses on the lead character's transformation from escaped convict to hero, as he is pushed and inspired by circumstances and people (particularly Pop and Claire Temple) to emerge from hiding and use his powers to help others. But even as this emergence takes place, Luke continues to help by shielding victims to *prevent* harm, as much as (if not more than) he hits villains to *inflict* harm: he stands in front of the injured corrupt police detective, Rafael Scarfe, when Cornell's men try to run him over (E06); he protects Misty from being shot during the hostage crisis at Harlem's Paradise (E10–11); and he covers a police officer with his body when that man's partner starts firing at Luke (fig. 1).

4 All references to *LUKE CAGE* are to the first season of the series, which as of this writing is the only season that has aired.



Fig. 4: Film still, "Code of the Streets", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E02, 42:31.

There are other ways in which Luke submits to violence of different types, rather than leading with his fists. When his landlords are being threatened, he first asks the four men to stop being disrespectful, and then stands still while one of them hits Luke in the face and shatters his own hand (E01).<sup>5</sup> After Cornell threatens to expose Luke as a fugitive, he decides to leave Harlem, before Claire convinces him to stay and fight back (E07). He tells the two officers who stop him that he just wants to walk and mind his own business (E09). Despite his innocence he does not resist being taken back to prison at the end of the series (E13). Even during his climactic battle with Diamondback, who is wearing a suit that makes him at least as strong as Luke, he simply decides to stop trading blows: "I'm not doing this any more. . . . You want me dead? Then kill me" (E13).<sup>6</sup>

This is unusual behavior for a superhero. We are used to seeing these characters – despite their ostensive commitment to peace – embracing violence with much more enthusiasm than Luke does. As Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence have argued in several works,<sup>7</sup> superheroes most often embody a troubling perspective – derived originally from certain biblical responses to crisis – that they have termed "zealous nationalism".<sup>8</sup> This perspective is rooted in moral dualism, as a lone savior driven by a commitment to justice is faced with

5 This is in fact the first time that we see Luke's powers in action.

6 As it turns out Luke is employing a rope-a-dope strategy, letting Diamondback wear his suit out beating on him before being dispatched by our hero with three quick hits. Still, the fact is that Luke wins by submitting to violence.

7 See, e.g., Jewett/Lawrence 1977, 2002, 2003, and 2010.

8 For a concise account of both zealous nationalism and prophetic realism (which is discussed below), and the biblical origins of each perspective, see Jewett/Lawrence 2003, 44–54.

corrupt and/or ineffective laws and so becomes a vigilante in order to save the community by destroying the evildoers who threaten it.<sup>9</sup> There are some elements of this perspective in *LUKE CAGE* (2016), especially regarding problems with the police and Luke's justification for using violence to make Harlem safer.<sup>10</sup> But Luke never directly or even inadvertently kills anyone, and even after seeing Cornell let out of jail (E07) he still hands Diamondback over to the authorities when their fight is done (E13) – and, again, he gives *himself* up to the police in the end.

In many ways, in fact, *LUKE CAGE* (2016) appears to represent the opposing worldview – also biblically rooted – which Jewett and Lawrence refer to as “prophetic realism”. Instead of wishing for a solitary hero who ignores the law to save everyone from evil, this perspective recognizes human complexity and valorizes communities working together to improve their situation using due process. This focus on community is evident throughout the series, from the importance of Pop's barbershop as a refuge and meeting place, to the fact that Luke has no mask or “superhero” identity: he is always Luke Cage and he openly helps, and often needs the help of, the people around him.<sup>11</sup> He also tries to *understand* the people who are hurting Harlem, and the series itself slowly peels off the masks of the villains – Cornell Stokes, Mariah Dillard, Willis Stryker – to show us the painful histories that have shaped their current identities and actions.<sup>12</sup>

9 Examples of American cinematic superheroes who embody zealous nationalism include the protagonists of *BATMAN* (Tim Burton, US 1989), *SPIDER-MAN* (Sam Raimi, US 2002), *SUPERMAN RETURNS* (Bryan Singer, US 2006), *IRON MAN* (Jon Favreau, US 2008), *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* (Christopher Nolan, GB/US 2012), and *MAN OF STEEL* (Zack Snyder, GB/US 2013).

10 In this regard one of the most zealous moments in the series comes after Pop's funeral (E05), when Misty is upbraiding Luke for antagonizing Cornell and saying that she will get him “the right way”, that “the system will win”. Luke is having none of it: “Forget the system. Arrests lead to indictments, and indictments lead to pleas. There's always a bigger fish. A bigger angle. A slap on the wrist. And boom. Right back in business. I ain't going for that.” This conversation is an example of the wonderfully complex, shifting dynamics of *LUKE CAGE* (2016), given that Luke as noted below does end up trusting the “system” in several respects, while Misty moves further into vigilante territory: she attacks Claire during an official interrogation (E08) and circumvents police protocol when trying to protect a key witness against Mariah, which leads to the witness's death and Mariah's freedom (E13).

11 In his eulogy for Pop, Luke admits that he used to be “selfish” in his responses to violence, and that Pop taught him a critical lesson: “If we try to protect only ourselves, without looking out for those people closest to us, then we lose” (E05). He concludes the eulogy by affirming, “I don't believe in Harlem. I believe in the people who make Harlem what it is.” This faith is returned at several points in the series, notably when many of Harlem's people put on hoodies with holes in them to help Luke evade the police, and when they all start chanting “Luke! Luke! Luke!” during his final fight with Diamondback (E13).

12 Pop too worked to understand the value and humanity of all people, regardless of their past. As Luke notes in his eulogy, “Pop saw the shine in everyone that walked into his barbershop. . . . He made them feel better about the world, and themselves. We have to strive on a daily basis to do the same for each other” (E05).

The most striking way in which *LUKE CAGE* (2016) fails to do this very thing involves Willis Stryker, who is portrayed as cartoonishly evil. The attempt to understand his horrifying behavior is weak and unsatisfying; simply having a thoughtless and hypocritical father hardly accounts for Stryker's murderous rampages. And the parental indifference he experienced in no way comes close to the horrors

One other feature of Luke's character stands out as unique in a way that is connected to prophetic realism: his role as a Christ-figure. While a great many superheroes also symbolize Jesus, they do so while waving the flag of zealous nationalism. There are by no means any universally agreed parameters for identifying cinematic Christ-figures, but Lloyd Baugh's influential *Imaging the Divine* (1997) offers a useful starting point.<sup>13</sup> And while he does not even mention superheroes, almost all of his criteria are in fact part of standard superhero tropes: they are saviors with mysterious origins; they perform miracles; they suffer and bleed; they have devoted followers or helpers; and they are committed to justice, which often leads to conflicts with authorities. In addition many heroes are often scapegoated, and it has become increasingly common for them to die and resurrect, sometimes literally. In film the Christ-like nature of these (literal or figurative) deaths is often indicated by showing the hero in a crucifixion pose.<sup>14</sup>

Luke meets all of these Christ-figure criteria. Initially no one knows who he is or where he is from. He has miraculous strength and seems impervious to harm, although he suffers and bleeds when shot by the Judas bullet. He is helped by several people, including Pop, Claire, Misty, and (in a great cameo) Method Man. His sense of justice is what compels him to finally step out of the shadows to protect the community.<sup>15</sup> He struggles against several authorities including the police, Mariah, and Cornell. He is falsely accused of killing both Cornell and a police officer. He is not prone to crucifixion poses, although he possibly appears in one after he has been shot by Diamondback and is helped by Claire and Dr. Burstein, his arms across their shoulders (fig. 5). More directly, after his eulogy for Pop he is shown walking with a neon crucifix over his shoulder and a street lamp halo (fig. 6); during the opening a crucifix is projected onto Luke's back (fig. 8); and at the very end of the series, as Luke is being driven out of New York by the police, he passes by a brightly lit "Jesus Saves" cross (fig. 7). Finally, we see Luke "resurrected" at least twice: after Dr. Burstein's Seagate Prison

suffered by Cornell and Mariah, who are shown to us as infinitely more complex, conflicted, and interesting adults than Stryker. That said, to its credit the series remarkably does not end with the standard climactic/apocalyptic superhero battle between mimetic enemies. It certainly appears to be going in this direction, especially when the penultimate episode ends with Diamondback in a super-suit confronting his half-brother Luke. But this fight is actually quite brief and ends very near the start the final episode, leaving a great deal of time for people to simply have conversations about what is next for themselves, for others, and for the community.

- 13 The criteria for identifying Christ-figures listed in this paragraph come specifically from chapter six of Baugh's text ("Essential Dimensions and Typical Guises of the Christ-figure"). There are of course any number of criteria not mentioned by Baugh that could be used instead; see, e.g., Kozlovic 2004. Also, as noted below, many objections have been raised regarding the ways in which Christ-figures are generally identified and interpreted.
- 14 The one criterion mentioned by Baugh that appears least often in superhero films is prayer, although this is not unheard of (e.g., Superman's very Gethsemane-esque visit to a church in *MAN OF STEEL* [2013]). In keeping with this pattern, prayer is arguably the one Christ-figure requirement from Baugh's list that Luke does not clearly fulfill – although he does give a eulogy for Pop in a church (E05).
- 15 Referring to his role as the savior of Harlem, Angelica Jade Bastién (2016) says that she has come to think of Luke as "Hood Jesus".

experiment explodes, giving Luke his powers and leading everyone to think he is dead (E04);<sup>16</sup> and when he appears to actually die for a moment while being treated for the Judas wounds but is brought back to life when Claire throws a live electrical hot plate into the acid bath that contains him (E10).



Fig. 5: Film still, "DWYCK", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E09, 41:49.



Fig. 6: Film still, "Just to Get a Rep", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E05, 48:47.

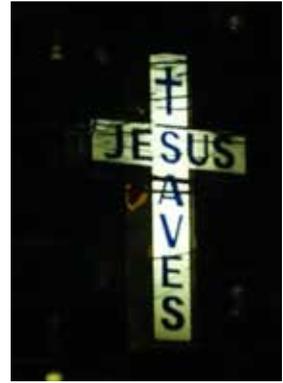


Fig. 7: Film still, "You Know My Steez", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E13, 43:35.

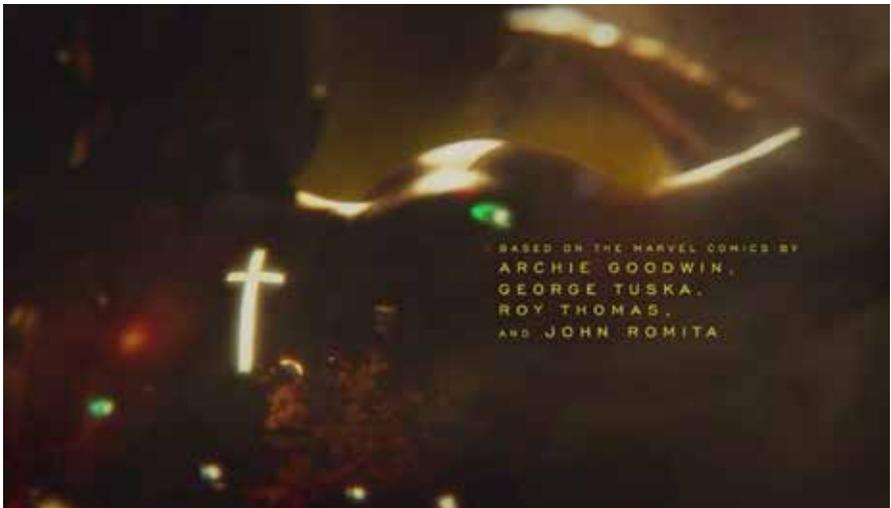


Fig. 8: Film still, opening credits, LUKE CAGE (2016).

16 This moment also represents the death of Carl Lucas as an identity. As Luke angrily tells Dr. Burstein after his post-Judas resurrection, "I'm Luke. Carl died at Seagate" (E10).

LUKE CAGE (2016) contains several other possible Christ-figure elements not mentioned by Baugh. Luke is poor,<sup>17</sup> and his submission to the police at the end is a “willing sacrifice”.<sup>18</sup> He has a dual nature, “one fantastic and the other mundane”,<sup>19</sup> beautifully captured by the name that Cornell gives him: “Dishwasher Lazarus” (E05). He is betrayed by a Judas-figure,<sup>20</sup> his old friend Willis Stryker who – in a move that is unbelievably on the nose – shoots Luke with the Judas bullets. As for Pop, in both his encouragement of Luke and his death he can be seen as analogous to John the Baptist, someone who “identifies and/or points the way to the Christ-figure, and fades away”.<sup>21</sup> It is even possible to see Luke’s hoodies as a gesture towards the “popular image of Jesus in his iconic white robes” (see fig. 9 and 10).<sup>22</sup>

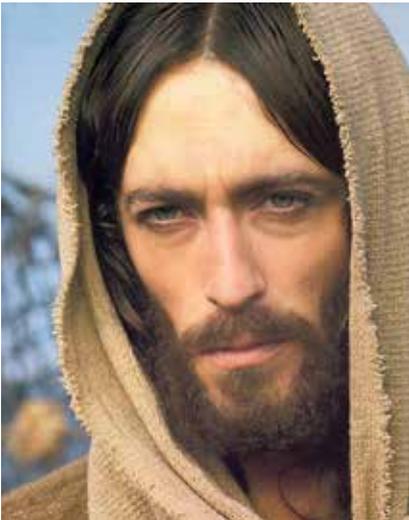


Fig. 9: Film still, JESUS OF NAZARETH (Franco Zeffirelli, GB/IT 1977).



Fig. 10: Film still, “Moment of Truth”, LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E01, 52:46.

And then, of course, the show several times goes out of its way to tell us directly that Luke is a Christ-figure. When he confronts Cornell after surviving the mis-

17 Kozlovic 2004, par. 61.

18 Kozlovic 2004, par. 51.

19 Kozlovic 2004, par. 33.

20 Kozlovic 2004, par. 40.

21 Kozlovic 2004, par. 43.

22 Kozlovic 2004, par. 63. The hoodie appears to evoke the image of Jesus specifically as shepherd, as taking care of others, which fits Luke’s reference to Luke 4:18 (discussed below). In fact the first time he wears a hoodie in the series is also the first time he uses his powers, when he protects his landlords from Cornell’s men (E01). When the fight is done, Mrs. Lin says that she wants to pay Luke to help them, and he replies, “I’m not for hire. But you have my word ma’am: I’ve got you.” And then he pops his hood (fig. 10).

sile attack, he is advised to consider his next actions carefully: “[It] costs to be a savior. Ask Jesus” (E05). And when Shades tells Cornell about the Judas bullet, he points out, “If you wanted to kill Jesus, that’s the bullet you’d use” (E05).<sup>23</sup>

As many critics have noted, simply labeling a character as a “Christ-figure” is not in itself all that meaningful, as it begs the question: “So what?”<sup>24</sup> In most superhero narratives, I would argue, presentation as a messiah is used to support the perspective of zealous nationalism. This perspective depends heavily on claiming the moral authority to decide who is good and who is evil; aligning your hero with Christ conceivably can do a good deal of work towards this end.<sup>25</sup> *LUKE CAGE* (2016), however, explicitly tells us that Luke will be a very different kind of savior when he recites Luke 4:18 and re-names himself after the gospel writer: “The spirit of the Lord is on me, because I have been anointed to preach good news to the poor. He sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind. To release the oppressed” (E04). Luke will thus be a savior more interested in helping people in need than in defeating evil. This is a much more down-to-earth mission, a more human mission, than we see in most superhero stories.

In this regard, while Luke is clearly special in many ways, the show also works to humanize him. This is evident in his fear of being recognized and sent back to jail, and his determination to earn a living with honest work, whether sweeping up hair, washing dishes, or tending bar. There is also the simple but important fact that he can be physically hurt: he is shot by Diamondback, he bleeds, he almost dies. When Cornell facetiously comments that people act as if Luke “can walk on water”, Shades asks in all seriousness, “Can he?” (E07). This question, along with Mariah’s suggestions for killing Luke – drowning, burning, poisoning (E06) – points to the vulnerabilities that he shares with the rest of humanity. This shared connection is movingly underscored when men in the community wear hoodies with holes in them, risking their own safety to

23 See Campbell 2016 for a theological discussion of the ways in which Luke functions as a Christ-figure in comparison to Matt Murdock from *DAREDEVIL* (Netflix, US 2015, 2016). Campbell argues that each hero represents very different aspects of the Christian messiah’s salvific role, with Matt as the suffering Jesus and Luke the risen Christ. He contrasts the fact that Matt’s “body is broken time and time again for the sake of those he seeks to save” with the understanding that Luke is “indestructible”: “Freed from death and physical pain, after his resurrection, Luke Cage is able to tackle oppression in Harlem fearlessly. Mostly.” While Campbell makes many good points, his use of “mostly” here is, I would argue, an understatement. Unlike Daredevil, who is in fact called “the man without fear”, Luke is filled with a great deal of anxiety – and (arguably) fear – about taking on oppression. And while he is certainly much less susceptible to physical harm than Matt Murdock, *LUKE CAGE* (2016) makes the point in several ways noted below that Luke is far from indestructible.

24 See, e.g., Deacy 2006; Derry 2012, 189–191; Jasper 1997; Lyden 2003, 24; Plate 2003, 158, 160 n. 12.

25 It is thus not surprising that most superhero films end with a huge, enormously destructive fight. The protagonist essentially becomes the savior figure of Revelation, triumphing in an apocalyptic battle against evil.

make it harder for the police to find and capture Luke (E12).<sup>26</sup> As he becomes us, in other words, we become him: ordinary/special, criminal/hero, human/divine: Dishwasher Lazarus.

## “WHO’S GONNA TAKE THE WEIGHT?”

The use of Hip Hop culture throughout *LUKE CAGE* (2016) is pervasive. From the soundtrack to the location of Luke’s community, Hip Hop culture is prevalent and provides a foundational grounding for the series and for the character of Luke. His connection to the community, the father figure in Pop, the oversized picture of Biggie Smalls in Cornell’s office, and the underground aura give *LUKE CAGE* (2016) a strong connection to a culture much larger than just its music.

As scholars have asserted, Hip Hop is much more than just music videos, lyrics, and “bling”.<sup>27</sup> It is a culture by which those who have been disinherited can find identity, space, place, and being.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Hip Hop is a contextual manufacturing of those oppressed and cast aside into DJing, rhythms, MCing, dance, language, street entrepreneurialism, street fashion, knowledge and spirituality.<sup>29</sup> Thus, *LUKE CAGE* (2016) and the themes within the first Black comic book hero present a reassertion of Black narrative and theology. *LUKE CAGE* (2016) is a secular articulation of the spiritual reimagined within a Hip Hop context and ethos. To that end, Luke takes on three of Hip Hop’s theological concepts: (1) <sup>a</sup> theology of social action, (2) God of the profane, (3) a theology of community.<sup>30</sup>

Jon Michael Spencer’s theomusicology provides a framework that allows us to better comprehend Luke’s connection to Hip Hop, its culture, and its theology.<sup>31</sup> Theomusicology is defined as “a musicological method for theologizing about the sacred, the secular, and the profane, principally incorporating thought and method borrowed from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and philosophy”.<sup>32</sup> It is, as Cheryl Kirk-Duggan and Marlon Hall state, “Music as spiritual practice ... hear[ing] the challenges and evils in the church and the world

26 A television news report on this community action highlights the iconic/religious significance of Luke’s hoodie by referring to him as “The ‘Hole-y’ Hero” (E12).

27 Dyson 2001; Hodge 2009, 2010; Johnson 2013; Miller/Pinn 2015; Miller/Pinn/Freeman 2015.

28 Forman 2002, 173–211.

29 Hodge 2010, 42–43.

30 Hodge 2010, 73–187.

31 While the central premise of this framework focuses on music, I have expanded its use to also explore cultural phenomena within Black and city contexts along with adding symbolic imagery and cultural mores – all of which are a part of *LUKE CAGE* (2016).

32 Spencer 1991, 3.

as the music reveals.”<sup>33</sup> Theomusicology is distinguished from other methods and disciplines such as ethnomusicology:<sup>34</sup>

Its analysis stands on the presupposition that the religious symbols, myths, and canon of the culture being studied are the theomusicologist’s authoritative/normative sources. For instance, while the Western music therapist would interpret the healing of the biblical patriarch Saul under the assuagement of David’s lyre as a psychophysiological phenomena, the theomusicologist would *first* take into account the religious belief of the culture for whom the event had meaning. The theomusicological method is therefore one that allows for scientific analysis, but primarily within the limits of what is normative in the ethics, religion, or mythology of the community of believers being studied.<sup>35</sup>

The theomusicologist is thus concerned with multi-level data within the context of the people they study, and subsequently analyzes the material within the time, culture, and context in which it was created<sup>36</sup> – something that LUKE CAGE (2016) provides a particularly good space for, and precisely what is needed when examining Hip Hop culture within the series.

Luke is a hero suitable for the post-civil rights context<sup>37</sup> in which Hip Hop finds itself. His use of violence, often as a last resort as when protecting his landlords, is a just use of that force when seen through the Hip Hop lens of rules of engagement. In other words, force should be used only when necessary and to protect those whom you love.<sup>38</sup> In one sense, Luke focuses primarily on his own community to do the work of a hero – much unlike other superheroes who take on a more meta-savior role to “save the world” or to save humankind from some far-off evil. In Luke’s sense, this far-off evil is present in the local and, with advice from Pop, can create a space for heroic measures.<sup>39</sup>

33 Kirk-Duggan/Hall 2011, 77.

34 There is no universal or singular definition of ethnomusicology, as William Darity states; several words come to mind for ethnomusicology such as sound, music, performance, context, and culture. For some, it is the study of music in culture, or, more broadly, the study in context (Darity 2008, 20–22).

35 Spencer 1991, 3–4.

36 Theomusicology broadens the discussion of religion within Hip Hop contexts and asks the question “What is the Hip Hop community saying in the context in which the music, the art, the album, and the artist were created?”

37 This reference is to the generation of young adults born during the post-soul era (1980–2001), raised on a transmediated diet, disconnected from previous generations both locally and ideologically, and currently with non-binary issues to contend with in a post-9/11 society and living in Western society. This generation does not have the binary issues to contend with that the Civil Rights generation did (e.g. more Blacks in leadership or the right to vote). While those issues are still present, they manifest themselves in a matrix of problems, which involve police brutality, sexuality, sexual orientation, socio-economics, transgender, class, and race.

38 Hodge 2017, 116–148.

39 I would note that there is still a strong patriarchal feel within LUKE CAGE (2016), and that this continues to be one of Hip Hop’s major flaws. Gender and sexuality tend to favor men and heteronormative standards, leaving little to no room for LGBTQ and other variances to that norm. In this regard even

When interpreting a character like Luke in terms of religion and Hip Hop, we might consider three guiding categories:

- 1) The Sacred: not only for those elements within a society that are set apart, and forbidden, for ritual, but also for those elements within the given society and culture that aspire for both the adoption of a pious stance and the search for deity.
- 2) The Secular: for those items designated by a given society and culture as having little to no connection with a form of deity.
- 3) The Profane: for those areas in a society labeled or designated outside given morals, codes, ethics, and values established as “good” and/or “right” by the society and culture being studied.

With these understandings in mind, we can see Luke as a sacred, secular, and profane hero. An example of this trinary perspective is provided when he speaks at Pop’s funeral (E05; fig. 11). Luke is in a conventionally sacred space, a church,



Fig. 11: Film still, “Just to Get a Rep”, LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E05, 44:46.

in front of a sign that connotes transcendence. But while he is the son of a minister, he himself is not ordained; he is as secular as his suit, and a key part of the message he delivers in this moment is very much about *this world*, about the community of Harlem. The profane is all that Luke embodies of the streets and his invoking of violence for good, his secular jacket covering the profane bullet holes in his shirt. The angle of this shot also suggests that Luke commands re-

though Luke’s use of his power is communal, he is still cis gendered and attracted to women, as in the case with his sexual encounters with Misty.

spect and those who follow must listen; the subtext could mean he possesses something of deity himself, rooted in the sacred, secular, and profane.

The notion of a secular, sacred, and profane hero is not a foreign concept for those within the Hip Hop community. Heroes come in all forms, shapes, genders, and sizes. Take Biggie, for example, a hero who embodied an apotheosis approach to God and faith, yet was in all manner still “secular” and “profane”. For the Hip Hop community, the good outweighs the bad, and Biggie is representative of an ongoing debate about God’s connection to pimps, thugs, baby-mammas, and “niggas”. Biggie provided that sacred, secular, profane connection to God and re-articulated it in his music, poetry, and work with his community. Someone like Luke is that conduit as well, as a person able to utilize their context and to begin to create a “better way” without using conventional methods.

The Hip Hop community regularly experiences violence, death, nihilism, and war-like conditions. One might argue that this reality is at the center of most of Hip Hop’s social critique of dominant societal structures and systems. Equality, justice, fairness, impartiality in the law, and a social voice is where many Hip Hoppers – especially the underground community in which Luke finds himself – push towards and to which they give a lot of their energy. Thus, Luke, a reluctant hero at first and not originally from Harlem, roots himself into his space and place and rises to give that voice back to the community. This arc fits well with a messianic narrative or a Hip Hop Jesus that The Outlawz or even Kendrick Lamar describes. Luke is not too perfect, not too saintly, not too connected to divinity; a hero that the post-civil rights Hip Hopper can connect with and to. “Luke” is the answer to the question posed by the title of the Gang Starr track (and of episode 3), “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?” This is worthy of notice and, especially in the image of a strong Black man in Luke, something that is much more complex than just all good or all evil.

## “THAT’S THE LAST TIME YOU WILL EVER CALL ME A BITCH.”

Constructions of masculinity and femininity inevitably implicate each other. When we approach any discussion of gender and sexuality, intersectional theory, formulated by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw<sup>40</sup> and further championed by Patricia Hill Collins,<sup>41</sup> is crucial. It becomes even more crucial when we consider gender in a series like *LUKE CAGE* (2016), which actively wrestles with race and class stereotypes, often using Christian tropes to do so. The characters struggle within a context that bell hooks has named “imperialist white-

40 Crenshaw 1989 and 2012.

41 Collins 1990, 2013, and 2014.

supremacist capitalist patriarchy”.<sup>42</sup> That is, the show is not just about race, not just about gender, but is about these identity markers as interconnected ways of distributing power within our social context, in combination with religion, sexuality, material dis/advantage, etc. Characters’ responses to their histories of violence flow down gendered lines. This section highlights three themes: absent parents, that is, a lack of constructive gender models; sex; and the relationship of gender to power.

From the beginning of the series, the issue of absent parents surfaces. As Pop is explaining why it is important to create a safe space for the young men of the neighborhood, Luke says, “Everyone has a gun, no one has a father” (E01). The link between a lack of positive male role models and community violence is made explicit. Pop’s approach to the boys of the neighborhood also reflects what Patricia Hill Collins has called “other-mothering”,<sup>43</sup> the practice, common in stressed communities, of “taking in strays”, taking responsibility for underparented or neglected children and integrating them into non-biological kin networks. This practice is something we see not only with Pop, but also with Mama Mabel and then Mariah (E07).

Here begins a gendered split between the constructed parenting provided by Pop and that provided by Mama Mabel. Pop, on one hand, gives emotional support and mentoring, consciously creating sanctuary space free from violence. Mabel, on the other hand, brings abandoned children, Cornell and Mariah, into her world of hustle and violence. Mariah further takes on the role of “other mother” to Cornell. Though she tries to provide him with a kind of care different from that provided to them by Mabel, in the end, she cannot help but reproduce the violence of her past, bringing death rather than life. This parallels the role she plays for her neighborhood: her dream is to uplift, but in the end she cannot help but consume.

Mariah’s collapse into devouring mother connects to the series’ meditations on sexual violence. Even in episode one, Luke assists a co-worker, Candace, who is uncomfortable serving the VIP room alone, for fear of harassment or assault. The show acknowledges sexual violence as one of the multifaceted forms of violence it addresses, one that swirls around with and refracts other forms of violence, including structural violence. When Misty is speaking with a counselor after her attack on Claire (E08), he suggests that she needs to acknowledge her adolescent guilt over the murder of her cousin, who was abducted and raped (E09). In juxtaposing the exploitation and destruction of this body – young, black, and female, characteristics interpreted by her assailants and by the police as evidence of its disposability<sup>44</sup> – Misty’s narrative offers a contrast with Luke’s

42 hooks 2004, 29.

43 Collins 1995.

44 See Crenshaw 1991, especially 1266–1271.

invulnerable body. However, this contrast also highlights that while vulnerability to physical and structural violence is shared across disadvantaged communities of color, it affects men and women in different ways.

There is also the tragedy and complexity of Mariah's childhood sexual abuse, for which Cornell ultimately pays. Her crazed reaction to Cornell's accusation that she "wanted it" is multivalent (E07). On one hand, her powerful denial of the accusation offers a clear demonstration of how inaccurate and self-serving the cultural commonplace of blaming victims is. On the other hand, her actions afterward also reinforce the stereotype that abused women are crazy and dangerous.<sup>45</sup> Further, her character arc does not challenge the trope, fodder for exploitation films galore, that requires that women be raped before they are socially sanctioned or morally excused for mobilizing their own power as physical violence. Finally, there is also the last scene with Shades, who has just fallen in love with Mariah as a result of her violence, when she echoes her words to Cornell, "I did not want this", and Shades replies, "I think you did." What do we do with the juxtapositions that such an assault narrative provides in the context of rape culture?



Fig. 12: Mariah ascending. Film still, "You Know My Steez", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E13, 42:08.

Any discussion of sexuality in LUKE CAGE (2016) must consider the forms of sexuality that are visible and those that are invisible. It is not difficult to take a queer reading to the relationship between Luke and Cornell.<sup>46</sup> They are both

45 Merry 2008; Levy 2008.

46 On queer theory and the academic study of religion, see Wilcox 2012.

as smooth as protagonists from seventies' soul cinema, showing each other up, engaging in repartee parallel to that between Luke and the major female characters, and vying for the soul of their fictional Harlem. Through the male-desiring gaze, they can be read as competing suitors, the tragically Luciferian Cornell and the reluctantly messianic Luke, but also, therefore, as completing each other.

The homoeroticism between the two must remain subtext, however. This message is reinforced by the continued rhetorical use of the term “bitch” as an insult for men, angrily ascribed, for example, not only by Cornell (E01), but also by Misty (E07) and Turk (E12). The word's repression specifically of women is symbolically subverted by the clear inclusion in the series of powerful women, is made light of when Claire successfully recovers her bag from a mugger, and is explicitly challenged when Mariah tells Shades, “That's the last time you will ever call me a bitch” (E08). Yet the word's specifically homophobic power is never challenged, whether subtly or directly, as it would be by the visible presence of openly LGBTQ characters.

The foreclosure of latent desire between Cornell and Luke comes not only as Cornell is removed, but also with the simultaneous arrival of Diamondback, with his Old Testament rules and punishments. An erotically charged story of rival Brothers is overwritten with a literal one of rival brothers, explicitly presented in the show as a Cain and Abel story. However, behind this story of hate and fratricide is also an Isaac and Ishmael story, sons of the same man by different women. As Delores Williams has deftly demonstrated, peering behind the androcentric and patriarchal narrative actually gets us to a story of two women, mothers to sons from the same man, that is, to the shadows of Hagar and Sarah.<sup>47</sup> In Williams' analysis, Hagar's story is the story of African American women's historical experience. Hagar's appearance here only as back-story in the conflict between two powerful men is consistent with the historical androcentrism of Christianity, shared by the Black Church, that Womanist theologians such as Williams deconstruct. Predictably then, the shadow mothers also set up some “yo mama” insults (E13).

Finally, consideration of gender and sexuality in the series would be incomplete without a meta-view about the place of the show in its broader social context. The series features numerous significant roles for people of color and, more specifically, for women of color. In a media landscape in which roles for actors of color are often both deliberately and unconsciously limited,<sup>48</sup> LUKE

47 Williams 1993.

48 I am thinking here of critiques of “white washing” characters as other media forms are adapted to film, of the marketing concern that more than one significant character of color will pigeon-hole a show (e.g., as dramatized in “Indians on TV”, *MASTER OF NONE* [Netflix, US 2015], S01/E04), and of the lack of recognition for actors of color who do manage, in spite of systemic racism, to land important roles (#OscarsSoWhite).

CAGE (2016) provides an important exception. It is resplendent with beautiful women of color, of various ages, whose characters represent different avenues of agency, empowerment, and choice, even if the writing does not always do them justice.<sup>49</sup> It is also refreshing that sexuality is represented as a normal part of adult life; the series skips the cheap will-they/won't-they plot points; Misty and Claire don't have to compete over a man, but instead come to admire each other through cooperation in the trenches. Further, while the series attends to sexual violence, as discussed above, it is significant that the sexual encounters actually depicted on-screen are consensual, in great contrast to many competing series, though consistent with JESSICA JONES (Netflix, US 2015), which introduced Luke's character.

### “I’M NOT A MONSTER.”

In the tenth episode of LUKE CAGE (2016), Luke reenters the acidic waters of baptism whence his salvation comes (E10). Luke undergoes his initial baptism as a scientific experiment at Seagate Prison (E04; fig. 13). He dies as Carl Lucas and becomes a new creature. When Claire confronts Dr. Burstein for transforming Luke Cage, he responds, “I ... I’m not a monster (E10).” Burstein’s response offers a crucial point of departure for evaluating the theological significance of LUKE CAGE (2016). Indeed Dr. Frankenstein Burstein and his creation confront us with an interesting paradox. Who is the monster?

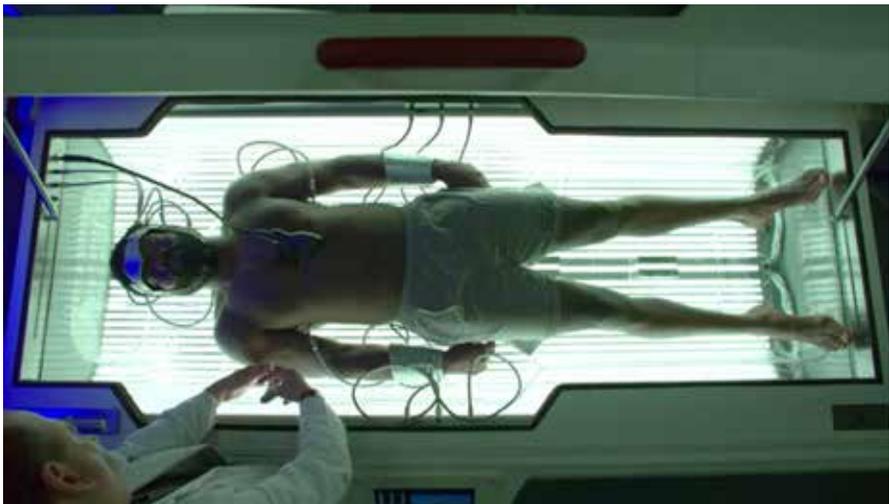


Fig. 13: Baptism/rebirth. Film still, “Step in the Arena,” LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E04, 39:34.

49 Bastián 2016.

LUKE CAGE (2016) opens us up to a particular moment in the United States and elsewhere when militarism, racism, and economic exploitation have crippled Black and Brown lives. The show invites theological reflection and interrogation because of its themes of freedom, art, and humanity. Black Theology and Womanist Theology offer unique vantage points for engaging Luke Cage methodologically. Because both theologies are grounded in the reality of Black lives, these theological frameworks are relevant in regard to Luke and the Harlem community. For James Cone, the parent of Black Liberation Theology, Black experience, Black history, Black culture, revelation, scripture, and tradition encompass the sources for Black Theology.<sup>50</sup> Concern for the community and liberation in light of Jesus' gospel guides the theological norm or hermeneutical principle in Black Theology. Womanist theology concerns itself primarily with the liberation of Black women and the family, establishing a positive quality of life for women and the family, and forming political alliances with other marginal groups struggling to be free of the oppression imposed by white-controlled American institutions.<sup>51</sup>

For understanding the concept of a monster, James Baldwin is useful. In the documentary TAKE THIS HAMMER (Richard Moore, US 1963), Baldwin says, "I'm not describing you when I talk about you. I'm describing me . . . We invented the nigger. I didn't invent it. White people invented it." Baldwin articulates that the creation of the monster (nigger) emerged from white supremacist fears imposed on Blacks. In *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West describes niggerization as the act of American terrorism on Black people, treating them as niggers for over 350 years, making them "feel unsafe, unprotected, subject to random violence, and hated".<sup>52</sup> Like the Tuskegee syphilis experiments in the late 20th century, Dr. Burstein takes Luke's Black body without any concern for his humanity. Burstein objectifies Luke into a thing that can benefit U.S. imperialism and militarism.

For centuries, the white gaze has invented slaves, Sambos, welfare queens, Jezebels, Hulks, and even animals out of Black bodies. These catastrophic misnomers are made possible by what Emilie Townes calls "the fantastic hegemonic imagination". Townes says, "The fantastic hegemonic imagination traffics in peoples' lives that are caricatured or pillaged so that the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its image."<sup>53</sup> In this way, we may understand Luke Cage's impenetrable Black body as a result of white supremacist fantastic hegemonic imagination. The creation of Luke Cage emerges from the imagination of Dr. Burstein and not from Luke himself. Luke's impenetrable

50 Cone 2010 [1970], 24–35.

51 Williams 1994, 53.

52 West 2004, 20.

53 Townes 2006, 21.

body raises questions about how the United States sees itself concerning Black bodies. Does the United States understand itself to be impenetrable like Luke because of its military power? Does fear within the psyche of the white gaze perpetuate police brutality, harsh punishment, and the disproportionate imprisonment of Black bodies in the prison-industrial-complex due to false conceptions of the Black body? Who is the monster?

In *The Future of Ethics*, Willis Jenkins articulates the ways in which the earth is connected to women's bodies.<sup>54</sup> In particular, Jenkins evokes Womanist voices to demonstrate how earth's vulnerability relates to the vulnerability of women. The penetrable bodies of women in *LUKE CAGE* (2016) – of Candace, Mariah, and Misty's cousin – contrast with Luke's normally impenetrable male body. When Luke too is pierced, his insides ravaged by the Judas bullets, this gender distinction breaks down somewhat. Jenkins also helps us to go beyond the binary of female/male, as well as that of human/non-human, considering *all* those who are susceptible to harm. In this regard we remember that the United States continues to assert its imperial self not only through patriarchy and racism, not only through war and colonialism, but also through fracking, polluting, razing, and drilling.

What is Luke's response to his tragic condition and paradoxical self? He answers the niggerization imposed on his body like Emmett Till's mother, who responded to the murder of her 14-year-old son by saying, "I don't have a minute to hate. I'll pursue justice for the rest of my life."<sup>55</sup> Out of love, Baldwin tells his nephew that he does not have to confine himself to the definitions of the white world. With these two formulations, we may understand Luke Cage's pursuing love and justice as a response to the various cages in which he exists. When Luke chooses his name, he quotes Luke 4:18 (E04), a central text in Black Theology. In regards to Luke 4:18, Cone says, "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation."<sup>56</sup> Like the Jesus of Black Liberation Theology, Luke Cage is anointed to bring liberty to the oppressed. As Jesus enters the human condition of those who experience systemic violence, Luke steps into the experience of those who are economically exploited, those who encounter police brutality, and those who encounter gang violence.

When two police officers stop Luke, many viewers may have people in mind like Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Renisha McBride, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, and many others. Police inquiries have resulted in the deaths of too many Black and Brown people in the United States. However, the scene presents liberative tones when the bullets bounce off Luke (E07). This scene is very similar to Kendrick Lamar's music video *ALRIGHT* (Colin Tilley, US 2015), where Kendrick's body

54 Jenkins 2013.

55 West 2004, 21.

56 Cone 1997 [1969], 35.

levitates against the gravity of state-sanctioned violence. Even in the face of the monstrosity of police brutality, Luke shields the one police officer from the bullets of the other. He demonstrates a central claim in the thought of Baldwin and Black Theology – the liberation of the oppressed is tied to the liberation of the oppressor.

## “NO ONE CAN CAGE A MAN IF HE TRULY WANTS TO BE FREE!”

In his brief yet influential introduction to the subject, Eddie S. Glaude Jr. argues that if “African American religion” is to have any analytical purchase, it must mean more than simply the religious life of people who happen to be Black. He insists, instead, that we understand it as a religious formation that “emerges in the encounter between faith, in all its complexity, and white supremacy”.<sup>57</sup> African American religion responds to the political and social context of the United States in three ways. It represents a “*sign of difference*”, insofar as it “explicitly rejects, as best as possible, the idolatry of white supremacy”. African American religion operates as a “*practice of freedom*”, wherein the “black religious imagination is used in the service of opening up spaces closed down by white supremacy”. And it “insists on its *open-ended orientation*”, meaning “African American religion offers resources for African Americans to imagine themselves beyond the constraints of now”.<sup>58</sup>

We have already seen the ways in which Luke Cage, our “dishwasher Lazarus”, stands as a *sign of difference* with regard to the traditional superhero story. If we take the archetypal comic book superhero who doles out violence in his (or occasionally her) quest to redeem the masses as an embodiment of the white savior – the figure who takes up the white wo/man’s burden to save those who cannot save themselves – then we can read Luke Cage’s reluctance to do harm and commitment to protecting the vulnerable as a rejection of one logic of white supremacy.

To this sign of difference we can add that the show opens up spaces closed down by white supremacy by reclaiming the image of the Black man in a hoodie which figures so prominently in the racist fantasies of the collective American subconscious in recent memory. Cheo Hodari Coker, the show’s creator, brought to life a bulletproof Black man who shields other Black and Brown bodies from harm at a time when for viewers of color their bodies are as vulnerable as they have ever been. Nothing is more indicative of the show’s birth in the Black Lives Matter moment than Coker’s choice to dress Luke Cage in an array

<sup>57</sup> Glaude 2014, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Glaude 2014, 11–12 (emphases in the original).

of hoodies. Here Coker directly intervenes in the demonization and criminalization of Black bodies. Responding to the grim reality that a hoodie could, in the eyes of a vigilante like George Zimmerman, condemn Trayvon Martin to death, Coker reclaims the hoodie and opens an imaginative space wherein “heroes could wear hoodies, too”.<sup>59</sup>

In many respects *LUKE CAGE* (2016) can also be understood as a *practice of freedom*. This is, after all, the meaning behind the titular character’s name. Freedom is a central theme of the show, which is oriented around the wrongful conviction of a man who has escaped from prison. “No one can  *cage* a man if he truly wants to be free”, Luke states as he explains his adopted surname (E04). He demonstrates this ideal repeatedly as he escapes an impressive array of both figurative and literal confinements, including Seagate Prison, his father’s low expectations, his own fears and anxieties, and the rubble that he is buried under when Cornell shoots him with a missile (E03–04; fig. 14). As for “Luke”, he takes his first name from the gospel where Jesus proclaims he has come to “preach good news to the poor ... freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind” (E04, Luke 4:18).

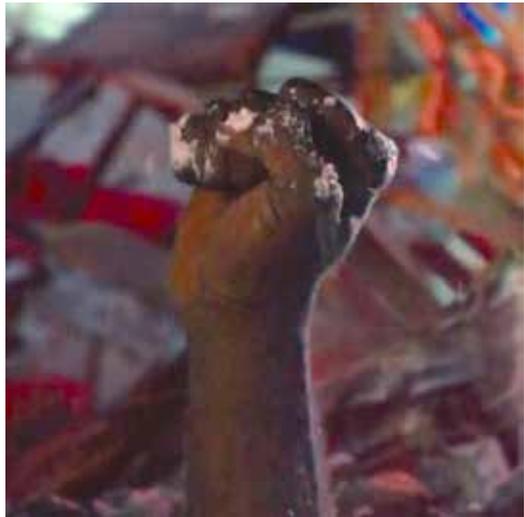


Fig. 14: Luke’s fist breaks free of the rubble *and* symbolizes solidarity with Black liberation movements.  
Film still, “Step in the Arena”,  
*LUKE CAGE* (2016), S01/E04, 44:10.

Nowhere does the show exemplify the features of African American religion more poignantly than in its *open-ended orientation*. *LUKE CAGE* (2016) achieves something that has long remained a defining feature of African American religion: the creation of an imaginative space in and through which Black people can conjure worlds beyond the violence and degradation of daily life in a racist

59 Kim/Shifflet, 2016.

society. David Walker prophesied that God would wipe white supremacy off the face of the earth in wrath. The Exodus story of slaves set free by plagues and the parting of seas served as the mythic model for the liberation of the enslaved in the South and, later, for a second Exodus out of Jim Crow in the Great Migrations. Martin Luther King Jr. insisted that African Americans “as a people will get to the Promised Land”, even if he also admitted, on the eve of his assassination no less, that he might “not get there with you”.<sup>60</sup> And LUKE CAGE (2016) brings a world into being where a Black man in a hoodie is impervious to the bullets of police officers and gangsters alike, where that hoodied hero unites his beloved community (Harlem) against the death-dealers set out to destroy them from without and within.

Coker characterizes this open-ended orientation as a sort of wish fulfillment, noting “superheroes to a certain extent are always wish fulfillment”.<sup>61</sup> Another way to think about the show, though, would be as an example of what Robin D. G. Kelley calls “freedom dreams”. Reflecting on the significance of the imagination in the Black radical tradition, Kelley quips, “call me utopian, but I inherited my mother’s belief that the map to a new world is in the imagination, in what we see in our third eyes rather than in the desolation that surrounds us”.<sup>62</sup> When we view LUKE CAGE (2016) through the lens of African American religion, we begin to see the ways in which Black superhero narratives can function as religion, especially in the present moment when one must insist that Black lives matter in the face of a society that too often insists otherwise.

## “ALWAYS FORWARD, FORWARD ALWAYS.”

The content of LUKE CAGE (2016) demonstrates what one could call an “ultimate concern” in the Tillichian sense. It looks through the unconditional aspects of the existential situation of the context within which it is situated and subtly and overtly voices the situation through summarizing its multiplicity into themes/questions/problems that can be addressed.<sup>63</sup> In other words, we enter into the dynamic social, political, economic, racial, and other dilemmas of the New York City where the story is set without an explanation of those problems as problems, but with a Heideggerian “thrownness” right in the middle of the “action” from which the concerns that need to be addressed emanate.<sup>64</sup>

Luke Cage’s role in this context is one of synthesis: he embodies the ultimate concern as displayed in the whole of the fucked-up situation manifested

60 King 1991 [1968], 286.

61 Kim/Shifflet, 2016.

62 Kelley 2002, 2–3.

63 Tillich 1951, 10–11.

64 Heidegger 1996 [1927], 127.

in the struggle that ensues between Cornell and the drug kingpin Colon (E01), the political maneuvering of Mariah as a disguise for her own balancing act between the legal and the illegal for personal benefit (E01), and the campaign of extortion of local businesses executed by both Cornell and Mariah (E03). In the embodiment and synthesis of this multiplicity, Luke Cage becomes a God in the Whiteheadian sense, a deity that is both involved with and affected by temporal processes. He does not create an answer *ex nihilo*, but takes the jagged bricks of his context and theopoetically makes a house of liberation in which Harlem residents “relocate” and experience a transformation of their understanding of themselves, their worth, and their potential for greatness, even in the midst of the multifaceted oppression plaguing them.<sup>65</sup> In the words of Jerome Stone, this might be thought of as “minimalist transcendence”, a humanistic response/intervention that replaces the need for a divine response, or at least the affirmation that transcendence described in this way is more logically defensible due to an empirical experience and location of such transformation.<sup>66</sup> Luke represents the “creative transformation” that John Cobb describes as “the call forward”,<sup>67</sup> a notion echoed by Pop’s sacred mantra/dying words: “always forward” (E02).

One of the most interesting themes of *LUKE CAGE* (2016) that goes largely unstated is that of the “world within a world”. The Harlem as presented has autonomous existence in the way that Indigenous communities in North America have a sort of sovereignty: it is dependent on the world from which it comes in a peripheral way, yet operates on its own rules. It has its presidents and its pawns, its members with social capital and those without. This is Whiteheadian interconnectivity. The parent world’s racism, poverty, classism, sexism, and other deities of white supremacy that converge in the “event” of Harlem all play a role in how Harlem functions.<sup>68</sup> But the blatant existence of this parent world and its diseases are rarely made explicitly evident. One key example is Cornell’s identification of what in his exegesis is the curse/blessing of the underestimation of Afro-diasporic individuals in the parent world of the United States in his statement, “It’s easy to underestimate a nigga. You never see them coming” (E01). Another is the recurring appeal to literary works written by people of Afro-diasporic descent born in the United States as a source/instance of reclamation of identity, such as those of Langston Hughes and Walter Mosley (E01). The liberation strategy here is processual, emphasizing in glimpses how the humanistic wise use of the thematic background of a

65 Whitehead 1978 [1929], 346.

66 Stone 1992, 109–110.

67 Coleman 2008, 87.

68 Massumi 2009, 5–6.

context (even the background that is virtually inaccessible) can set a brighter future for even the darkest situation.<sup>69</sup>

Another theme of the series is “Switzerland”, or Pop’s Barber Shop. In this rhizomic meeting place, the hierarchical tensions of key influential people in the Harlem World become nonfactors, as all who enter this shrine of the barbershop lose the stance of competitor and become colleagues. This is not the cancellation of difference, but the acceptance of the contrast of multiplicity, so that difference is not solved but courageously engaged within this beautiful mess, this chaosmos, many times uncomfortably (E02). The role of space is important in LUKE CAGE (2016) as a process liberation philosophy, for Switzerland is a freeze frame of the moment of decision. In Switzerland, there are no decisions but only possibility. In Switzerland, entities are presented with choices that could lead to their progressive liberation if they enact them outside the Harlem World. Pop’s Barber Shop is a prime liberating thematic instance of the secular transcendence that Alfred North Whitehead alludes to and Jerome Stone clearly spells out.<sup>70</sup>

The pinnacle of this liberating process/secular transcendence unearthed by Luke Cage is the notion of secular Gods that shows up in the background of the series, sometimes literally. There are allusions to the transcendent Gods of classical Christian theism, such as the funeral service for Pop (E05) and the biblical recitations of Luke’s nemesis Diamondback (E08). But either these are figureheads which symbolize empty religiosity or they use religion subversively, even perversely. These Gods, in other words, are dead.<sup>71</sup> The “true religion” of the Harlem World of LUKE CAGE (2016) lies elsewhere. You don’t get much more religious than having a picture of the Notorious B.I.G. on your wall as the focal point of honor. The MCs are some of the Gods of Harlem, along with the drug lords. These are the people who many of the residents of the city – like Shameek, done in by hubris and Cornell’s fists – aspire to be. They set the tone of the town. So does Luke Cage. While the drug lords take the position of disconnected coercion to influence Harlem, Luke presents a different way of life that is interconnected persuasion. In the poetry of his Godhood, he takes the vileness of the world and creatively transforms it to a beautiful mess that influences the dwellers of Harlem to follow his modest whispers of liberation, whispers infused with a contagious renewed sense of hope and power.<sup>72</sup>

69 Whitehead 1967 [1933], 256–257.

70 Stone 1992, 109–110.

71 Nietzsche 2007 [1882], 71–72.

72 Walker 2004, 59–60, 62, 69–71.



Fig. 15: Conflicting theologies: Shameek swaggers, Luke sweeps. Film still, “Moment of Truth”, LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E01, 02:57.

## “DO WHAT YOU CAN, KID.”

So where does all this get us? What is the point of this shared rumination on LUKE CAGE (2016), which is, in the end, just a Netflix series based on some comic books? Why should scholars of religion care? Why should anyone care?

Circling back to Jonathan Z. Smith, he has theorized religion as a way of envisioning how the world should be, in contrast to how it is, and acting out ways to reconcile that gap.<sup>73</sup> Creating a show, watching its episodes, participating in its fan culture, even ragging on it through criticism can be analyzed as part of this practice. After all, disappointment only makes sense in comparison to a better what-could-be. In a sense this idea speaks to the tension within the concept of the superhero itself: it is an imperfect response to the problems of the world in which we live, the envisioning of a solution that is not only impossible but also itself problematic. In the words of Method Man as he concludes his ode to Luke, “Bulletproof Love”: “People say we don’t need another hero, but now we got one” (E12).

Our initial roundtable discussion and this ensuing article analyze, and ultimately contribute to, the meta-process of a culture reflecting on itself through its own products. We are excited about working in collaboration to allow for a richer sense of context than any of our individual approaches to LUKE CAGE (2016) could provide on its own. Rather than a single scholarly take, this article

73 Smith 1987.

is intended to provide a kaleidoscope of different perspectives, each lens allowing us to see new pieces and shifting our vision of the whole.



Fig. 16: Misty tries to see the whole picture. Film still, "Manifest", LUKE CAGE (2016), S01/E07, 10:45.

The sections of this article share what can be read in Smith's formulation as a dialectic of hope and disappointment. In its conscious engagements, the show has potential to offer subversive alternatives to the expected messages of mainstream entertainment. Luke is a more thoughtful, more human Christ-figure than usually found within superhero narratives, yet the genre's default to purifying violence ultimately proves impossible to completely escape. The series introduces not one, but several compelling characters who are women of color, but also at times disempowers them in conventional and therefore perplexing ways. The image of a righteous Black man in a hoodie, immune to bullets, is a Messianic dream in this moment in which "Black Lives Matter" is a supposedly controversial statement. Yet the image can also be twisted into white-supremacist sadism. The Harlem of the show represents an autonomous alterity, but does so by appropriating a real, thriving African American community into a fictional vision largely of deprivation. There are so many ways that the show is invigorating, entertaining, and inspiring and so many ways in which it inevitably falls short. Discussing together is part of the way we reconcile the gap.

Tracing religious elements within the show, putting the series in relationship to cultural phenomena with which it is in dialogue, and considering its trajectories of influence demonstrate that LUKE CAGE (2016) wrestles with some of the

major issues of our cultural moment – racism, violence, sexuality, and power – issues with which, as scholars of religion, we must also engage. In the end, there is no single answer or meaning. The show is multivalent, as are the best scholarly conversations.

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