A Power Man’s Theology: Marvel’s Luke Cage and Black Liberation Theology

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Netflix released Marvel’s *Luke Cage* in 2016 to critical acclaim. Born from a 1970s comic book, the series features Luke Cage, an African-American superhero. Cage is a big, bald, bulletproof black man. Instead of tights and a cape, Cage wears a hoodie calling the audience to remember Trayvon Martin and other victims of white racism. Theologian James Cone created Black Liberation Theology in the 1970s. As a result of Cone’s work, Black Liberation Theology addresses the issue of white racism from a theological standpoint. In this thesis I present a close reading of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* using Black Liberation Theology as a theory of communication. Here, I explore three questions. First, how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* explore Black Liberation Theology’s distinction between blackness and whiteness? Secondly, how does Coker use Marvel’s *Luke Cage* to define liberation and use that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United States today? Finally, how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* join Cone in critiquing the church and white theology, and what solutions does Coker present to repair the church and white theology’s relationship with blackness? The answers to these three questions work together to affirm the central argument for this thesis: Marvel’s *Luke Cage* employs Black Liberation Theology to practically reimagine Christian theology and the Christian church as liberating forces in the modern world.
A Power Man’s Theology: Marvel’s *Luke Cage* and Black Liberation Theology

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication and Sociology

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

DiArron B. Morrison

December 2019
This thesis, directed and approved by the committee for the thesis candidate, DiArron Morrison, has been accepted by the Office of Graduate Programs of Abilene Christian University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Communication

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members, Dr. Lauren Lemley, Dr. Jonathan Camp, Dr. Cindy Roper, and Dr. Andre Johnson, for their insights and encouragement during this thesis process. I owe a special thank you to Dr. Lemley. Your dedication to helping us grow as scholars has been one of the most profound blessings of my life. I am additionally indebted to Dr. James Cone, whose theology provides me with a framework to make a meaningless faith meaningful. A very special thank you goes to my parents Sheba and Gregory Morrison Sr. and my brother Gregory Morrison Jr. who were the first voices of liberation in my life. Finally, the biggest thank you goes to my wife, Kacey Ingram-Morrison, whose love, support, motivation, and accountability sustain me.
To Nat, Mr. Little, Martin, Malcolm, Fred, Emmett, Trayvon, Tamir, Kendrick, Eric, Sandra, Delrawn, Philando, Kalief and the legions of others victimized by white supremacy since its inception, your blood cries out for justice from this stained soil.

To the human beings treated like animals and traumatized by racist policies and agenda on the United States’ southern border during the Trump Administration, liberation is your birthright.

To my liberator, Jesus the Christ, Son of YHWH; the God of the Exodus; the Lord of Hosts . . .

This thesis is humbly dedicated
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION


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, 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.”

As a Black Liberation Theologian, watching the series often felt similar to sitting in church. As Luke Cage swagged through the streets, fighting for no other reason than to bring good to his community, it was as if I felt the Spirit move. Then, the closer I watched, the more I began to hear themes and, at times, even the words of James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology flowing through the series. Whether it was Cage citing Luke 4:18-19, or the constant interplay between the ideologies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr, the more I watched Marvel’s *Luke Cage* the more I began to believe that the show was a contemporary manifestation of Black Liberation Theology. My question then became, what message is this show’s employment of Black Liberation Theology conveying? In this thesis I explore this question. To accomplish this task, this chapter

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examines the rhetors of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* and the show’s audience. After summarizing the plot of the show, I turn my attention to James Cone and Black Liberation Theology. Finally, I conclude with an overview of my methodology and a roadmap of the chapters to come.

**Rhetorical Situation**

In this section I overview the Marvel *Luke Cage*’s rhetorical situation. First, I discuss the show’s two rhetors: Marvel and Cheo Hadari Coker. Next, I examine the show’s audience. I conclude with the exigence subsection discussing the social context surrounding the show’s release.

**Rhetors**

Marvel’s *Luke Cage* is an adaptation of the comic book from the 1970s. According to Derry et al., “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.” However, as journalist Abraham Riesman notes “when viewers fire up Netflix’s original series Marvel’s *Luke Cage* today, they won’t see Luke as he was for the first three decades of his existence. They’ll see the one . . . [of] the early aughts.” The Luke Cage of the early 2000s and 2010s retains much of the earlier version’s origin story and powers but often breaks away in consciousness, motivation, and experiences. Two rhetors are primarily responsible for adopting, adapting, modifying, and, at times, discarding aspects of Luke Cage’s many comic book manifestations in the Netflix

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version. The first is Marvel, who not only created the character but retains a fair amount of creative direction over him. The second rhetor, the show’s showrunner, Cheo Hodari Coker, reaches into the Marvel Universe’s multiplicity of Luke Cage storylines to present a hero for the modern day. Coker wields the show into modern times, allowing the show to engage contemporary issues. Below I provide a brief overview of both rhetors.

**Marvel.** The setting of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the television and film branch of Stan Lee’s Marvel Comics. Lee, who began his career as a comic strip creator in the 1940s, collaborated with Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko to create Marvel, a universe of comic book superheroes of which he became the editor in 1972. He served in that role until 1999. Though he no longer served in an official role with the company, Lee remained beloved by Marvel fans and made cameos in several Marvel films that were produced after his tenure. The universe has expanded since Lee, Kirby, and Ditko created it to add and include characters by a plethora of different creators like Archie Goodwin, *Luke Cage*’s creator. Disney purchased Marvel in 2009. This led to a major expansion of the MCU’s already growing presence in movies. As a part of that expansion Marvel partnered with Netflix in 2015 to recreate the Marvel’s Defenders Universe, which is a part of but has very little practical overlap with the MCU in movies. Starting with the release of Marvel’s *Daredevil* in 2015 Marvel added *Jessica Jones,*

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Luke Cage, The Iron Fist, and finally, The Punisher over the next four years Marvel.⁸ Despite Disney’s ownership, showrunner Cheo Hadari Coker told the YouTube series Blueprint that Marvel still plays an active role in determining how its characters are portrayed on television and in movies. Coker recalls having to have ideas approved by both Netflix and Marvel for his show.⁹

According to counselor Jamoki Zakia Dantzler, the Marvel Cinematic Universe arose during the 1980s and 1990s as many comic book superheroes made the transition from comic book to television and film. However, “it was not until director Bryan Singer’s X-Men that the initial wave of Marvel films featuring superheroes began to appear.”¹⁰ According to Nicholaus Pumphrey, scholar of religious studies and history, “in the 1960s, the X-Men seemingly symbolized the civil rights movement.”¹¹ Historian Marsha R. Robinson and communication scholar Caryn Neumann explain that “accepting one’s distinctiveness and one’s uniqueness is a common thread in the Marvel comic universe.”¹² Marvel also has a history of using its characters to represent movements for social change. Given Marvel’s history of activism and representation, it is no mystery that Cheo Hodari Coker was tapped to write and show run Marvel’s Luke Cage.

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⁹ “Blueprint.”


Cheo Hodari Coker. Netflix’s adaptation of Luke Cage ascends from the mind of Cheo Hodari Coker. Coker was born in 1972, the same year that Marvel introduced their first Luke Cage comics. Coker “grew up near the University of Connecticut in the village of Storrs.” Due to his parents’ divorce, Coker lived in between two realities: the suburbs of Storrs and the projects in New Jersey. The showrunner’s “mother, Patricia, the daughter of the WWII fighter pilot Bertram Wilson, dropped out of college to have her son, but went back and ended up becoming a lawyer. His father was a janitor.”

According to Coker, he did not have a great relationship with his father. What is more, his parents’ dissonant living situations left him searching for his identity and his blackness, which he found in part through hip-hop. Following high school, Coker enrolled at Stanford University. During the 1990s and early 2000s “Coker leveraged the opportunity to connect with hip-hop’s movers and shakers, scoring interviews with big-time artists such as Ice Cube.” Another major hip-hop artist with whom Coker created a relationship is Notorious B.I.G. Coker eventually “wrote the screenplay for Notorious, the 2009 biopic about the late rapper's life,” partially because, “Coker had spoken with the rapper 36 hours [before the rapper’s murder]—the last interview B.I.G. ever gave.”

After the success of Notorious, Coker, “an adept storyteller . . . made the leap to the

screen in 2009” taking a job “writing for SouthLand, where he eventually rose to supervising producer and won an 2013 NAACP Award for the Season Four episode ‘God’s Work.’”

After producing several other shows, Coker “pitched his take on a new show about a Marvel Comics superhero to Netflix.” That show was Luke Cage. As the show’s writer and executive producer, Coker “infuses Luke Cage, his Netflix series about a bulletproof Black superhero, with a love of Black art and activism.” Taking a unique approach to creating the show, Coker says “the first thing [he does] is basically pick the song titles as episode titles.” Elsewhere, Coker says that he “really views the show as like a bulletproof version of Lemonade,” the hit Beyoncé album. More than tapping into his love for hip-hop, Coker leans heavily on his role models for inspiration. In fact, when pitching the idea for the show, “he brought with him a picture of his grandfather, a Tuskegee airman, in the cockpit of his plane shortly after a dogfight.” According to Coker, he was “either going to be an Air Force pilot or a screenwriter” taking after his grandfather or his uncle.

Coker’s influence on Marvel’s Luke Cage bleeds through as

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the show delves into topics such as police brutality, political corruption, parent-child relationship difficulty, etc., while employing hip-hop and R&B to help tell its story. Coker’s influence collaborates with the talent of actors such as Mike Coker, Simone Missick, and Alfre Woodard to create a unique experience for Marvel’s *Luke Cage’s* audience.

**Audience**

As I mentioned above, Marvel’s *Luke Cage* was released on Netflix. In fact, the show is a Netflix Original, meaning that the content was not only created by the streaming service but plays on Netflix exclusively. According to CNN’s Seth Fiegerman, Netflix “has 139 million subscribers globally. It expects to add another 8.9 million subscribers in the quarter that ends in March.”28 *Business Insider’s* Jethro Nededog says that in its premiere year, 2016, Marvel’s *Luke Cage* was “watched by an estimated 3.52 million adults under the age of 50,” putting it “in fifth place [in terms of all] Netflix's original series,” notably attracting more viewership in that time span than the fourth season of Netflix’s *House of Cards*.29 SJ Clarkston, who was an executive producer for season one of the show, says that “*Luke Cage* ‘was sort of a mix’ in terms of audience.”30 Even amid reports that the show “lost a lot of viewers when [it] returned for Season 2,” its wide range of appeal and proven drawing power means that millions of people have

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Having been one of the most popular shows on the internet at one point, Marvel’s *Luke Cage* has a wide ranging and multifaceted international audience, giving the show the potential to create an enormous social and cultural impact.

**Exigence**

*Luke Cage* was released just four short years after the 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin and three following the acquittal of his murderer: George Zimmerman. The event “sent shock waves through America, and once again elevated race and racism as major topics for mass media debate in communities.”

Like Cage, Martin wore a hoodie at the time of his shooting death. In the years that followed, Martin’s media coverage chronicled shooting deaths of black men at the hands of law enforcement across the United States. Just two months before the September 2016 release of Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, three black men, Delrawn Small, Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile, were killed by police in three separate states on July 4, July 5, and July 6 respectively.

Unfortunately, these are not nearly the only names on what was certainly a long list of black people to be unjustifiably killed by police, but the three murders provided a perfect glimpse of a bright red racial pimple that was once again shone on America’s face. What is more, the show’s 2016 release preceded the first Trump election by only two months. Flanked by cries to build a wall on the southern border of the U.S., an empowered white supremacist faction marched in Charlottesville, Virginia declaring America a white...

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person’s nation in 2017. For all intents and purposes, Marvel’s Luke Cage premiered in a world of a revitalized and a re-realized conversation about the level of comfort U.S. culture had with being racist. Said another way, Marvel’s Luke Cage was released in a moment in time when racism, which the United States had proclaimed to be dead years earlier, returned to the nation’s table and demanded ownership of the nation’s soul.

Marvel’s Luke Cage Plot Summary

The series follows Luke’s battles with four villains. For that reason, I summarize the plotline of Luke’s four major battles here. I provide more specific summaries of the characters and story arcs I analyze in the chapters that follow. The first episode opens in Harlem, the primary setting of the show. At that time Luke works in Pop’s Barbershop. Pop acts as a father figure for many of the youth who lived in Harlem who were looking for an opportunity to escape the often-dangerous environment that the city’s crime syndicate creates. Pop’s Barbershop serves as a safe space for them to relax and enjoy peace. The Barbershop is that for Luke as well, though he is not a youth (early 30s) and not from Harlem. Luke is a fugitive escapee from prison. Originally from Georgia, Luke had been sent to prison for a crime he did not commit. While in prison, a few pivotal things happen to Luke. First, he meets his eventual wife, Reva, who is the prison psychologist. Reva’s death, which happens before the first episode, haunts Cage.


he is forced to join a fight club as a result of a crooked corrections officer, Albert Rackham, plotting against him. Later, Rackham orders two of his cronies, Shades and Camanche, to beat Luke until the point that he needs a drastic life-saving procedure. The doctor, Noah Burstein, is conducting experiments on prisoners after they were beaten almost to the point of death. This operation, which consists of dipping the subject in a pool of boiling chemicals, had killed all of their previous test subjects. Luke survives this bath, however, after Rackham, determined to kill him, turns the heat up to an astronomical temperature. When Luke emerges from the blown-up pool, he has gained impenetrable skin and super strength. Using his strength, he punches a hole the cement wall and escaped from prison.³⁷ Luke cannot not work legally because he is a fugitive. Therefore, he works two jobs: one at the Barbershop and one at the Harlem’s Paradise, the club owned by Cornell Stokes.³⁸

**Villain One: Cornell “Cottonmouth” Stokes**

Initially, the show makes nothing of Luke working for Cornell (from here on referred to as Cottonmouth). Cottonmouth employs many of Harlem’s residents, both legally and illegally. Harlem’s Paradise is where Luke meets Detective Misty Knight while he is working as a bartender, and she is working undercover.³⁹ After one of Cottonmouth’s employees at Harlem’s Paradise joins a plot to rob him, Luke is forced to quit. Pop serves as a mentor to all three of the young men involved in the robbery. Cottonmouth seeks to kill all who remain alive following the attempt, which brings him

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into conflict with Pop. Luke then quits Harlem’s Paradise. That episode ends with one of
Cottonmouth’s henchmen shooting up the Barbershop, killing Pop. Luke then wages
war on Cottonmouth and his illegal dealings. Cottonmouth is later killed by his cousin,
Mariah.

**Villain Two: Diamondback**

As quickly as Cottonmouth disappears from the show, a new villain appears. Eventually revealed to be Luke’s half-brother, Willis “Diamondback” Stryker emerges from the shadow in season one episode eight. Seeking revenge, Diamondback attempts to kill Luke and comes closer to doing so than any other of the show’s villains. He is a complete terror to Harlem in the process. After finally uncovering the darkest secrets of his family’s past, Luke is able to defeat Diamondback in the final episode of season one. As a result of the notoriety that his vigilante efforts have received since his war with Cottonmouth, Luke’s criminal past catches up with him. Season one ends with Luke being taken back to prison.

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Villain Three: Bushmaster

Days before, John “Bushmaster” Mclver arrives in Harlem and promises to take control of it. In his fighting debut, Bushmaster overpowers Nigel’s bodyguards, taking several gunshots to the chest and abdomen and dispelling the metal from his chest before killing Nigel and taking over his criminal empire. Bushmaster possesses power that can rival Luke’s, which he derives from taking a combination of natural herbs and spices called nightshade. The show later reveals that Bushmaster was shot once before and a healer had used this combination to heal him. The healer saving him was a miracle because that dosage of nightshade would have killed most other people. Luke first encounters Bushmaster when he invades the compound of the Yardies, the gang Bushmaster took possession of. However, on this occasion, Luke and Bushmaster do not fight. Rather, in preparation for a fight, Bushmaster takes note of Luke’s abilities and buys more nightshade from local natural remedies doctor, Tilda Johnson, who turns out to be Mariah’s estranged daughter. Luke learns firsthand that Bushmaster’s power coupled with an exceptional martial arts aptitude makes him a severe threat to Luke in hand-to-hand combat situations when Bushmaster knocks Luke out in episode five of season two. Bushmaster then tries to kidnap Piranha, who now has power of attorney over Mariah’s assets. If Piranha were to disappear, his absence would, in essence, render

44. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
her broke. However, Luke is with Piranha at the time of the attempted kidnapping.\textsuperscript{48} Earlier in the season, Luke followed Cockroach home and beat him up because Cockroach was abusing his girlfriend and son. Cockroach later sued Luke.\textsuperscript{49} Unable to pay the settlement money, Luke appears at Piranha’s party for money. After rescuing Piranha from the kidnapping attempt, Luke brings Piranha to his father’s church building for safe keeping. Bushmaster then manages to best Luke in a scheduled bout by blowing paralyzing dust in Luke’s face and throwing the hero into a river.\textsuperscript{50} Unable to move or breathe, Luke has flashbacks to the experiment gone wrong in prison, which also happened in water.\textsuperscript{51}

Meanwhile, the show reveals that Bushmaster is on a mission to avenge a wrong done to his family by the Stokes family. After regaining his ability to move, Luke swims to shore only to find Piranha gone from the church. Bushmaster then takes Mariah’s money and assets and kills Piranha, making the theft permanent. Mariah then attempts to go into hiding, but Bushmaster catches her and sets her house on fire while she and Tilda are inside. Luke saves them as Bushmaster takes up camp in Harlem’s paradise.\textsuperscript{52} Cage then brings them to the police precinct, where Misty is now in charge after her boss was murdered. Luke then goes to his father’s church to protect him in case Bushmaster

\textsuperscript{48} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “All Souled Out.”

\textsuperscript{49} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Wig Out.”


attacked. Eventually, Luke, his father, Misty, Mariah, and Tilda take refuge in an uncompleted building owned by Rand Enterprises. There, Luke and his father make amends, and Mariah tells Tilda that she killed Cottonmouth and did not wish to have a relationship with Tilda because Mariah conceived Tilda as a result of being raped by Mariah’s uncle, Pete. Mariah, therefore, did not wish to have a relationship with her daughter but used her to regain political footing in Harlem. During that time, Bushmaster puts a bounty on Mariah’s head and receives information about the group’s location. Bushmaster arrives, and Luke finally defeats him.

**Villain Four: Mariah Stokes Dillard**

Introduced in the first episode of the show, Mariah Stokes Dillard outlives all of her evil counterparts. As I will discuss further in chapter two, Dillard’s villiandom is an evolution. Her struggle with Luke is for the very direction of Harlem and to determine in whose image the city will be made. She begins as a politician pushing her “Keep Harlem Black,” and “Family First” initiatives. After Cornell’s death, she transitions slowly into a life of crime by murdering several people and participating in other nefarious activities, such as selling guns and drugs. Early on, both Misty and Luke make taking Mariah down their goal. She, like Cottonmouth, meets her demise at the hands of a close family member: her daughter, Tildy.

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56. Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, “If It Ain’t Rough, It Ain’t Right.”

57. Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, season 2 episode 13, “They Reminisce Over You,” directed by Alex Garcia Lopez, written by Cheo Hadari Coker, featuring Mike Colter, Reg E. Cathy, Simone Missick, Alfre
Following Luke’s journey as a vigilante, Marvel’s *Luke Cage* makes assertions about society. There are messages hidden in the character arcs, dialogue, scenery, music, etc. In this paper, I engage in a close reading to identify and interpret these rhetorical messages and arguments.

**Close Reading**

Close reading is a method rhetoricians use to interpret a text. Education scholars Diana Sisson and Betsy Sisson explain that “the concept of close reading can first be traced to the theological term exegesis which derives from the Greek language, meaning to ‘lead out’ and refers to the critical explanation or interpretation of a text.”58 Here, I understand close reading as communication scholar Barry Brummett defines it: “the mindful, disciplined reading of an object with a view to deeper understanding of its meaning.”59 The object, referred to as the text, is, as rhetoric scholars Michael Leff and Andrew Sachs assert, “not a mirror of reality, but . . . a field of action unified into a functional and locally stable product.”60 Importantly, close reading is an interaction between a text, the critic, and the readers. The text is the object being read. The critic is the person or persons doing the analysis of the text. The readers are the audience of both the text and the critic’s analysis of the text. Education scholars Ruth Nathan and Julie Minnis further explain that the critics “look first and foremost at a text’s language, and

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subsequently—based on a text’s details—make logical inferences using [his or her]
background and prior knowledge."61 To that end, Leff and Sachs warn that “the critic
must frame the discourse within its context, the focus of attention centers on the text itself
and the rhetorical features embedded within it.”62 Rhetorician Leah Cecarelli adds that a
close reading “insists that an audience accept the multiplicity of meanings to fully
appreciate the text’s deeper significance.”63 Multiple critics analyzing the same text may
highlight differing meanings and significances within the same text without the differing
meanings and significances canceling or devaluing each other. Rather, much of the
critic’s analysis depends on the theory that he or she employs. Brummett says that “a
theory and its method is a structure of thinking, of perception, shared by both critic and
reader as they approach a text.”64 A critic’s theory will shape which of a text’s elements
his or her analysis sheds light on for an audience. In this thesis, my theory is Black
Liberation Theology. In order to understand Black Liberation Theology as a critical
theory of communication I first examine the origins of the theology, starting with James
Cone.

James Cone

The creator of Black Liberation Theology, James Hal Cone “was born in Fordyce,
Arkansas, a small town about sixty miles southwest of Little Rock. [His] parents moved
to Bearden, fourteen miles from Fordyce, when [he] was a year old.”65 It was in Bearden

61. Ruth Nathan and Julie Minnis, “Together is Better: Effective Close Reading of Nonfiction Texts,”
63. Leah Ceccarelli, “Polysemy: Multiple Meanings in Rhetorical Criticism,” in Rhetorical Criticism,
64. Brummett, Techniques of Close Reading, 35.
that Cone began to face the reality of white American racism. He recalls his childhood, saying “my mother and father talked about it all the time. They told us stories about lynching.”66 As result of his experiences in Bearden, Cone reports that “two important realities shaped [his] consciousness: the black church experience and the sociopolitical significance of white people.”67 These two realities would shape Cone’s life, work, and ministry.

Church was an outlet and a safe space for Cone. He went on to become “an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.”68 Cone explains that “both the black church and black theology are products of [black] tradition.”69 Cone’s belief in the essential worth of blackness drove his theological studies. As a scholar, he was “a distinguished professor of systematic theology at Union Theological Seminary,” a post he began in 1969.70 Through his academic work and teaching career, James Cone has “inspired generations of scholars, professors, pastors, and activists to work to dismantle white supremacy and helped to give birth to womanist theology and other liberation theologies.”71 Black Liberation Theology arose from Cone’s own experiences with racism and Christianity, as well as the activist culture of the time.

67. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 1.
69. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 96.
71. “Champion for Black Power & All the Oppressed.”
Black Liberation Theology

Black Liberation Theology, which Cone often calls Black Theology, is a product of the American Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Journalist Barbara Bradley Hagerty explains that “Black Liberation Theology was born on July 31, 1966, when 51 black pastors demanded a more aggressive approach to eradicating racism. [It] echoes the demands of the black power movement.”  

Cone emphasizes Black Liberation Theology’s commitment to blackness as black power. According to Cone, “black power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness.”  

Black Liberation Theology takes a revolutionary tone. The theology “draws inspiration from both the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.”  

The influence of both men is so prevalent throughout the theology that theologian Rothney Tshaka describes its origin as a collaborative effort deriving from “the prophetic voice of Martin Luther King Jr, Malcolm X’s critique of white racism in the USA as well as the pioneering work of James Hal Cone.”  

Cone confirms his purposeful fusing of these ideologies saying, “I wanted to bring Martin and Malcolm together so we can fight for justice as Martin King said but love ourselves as Malcolm X said.”  

Cone adds that “Martin and Malcolm represented two distinct poles of [his] identity.”  

These two poles of his personal identity struggle led Cone to seek to “reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther

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74. “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder's Words.”


76. “Bill Moyers Journal: James H. Cone on Vimeo.”

77. “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder's Words.”
King, Jr.’s idea of nonviolence and Malcolm X’s ‘by any means necessary’ philosophy?”

Cone’s commitment to the Christian faith led him to believe that “the Bible and the struggles of the oppressed throughout history broaden our vision of the truth and thereby impel us to make real the beloved community that Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke so eloquently about.” In addition:

Malcolm X, who was not a Christian . . . gave black theology its black identity. And this is important because we were black before we were Christian and in a white supremacist society like America has been: 246 years of slavery, 100 years of segregation and lynching. In a society where white domination is so powerful on the minority group and where black has been defined as evil and as negative then we have to turn that understanding of black on its head, see ourselves as loving ourselves and not hating ourselves.

Black Liberation Theology comes to form by blending these two ideologies with the theological perspective of James Cone. Through that blending, Black Liberation Theology challenges social consciousness. More specifically, it challenges the social consciousness of the powerful and petitions the powerless to tap into untapped social and communicative power.

As a communicative theory, I have broken Cone’s Black Liberation Theology into three broad categories: (1) black, (2) liberation, and (3) theology, to examine it more in depth. Black assesses how a text adopts and employs blackness as a culture, social status, and social movement in a struggle. Liberation analyzes how a text engages particular elements of social struggles (i.e., how Luke Cage engages hegemonic power). Theology

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78. “Champion for Black Power & All the Oppressed.”
79. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 1.
80. Hagerty, “A Closer Look at Black Liberation Theology,”
connects black and liberation to the life and mission of Jesus of Nazareth as well as Christian theology. In doing so, it provides those seeking to identify with the life and work of Christ (Christians and the Christian church) with social impetuses.

**Methodology**

In the following chapters, I present a close reading of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* using Black Liberation Theology as a theory of communication. Here, I explore three questions. First, how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* explore Black Liberation Theology’s distinction between blackness and whiteness? Secondly, how does Coker use Marvel's *Luke Cage* to define liberation and use that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United States today? Finally, how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* join Cone in critiquing the church and white theology, and what solutions does Coker present to repair the church and white theology’s relationship with blackness? The answers to these three questions work together to affirm the central argument for this thesis: Marvel’s *Luke Cage* employs Black Liberation Theology to practically reimagine Christians, Christianity, and the Christian church as liberating forces in the modern world.

All of the chapters work together to answer each of these questions. However, each chapter discusses one of the questions as the main point of emphasis. In chapter two, “Black,” I explore Blackness in Marvel’s *Luke Cage*. Here, I discuss the show’s implementation of black culture and its overall appreciation of blackness, which includes theorizing about how to save the future of blackness: black youth. Furthermore, Coker defines whiteness in the same way that Cone does. I argue that those elements are foundational for establishing it as a work of Black Liberation Theology. In chapter three, “Liberation,” I identify how the show engages liberation, including an explanation of
how the show defines liberation by examining the show’s protagonist and hero: Luke Cage. Chapter three closes by re-engaging the question of the relationship liberation has to hegemonies in an interplay of the ideologies Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. In chapter four, “Theology,” I turn my attention to Christianity. Here, I examine how the show takes on the Black Liberation Theology’s task of critiquing the church and white theology. I conclude chapter four with an analysis of what practical changes to Christianity Marvel’s Luke Cage calls for. The final chapter, chapter five, serves as a conclusion.
CHAPTER II

BLACK

In the 1970s Marvel Comic’s *Luke Cage* reimagined what a superhero could be. Cage was an ex-criminal and an ex-con. He also treated superhero work as a profession. Seeing an opportunity for gainful employment, Cage adopted the “Hero for Hire” moniker. If he was going to flex his superpowered muscles, he expected to be paid. While he may have not been the first hero with a criminal conviction and/or materialistic motivation, Cage was amongst the first black superheroes who operated in a predominantly black environment. Comic book fans were introduced to Black Panther and Wakanda half a decade before. However, no matter how much we wanted for Wakanda to be a real place, it was not. Harlem, however, was real. As a fan, the idea of this black man in this black place doing superhero things resonated differently. Both Black Panther and Luke Cage were black superheroes who operated in a version of the world that paralleled our own. But Marvel Comic’s *Luke Cage* did not depend on the creation of a mystical oasis of blackness to send a message about blackness. Rather, it popped down in Harlem, with its triumphs and its problems.

In this chapter, I examine how Netflix’s *Luke Cage* establishes itself as a black show and how that connects to Cone’s understanding of blackness in Black Liberation Theology. First, I overview blackness as Cone presents it in Black Liberation Theology.

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Next, I provide story lines from Netflix’s *Luke Cage* that are relevant to my analysis in this chapter. Finally, I analyze how the show promotes blackness by its setting, inclusive understanding of blackness, definition of whiteness, and hypotheses for black issues.

**The Black in Black Liberation Theology**

In Black Liberation Theology, blackness is certainly an ethnicity, but it is also more. According to theologian Timothy McGee “Cone uses the terms ‘white’ and ‘black’ to move between what he calls the universal and the particular, the symbolic and literal. Whiteness, for instance, could refer to actual white-skinned people or symbolically to the oppressors.” In Black Liberation Theology, “God is black” and so is Christ. Explaining the Christ’s blackness, Cone says “the blackness of Christ, therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather, the transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in struggle.”

Cone explains that Black Liberation Theology is “concerned about the gospel for everybody and if everybody is for the gospel in this society then they are for the poor and the weak and if you’re for the poor and the weak then you are for the liberation of black people too.” Notably, “the focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America.”

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since this theology comes out of the black community, we call it black liberation theology but it’s not just for black people in a narrow sense of that term. It is for blacks in sense that it focuses on the concerns of blacks who are living and who are voiceless in this society.”

Cone adds that “blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness.”

To that end, Cone asserts that “to speak the truth we black theologians must set forth the authentic experience of blackness.” Black Liberation Theology takes “seriously the cultural expressions of the community it represents so that it will be able to speak relevantly to the black condition.” Therefore, Cone says that he reads “the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God.”

Black Liberation Theology, then, “focuses on black history as a source for its theological interpretation of God’s work in the world because divine activity is inseparable from black history.”

In short, Cone presents blackness not only as a culture but as the most meaningful spiritual contributor to American society. Black culture provides soul- a soul that the country would otherwise not have. It also provides a mirror for the country to see its motivations and the outcomes of its oppressive white culture. Therefore, blackness extends to every culture brutalized by the devils of imperialism, white supremacy, and racism. Many of those cultures and devils are present in Marvel’s Luke Cage.

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7. “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder's Words.”
11. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 71.
12. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 754.
Marvel’s Luke Cage Plot Summary

Cottonmouth was a wealthy club owner and gun dealer in Marvel’s Luke Cage’s Harlem. Cottonmouth ran an organized and profitable illegal gun business that his grandmother, Mama Mable, groomed him to run and forced him to take over.13 During season one, the audience found out that Luke was a dishwasher at Harlem’s Paradise (Cottonmouth’s Club) because he had little money and could scarcely afford to pay his rent. During the first scene at the Harlem’s Paradise, Luke met detective Misty Knight who was undercover, investigating the Stokes family. After conversing on and off all night, Luke ran into Misty after the club closed. They ended up going to Luke’s apartment to spend the night. While sleeping there, Misty received a call and left. The next scene showed Misty at a crime scene, with bodies scattered everywhere. The crime scene on which Misty stood was created during a montage that played as Luke’s and Misty’s conversation at Harlem’s Paradise progressed. Shameke and Chico, two young men who Luke knew from his other job as a hair sweeper at Pop’s Barbershop, had enlisted a childhood friend, Donte, a bartender at Harlem’s Paradise, in a plan to rob a gun deal that Cottonmouth had arranged with a local Mexican gang. As they executed the plan, Shameke shot one of the drivers to prevent him from drawing his weapon. A gun battle ensued that killed everyone except Shameke, Chico, and Donte. Shameke then killed Donte to cover their tracks and take a bigger cut of the money. The robbery ruined Cottonmouth’s deal and his reputation as a gun dealer because his buyer believed that he

had staged the whole robbery. After the robbery, Diamondback, Cottonmouth’s gun supplier, sent Shades (Diamondback’s assistant) to oversee Cottonmouth’s situation.\textsuperscript{14}

Infuriated, Cottonmouth scoured Harlem to find out who robbed him. Upon learning of the plan, he found Shameke and killed him. However, Shameke only had half of the money that he had not yet spent. Cottonmouth then set off to find Chico. Hearing about all this and fearing for Chico’s safety, Pop implored Luke to step in and find Chico before Cottonmouth did.\textsuperscript{15} As one of the only people who knew of Luke’s abilities, Pop had been insisting that Luke should use his power to help others. Luke, citing his need to keep a low profile, always retorted that he could not and did not want to.\textsuperscript{16} However, because of the severity of this situation, Luke sprang into action and found Chico before Cottonmouth could. Nevertheless, Chico declined to go with Luke. A few hours later, Chico returned to the Barbershop. At that time local criminal intel man Bobby Fish reported that Chico was at Pop’s Barbershop. A zealous henchman responded by shooting up the Barbershop, a violation of the Harlem’s crime rules. What is worse, he killed Pop in the process. Infuriated, Cottonmouth threw the henchman off of the roof for killing Pop and breaking the rule.\textsuperscript{17}

The damage had been done. Angered by Pop’s death, Luke determined that he would take down Cottonmouth and his operation. He then began to shut down


\textsuperscript{16} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Moment of Truth.”

\textsuperscript{17} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Code of the Streets.”
Cottonmouth’s stash houses by staging a robbery, leaving all of the money, and causing the police to come and confiscate the money and any guns that were there. He concluded this effort by doing something similar to Cottonmouth’s headquarters: the Crispus Attucks building. In that building, Cottonmouth had stashed money he borrowed from his cousin, Mariah, who was a city councilwoman. The money she loaned him was from her campaign finances and had to be found and returned at once.\textsuperscript{18} Later, during a heated exchange, Mariah pushed Cottonmouth out of a second-floor window in the Harlem’s Paradise. She then beat him to death. Shades, who was planning to kill Cottonmouth himself, helped her to frame Luke by making the murder look like an amazing feat of strength and employing Candace, a waitress at the club, to lie and say she witnessed Luke kill Cottonmouth.\textsuperscript{19} Thus ended the first battle that Luke fought, which set the foundation for another continuous ongoing battle with the new queen of crime, Mariah Stokes Dillard.

Mariah’s build toward super villaindom happened more slowly than any of the other characters. Initially she was a run-of-the-mill politician. She was a silent partner in Cottonmouth’s gun business. At worst she was corrupt. Murdering her cousin, however, initiated a deep and full descent into criminal darkness. She took over his criminal gun business and became more and more ruthless. By season two she was a full-blown crime boss, dead set on building her wealth. In season two, Bushmaster came from Jamaica to Harlem to take the Stokes empire. He wanted exact revenge on Mariah and the Stokes


\textsuperscript{19} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Manifest.”
family because Mama Mable murdered his mother. In the process, he clashed with Luke, who had won the sway of Harlem’s citizens by the beginning of season two. Bushmaster took Mariah’s wealth in the fourth episode of season two.\textsuperscript{20} Mariah then went on a rampage of vengeance. She brought her cronies to the restaurant owned by Bushmaster’s uncle, killed everyone, and set his uncle on fire. This scene mirrored what the Stokes family had done to Bushmaster’s mother when he was a teenager, burning her home down with her still in it.\textsuperscript{21} The show later revealed that Bushmaster’s aunt escaped the fire in the restaurant and reported what happened to Luke. He then brought her to see her husband’s body, and they found Bushmaster there. Mariah had recently decided to expand the family’s criminal activity into selling heroin to gain more money. Shades, who was now dating Mariah, confronted her about selling heroin, but she told him to stay in his place, leading to the end of their relationship.\textsuperscript{22} She named the drug Bushmaster, which prompted Cage and Bushmaster to team up to get the drug off of the streets. They disbanded when Cage refused to allow Bushmaster to destroy the evidence. Now on his own, Bushmaster was forced to flee a coalition of mercenaries put together by Mariah to kill him. Tilda, Mariah’s daughter, then volunteered to help Bushmaster kill Mariah. Sensing that her life was in danger Mariah threw a concert at Harlem’s paradise to ensure there would be enough people around to make Luke protect the club from Bushmaster.


In a twist, Shades confessed to all that he had seen and done since being with Mariah. During the concert, Bushmaster attacked, Luke saved Mariah from him but let him go, and Misty arrested Mariah based on evidence that Shades retrieved from the club. Mariah then made a power play to take over the prison’s criminal enterprise. After giving a rousing speech at her hearing about Harlem needing her, she was taken away after a final kiss with her daughter. That kiss turned out to be poisonous, and Mariah dropped dead shortly after.

**The Blackness of Marvel’s *Luke Cage***

The battles between Luke and his foes have practical implication for the lives of each of the characters. Beyond the personal implications of struggles, the battle have deeper social impacts. In this section I answer the question: how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* explore Black Liberation Theology’s distinction between blackness and whiteness? To accomplish this, I first examine how Coker establishes Harlem as a black environment. I then turn my attention to the show’s inclusive definition of *blackness*. Next, I explore how Coker uses characters to define *whiteness*. Finally, I examine hypotheses for addressing black issues within the show. Those hypotheses seek to answer questions created by a struggle between forces of good and evil, justice and injustice. In *Luke Cage*, the struggle manifests in the form of an ongoing battle. That battle is for the soul of Harlem.

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Harlem

The Harlem of Marvel’s *Luke Cage* is a unique, even mystical world. Beyond the presence of people with superhuman strength, speed, and agility, the show’s Harlem is an unusual hub of blackness, only rivaled by Wakanda. In Harlem, the heroes are black. The villains are black. The barber is black. Most importantly, the culture is black. Harlem is a place in which a black woman can be recalled as a police sergeant for mismanagement of her precinct and not set the effort of black women in law enforcement back ten years. Instead she is merely replaced with another black woman who is subsequently replaced by a black man.  

Harlem’s culture and power structure are black to their core. The music of the show serves as a perfect example of that fact.

Harlem’s streets teem with jazz, soul music, and hip-hop. The show is, for the most part, scored by these three art forms. Live performances by contemporary black artists create the backdrop for scenes and often describe a character’s emotions. In the third episode of season one, Luke is determined to take down Cottonmouth. To accomplish that goal, he goes around Harlem shutting down houses that Cottonmouth uses to distribute guns. As he does this, funk singer Charles Bradley sings “if you ain't gonna do me right, I might just do you in. Ain’t it a sin.” Fittingly, Cottonmouth’s henchman had killed Pop in the previous episode, an act that Luke took personally. Therefore, Luke was hoping to “do [Cottonmouth] in,” not by killing him but by taking his money.

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Additionally, Blaxploitation era music often accompanies tense moments such as when Cottonmouth goes to visit Pop in season one episode two. Cottonmouth had just murdered Shameke, something that he knew Pop would be upset about. Pop was also trying to find and save Chico while Cottonmouth was trying to find and kill Chico. Scenes like this serve multiple purposes. In this case, the music establishes the tension between Pop and Cottonmouth by calling back and paying homage to black film’s origin. It is worth reiterating that the original Luke Cage comic was a Blaxploitation work. Not only does the show honor black film, but its own roots as the first black hero with his own comic book. The show intertwines that homage to blackness with Harlem itself. In Marvel’s Luke Cage, Harlem serves as the epitome of blackness.

**Inclusive Blackness**

I choose the word I instead of African-American with intention. Harlem is divided into neighborhoods of varied blackness. Though each group might identify as black on varying levels (or not at all), all of the people groups’ histories have been impacted by the trans-Atlantic slave trade in some way. Harlem is comprised of African Americans, Jamaicans, Haitians, Puerto Ricans, and Mexicans, with a few scattered white people. In a liberal interpretation of the word black, all of these groups are black in one way or another. The show drives this point home by adapting two characters to specifically establish an inclusive blackness. In the comic, both Shades and Claire are African American. In the show they are Latinx. As descendants of trans-Atlantic slave trade

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victims, these characters are still black, but a different kind. Thinking back to Cone’s definition of black, these characters are black because of the shared legacy of harm done by imperialism and white supremacy.

Claire, for example, tells Luke that she “didn’t need to leave [her] house to experience racism. Soy Africana Cubana.” She continued, “I got family members so filled with shame and hatred, they will deny each other to the grave. That’s how deep it can run.” In Luke Cage’s Harlem, Cuban culture is tied to blackness, not only by a mutual interaction with imperialism, but by the psychological ramification of colorism.28

The show uses Shades to connect Latinx cultures to the black experience as well. He tells Mariah, “you can have all the money in the world, you still ain’t nothin but a nigga for some people.” Initially hearing “nigga” come from Shades mouth was off-putting to me. Shades is not African American. He is Latino. However, when he speaks those words, he relates an experience from his own culture to Mariah’s. Shades speaks to the struggle of exceptional black people. Though they learn to navigate and adopt the values of white culture and spaces, their attempts to assimilate always meet a wall. They never gain full access to white culture. Shades connects this aspect of blackness to the Latinx experience. He, like Mariah, knows the pain of capped acceptance. Though not African-American, he knows the pain of “just being a nigga to some people.” It is not simply an African-American phenomenon but rather a part of the nature of engagement with between blackness and whiteness. Claire and Shades, though Latinx, are black both ethnically and socially.

The presence of different varieties of blackness opens the way for different aspects of blackness to be on display. Notably, in season two, Bushmaster serves as the main villain. His story arc showcases fantastic reggae music as well as various aspects of Jamaican culture such as patois and Jamaican dishes. By highlighting Bushmaster’s culture, Coker pulls Caribbean culture under the umbrella of blackness as well. Though Bushmaster is a villain, the Stokes family murdering his mother makes his desire for revenge is well warranted.29 Furthermore, the people who work and live in his neighborhood are normal citizens of Harlem. Their culture contributes to what Harlem is. Likewise, it contributes to what blackness is. In Luke Cage’s Harlem blackness is not monolithic. Black is not a category under the overbearing weight of whiteness. Rather, black is an umbrella under which many unique cultures find refuge and connection.

**Defining Whiteness**

Because Marvel’s Luke Cage is a show enthralled with blackness and black culture, whiteness is defined in terms of blackness. As is the case in Black Liberation Theology, whiteness in the show does not simply refer to a skin color. That aspect of the show is perfectly exemplified by an exchange that happens between local lawyer, Patricia Wilson, and the police. When her son, Lonnie, was beaten by an angry police officer, she tells police inspector Ridley, “I thought having a sister in charge would make a difference but you’re blue and that makes you just as white as the rest of them.”30 For Patricia, Inspector Ridley’s willingness and desire to protect the police and policing system from

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29. See chapter one.

appropriate accountability makes her white. Here, *whiteness* speaks more of a connection to a system of power than an ethnicity or race. In *Luke Cage’s* Harlem the political system is not the only system of power. The investigation into Misty’s partner, Scarf, reveals that in many ways the political and justice system is beholden to Harlem’s greatest power structure: the criminal enterprise.

Crime bosses are a staple of the show. Different ethnic groups take their place as contributors to the criminal enterprise. The show’s most featured criminal group comes in the form of the Stokes family. During the course of the show this criminal faction has two leaders. In the two section that follow, I examine how the show presents Cornell “Cottonmouth” Stokes and Mariah Dillard as the faces of whiteness by highlighting each character’s motivations and impact on the community.

**Cottonmouth.** The first time Cottonmouth appears on screen, he is in the midst of a conversation with his cousin, Mariah. Mariah tells him that politics is the center of power and that he should “forget about all this other noise.” He replies by telling her that his “noise keeps [her] flush. All that ‘Keep Harlem Black’ wakabooliac may get you re-elected,” he says, “but when the smoke clears, it’s niggas like me that let you hold on to what you got.”31 Later he tells Mariah that she is a “laundromat for the money.” At the time she had not fully accepted to her role in the criminal enterprise and she took great offense to his assertion. However, to him the nature of their operation dictated that he makes money illegally and she legitimizes it. She should “focus on the black and [he] protects our green.”32 Later, Mariah tells him to forget about making money, sell his club,

and consider entering politics. Mariah consistently makes similar suggestions to him throughout the season to which he replies that he is focused on making money. For Cottonmouth, money is the connection between people and power. It becomes his primary and perhaps his only motivation.

Beyond being a motivation, Cottonmouth uses money to cloak his insecurities. His interactions with Luke are an example of this. He constantly taunts Luke because of their opposing economic statuses. He regularly calls Luke a “dishwasher.” In fact, at times it seems that he does so to simply not acknowledge that Luke may be a threat to him, making them equals in a way and shattering Cottonmouth’s understanding of the world and the security provided by his money. Therefore, he routinely jabs at Luke for being poor. Following Pop’s death, Luke struggles in the funeral home to figure out how he will pay for Pop’s funeral arrangements. Cottonmouth walks in and tells Luke that “it's too bad that you don’t have the means to give him [Pop] a proper burial” and later asks him how the job search is going, once again calling him a dishwasher. Additionally, after finding out about Luke’s escape from prison, Cottonmouth tells Luke that he will not turn him in but that he “own(s) [Luke] now.” Money and power have affected Cottonmouth the same way they impacted slave owners. He feels that because he has more money and a higher social standing than the people around him, he is better than them. The people around him cease to be human. He has taken on the identity of the slave owner, actively looking to increase his wealth at all costs. His desire is to maintain wealth

and power through stripping people of their humanity, self-determination, and ability to challenge him.

Unfortunately, he is an extremely powerful figure in Harlem. His guns are the wheels that allow the city’s crime industry to move. The people of Harlem live at his mercy and good graces, which can turn on a whim. Coker exposes that reality by stripping him of his money. After Luke hits all of his stash houses, all of Cottonmouth’s money is confiscated by the police. He sends his goons to extort and rob local business owners, terrorizing the neighborhood. In a day he goes from operating an extremely sophisticated gun dealing business to becoming the kingpin over a low-level extortion ring. Earlier in the season, he accuses the younger generation of treachery saying, “that’s the problem with these youngsters. They want it all, but they don’t want to put in the work. They’ll rob, lie, cheat, steal just to get what they want.” His actions toward Harlem’s business owners show that he believes that lying, cheating, and stealing are things that he, and not other people, have the privilege to do.

To Cottonmouth, those around him are simply pawns or threats to his relentless and endless pursuit of wealth. The show offers Shameke’s death as profoundly triggering example of that fact. Granted, Shameke robbed Cottonmouth. He then refused to tell Cottonmouth where Chico was with the other half of the money they had stolen. However, none of that justifies Cottonmouth’s response. He beat Shameke to death with his bare fists. As Cottonmouth’s fist landed off screen, Shameke’s blood jumps back in the camera’s view of Cottonmouth’s face. Despite horrible screams, he punched Shameke


to death. Even when it was obvious that he had succeeded in murdering the young man, he continued to punch. Upon discovering Shameke’s body later Scarfe says “Shameke Smith, based on what they found in his pockets. We’ll need dental to confirm ID. His face is jacked . . . looks like he got hit by a train.” At the mere hint of his money being threatened Cottonmouth taps into a reserve of violence. He believes himself to be the broker of peace and so long as he has his money, there is peace. As King explains in his Letter from Birmingham Jail, the peace is not peace at all. It is “false peace.” Cottonmouth actually holds the Harlem’s citizens hostage with the threat of violence, which is really just potential violence. In killing Shameke, the potential becomes kinetic, and Cottonmouth recreates a death only rivaled by the real-life murders of Emmitt Till, Kendrick Johnson, and the millions of others who, in one way or another, threatened white supremacy, even if it was simply by existing. Shameke’s murder was a public display of power and a fear tactic. It was a message to Harlem. Do not mess with Cottonmouth. And so, instead of incinerating Shameke’s body, as Cottonmouth systemically does with the bodies of the people he kills, he leaves it to be discovered.

Ironically, Cottonmouth would meet a fate similar to Shameke. In a fit of rage, Mariah murdered him by pushing him out a second floor window at Harlem’s Paradise. There, on the floor of the establishment he called “my reputation, my blood, my legacy,” she caved in his chest in with a microphone stand. She then became the owner of his

club and his underground gun business, as well as the show’s predominant face of whiteness.

**Mariah Stokes Dillard.** Previously a city councilwoman, Mariah Stokes Dillard was a bonafide black success story. Escaping Harlem to go to college, she became a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., then a lawyer, and then entered into politics. Dillard moved back to Harlem under the guise of helping the city. Both inspired and haunted by her grandmother, Mama Mabel, Mariah became obsessed with her reputation and legacy. The Stokes name was tainted by years of operating a gun and prostitution business, so Mariah opted to shed it for that of her late husband Jackson Dillard.41 Being called Ms. Dillard instead of Ms. Stokes becomes a point of emphasis for Mariah. She constantly emphasized her desire to make her family’s wealth and dealing legitimate-first to Cottonmouth, and then to Shades after she killed Cottonmouth and they began dating. However, Mariah’s efforts and rhetoric are plagued with double talk, cognitive dissonance, and delusion.

Initially, her whiteness was defined by her privilege in benefitting politically from the hegemonic criminal system, that allowed her to maintain distance and plausible deniability. Cottonmouth’s criminal activity funded her political efforts. When the show began, she had recently loaned him campaign funds so that he could refurbish his club and make a high-profile gun purchase. She was deeply involved in the crime world, while at the same time being deeply uninvolved. She was a silent partner. As a result, she insisted on not knowing details. In fact, she told Cottonmouth, “I do not want the details” several times in the first seven episodes of the show. For Mariah, public distance between

her and her family’s legacy and inner workings was pivotal for maintaining her reputation. Her reputation was not her end goal, however. As was the case with Cottonmouth, her real driving force became most clear when something was taken away. That “something” for Mariah was her reputation.

In episode seven of season one, local journalist Thembi Wallace tricked Mariah into participating in a feature story about the Stokes’ family legacy and criminal dealings. What Mariah believed would be a live interview about her political success and initiatives to help Harlem was actually a ploy to get into her home and ask her questions about her, Mama Mable, Cottonmouth, and her political corruption. Hours later, Cottonmouth was arrested. A whirlwind of bad press led to Mariah’s party leadership asking her to step down from her city council position. The conversation that she had with Cottonmouth in the next scene was the one in which she killed him.

Left without her reputation and previous privilege of distance, Mariah began to lean more deeply into her criminal persona. She began to resemble Mama Mabel, the pimp and gun dealer, far more than Mama Mabel the philanthropist. After Mariah framed Luke for Cottonmouth’s murder, she paid Candace to falsely testify against him. When Candace expressed her distain for Cottonmouth and her discomfort with going on the record to say that they slept together, Mariah tells her that she is not a whore. Rather she was a businesswoman and the money that Candace received for her testimony was power. Mariah used her money and power to manipulate Candace. In a paternalistic act,

42. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Manifest.”
Mariah suggested that asking Candice to frame an innocent man and perjure herself was Mariah providing this vulnerable young black woman with an opportunity.\textsuperscript{44} She took advantage of Candice’s youth, fear, and poverty to advance her own cause. Then when Candice changed her mind and decided to provide the truth in her testimony, Mariah killed her.

Mariah wanted power that would make her untouchable. Initially she hypothesized that such power came primarily from her reputation. However, following Cottonmouth’s murder, her ideals began to shift. Immense wealth became her new ticket to untouchable power. After she saw how money bought her immunity in Candace’s situation, she sought to amass a fortune that would put her into another financial and social stratosphere. She asked Shades, “do you know what a half billion dollars can do for my family name? My name is Dillard, but I’m haunted by being a Stokes. One deal could change all of that.”\textsuperscript{45} That deal was the purchase of Atreus Plastics, a black-owned plastics company that had just acquired the patents to a revolutionary and profitable plastic, worth about a billion dollars. To convince the owner of the company, Mark Higgins, to sell, Mariah enlisted a young black woman, Billi, to seduce him and take photographs. Mariah then promised to keep the photographs private if Higgins convinced his board to sell. When he told her that he was not going to sell his company to no

\textsuperscript{44} I use “paternalism” here as a reference to white patriarchy wearing a sentimental mask to illustrate, once again, why white men should hold all the power: because they used it to care for all those “dependents” incapable of caring for themselves. For more on this, see: Laurel Clark Shire, “Sentimental Racism and Sympathetic Paternalism: Feeling Like a Jacksonian,” \textit{Journal of the Early Republic} 39, no. 1 (2019): 114.

crackers she said, “Saltine or Ritz,” calling herself a cracker and contradicting her previous political messaging about the importance of black ownership. Coker used her own words to identify her with the rich white power structure. The only black ownership that mattered to her is her owning whatever it is that she wanted.

Mariah’s focus shifted. She still wanted to be a political influencer, but now wanted to do so from a position of extreme financial power. Advised by a political consultant, Mariah reconnected with her estranged daughter, Tildi. Coker made it clear that she did so only for her political advantage. In episode nine of season two Mariah told Tildi that she tried to love her but could not. Her only motivation for connecting with her daughter was to rehab her public image. She constantly created spin and propaganda about herself. At times it seemed as if no one believed it as much as she did. Seeking to justify her criminal activity, Mariah told Tildi “your great grandmother was a ghetto philanthropist. Your cousin Cornell financed all of my campaigns. Now I am a legit philanthropist. That’s the American way, girl.”

However, Mariah was not good at hiding who she really was or her intentions. All of the other characters realized how evil she was at some point in the series. When everyone wanted Luke’s head on a platter following Cottonmouth’s murder, Misty locked in on Mariah and taking the queenpin down. Both Misty and Bushmaster called Mariah the devil. Stocks tycoon, Piranha, who assisted Mariah in acquiring Atrius Plastics, noted that Mariah “wanted to know more about offshore banking, stocks, and crooked legal

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ways white folks get down when it comes to protecting their green.” He later called her “black Mariah Trump.”

Black Mariah is a reference to the Mariah character of the comic book who was designed to have even fewer redeeming qualities than her counterpart on the show. Even Nandi, a corrupt police officer, called Mariah “a cancer to Harlem” because of her dealings “laundering gun money to fund her campaign, [and] killing her cousin Cottonmouth.”

Mariah completed her evolution by giving up legitimizing her wealth and breaking her family’s one rule. She decided to sell heroin, which Coker established as responsible for an outbreak of overdose deaths in Harlem. The next episode featured young people at a party having a violent reaction to a heroin named after Bushmaster. This was Mariah’s final plunge into selfishness, self-absorption, and whiteness. She reclaimed the Stokes moniker and surpassed her grandmother and her cousin, Cottonmouth, in terms of the damage she caused Harlem. The Stokes family, who had dealt in violence and intimidation for decades now dealt the very poison that contaminated the city. She transitioned from acknowledging that some harm had to be done in order for her to do good, to embracing the very essence of damaging and damning a community. Worse than any low-level street dealer, she became a drug

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distributor akin to the American government in the 1980s. Using drugs, she launched a targeted assault on the weakest, poorest, and most downtrodden in her own community. She did all this to build on top of what was already a massive fortune. The people of Harlem were no longer people to her, they were pawns and threats in an endless pursuit of wealth.

She then took on a paternalistic role in Harlem, creating one last bit of spin. When she was finally arrested and stood before the judge, media, and people of Harlem she says:

There is a storm wall around Harlem. One that was built brick by brick by my grandfather Samuel Stokes and by my grandmother Mabel. That wall is eroding. Global warming has taken its toll. Y’all deny the signs. The water has gotten hotter. What should have become a thunderstorm has now become a hurricane. No one was prepared, nothing has been fortified. Resources are overwhelmed. The rains will come torrential and the waters will rise too fast. People won't have time to evacuate. If you release me, I will fortify that wall around Harlem before it is too late… as long as you have been on the bench, as long as everyone here has been alive there has been a Stokes patching up that wall around Harlem. You need me out there. You want me out there, because without me there to help Harlem, God help us all.54

Coker forewarned viewers about Mariah’s self-important view of Harlem’s ecosystem when Diamondback told her that if she stuck with him, “Harlem will be remade in her image,” and she replied that “Harlem is already made in [her] image.”55 Her monologue was accompanied by a montage of Luke fighting upheaval in the city. To Mariah’s point, her absence had created a vacancy that the crime world hoped to fill.56 True or not,


Mariah and her family had been a terror to Harlem. Luke told Bushmaster’s aunt, Ingrid, “I'm so tired of seeing women and children caught in the crossfire. The killing has to stop.” Ingrid, who had witnessed Mariah’s grandmother burning her sister alive and Mariah burning her husband alive replied, “it won’t happen until the last of the Stokes is buried in dirt.”

Mariah’s absence, though catastrophic in the short term, meant hope, freedom, and new possibilities for the people of Harlem in the long term.

Decades of Stokes terror had forever changed Harlem. Crime, violence, and drugs created an almost inescapable environment of stifled opportunity. People like Misty, Mariah, and Tildi, who were able to escape Harlem and create opportunity elsewhere, were rare. People were more likely to end up like Pop: in a gang and sent off to jail. In more unfortunate cases, they ended up like Chico and Shameke: former neighborhood legends, whose inability to escape Harlem’s crime cycle led to their deaths. With that reality in mind, Marvel’s Luke Cage engages in another aspect of Black Liberation Theology’s blackness: creating black hypotheses to engage black issues.

Black Hypotheses

Woven into the show’s dialogue is a hidden conversation about how to save and provide for black youth. An early example of that conversation comes at the end of the show’s second episode. In this scene, Luke is called a nigga by a young man holding a gun to his head. Luke proceeds to explain to the young man that they are standing across from a building named for Crispus Attucks, a black hero. For Luke, the irony of being called a nigga by another black person in such a place is obvious. The young man did not

make the connection. Through this scene, Coker points out that there is a disconnect between his heritage and his actions. He juxtaposes this young man with Crispus Attucks, revered for bravery because he was willing to die for freedom. This young man stands here with a gun pointed at the back of another black person’s head. He is seemingly willing to kill Luke for no other reason than his presence. The show posits that such a person needs saving.

Coker does not offer a hypothesis for how to engage the black issues it raises; it offers several. Each hypothesis is cloaked in the ideology of characters who are not only pivotal in the show’s development but influential in Luke Cage’s Harlem. Mariah and Cottonmouth collaborate to provide a hypothesis. Pop’s hypothesis is revered. Finally, Luke’s hypothesis becomes the bedrock for the show’s theology of liberation.

**Hypothesis 1: Mariah and Cottonmouth.** As I have already established, Mariah and Cottonmouth serve as two sides of the same coin. Though their approaches are initially different, their values are the same. They both value power above all else. No example emphasizes that more than an exchange they share in season one episode two. Mariah tells Cottonmouth he is wasting his gifts and that his gangster lifestyle is not what “our ancestors fought for, what our people died for.” He replies that it is “exactly what they died for: self-determination, control, power . . . you know what people remember besides black martyrdom? Black money.” 59 Money, self-determination, and power ultimately come to define what the Stokes family is about, with power being their primary motivation. In a conversation that they have several times with different words Mariah tells Cottonmouth that “politics is where the power is.” For her, politics is a way

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to gain legitimacy and respect; because “respect is all that really matters.”60 For him, “money outlasts respect. Respect puts your name on the side of a building; money will keep it there.”61 The combination of both ideologies helped to build the Stokes family. When Mariah says, “for black lives to matter, black history and black ownership has to matter,” it makes sense for her to recognize this as a truth.62 After all, she is one of the main benefactors and heirs to the most profitable black gun business in Harlem, maybe even New York. For her and Cottonmouth, black money as a liberating force is a lived experience. All they have and who they are is a result of black wealth.

Black wealth also allows them to participate in paternalism, which they understand to be charitable community work. Mariah struggles with becoming like Mama Mabel. She wants to protect and provide for Harlem the way that Mama Mabel did. Shades explains that when he was a kid if a person “needed a thanksgiving turkey . . . school clothes,” or their “old man put his hands” on them, the people in the community knew to “go see Mama Mabel Stokes.”63 However, like Mama Mabel, Mariah is also power hungry. Therefore, she recreates and adds to the same toxic environment that Mama Mabel cultivated.

Therein lies the issue with Mariah and Cottonmouth’s hypothesis: black wealth solves black issues. It depends on wealth and power. In both of their lives and ultimate downfalls the phrase “absolute power corrupts absolutely” is on full display. Power turns Cornell Stokes, a kindhearted musician and the grandson of Harlem’s queenpin, Mama

Mabel, into Cottonmouth, ruthless gun peddler. Power and the maintenance of power dictated that he could not pursue his dreams and talent; rather he had to stay in Harlem and maintain the family gun business.\footnote{Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Manifest.”} Mariah’s corruption happens before the audience’s eyes. The woman who was simply a run-of-the-mill corrupt politician, becomes a full-blown gun and drug queenpin.

Both Cottonmouth and Mariah speak truthful statements about the necessity of black ownership as well as self-determination being the fulfilment of the dreams of black ancestors. However, they do it at the expense of black people, specifically poor black youth. Instead of empowering and facilitating positive opportunity for Harlem’s youth, they use them as pushers and pawns. They either directly or indirectly murder every young black person who they come in contact with. Shamke, Chico, and Candace all die at their hands. Their hypothesis, though containing elements of truth, is ultimately voided. Coker presents it as something the audience should glean from but not adopt. Pop’s hypothesis, however, is presented in a much more positive light.

\textbf{Hypothesis 2: Pop.} As I have already mentioned, Pop is a former gang member who spent time in prison. After he completes his sentence, he opts out of re-entering the criminal lifestyle. Rather, he opens up his barbershop, which eventually become a refuge for Harlem’s youth to escape the negative elements of their environment. Pop says that Harlem’s youth “want a way out but they have too much pride to ask for help so you have to Jedi mind trick ‘em.”\footnote{Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Code of the Streets.”} That is what he does. In the midst of a violent ecosystem created primarily by the Stokes, Pop builds a silo. In his barbershop, Harlem’s youth
receive a different conditioning than the one their violent neighborhood offers. The shop has two Barbershop rules: no cursing and no street talk. Luke reports that Pop believed that “these kids need to see a man go to work every day, and be in the presence of men in uniform putting in work.” For Pop, a role model who takes a path other than the quick cash route of the streets was essential to saving black youth. He was a mentor and a guide. Even Cottonmouth says, “where some people saw a warzone Pop always saw a pasture, a breeding ground for artistry, greatness.” Pop’s impact was resounding. Even Harlem’s gangsters respect the peaceful and nurturing environment he creates. As a result, Pop’s Barbershop becomes Switzerland, a neutral territory where the problems of the streets did not exist and could not survive.

Pop’s hypothesis for saving black youth was summed up in two words: care and presence. Luke petitions Pop to abandon Chico, telling him, “you just got to let some people go.” Pop refuses and insists that Luke find Chico. He reminds Luke of a previous conversation between the two when Luke told Pop, “I owe you one,” in exchange for Pop keeping Luke and his criminal past a secret. This exchange explains everything that the audience needs to about Pop. With a bulletproof, super-powered employee owing him a humongous favor, Pop chooses to call it in, not for selfish gain but to save the life of a local youth who has made the mistake of a lifetime. After Luke finds Chico, who refuses to go back with him, he tells Pop that “you can’t save everybody.” Pop replies, “you’re wrong about that. What would have happened to my life if people gave up on me?”

Pop has a heart that desperately hopes to save the next generation, but he is plagued by an inability to create meaningful structural change. He can create Switzerland but not end the war. Shameke, for example, orchestrates a plan to rob Cottonmouth and subsequently murders one of his oldest friends in order to “be rich.” He falls into the same trap Cottonmouth did. The appeal of quick money proves to be too enticing for Pop’s approach to compete with. Misty shares that Pop had a huge impact on her and her journey of going to college and becoming a police officer. However, Misty also knew her father and had an active relationship with him. The show makes it clear that she is in the minority in that regard. Luke says, “everyone has a gun, and no one has a father.” Pop possesses this great wisdom but cannot help but watch this new generation fall into the same pitfalls that he and his peers did. He was in a gang with Alfredo Diaz, Chico’s father. Pop spends the last hours of his life desperately trying to save Chico’s. It was a cycle that he was trying his best to break but simply could not.

As Luke says “Pop never forgot his people. Where some people saw hardrock kids, he saw precious jewels . . . . Pop saw the shine in everyone that walked into his barbershop.” That Barbershop was intended to be the breeding ground for the betterment of the next generation. Nevertheless, Pop’s Barbershop was destroyed multiple times during the first season. Its destruction signals an end of neutrality and passivity as the predominant responses to whiteness in Harlem. The final destruction

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70. Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, “Who’s Gonna Take the Weight?”
happens in the fight between Luke and Diamondback. Luke is indwelled with Pop’s spirit. He accepts Pop’s mission. However, his hypothesis is different. His hypothesis combines all of Pop’s hope for a better Harlem with the power to create change.

**Hypothesis 3: Luke Cage.** As I will discuss in chapter three, Marvel’s *Luke Cage* follows Luke’s journey to becoming a vigilante and developing his own hypothesis for how to address black issues. Pop’s death serves as a major turning point in Luke’s outlook. Not only is it Luke’s watershed moment, when he finally makes the decision to come out of hiding and use his power for good, it also serves as his primary motivation in season one. Following Pop’s death, all of the show’s protagonists talk about the impact he was hoping to have on the community frequently. Empowered with special abilities, Luke has the opportunity to do more than simply remember Pop. Luke takes to the streets and seeks to make structural change to Harlem’s ecosystem.

Luke begins by taking down Cottonmouth’s gun operation. He raids Cottonmouth’s stash houses. He walks through Harlem and intimidates anyone remotely associated with Cottonmouth’s operation. After a short period of Luke’s crime pillaging Harlem is abuzz and as Cottonmouth’s lawyer says, “the streets are talking.” By the time of Pop’s funeral low-level criminals run when they see Luke. As Cottonmouth deduces, he is trying to prove to Harlem that it does not need gun peddler or a crime scene at all. Ultimately, Luke’s vigilante work leads to Cottonmouth’s mental and

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75. Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, season 2 episode 5, “All Souled Out,” directed by Kasi Lemmons, written by Ian Stokes, featuring Mike Colter, Finn Jones, Reg E. Cathy, Simone Missick, Alfre
financial downfall. Though Mariah killed Cottonmouth, Luke freed Harlem of his abusive power well before he was pushed through that window. He did not have the freedom to abuse Harlem without consequence any longer. Luke changed the ecosystem.

Luke takes a similar approach to addressing the drug issue as well in season two. In the first episode he is roaming Harlem at night and scaring drug dealers selling heroin named “Luke Cage.” Eventually he takes hold of the crime scene by intimidating high-level drug bosses out of the city. By attacking the criminal enterprise from top to bottom, he is able to disrupt it and take down several of its pillars: Cottonmouth, Diamondback, and Mariah. Luke battles the system head on, bringing a direct and often violent fight to the oppressor. As I will discuss in chapter three, he shifts his approach at the end of season two, opting for diplomacy instead of direct action. Luke Cage’s hypothesis for black issues is simple: bring justice and protection to Harlem by any means necessary.

Conclusion

This chapter posed the question: how does Marvel’s Luke Cage explore Black Liberation Theology’s distinction between blackness and whiteness? Luke Cage, the show and the character, are distinctly black. They are black in culture, practice, and focus. And this understanding of blackness is multifaceted, complex, and interconnected. Coker makes an assumption that is foundational in Black Liberation Theology, that black culture is the salt of the Earth. It has something meaningful and unique to provide.


Blackness is the practical and spiritual answer to oppressive whiteness. The show is set in a black neighborhood with black characters who are focused on black issues. Even whiteness is crafted from a black reality and embodied by black people.

Beyond skin color, Coker equates blackness in the show with the disenfranchised and those who have been taken advantage of. Whiteness is personified as those who are oppressing and benefiting from oppression. Blackness is Pop trying to figure out how to prevent young men and women from falling into the pitfalls of a racist system that has subjected them to subhuman treatment and given them guns and drugs as a coping mechanism. Blackness is Luke Cage stomping out thugs and drug dealers. Black is the humbled masses of Harlem. Harlem is a silent player for whose soul the main characters battle. The fights among Luke and his adversaries have practical and likely lifelong implications for people in the community who cannot fight for themselves. Will Harlem continue to be the victim of gun violence and drug peddlers? How can black people better a community devastated by the selfishness of the wealthy? How do black people combat the devilish forces of white power? Black Liberation Theology seeks to answer these questions from a black perspective, just as Luke Cage does. In fact, the asking and subsequent conversation about how to fix such issues becomes the bedrock for liberation.
CHAPTER III

LIBERATION

What would you do if you were bulletproof? That is a question I do not have the privilege of answering. For Luke Cage, however, it becomes the question of his lifetime. Luke’s answer is to fight back. Prompted by Pop’s death, Luke becomes the defender of Harlem. He shuts down gun markets and puts drug dealers out of business. Street criminals run when they see him. Crime bosses hatch elaborate plans to kill him. He helps expose corruption of politicians and police officers. He fights to create a space of safety and self-determination for the citizens of Harlem. Still, Harlem is riddled with crime and drugs. Criminals still terrorize citizens at will. The show takes a different approach to liberation than simply dispelling the environment’s unpleasant elements. In this chapter, I examine how Marvel’s Luke Cage defines liberation and uses that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United States today. First, I provide an overview of liberation within Black Liberation Theology. Then, I summarize relevant events in the show’s plot development. Finally, I analyze liberation within Marvel’s Luke Cage.

The Liberation in Black Liberation Theology

Black power is an essential element in Black Liberation Theology. According to Cone, “black power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings
with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”¹ Furthermore, “there can be no revelation which does not provide us with an understanding of our own authenticity.”² It is not “black racism or black hatred. Simply stated, black power is an affirmation of the humanity of blacks in spite of white racism.”³ Black power is the essence of liberation in Black Liberation Theology. To that end, Cone agrees with “Malcolm X when he says: ‘the worst crime that white people have created is to teach black people to hate themselves. That’s why we kill each other, we kill each other in the ghettos etc.’”⁴ It is the very condition that prompts the need for liberation, Cone asserts. He says that the fact that “white America has issued a death warrant for being black is evident in the white brutality inflicted on black persons. Though whites may deny it, the ghettos of this country say otherwise.”⁵ Therefore, liberation “means complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”⁶

Returning to the integration of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., Cone presents liberation in terms of a back and forth between love and justice. The ideologies of all three men converge around a commitment to the poor, weak, and ignored in society, specifically the roles of love and justice in liberation. Cone describes Black Liberation Theology “as a theology that sees God primarily as concerned with the poor and the weak in society.”⁷ Leaning on the Israelite tradition, Cone asserts that “Yahweh’s

⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 208.
⁷ “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder’s Words.”
concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society. Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not tolerate injustice against the poor; God will vindicate the poor.” 8 Here, “Yahweh takes sides.” 9 Cone says that “God is taking sides with those who are voiceless and weak and he is empowering them to know that they were not made for slavery, not made for domination but they were made for freedom like everybody else in the world.” 10 Due to their subjugated status in America, “the God of the oppressed takes sides with the black community.” 11 Therefore, in Black Liberation Theology whoever fights for the poor, fights for God; whoever risks his [or her] life for the helpless and unwanted, risks his [or her] life for God. God is active now in the lives of those men [and women] who feel an absolute identification with all who suffer because there is no justice in the land. 12

In Black Liberation Theology, seeking to liberate the weak is not merely a facet, but rather the practical manifestation of the theology itself. According to Cone, “there is no knowledge of Yahweh except through God’s political activity on behalf of the weak and helpless of the land.” 13 In fact, the political and the spiritual are inseparably tied. Liberation has “to be political because politics is a part of life.” 14 Black Liberation Theology is “a message about the ghetto, and all other injustices done in the name of democracy and religion to further the social, political, and economic interests of the

10. “Black Liberation Theology, in its Founder’s Words.”
oppressor.”

This means that “because black families were brutalized and broken by slavery and oppression, God becomes the stabilizing and liberating force in their lives.”

Cone then calls for what he terms “black rebellion,” defined as a “manifestation of God himself actively involved in the present-day affairs of men for the purpose of liberating a people.” According to Cone, Jesus Christ is the personification of liberation. He says that “Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his solidarity with them even to death.” Liberation is a marriage between the political and the spiritual.

In America, engagement with the political means engaging with hegemonies. Many civil rights leaders in the 1960s believed that working with and even within the hegemonic system provided the best route to black liberation. Tactics such as sit-ins and marches spoke to a denial of rights by a hegemonic power. They also demanded that those rights be granted. Malcolm X disagreed. According to X, “the established order, has the ways and means to heal the sick, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and shelter the homeless, yet it does not and has refused to do so because it has confused human wants with genuine human needs.” For X, the hegemonic system was completely unreliable. It understands the issues that face the weakest members in its society and has simply chosen to ignore them. In seeking to reconcile the ideologies of the two men, Black Liberation Theology seeks to answer the question: to what extent can liberating

15. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 645.
17. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 688.
forces depend on a hegemonic system of power in the black struggle of liberation? Here, I argue that Marvel’s *Luke Cage* poses that same question.

**Marvel’s Luke Cage Plot Summary**

In the episode leading up to Cottonmouth’s murder, the show reveals that Misty’s partner, Rafeal Scarffe, is a dirty cop on Cottonmouth’s payroll. He provides Cottonmouth with information and also executes tasks that allow the crime boss to get out of legal binds. Scarffe even kills Chico to prevent him from testifying against Cottonmouth. As the show pushes closer to Cottonmouth’s fate, the walls begin closing in on the two men. In a desperate attempt to squeeze more money out of his criminal employer, Scarffe withholds some guns that Cottonmouth has ordered him to retrieve from police custody. Instead of paying the fee, Cottonmouth shoots Scarffe, causing him to flee while bleeding profusely. Scarffe finds Luke. When Luke asks him why the detective came to him, Scarffe tells Luke that he knew that Luke’s distrust of law enforcement would prevent him from calling the police. Eventually Scarffe succumbs to his injuries. Misty arrives just in time to see him take his final breath. He dies in Misty’s arms.

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Following Cottonmouth’s death, Luke begins a budding relationship with Claire, a nurse who has just returned to Harlem. While walking with Claire in the park, Luke is shot. Usually the bullets bounce off. However, this bullet penetrates Luke’s skin and lodges in his abdomen. The show later reveals that Diamondback, Cottonmouth’s former gun supplier, shot Luke with a Judas bullet, the only bullet that can penetrate the vigilante’s skin. The show also reveals that due to a longstanding rivalry, Diamondback framed Luke and is the reason Luke was sent to prison. After defeating Diamondback at the end of season two, Luke is arrested for escaping prison.

With no explanation of what happened while Luke was away in prison for the second time, season two opens with Luke walking through the streets of Harlem as a celebrity. Luke’s celebrity status parallels his faltering ability to control his anger. The hero who once opted for phrases such as “sweet Christmas” now curses frequently. He even punches a hole in Claire’s wall, prompting her to leave and put an end to their romantic relationship. Luke’s change in behavior is prompted by unresolved animosity.

towards his father, who is now in Harlem.\textsuperscript{29} Throughout the season, Luke’s issues with his father become the demons that he will either overcome or be consumed by, leading to his downfall. But Luke is not the only person enduring personal struggles.

Misty battles with the loss of her arm (suffered in Marvel’s \textit{Defenders} season 1), which, in addition to grappling with her partner’s corruption, forces her retirement from police work.\textsuperscript{30} She later returns to the force, unable to deny her deep desire to issue justice to criminals. However, after giving back her previously awarded pension and returning to work, she is relegated to desk duty.\textsuperscript{31} Determined to do the work that she loves, she begins going on rogue missions, without the approval of her new supervisor: Lt. Ridenhour.\textsuperscript{32} She later receives a robotic arm for saving Colleen Wing’s (girlfriend of Defender and Owner of Rand Enterprises, Danny Rand) life.\textsuperscript{33} She then strikes out to take down Mariah Dillard.

Because of Cottonmouth’s irrational behavior in his final days, Mariah is out of politics. After killing her cousin, she frames Luke for the murder to escape prison and perhaps gain political empathy. Though she accomplishes both goals, she still does not


\textsuperscript{31}. Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Soul Brother #1.”

\textsuperscript{32}. Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Wig Out.”

reclaim her city councilwoman position. Having inherited a crime empire from Cottonmouth, Mariah turns her attention to expanding her wealth. In her first appearance in season two, she discusses a deal with a local broker, Piranha, to buy a plastics company, which is on the brink of creating ground-breaking technology. Later she blackmails the owner, Mike Higgins, into selling her the company. To produce the money to buy this corporation, Mariah puts her family’s illegal gun enterprise on the market. The business draws three suitors, all of different ethnicities: Mexican, Arturo Gomez III; African American, Darnell “Cockroach” Hamilton; and Jamaican, Nigel Garrison. Eventually, Mariah chooses to sell to Nigel, the Jamaican suitor. However, when Shades, Mariah’s new love interest and closest confidant, arrives to make the deal it is not Nigel to whom he sells the guns; rather it is another Jamaican buyer. The buyer ends up being Bushmaster, who was in Harlem to exact revenge on the Stokes family by destroying Mariah. After Bushmaster failed to take Mariah down, he returns to Jamaica, leaving Luke and Mariah to battle for Harlem. Eventually her crimes catch up with her, and she is arrested. After her arrest and a suspicious kiss from her daughter that would eventually kill her, Mariah leaves the nightclub and thereby the criminal enterprise to Luke who initially refuses it. The season ends with him in the owner’s office of Harlem’s Paradise taking business and rejecting a request to meet Claire.

34. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
The Liberation of Marvel’s Luke Cage

Luke’s complicated story arc in season two raises a lot of questions about what exactly his character is meant to represent. In the next section, I analyze how Coker develops his characterization of Luke and his protagonist counterpart, Misty Knight, to establish the show’s theses about liberation. Here I ask the question: how does Coker use Marvel’s Luke Cage to define liberation and use that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United States today? To answer this question, I first examine how Coker constructs Luke’s identification with the poor as a means of providing a definition of liberation. I then turn my attention to Luke and Misty’s evolving and overlapping ideologies about the role of hegemonies in liberation to highlight practical implications for modern liberation efforts.

Identification with the Poor

One of the most important connecting pieces between Luke Cage and Black Liberation Theology is that liberation means placing power into the hands of the poor, mistreated, and powerless. In the show, the poor, mistreated, and powerless are the people of Harlem. Their neighborhoods are riddled with drugs, terrorized by violence, and used as a board in the chess game played by Harlem’s crime syndicate. The new source of power, Luke Cage, identifies more with the average Harlem citizen than with any identifiable institution (e.g., police, politicians, criminals, or churches). Luke does not stand as a representative for anyone but the masses who suffer in silence. Few examples exemplify this as well as Luke’s time fleeing the police in the latter part of season one and Luke’s constant financial struggles throughout the course of the show.
**Police Brutality.** The show paints Luke’s trouble with law enforcement as both the reason for and an example of the ongoing relationship between Harlem’s citizens and the police. Seeing an opportunity to taint Luke’s reputation, Diamondback straps on a suit that gives him superhuman strength. He then finds an officer who is beloved in the community and punches him in the chest with fatal force. Everyone, except for Misty, assumes Luke was responsible because of the strength required to commit the act. Jake, an angry officer, says, “one of our own is dead. Cage is going to pay for what he did. We’re going to hit the streets hard. We’re going to shake the ground. We’re going to smoke him out. That’s how you find a roach, fumigate.” Inspector Ridley replies, “you’re talking about a community of people, not pests.” Jake fires back saying, “oh come on inspector, I’m from the South Bronx. I’m 28 years on the job. I’m not just some idiot who’s afraid of blacks and Hispanics.” He later says, “caution is in the wind, just like he is. I need results.” Inspector Ridley tells him to remember who he serves and tells him not to “light up Harlem.” He then says, “the good people of Harlem have no problem with me, just the assholes.” This statement is painfully brought into focus as the viewer sees a montage that played over the course of the conversation and realizes that all of the “assholes” are all young black and brown people who, before the police arrived, were minding their own business. The police take to the streets, determined to find Luke. They launch a scorched earth campaign to arrest him. The aforementioned Earth that gets scorched is actually the innocent people of Harlem. They harass every black and brown person who they can find.

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Luke, who is also innocent, is treated in a way that presumes his guilt, just the citizens of Harlem are. Trish, a local radio show host, says, “I think it’s noteworthy that the only people that I’ve spoken to who criticize (Luke) are the ones who don’t know him personally. So many others have read about him or saw him on the news and jumped to conclusions.” This process of assessing guilt and/or evil intentions to Luke without knowing anything about him mirrors the treatment that black people are given by the media and other sources after they are killed by police.

Luke shares in their mistreatments because Harlem’s initial feelings of mistrust toward him evolve into almost universal solidarity. When asked why Luke is running if he is innocent, Method Man responds that “bulletproof always come second to being black.” The people of Harlem “wear hoodies with holes as a sign of solidarity with” Luke who local journalist Thembi Wallis calls “an outlaw.” They put their own lives at risk to protect Luke, knowing how desperate the police are to capture him.

Here, Coker provides an instance of the Harlem’s citizens taking liberation into their own hands. Having endured police brutality their whole lives, they stand up and protect Luke by any means necessary. The police roam their neighborhoods as a sign that they are a conquered people. They harass citizens at will. In the first season’s tenth episode, Harlem’s citizens take their power back. The only currency they have to pay for freedom is their bodies and maybe their lives. Willing to pay the price, Harlem’s citizens tell the police that they cannot harass the city just because they are upset. In fact, Harlemites use their power to make the police powerless. Harlem’s officers never find

Luke. He only surrenders two episodes later in order to save people.\textsuperscript{39} Harlem’s citizens reclaim their power by uniting and fighting back. However, Luke does much of the show’s fighting back.

\textbf{Luke Cage: A Poor Man’s (Woman’s) Hero.} In addition to a figurative identification with the poor, Luke also literally identifies as poor. For the vast majority of the series, Luke either struggles to pay his rent or lives with his girlfriend, Claire, in what can only be a rent-free situation. His vigilante efforts do not generate income.\textsuperscript{40} After he and Claire split, he begins taking refuge in Pop’s Barbershop.\textsuperscript{41} Unlike a fox or a bird, Luke has nowhere to lay his head. What is apparent from him working two jobs and still being harassed by his landlord for money in season one becomes a topic of conversation in season two.\textsuperscript{42} Luke is broke. He is homeless. He is poor.

Beyond being financially poor, however, Luke serves as an example of why Cone uses “poor” and “black” so interchangeably. Luke struggles with realities and situations that are both out of his control and thrust upon him. The first of these realities is being framed by Diamondback which resulted in him being sent to prison.\textsuperscript{43} After escaping, he lives in fear of being discovered for many reasons. One of the main sources of his fears is


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{40} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Soul Brother #1.”}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{41} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Wig Out.”}


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{43} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Blowin’ Up the Spot.”}
trauma that results in nightmares and talking fearfully in his sleep.\textsuperscript{44} Kalief Browder made mainstream what has been the reality of many young black people for decades; jail is a traumatic experience.\textsuperscript{45}

Furthermore, when Luke began his work as a vigilante his past threatened the progress of his liberation efforts. Claire tells Luke that “if people see that you’re one of them, that’s good. If you stand and fight, they’ll follow you.” Luke replies, “if I go to prison, who’s going to want to follow me?” Claire then explains that

half the people uptown have fathers, uncles, cousins, brothers in prison. You're not different than anybody else. You get your wish. You're not special. Instead of running, if you make a move and take [Diamondback] down once and for all you save this community and you free yourself.\textsuperscript{46}

This exchange between Luke and Claire draws out an important point about Luke’s character. Cone frames Christ as the lived experience of the poor. Coker paints Luke in the same way. More than just knowing what it means to struggle to pay rent, Luke Cage can speak to, understand, identify with the experience of Harlem’s (and America’s) “least of these” more than any run-of-the-mill officer, politician, or clergyman could. He knows what it means to be harassed, mistreated, and falsely accused. He is primed to be a force of liberation because he knows what it means to need liberation. His efforts to free Harlem are not far-out conjectures from a board room or strategy session. Luke Cage’s liberation efforts are a direct product of his lived experience. That lived experience makes Luke a leader in Harlem and puts him in line with two other leaders from Black America’s past: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

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\item[44.] Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Moment of Truth.”
\item[46.] Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Manifest.”
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Marvel’s *Luke Cage and the Hegemony Debate*

Just as Cone does in Black Liberation Theology, Coker weaves an ongoing interplay between Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr into Marvel’s *Luke Cage*. The series mentions the two figures on a number of occasions. Notably, in a rap verse that Method Man delivers to show support for Luke as he flees from police after being set up by Diamondback, he mentions that they “already took Malcolm and Martin.” In this instance, Coker uses Method Man to put Luke in the realm of leadership associated with Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. DW, a kid who follows Luke around with a camera, pushes a similar agenda when he says, “I don’t remember Malcolm or Martin turning down any interviews.” In this particular case, Luke is lamenting the spotlight that his vigilante activity is bringing him. These examples show that people in Harlem look to Luke as a symbol of leadership and liberation akin to X and King.

The show also alludes to both prophets in a more subtle way. The primary allusion comes in the form of street signs. Specifically, Malcolm X Blvd. is featured several different times. Starting with the opening sequence, Malcolm X Blvd. appears on three separate occasions. The last time the street sign appears on the opening sequence, it is on a punching fist. In the storyline, the intersection between the streets in Harlem named for the two men marks an important moment for liberation in the show. In season two, Luke survives a Judas bullet, sold to his would-be assassin by Mariah and Shades. After Luke returns the bullet to Mariah, he tells her that he would kill her if she spoke Claire’s name again. He further explained that no bullet could kill him and that he would

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happily go to jail because no jail can hold him. He then promised to pursue her without end. This encounter serves as the season’s first instance of the face of blackness prophesying future destruction to the face of whiteness. The next scene shows him passing the intersection between Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd and Malcolm X Blvd.\textsuperscript{50}

Beyond marking major moments of liberation in the series, the interplay of the ideologies of X and King plays an active role in the character development of the show’s two primary liberating forces: Luke and Misty. Initially these two characters have a shaky relationship. By pure fate or coincidence Luke works at the two places frequented by Shameke and Chico, the young men who robbed Cottonmouth.\textsuperscript{51} For this reason, Luke attracts Misty’s suspicion more than any other potential suspect. She maintains a strong distrust for Luke until the latter part of the first season. By that time, however, her suspicion of him is not the biggest point of contention between the two. The rise of his vigilantism has created an ideological difference between them. On her part, she believes Luke needs to work with the police, within the system. Luke, on the other hand, distrusts the police and the hegemonic powers of the criminal justice system. For Luke, working within the system is just as bad as being a criminal. Luke and Misty create a juxtaposition of trust and distrust of hegemonic power throughout the course of the series. Each embarks on a journey to trusting or distrusting Harlem’s hegemonic systems, each moving away from their initial position and toward the other’s perspective. In the sections to come I first examine Misty’s trust of Harlem’s hegemonic criminal justice system and her journey to distrusting the hegemony. Then I examine Luke’s distrust of

\textsuperscript{50} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Soul Brother #1.”

\textsuperscript{51} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Moment of Truth.”
Harlem’s hegemonic criminal justice system and his subsequent decision to work within another hegemonic system.

**Misty’s Trust.** Misty’s insistence that Luke “either be a part of the solution or leave” sums up her initial attitude toward a vigilante running the streets of Harlem. Earlier in that episode, Scarffe asked her what was wrong with having a vigilante doing their work for them. She replied, “yeah there’s something wrong with that. It’s anarchy; a complete breakdown in the system. There are rules and regulations to what we do.” 52 Early in the series, Misty’s undying belief in the criminal justice system serves as her most predominant trait. The show explains her strong allegiance to the criminal justice system’s hegemonic power with a detailed backed story.

Misty explains that as a teenager, her cousin Casandra was kidnapped, raped, and murdered. According to Misty,

> it took the cops two week to find her body, disfigured and beaten. The boy, Mike Jones, ran a train on her with his crew. The cop didn’t push, he didn’t really give a shit. She was just another poor worthless bitch from the Polo Grounds.

When the police psychologist asks if her cousin’s rape and murder is the reason that she became a cop, Misty replies, “I apply foot to ass and match lead for lead. I put murderers in handcuffs. I don’t just seek justice, I stalk it. And that much should go on my record.” She even decides to stay in Harlem, forgoing promotion opportunities because she feel like she can make a difference in the area. 53

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For Misty, being a part of the system is a way to regain control she once lost. Her mother tells her and her cousin to not separate. It is only after Misty ignores that directive and goes to the store alone does Casandra disappears. She feels responsible for the situation and being a police officer is her way to regain control that she feels that she lost. It is her security blanket, and as a result, something she trusts in deeply. It allows her to match violence for violence within a structured system that dictates who is good and who is bad. It provides rules for the wilderness to which her cousin fell victim and allows her to be the goel for others.54

Misty’s background allows her to escape the pitfall of corruption. As a result, she becomes a liberating force. She identifies with and protects the poor. She is not overly abusive or power hungry; she simply loves Harlem and wants justice for the city. She protects people from one of Harlem’s most abusive forces: the crime syndicate. However, she becomes a part of another abusive force in Harlem, the criminal justice system. During the course of the series, however, Misty learns that the system in which she places her hope is fundamentally flawed.

**Misty’s Journey to Distrusting Hegemonic Power.** The first major blow to Misty’s trust in the system is her partner, Scarffe. In the sixth episode of season one, Misty recalls that when she got promoted to detective ten years prior, Scarffe took her under his wing and mentored her even though many of the other officers did not think she belonged there. She says that during their partnership “he has had [her] front and her

back.” The revelation of Scarffe’s corruption creates an unavoidable world wind in Misty’s life. The system in which she has put so much hope began to show gapping cracks. After Scarffe’s death, Misty’s sergeant tells her that higher-ups are afraid of headlines because Scarffe, a deceased crooked cop, is the only one who can tie the crimes together. When Misty says that she will tie them together, her sergeant replies “you’re on the wrong side of the class baby girl.” The camera then peers into a room with large windows. The room contains three white men discussing how they will handle the case. This is the only time in the show when the police power system is white – when the one force for liberation on the police force is boxed out and not allowed to do her work.

The police later arrest Cottonmouth in connection with Scarffe’s murder. Upon Cottonmouth’s release from prison, higher-ups replace Misty’s sergeant with her old colleague from her previous precinct, Inspector Priscilla Ridley. Her outgoing sergeant urges her to stop investigating Scarffe, Cottonmouth, and Luke, saying that she needs to “play it smart” because “she still has a future” within the system. However, with Scarffe’s illegal dealing exposed, she receives increased scrutiny and skepticism from her colleagues. Ironically, she is an outsider on the police force because she is not corrupt. Cottonmouth tells her colleague, Lieutenant Perez, that “if Scarffe talks, [he] ain’t the only one going down. Half the department is going with [him].” The system of power and hegemony in which she has put so much hope for justice is rotten. What is worse, the person who she felt that she could trust the most is actually the face of the department’s corruption.

57. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Manifest.”
Perhaps the final blow to Misty’s faltering trust in the system is Candice’s death. Candice is a young lady who witnesses Mariah kill Cottonmouth. Mariah then offers Candice a bribe to frame Luke. Eventually, Candice’s conscience gets the best of her and she decides to tell the police the truth. This results in Mariah’s arrest. Misty takes it upon herself to hide Candice. Feeling as if she is unable to trust anyone in the police department, she does not file an official report that Candice is in witness protection. Rather, she gives Candice a phone that only has Misty’s number programmed in it. Through a turn of events Shades gets ahold of Misty’s phone. To prevent Candice from testifying, he murders her.

When the police find Candice dead, they set Mariah free. Before leaving the precinct, Mariah tells Inspector Ridley that the police have Diamondback, the man who killed Cottonmouth, in their possession. That story provides the inspector with a nice and clean narrative that is likely to restore peace of mind to Harlem’s citizens and her bosses, even if it lacked truth. Mariah is speaking to the politician who exists in any powerful person within the system. Despite their good intentions or desire for justice, the need for order makes them susceptible to bending the truth and thereby, accepting an injustice. Before the audience gets a chance to see how the inspector will respond, Misty says “this shield is not worth the tin that it is printed on if Mariah Dillard can just walk out of here after what she’s done. The system is broke, Priscilla [Ridley].” The inspector replies, [Misty] you are one of the finest detectives I have ever seen but you have got to learn that there is no getting around the system, you have got to work within it. Candice should have been in protective custody, she should have been here, and I should have known about it. Mariah Dillard walked out of

here today because of you. Because you didn't trust our system. Because you didn’t trust me.\textsuperscript{61}

However, the system’s persistent corruption has given Misty every reason to be distrustful. When Luke asks her “how is the system treating you lately,” the question reaches beyond how her peers or even the community is treating her. Rather, it reaches to a breakdown of her beliefs and dependencies.\textsuperscript{62} She can no longer depend on the criminal justice system because it is beholden to criminals and is, in large part, a criminal enterprise itself.

In between season one and two, Misty loses her arm, which forces her into retirement. She then discovers that Cockroach, a criminal who she and Scarffe arrested, has been released as a result of Scarffe’s tainted convictions. When she asks, “how many other cases got bounced because of Scarffe,” Captain Riddenhower tells her at least 30. She replies, “then I’m gonna put them all back, one at a time.” She decides to go back to work.\textsuperscript{63} Unable to live with so many criminals back on the street, she forgoes her pension and early retirement and re-enters the system she had learned to be weary of. Other officers constantly question Misty and stifle her efforts after she loses her arm. Captain Riddenhower resigns her to desk duty and does not allow her to interact with witnesses or go to crime scenes. When she disobeys and does police work, other officers tell her that she should not be there. In season two, episode two Nondi plays the role of undercover cop in Harlem’s Paradise, a role that Misty played in season one. Meanwhile, Misty sits

\textsuperscript{61} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “You Know My Steez.”
\textsuperscript{63} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Soul Brother #1.”
at her desk attempting to figure out a case that she has been told not to work on.\textsuperscript{64}

Frustrated with her new lot, Misty begins rebelling against the system more frequently. She systematically defies orders, goes to crime scenes she has been told to stay away from, and investigates cases that she has been told to leave alone. Captain Riddenhower and other officers stifled her ability to investigate crimes and bring about justice at every turn.

Cockroach becomes the face of the larger aftermath of Scarffé’s corruption. He beats his girlfriend, runs an illegal casino, and is now making a play to buy Mariah’s gun business.\textsuperscript{65} He is reckless and cocky. Misty goes to talk to Cockroach’s girlfriend after he abuses her again. She attempts to convince the young lady to provide her with information to arrest him. Cockroach’s girlfriend tells her she does not believe that the police have the ability to take him off the streets because they failed to do so the last time due to Scarffé’s corruption.\textsuperscript{66} The only person who delivers any semblance of justice in the face of this terror to the community is Luke, who beats Cockroach half to death.\textsuperscript{67}

Frustrated with the growing crime problem and her powerlessness, Misty contemplates framing Cockroach by planting a “Judas bullet” in his apartment. Years before and unbeknownst to her, Scarffé planted the gun on Cockroach which led to his first conviction and subsequent release. If Cockroach was caught with the bullet, it would be a mandatory prison sentence. She goes as far as breaking into his apartment and taking


\textsuperscript{65} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Straighten Out.”

\textsuperscript{66} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “All Souled Out.”

\textsuperscript{67} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Straighten Out.”
bullet out. Perhaps the only reason that she does not actually frame Cockroach is because she finds him decapitated in his apartment.\textsuperscript{68}

When Misty confesses that she was going to frame Cockroach, she expects to be fired, perhaps even prosecuted. When her captain does neither she is beside herself. She says, “so that’s it? I get a stern talking to and then I go back out there and do the job?” Her captain then reminds her that there is a war raging in Harlem and she says “yeah I noticed the war. It is the same war that we have been fighting for years and shit doesn’t change. But the rule of engagement does and if I do it your way nothing happens, zilch. And the other way I become Scarffe and I cannot become Scarffe.”\textsuperscript{69} In the midst of a deep personal conflict, she comes to the final conclusion that the system is broken and inept. She knows first-hand that the system cooperates with and benefits from crime. Now, even a good person in the system cannot bring about any meaningful justice.

On a personal level, she prides herself on being able to see everything. Nevertheless, she does not suspect that Scarffe is dirty and that Luke is a fugitive/powered human. Both missteps occur as a result of her job blinding her. She meets Scarffe on her first day as a detective and bonds with him because of the way he looks out for her.\textsuperscript{70} She meets Luke undercover and is so focused on Cottonmouth that she goes to Luke’s house, sleeps with him, and still suspects nothing.\textsuperscript{71} The Candice situation undoubtedly triggers leftover guilt that she feels from her cousin’s death. Now the system she depends on is definitively undependable. Her desire to serve justice is not

\textsuperscript{68} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “All Souled Out.”
\textsuperscript{69} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “The Basement.”
\textsuperscript{70} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “The Basement.”
\textsuperscript{71} Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Moment of Truth.”
gone. Rather, she quits the police force and becomes the very thing she previously understood to be a threat to justice: a vigilante.

Misty’s desire to be a force of justice drives her transformation. She wants to ensure that Harlem’s citizens are safe from the forces that do them harm. When harm is done, she feels compelled to ensure that justice is served. She realizes that the hegemonic criminal justice system’s main concern is not justice. Therefore, she strikes out on her own, to pursue true justice outside the system. In doing so, she joins the ranks of another vigilante whose experiences made him distrust the hegemony of the criminal justice system – Luke.

**Luke’s Distrusts.** Luke’s distrust begins with his incarceration. He sits at the unique intersection of former law enforcement officer and convict. Having seen the inner workings of the policing system, his imprisonment allows him to see the other side of the system that he formerly served. He is sent to a privately-owned prison: Seagate. Almost immediately after Luke arrives, the corrupt prison guard, Rackham, publicly identifies him as a former police officer. This makes him more susceptible to being targeted by other prisoners and only pushes Luke further into isolation and mistrust of those around him. Over time, Luke makes a friend, Squavels, who is Luke’s companion in this difficult situation. Through his relationship with Squavels, Luke’s black and white understanding of who is good and who is bad blurs. As he is building a relationship and beginning to trust a convicted criminal, it is becoming clear that he cannot trust or rely on the criminal justice system to deliver justice. Rackham is a terror to prisoners. His treachery reaches

its peak when he orders prisoners to kill someone and then threatens to frame Squavels. Rackham wants Luke to fight in a prison fight club, which he broadcasts and makes money from. Luke initially refuses. When Rackham tells Luke that he is turning down “a good offer,” Luke replies, “slavery was always a good offer, to a master.” However, faced with the choice to save Squavels or let Rakum frame an innocent, Luke chooses to save his friend. Perhaps a large motivating factor for Luke is that he was also framed, which is how he ended up in Seagate. Desiring to not see someone else face the same fate, Luke begins to fight in Rackham’s fight club. He wins consistently and becomes a main attraction. When he threatens to stop fighting, Rackham tells Shades and Comanche to brutally beat him. The injuries Luke sustains from that beating are potentially fatal. At that point, Dr. Noah Burstien, the prison doctor, enters Luke into an experiment that he is doing on prisoners who sustained injuries from Rakum’s fight club. The point of the experiment is to see if Dr. Burstien can create superhumans. Everyone who he subjects to the experiment died, except for Luke. Rackham, determined to kill Luke, turns all the dials up, which causes for the machine to essentially boil Luke alive before exploding. Instead of perishing, Luke receives impenetrable skin, super strength, and extra-human agility, speed, and leaping ability. Rackham dies, however. Fearing that he will be charged for the guard’s murder, Luke breaks out of prison, making him a fugitive.  


When Coker introduces Luke in the series’ first episode his life is in shambles. Much of the reason he is in that state is because the system’s failure. He is innocent of the crime that landed him in prison. Because he is sent to a private prison, he and the other prisoners are far more susceptible to the unethical and illegal experiment Dr. Burstien is doing at Seagate. Furthermore, the prison guards behave unethically, focusing more on making profit than rehabilitation. Undoubtedly, at the end of his tenure at Seagate, Luke Cage is left with no reason to trust the system. The police who investigate his case fails him. The jury who pronounce him guilty fails him. The judge who delivers his sentence fails him. The prison guards, psychologist, and doctor failed him. What is worse is that once justice has been served and he has the freedom he is owed, he constantly has to look over his shoulder. Why would Luke Cage trust the hegemonic system that is the criminal justice/prison industrial complex?

Later, after Luke begins his vigilante efforts, he makes his distrust of the system known to everyone. The person who engages this aspect of Luke’s character most is Misty. In the latter part of season one, when Misty tells Luke that shutting down Crispus Attucks is not his job, he tells her that “people need someone that didn’t require a warrant or shield to get things done.” This statement shows that Luke’s distrust is multifaceted. Not only does his incarceration and subsequent mistreatment lead to his opinion of law enforcement, his experience with the system’s inability to, as he says, “get stuff done” has contributes as well. Throughout season one Luke goes back and forth with Misty about the role the system should play in fighting crime. Luke insists that the system is broken at worst and limited at best. Misty is sure that the system provides the best chance

at real justice that society has to offer. Eventually, Misty’s reliance on the justice system is shaken. As Misty undergoes her journey that ultimately led to her distrust the hegemonic power that is the criminal justice system, Luke is beginning to see the benefit of being connected to another, more powerful hegemony: the crime world.

**Luke’s Journey to Trusting the Hegemonic Power.** The final scenes of season two end with one of the most shocking cliffhangers the show has to offer. Luke Cage becomes a crime boss. In that same episode, Tilda, Mariah’s daughter, decides to rid the world of her evil mother. Visiting Mariah in prison, Tilda, a doctor who practices natural remedies, concocts a poisonous mixture, which she wears on her lips. She then delivers a deadly kiss that slowly but eventually kills Mariah. Having detected that Tilda was up to something, Mariah calls in her lawyer and changes her will. She leaves Harlem’s Paradise to Luke, arguing that “Harlem’s Paradise is the crown jewel of Harlem. It should go to someone who loves Harlem as much as I do.” The episode and the season close with Luke taking a meeting with Carbone and Escara, leaders of crime families in New York.\(^76\)

This turn of events raises so many questions. The primary one is why would this person who has been synonymous with liberation, the poor, and Harlem’s fight against crime embrace the wealth driven crime world? There is one overarching reason for Luke’s change in station and ideology. Luke’s sole motivation for taking on Harlem’s Paradise is the amazingly difficult time he has had fighting crime as an outsider. Early on in season two Luke says, “punching water. When I was a young sheriff, that’s what my training officer Cortez used to call it. No matter how many times your fist hits the water,

\(^76\) Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, “They Reminisce Over You.”
it always refilled itself. Like you never punched it at all.” Frustrated by what seems to be
a never-ending battle with the drug epidemic in Harlem, Luke is beginning to feel as if
his efforts are useless. If it is not bad enough that the package containing the drugs bear
his name, every time he makes an effort to eliminate one source of drugs, more pop up. All the while people are overdosing and dying from heroin. At this point people look to
Luke to rectify issues such as the growing presence of drugs in the neighborhood. In
addition to his own desire to see Harlem free from its drug problem, people are directly
making Luke responsible for liberating the area of drugs. Despite his abilities, he does not
have full control over the situation. He cannot control what comes in. All he has the
ability to do is shut it down when it arrives. That is not a recipe for elimination. Rather,
Luke’s role has become management of how much drugs (or guns for that matter) remain
in Harlem.

When comparing Luke’s ironic feeling of helplessness to a later moment of
power, his ideological transition makes sense. In episode thirteen of season two, Mariah’s
arrest creates a vacuum of power in Harlem. The Stokes family had been the ruling
family of Harlem for almost half a century. Now, there was no Stokes (or Dillard) to sit
on the figurative throne. As a result, the other crime families of New York scrambled to
take control of Harlem. Hoping to stop the hemorrhaging of crime and terror in Harlem,
Luke goes after every crime boss in New York, displaying his might and bulletproofness
along the way. This montage ends with him in the home of the Italian mob boss. First, he
breaks the arm and leg of her personal bodyguard. Then he brokers a compromise with

77. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
her: “no action above 114th or below 150th, from Harlem River Drive to the West Side Highway. Retribution on anyone who acts a fool on Lenox Ave, Strivers Row, Rucker Park, or any of the parks.”

Giving up the idea of being a universal creator of peace, Luke looks to the needs and wellbeing of Harlem first and foremost. This is important character development. Luke’s protection is pointed and intentional. He sees himself as Harlem’s protector and liberator. Luke is resigned to use “intimidation and fear to do work,” and “speak the language of those who would do others harm.”

Luke identifies with Harlem. His love for Harlem drives him to protect it at all costs. His initial denial of Harlem’s Paradise serves as his Gethsemane, in which he initially hopes to pass on a cup that is his to drink. Ultimately, he decides to bring salvation to Harlem by taking his throne and protecting it from evil forces. Unlike Cottonmouth or Mariah, Luke does not enter the crime world for selfish reasons. He takes over the business left behind by Mariah to close the vacuum and secure the city; because he loves Harlem. He is willing to employ any means necessary to protect and liberate Harlem, even if that means becoming a crime boss and working within a system that is harmful to Harlem. With his eye set on liberation, Luke Cage places his trust in the crime hegemony in Harlem and his ability to navigate and dismantle it.

**Conclusion**

Both Black Liberation Theology and Luke Cage pose a similar question about liberation: what is it? Fittingly, when the Israelites saw the food God provided them in the wilderness, they asked the same question. Liberation is similar to manna. It is

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82. Exodus 16:15, English Standard Version.
provided to God’s people, the poor and mistreated. It may even seem otherworldly. Often, they grow tired of it (or fighting for it). However, manna is nourishment. Like manna, liberation is not simple. It is frustratingly complex. In this chapter I posed the question: how does Coker use Marvel's *Luke Cage* to define *liberation* and use that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United States today? James Cone came to the conclusion that liberation was a process of taking power out of the hands of the powerful and putting it into the hands of the powerless. For this reason, he understood Jesus through the perspective of his birth in Bethlehem, his baptism with and life among the poor, and his death and resurrection. Derry et al. assert that Luke fits several criteria for being christlike. He is initially mysterious, possesses power, struggles against hegemonic forces, suffers and bleeds, temporarily dies, and is resurrected. To their criteria, I add an additional and important christlike characteristic Luke possesses. Like Jesus, Luke lives an impoverished life while serving as a liberating force. He is not simply powerful and fighting the liberation fight. He, like Christ, is denless and nestless. The power that both men possessed means that the weak, poor, and disenfranchised became powerful.

Cone also bravely sought to reconcile the ideologies of two of the world’s greatest liberating minds: Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Coker follows suit. Misty and Luke pick up a conversation that will prove to be vital for the fate of liberation. To what extent can the poor, ignored, mistreated, and disenfranchised depend on hegemonic

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85. Matthew 8:20, ESV.
systems for justice? To what extent should those seeking liberation and to be liberating forces get involved with hegemonic forces that have historically been oppressive? Black people have been systematically mistreated by economic, civic, criminal, and religious hegemonies since black became a racial indicator. Is freedom possible without ownership in an established hegemony? Driven by the desires of justice and love respectively, Misty’s and Luke’s ideologies evolve as they engage hegemonic forces. Modern day liberation efforts should first turn their liberation efforts to the matters of delivering justice to the poor and creating an environment in which the disenfranchised discover self-love.

Institutions (e.g., universities, businesses, churches, etc.) across the country have turned their attentions to diversity. In response to our country’s history of oppression and segregation, the country’s institutions have turned to desegregation. Blacks and whites now sit side by side in classrooms, boardrooms, and church services (much less in churches than the others). Diversity and desegregation, however, only means that non-whites enter into white spaces—white-owned spaces. With no regard for the history of hurt and no attention given to justice, white power structures tell non-whites to be happy to be allowed in the room. The interaction only furthers the cultural and psychological damage done to non-whites. When institutions craft efforts to bring diversity, reconciliation, and sometimes even equitable justice, non-whites’ wellbeing is often neglected under the guise of helping whites get on board. What does Black Liberation Theology and Marvel’s Luke Cage have to say to modern liberation efforts in the United States? Liberation efforts need Misty and Luke. They need Martin and Malcolm. They need justice and
love-true justice and true love. Diversity and desegregation will not cut it. Justice and love are required.

Furthermore, liberation, at least in part, means empowering the poor, as we see in the form of the gun-business-dismantling and drug-house-destroying Luke Cage. However, in a world without superpowered, bulletproof black men, how do liberating forces get power into the hands of the powerless? Liberation is not simply the end result of efforts to empower the poor, but also the journey to empowerment. It is a struggle to reconcile seemingly opposing forces with the mutual interest of empowering the powerless and destroying oppressively powerful forces. For Cone, liberation is not only a definition and struggle to reconcile, it is a theological imperative.
CHAPTER IV
THEOLOGY

I am not the first scholar to identify similarities between Luke and Jesus.¹ The similarities jump from the screen and grab the audience. Luke, like the Jesus of the Christian New Testament, is blessed with other-worldly powers, which he uses as a force for good. More importantly, the two men share a worldview. When prompted to pick a new name for himself, Luke takes a quotation from the prophet Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.²

Interestingly, he does not take the name of Isaiah. Instead, citing Jesus’ quotation, he takes the name of Luke from the gospel that records when Jesus opens the scroll of Isaiah in his home synagogue and reads the very passage that Luke calls to mind when choosing a new identity for himself. For Jesus, this passage from the book of Isaiah is a bold proclamation of what his work will be and who his efforts would be focused on helping. In choosing the name Luke, he identifies the same direction and life’s work. Fittingly, this verse, Luke 4:18-19, is a favorite of Black Liberation Theologians and a major Biblical justification for the theology. In this chapter, I examine the relationship between

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Black Liberation Theology and the theological implications that Marvel’s *Luke Cage* presents. To do so, first I examine the theology of Black Liberation Theology. Next, I provide a summary of Marvel’s *Luke Cage’s* relevant storyline. Finally, I examine the theology Coker infuses into the show.

**The Theology in Black Liberation Theology**

*Theology* bears many definitions. Cone defines theology as “the discipline that seeks to analyze the nature of the Christian faith in the light of the oppressed,” which “arises chiefly from biblical tradition itself.” Elsewhere he adds that “the task of theology is to show what the changeless gospel means in each new situation.” As a result, his “theology comes out of the black experience of slavery, segregation, and lynching and not from white and European theologies that [Cone] studied in graduate school.” In fact, a pillar of Black Liberation Theology is critiquing what Cone calls *white theology* and the church that arose from the doctrine of white theology.

For Cone, Black Liberation Theology arises in response to a need “for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its ‘whiteness’ so that blacks may be capable of making an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ.” He later explains his belief that if he is “going to write an authentic, Black Liberation Theology [he] has to let the suffering of black people speak in and through [the] theology.” Thinking back to his graduate studies Cone says:

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7. “Champion for Black Power & All the Oppressed.”
What I studied in graduate school ignored white supremacy and black resistance against it, as if they had nothing to do with the Christian gospel and the discipline of theology. Silence on both white supremacy and the black struggle against racial segregation made me angry with a fiery rage that had to find expression.8

Cone spends a vast amount of time counteracting and arguing against white and European theologies, so much so that his obituary in the National Catholic Reporter says that “his theology contrasted sharply with traditional theological approaches.”9 However and “unfortunately, even black theologians have, more often than not, merely accepted the problems defined by white theologians. Their treatment of Christianity has been shaped by the dominant ethos of the culture.”10 Discussing the mission of the black church, Cone says that if the

black church has one problem that I think it needs to think about, it is the problem of whether it is called to save its own life or whether it is called to lose its life for the sake of others. If feel that the black church is concerned with saving its own life because it’s so interested in the gospel of success . . . The problem is that the church has lost its legacy. It’s lost its message. And when success becomes the focus it loses its mission.11

In God of the Oppressed Cone reflects on how the assertion of God’s blackness was received, saying: “my affirmation that God was on the side of oppressed blacks in their struggle against white supremacy was countered with King’s nonviolence and the biblical themes of love, forgiveness, and reconciliation.”12 However, Cone says that “by defining the problems of Christianity in isolation from the black condition, white theology

10. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 599.
becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction for criminal acts committed against blacks.”\textsuperscript{13} This view of theology paints God as the perpetrator and justifier of murder, dehumanization, and subjugation. Contrastingly, Black Liberation Theology asserts that “God is, power in the powerless.”\textsuperscript{14} Cone cites the exodus story of the Bible to support this claim, calling God “Yahweh, the God of the Exodus.”\textsuperscript{15} This means that “God’s call of this people is related to its oppressed condition and to God’s own liberating activity already seen in the exodus.”\textsuperscript{16} In short, “God came and is present now, in order to destroy the oppressors' power to hold people in captivity.”\textsuperscript{17} Therefore “in order to be Christian theology, white theology must cease being white theology and become black theology by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God’s intention for humanity.”\textsuperscript{18} Black theology is “the story of black people's struggle for liberation in an extreme situation of oppression.”\textsuperscript{19} Breaking from what has become traditional theology (white theology), Black Liberation Theology is primarily concerned with the liberation of the oppressed by any means necessary. It further affirms that the church, both black and white, must adopt this theology in order to truthfully fulfil its purpose.

In this chapter I pose two questions. First, how does Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage} join Cone in critiquing the church and white theology? And second, what solutions does

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Cone, \textit{A Theology of Black Liberation}, 436.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 57.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Cone, \textit{A Theology of Black Liberation}, 312.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 90.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Cone, \textit{A Theology of Black Liberation}, 453.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 50.
\end{itemize}
Coker present for repairing the church’s and white theology’s relationship with blackness? To answer these questions, I must first provide an overview of Marvel’s *Luke Cage*’s relevant storyline.

**Marvel’s *Luke Cage* Plot Summary**

As Coker began to plant the seeds for a clash between Luke and Mariah, who was spiraling further into corruption, Luke encountered a blast from the past. At the end of the first season’s seventh episode, the same episode in which Mariah killed Cottonmouth, Luke was shot with a Judas bullet by a man who calls him Carl. Carl Lucas was Luke’s birth name, which he shed when he became Luke Cage after escaping from Seagate Prison. Willis Stryker, better known as Diamondback, had acquired several Judas bullets for the explicit purpose of murdering Luke.20 Coker reveal that Luke and Diamondback were old friends who grew up together in Georgia. Diamondback’s mother was the secretary at the church where Luke’s father preached. As teenagers, Luke and Diamondback got into trouble with the law together. However, Luke’s father, Rev. James Lucas, used his influence within the community to get Luke a lenient sentence, pinning the whole crime on Diamondback. If this is not motivation enough, Diamondback then revealed that he and Luke are actually half-brothers through his father, who previously had an affair with Diamondback’s mother. Unwilling to lose his reputation or his church, Rev. Lucas publicly denied that Stryker is his son, and he took no part in raising him beside giving his mother checks. Rev. Lucas even denied Diamondback the ability to bear the Lucas last name. Coker indicated that Diamondback figured out who his father is.

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via context clues. Nevertheless, Diamondback was determined to ruin and kill his brother. Diamondback revealed that he framed Luke, resulting in Luke’s imprisonment in Seagate before the show.21

Meanwhile Claire took the severely wounded Luke to Dr. Noah Bernstein’s home. Aided by Dr. Bernstein's knowledge of the original experiment, Claire figured out how to extract the bullet from Luke and heal him. After finding out that Reva, his beloved deceased wife, was actively evaluating potential participants for the experiments, Luke destroyed Dr. Bernstein's files and his makeshift lab in his barn.22 Luke then left to and took a detour through his hometown, Savannah, Georgia, where he discovered that Diamondback’s story was true.

Back in Harlem, the police were convinced that Luke was responsible for the deaths of a police officer, who was actually killed by Diamondback. This caused them to take a “them vs. us” mentality and start terrorizing Harlem’s citizens. When Luke returned to Harlem, Mariah held a rally in support of a young boy who was severely beaten by the police as they searched for information on Luke’s whereabouts.23 Diamondback invaded the gathering and took the rally-goers hostage in a further effort to frame Luke. This led to Luke being arrested and subsequently fleeing from police who


were now equipped with Judas bullets by the police department’s new weapons supplier: Diamondback. Luke fled to the Barbershop where he met Mariah who bribed him with evidence, which she stole from Diamondback, that would exonerate him. But before Luke could retrieve this information, Diamondback attacked him again. This time Diamondback equipped himself with a suit that allowed him to match Luke’s power and absorb Luke’s hard-hitting blows. After fighting in the streets of Harlem for several minutes, Luke resigned himself not to fight. As flashbacks of Diamondback teaching Luke to fight flashed through his head, he realized that it is best to let Diamondback beat himself by not feeding into the fight. Diamondback’s suit was powered, at least in part, by the blows Luke issued to it. Luke employed the rope-a-dope strategy and told Diamondback “if you are going to kill me, kill me, I’m done fighting.” Using this strategy, Luke allowed Diamondback to tire himself out and finished the fiend with one final blow, that rendered him incapacitated but not dead. As the season ends, Luke’s past finally caught up with him. Federal agents met him following the fight with Diamondback and informed him that he must return to prison. Because Luke had not gotten the file from Mariah, he could not prove his innocence. Though Luke’s friend, Bobby Fish, eventually finds the file, the final episode of season one ended with him in the back of a police van, leaving Harlem for Seagate Prison.


In the next section I examine how Coker executes the Black Liberation Theologian’s task of critiquing Christianity. First, I explore both Diamondback and Luke’s respective relationships with their father: Rev. James Lucas. Next, I establish Rev. Lucas as Coker’s representation of the church. Then, I explain how another Christian entity in the show, Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, represents white theology. Finally, I highlight the pathway Coker provides for the church and white theology to improve.

**The Theology of Marvel’s *Luke Cage***

Coker introduces Reverend James Lucas long before late actor Reg E. Cathy personifies the character in the premiere of season two. Rather, Diamondback introduces Rev. Lucas to the plot as he taunts a wounded Luke around an abandoned theater. In this scene Diamondback takes the first step in explaining Rev. Lucas’ past sins and revealing that Luke and Diamondback are actually brothers.27 In the first season’s remaining episodes, Luke and Diamondback fight back and forth in a manner akin to Ishmael and Isaac or Esau and Jacob. In fact, the battle between Luke and Diamondback rehashes a common theme in the Bible’s Abrahamic narratives in Genesis: sibling rivalry. Like the sibling rivalries in the Bible’s foundational book, the conflicts in this story are deeply relational. To explore this element of the show, I examine two relationship between the two men and their father. First, I probe Diamondback and his relationship with Rev. James Lucas. Secondly, I analyze the relationship between Luke and Rev. Lucas. These

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interconnected but distinct relationships work together to establish Rev. Lucas’s character as a metaphor for the church.

**The Secret: Willis Stryker**

Born Willis Stryker, Diamondback is Rev. James Lucas’ first born son – not with his wife, but with his mistress, the church secretary. As a Bible scholar, the revelation that Rev. Lucas’s wife was initially unable to conceive immediately drew my attention back to the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. The theme of the delayed ability to conceive runs throughout the Bible. However, Rev. Lucas’ response to the situation was similar to Abraham’s actions in Genesis. In that story it is Sarah, Abraham’s wife, who suggests that Abraham impregnate another woman, Hagar, the woman who became his mistress of sorts. The relationship between Rev. Lucas and Diamondback’s mother is similar. The show gives little indication of how exactly the relationship begins. Diamondback paints a picture for the soon-to-be-deceased city council hopeful Damond Boone, saying that his mother was “the secretary for a big-time preacher. A bold charismatic man who loved to talk loud and dress fancy.” Boone notes that Diamondback is similar. Diamondback agrees and continues saying that his mother and the preacher worked long stressful hours and, well they had a lot of laughter in that back office. Something was bound to happen, and it did: I was born. But he was married, and everything was good til the preacher’s wife two years later had a baby boy, the miracle child. And everything changed. The great Rev. Lucas wasn’t man enough to give his first son his last name. You see I was still Willis Stryker, but his real son was Carl Lucas. But here’s the crazy thing. Nobody said nothing. You see Carl and I; we grew up best friends but there was all this tension. You can just feel it like a draft coming in from under a door.

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Here, Diamondback tells his own story in his own words. Like most of the villains in the show, he is the victim of someone else’s treachery. Rev. Lucas is willing to do the deed but unwilling to live with the truth and consequences of what he does. As a result, the situation is clouded in darkness and secrecy. The situation, though simply and unpleasant for the reverend, is Diamondback’s life. He is a Stryker and not a Lucas. If someone reveals the truth that Rev. Lucas has an extra marital affair that will likely lead to him losing membership and reputation. It is imperative that he maintain a narrative of holiness. An alternative story with alternative facts is necessary. In this alternative story, the first-born Lucas never happens. Instead, Diamondback is a fatherless entity, forced to grow up alongside Luke, who gets all of the paternal recognition that he desires.

Diamondback becomes the son who is banished into the wilderness. The banishment comes in the form of the secret that he too is the son of the beloved and revered Rev. James Lucas.

The offenses do not stop merely with the secret, however. Diamondback reveals that both he and Luke are arrested as teens for stealing a red Corvette. Though caught in the vehicle right next to Luke, Diamondback receives different treatment than his brother. Diamondback says, “Carl was a Lucas. I was a Stryker. It was over before it even began. When it came time for sentencing, the preacher convinced the judge to let his golden boy join the Marines. Me, juvie. Got jumped two days in. Boy drew a shank and I killed him in self-defense.”30 In that moment Rev. Lucas faces a situation with both of his sons facing a trial together, complicit in the same crime. Diamondback believes that Rev. Lucas favors Luke and responds in kind. Luke remembers the nature of his relationship

with his father differently. He says, “Willis hates me because my father hates the idea of him. What he doesn’t realize is that my father never really liked me very much either.”

Luke’s understanding of the situation paints a much different picture than the one Diamondback recognizes. Rather than favor Luke over Diamondback, Rev. Lucas favors himself over either. Saving Luke was saving face. A son in prison is just as bad for his reputation as a mistress. As a result, one son goes to the Marines, thereby redeeming his character in a cloak of service. The other son goes to juvenile detention, exposing him to a traumatic event and thrusting him into a life of crime. By the time Coker introduces Diamondback, Willis Stryker is long dead. Diamondback tells Damon Boone that he “just wanted [Rev. Lucas] to see me. I was a good boy. I did well in school. But he always loved Carl more.” His unmet desire for his father’s acceptance creates Diamondback, pushing the good boy who did well in school into a grave and making him bitter toward Luke, who he believes to be the subject of his father’s attention.

Furthermore, Rev. Lucas picks himself over Diamondback’s mother. He explains that “sweet Dana? Oh her cancer ate her alive and she died alone, in a shelter, without a friend in the world. You see the great Rev. Lucas, he stopped caring for her after I was gone. He was free of her, and I was powerless. But she, oh she still she still loved him.”

The reverend, free from responsibility to care for Diamondback casts his mistress into the wilderness. Unlike Hagar, she dies in that wilderness, succumbing to cancer. Perhaps what frustrates to Diamondback more is her level of devotion to the reverend, despite his

selfishness. He says that “she wanted me to have something of my father’s.”

She gave Diamondback Rev. Lucas’ Bible as a keepsake. He says, “God had me at hello with Genesis. The story of Cain and Abel. When God asked Cain where Abel was after he killed him, Cain asked, ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’”

In a sentence, Diamondback not only traces back the origins of him becoming a criminal, but how he became the specific criminal he is.

**A Christian Criminal: Diamondback**

Coker fills the show with villains who make references to Christianity and the Bible. Cottonmouth thematically refers to Luke’s christlike characteristics by saying things such as “niggas act like he can walk on water,” and “it costs to be a savior, ask Jesus.”

Bushmaster joins the fray, calling himself “the stone that the builders refused.”

Despite other villains like Scarfe and Mariah making similar references to Christianity, no character in the whole series directly quotes or refers to the Bible nearly as much as Diamondback. In his first scene in the show, he says “one Judas for another,” before shooting Luke. In the next episode he manages to get Misty’s gun away from her. Holding her at gunpoint and pacing around her he says, “your adversary, the devil walks around like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour, 1 Peter 5:8.” He then says, “see my daddy was a preacher.”

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is, Diamondback references Rev. Lucas. Further, he explains that “two rulebooks got me through the darkness: the Bible and the *48 Laws of Power*.” Coker invites the audience to draw the connection between Rev. Lucas’ denial of Diamondback, his mother’s gift of the Rev. Lucas’s Bible, and the void of darkness that Diamondback’s pursuit of revenge and power fills. He is no the long a good kid who steals a car with his friend for a joy ride. Now, he is Harlem’s top gun supplier. He elevates himself by inflicting violence and quoting the Bible along the way. Diamondback quotes the Bible so frequently that Misty calls him a false preacher.

Besides acting as a deeply personal final villain for Luke to face in season one, Diamondback is Rev. Lucas’ legacy. He is the legacy of secrecy, suppression, and selfishness. He is not just the product of adultery. He is the product of power unchecked. His bitterness, though arguably mischanneled, is justified. His anger is, at the very least, understandable. Willis Stryker is James Lucas’ son and Diamondback is James Lucas’ fault. James Lucas, however, is not the man who has to clean up the mess he makes. It is Luke Cage who is left to war with his father’s decisions. That war and the revelations that accompany it create a rift in an already weak relationship between Luke and Rev. Lucas.

**The Miracle: Carl Lucas**

Several episodes before Diamondback gives the audience a full-length introduction to his father, Rev. Lucas, Luke creates his own version of the reverend’s reputation. Coker fills the fourth episode of season one with references to Luke’s father. Here, Luke explains that he has good manners because of his rearing. In talking about his


previous incarceration, he says that his “father always said that [Luke] would regret the life [he] chose.” Luke even credits Rev. Lucas with indoctrinating him with the passage of scripture that becomes his namesake: Luke 4:18-19. According to Luke, it is Rev. Lucas who tells him that “no one can cage a man if he truly wants to be free.” That episode alludes to the profound effect that Luke’s relationship with his father has on him. Unlike his brother, it is well known that Luke is the preacher’s son. He does not have to live through the experience of rejection as Rev. Lucas’ son. However, Luke does experience the pain of his father’s, just as his brother did.

Rev. Lucas rejects Luke because of his criminal convictions. The show explains that Diamondback frames Luke as an initial means of revenge. This particular criminal conviction comes after Luke serves his initial time in the military to avoid prison as a teen. Coker does not explain the exact crime Diamondback frames Luke with. Like Diamondback, Luke’s time in the prison industrial complex is traumatizing. While the trauma of going to prison is a major theme of the first season, in the second season it takes a backseat to the trauma of his father discontinuing their relationship after Luke’s conviction. Luke explains to Claire that he did not go to see his father after escaping from prison because “he wouldn’t want to see [Luke] anyway.” Luke is “his shame.” Luke adds that “the last thing that my father wanted to do is raise a black criminal. He did everything in his power to give me the kind of life so that wouldn’t happen and yet, I still went to jail.” Later Luke reveals that his “father called [him] a mistake when [he] went to prison.” His father’s statement is meant to walk back Luke’s previous status as a

miracle child. Instead of bringing his father joy by being the son born by his favored
wife, he brings the reverend shame. Luke’s rejection is not only made worse by the
reality that he is innocent, but also because of the comments are made during their final
correspondence.

Luke reveals that his father and mother came to visit him following his
She has been recently diagnosed with cancer and her condition is worsening. Rev. Lucas
essentially says that her illness is payback for Luke’s misdeeds.44 What is worse, that is
the last time that Luke sees his mother, and when she dies it is the warden, and not his
father, who notifies him.45 Furthermore, Luke’s previous statement that he “sent letters”
might not have done the reality of his efforts justice. According to Rev. Lucas himself,
Luke sends 50 letters that were all returned to him unopened.46

His father’s rejection creates an anger in Luke that only grows exponentially with
the revelation that Diamondback is his brother. Initially, Cage is in denial about his
father’s infidelity and his relation to Diamondback. When it becomes clear that
Diamondback is right and his belief in his father’s ultimate goodness and rightness is
fiction, Luke becomes angry. Up until this point, Rev. Lucas has had somewhat of a
protected status in Luke’s mind. Though Luke is hurt that his father has rejected him, he
also seems ashamed of himself. It seemed as if he understands his father’s response, even
if the subsequent actions hurt him deeply because, in Luke’s mind, Rev. Lucas is a holy
entity. The reverend is the reason that Luke says “sweet Christmas” or “sweet sister”

44. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
45. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
instead of any profanity. Even with the personal hurt that his father causes him, Luke still admires his father.

Between seasons one and two, the way that Luke sees the situation shifts. Perhaps returning to prison gives him time to connect the dots and grasp a better understanding of his father. Whatever the catalyst is, the Luke of season two has a very clear hypothesis of what went wrong in his life. Everything that happens to him – from Diamondback framing him to Pop’s eventual death – can be traced back to his father who no longer is a protected entity to Luke. Rather, he is the problem.

**Representative of White Theology: James Lucas**

For me, the most interesting fact about Rev. Lucas is not that he has lived the sort of life that Jerry Springer dreams of. Rather, the most pivotal aspect of the James Lucas character is that Coker creates the character specifically for this show. There is no mention of Luke’s father in the comics. My question then becomes, why does Coker create James Lucas? Of all the professions that Luke’s new father could have, why a preacher? Anyone can have an affair with their secretary. What was the purpose of putting the central location of that affair in a church building?

Rev. Lucas represents the relationship between black people and white theology. His two sons are the products of his actions. Diamondback represents vulnerable groups who need liberation, but who white theology completely ignores. For instance, despite the continual rise of black trans women being murdered in hate crimes, white theology continues to ignore an epidemic of hate that it is, in large part, responsible for. Just as the church leaves this vulnerable group out to dry physically and emotionally, Rev. Lucas ignores Diamondback’s needs out of selfishness and self-interest. On the other hand,
Luke is a product of unmet but reasonable expectations. Luke expects the kind of love the apostle Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13:7. However, instead of protection, trust, hope, and preservation, Luke is abandoned when he needs his father’s love the most. Luke represents groups who white theology chooses to ignore when their liberation becomes difficult. Fittingly, Luke is a convict. White theology turned its back on the legions of black and brown men targeted and shipped off to the prison industrial complex. Where is white theology in the fight against extensive prison sentences for non-violent crimes? What protection does the church have to offer to victims of slavery’s modern-day adaptation?

It is reasonable to expect that a person proclaiming the word of God of the exodus would not commit Rev. Lucas’ atrocities. Returning to Luke 4:18-19, it becomes clear that a different spirit is upon Rev. Lucas than was upon Jesus. Instead of proclaiming the good news to the poor, he creates a situation of poverty in which Diamondback’s mother suffers and dies. As opposed to proclaiming freedom to the prisoner, he abandons both of his sons to the prison industrial complex, refusing to save one and believe the other. Whereas Jesus’ miracles recover sight for the blind, his insistence on keeping his sins silent creates a blindness that turns one of his sons into a fiend and the other into a super powered ball of bitterness. Under Rev. Lucas no oppressed person is set free; rather he uses his power to oppress everyone he is in intimate relationship with.

Furthermore, both Luke and Diamondback become the mouthpieces of a frustrated and bewildered generation. Having been raised on white theology, these groups now have every right to resent Christian theology and even Christianity itself. White

47. 1 Cor. 13:8, New International Version.
theology leads Christians and Christian institutions to pursue their own advancement at the expense of the poor, the very group to which they should be ministering. It is hard to ignore Diamondback’s pain when he discusses how the relationship between his mother and Rev. Lucas ultimately led to her demise. According to Diamondback, Rev. Lucas uses his mother, taking the best of what she has and then discards her when she is no longer useful to him. This sentiment parallels the voices of many burnt former church members/Christians who grew up in the church and watched parents struggle to pay bills and remain above water. Despite financial woes, these people gave to churches religiously and continued to give as their lights were cut off and their homes were taken. Meanwhile, some ministers drove luxury cars, and lived in expensive homes, and churches built huge buildings to host their high-society functions. Having sucked so much of the financial wealth from a community, these bodies rarely, if ever, bring liberation.

Luke stands in for a tradition of liberation within Christian theology. As he tells Rev. Lucas, he is “saving souls [his] way. [He is] walking the righteous path [his] way, on [his] own terms and cleaning up your messes.” In Luke’s eyes, Rev. Lucas bears a huge responsibility for what is wrong with the world. He has left the righteous path. For Luke, the most significant development in the way he sees the world is that his father is not infallible. This is not the man that he once knew who taught him to say, “sweet Christmas.” Through pain he learns that his father is not who he once believed.

White theology does not have the ability to produce Nat Turner and Martin Luther King Jr. This theology does not have the same priorities of liberation and freedom. Like

Rev. Lucas, “it is concerned with saving itself.” White theology does not have the consciousness to create a truly liberating force. However, white theology is not the only aspect of the Christian religion that Cone critiques. Both he and Coker turn their respective attentions to the church as well.

**Representative of the Church: Mt. Olivet**

Throughout the show, another representative, Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church, joins Rev. Lucas in standing in for Christianity. In this section I explore Coker’s critique of the church. To accomplish this, I first examine the Mt. Olivet’s relationship with Harlem.

Hidden in plain sight throughout the entirety of the first season is the Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church. The church provides a backdrop for many of the show’s pivotal plot points. Mt. Olivet makes its premiere as the place that Cottonmouth dumps Shameke’s body after beating him to death. Four episodes later, Harlem’s citizens mourn in Mt. Olivet as they funeralize Pop. When Luke shakes down Turk Barrett, New York’s top informant on the crime underworld, for Diamondback’s location, he traps Mr. Barrett in a dumpster in an alley across from Mt. Olivet. Shades and Mariah sit in front of Mount Olivet when she decides to commit to being a criminal and a menace to Harlem. This is right before they blackmail Luke with his freedom. This is also the

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49. “James Cone- On the Mission of the Black Church.”


scene that precedes the final fight between Luke and Diamondback. Throughout the course of season one Mt. Olivet sits in silence, often times mere yards away from the events and people who terrorize the weakest in the community. Coker gives no insight to ongoing efforts to fight back against the prevalence of drugs, police harassment, and violence in Harlem. For the most part, the audience sees the church as a bystander and close proximity witness to the atrocities that plague Harlem. However, Mt. Olivet does become active in one episode.

In the eighth episode of season one, Mariah launches a smear campaign against Luke to frame him for Cottonmouth’s murder. Only hours after she has to relinquish her city council seat for being part of a corrupt crime enterprise, she uses an impromptu press conference to paint Cottonmouth as a “repentant man dealing with his violent past.” She then turns her attention to Luke, “an outsider,” and a “goddamned vigilante, who calls himself a hero [but is] a menace to the safety, the security, and the sanctity of our community.” Misty later reveals that it was Mariah called the press because she wanted to use Cottonmouth’s death to revive her career. Luke, who has recently been shot with a Judas bullet and is staggering through the streets of Harlem, has an encounter with the police who are seeking to find and arrest him for Cottonmouth’s murder. To save himself, Luke disarms both of the officers, knocking one out and throwing the other into the windshield of his cruiser. Mariah resolves to use the footage of Luke fighting of the cops as a rallying point to win back support.

Two episodes later, Diamondback also sees an opportunity to taint Luke’s reputation. He straps on a powered suit, finds an officer who is beloved in the community, and punches him in the chest so hard that everyone, except for Misty, assumes that it was Luke because to their knowledge no one else can hit that hard. Outraged, the police take to the streets, determined to find Luke. They harass every black and brown person they can find. One of them picks up Lonnie, the young man who Luke shielded from gun fire as Cottonmouth’s henchmen shot up the barbershop, killing Pop in the process. In a fit of rage, an officer beats up Lonnie. Outraged, his mother calls Mariah, who promises to ensure the media gets wind of the incident. Mariah then holds a rally at Harlem’s Paradise. Prompted by Diamondback, she talks again about how dangerous people like Luke are and argues that though the police were wrong to respond the way that they did, but everyone knows what happens when a cop dies. Ultimately, she uses her speech to spin the narrative and convince the crowd to equip the police with weapons that can hold Judas bullets and kill Luke. She takes an episode of police brutality and abuse of power issue and turns it into a discussion about Luke Cage as danger to the community.

Rev. John Pope, the minister at Mt. Olivet, speaks after Mariah finishes. He claps in her direction as she leaves the stage. He claps for her after using her bully pulpit to turn a rally for a young man wrongfully beaten up by the police into a plea to arm the police. Fox News could not have done a better “back the blue” sales pitch. Rev. Pope then says of Luke that “he calls himself a friend but by his actions we know that this is false. Now can you say false?” The crowd repeats the word false after him three times. He then follows by saying that
Luke Cage has a lot to prove to us. Where is he? Where does he come from? Will more come like him? And does his presence mean that we will be endangered, endangered by superhuman threats? Now I want you to follow me this evening from the bottom of your hearts. Not from the top or the middle, from the bottom of your hearts: THIS. [The crowd repeats]. STOPS. [The crowd repeats]. NOW. [The crowd repeats].

The crowd then chants with him: “THIS STOPS NOW!” repeatedly.55

To this point, Mt. Olivet has essentially been silent for the whole season. It stands by as drugs take out youth. It stands by as gang violence and organized crime claims life after life, at times literally dumping people on its doorstep. Now, when an advocate for liberation arises, Mt. Olivet’s spokesperson sides with Mariah, the newly minted face of white oppression, and the police, most of whom are corruptly accepting money from criminals. What is worse, the police have, that same day, shown the very worst side of themselves and beaten an innocent adolescent simply because they are angry, and their power dictates they can. In that moment, Luke, who has adamantly been working to shut down crime, becomes a criminal in Harlem because the political and religious sector say so.

At best Rev. Pope is a bumbling fool who has been, in the words of Malcolm X “misled, . . . been had, . . . been took.”56 At worst, Rev. Pope and Mt. Olivet are disconnected from the reality of the community in which they were planted. The question must be asked, why did Mt. Olivet side with the powerful? It is true that Luke has more physical power than anyone else on the show, but how could any group seeking to be a liberating force not see the real threatening power that exists in Harlem? It is, after all, widely known that the Stokes family are criminals. Reports of Mariah’s corruption

56. Malcolm X, Ballot or the Bullet, Cleveland, OH, April 3, 1964, Spotify.
certainly are still in the news cycle. The writing about the police is on the wall. How can they not see what is happening? How, in a moment of such intensity, could they side with the political and criminal hegemonies of Harlem and lead the citizenry astray in the process?

The answer is a lack of engagement. Just as Rev. Lucas does not engage in his sons’ lives during the moments that matter, Mt. Olivet is not engaged in the life of the community in ways that matter. They do not know about Mariah’s misdealings because they are not engaged. If they are engaged, the youth who the Stokes family is bullying into the criminal lifestyle, the dots will connect themselves. They do not know that the police are corrupt. If they are engaging the people being harassed and falsely accused by the police, advocating for law enforcement to have more powerful weaponry will be unthinkable. Rather, just as Rev. Lucas remains silent as Diamondback is hauled off to prison, the church remains silent as it witnesses oppression on a grand scale happening in its front yard. Just as Rev. Lucas chooses himself, the church chooses itself by safely siding with the powerful forces in Harlem, never holding them accountable for the pain they manufacture.

Coker places Rev. Lucas in intimate relationship with Luke and Diamondback. Instead of loving within those relationships, Rev. Lucas oppresses. White theology, according to Cone, is the theology of oppression. Selfishness is a characteristic that Cone assigns to the church. Mt. Olivet fails Harlem because it refuses to engage the city’s poor. When given a chance, it chooses to serve as Mariah Dillard’s stage, thereby siding with the white oppressor. Cone critiques the church for adopting white theology and siding with white oppression. The question then becomes, what solution does Coker provide for
the church and Christian theology. In the next section I argue that Coker uses the evolution of Luke’s and Rev. Lucas’ relationship to highlight the antidote for the church and Christian theology through repentance reconciliation, and redemption.

**Repentance, Reconciliation, and Redemption**

As a viewer, hearing Reg E. Cathy’s voice deliver a word of caution against belief and dependence on Luke in the first episode of season two fit right in with my understanding of who the church is in the show. Cathy’s voice is smoother than melted butter and his delivery sits the audience on the second pew of any black church. His cadence pulls the listener away from the style of popular modern-day preachers such Michael Todd or Steven Furtick and drops them right into what could easily be a civil rights rally. He says:

> Everybody talking about Luke Cage like he Jesus. Got magazines calling him the Bulletproof black man with Barack’s easy smile, Martin’s charm, and Malcolm’s forthright swagger. For the sisters, he’s a sumptuous dark roots to savor brown eyed handsome man of their fantasies. And for the hard rocks he’s the ghetto boogie man of their nightmares. Luke Cage makes conventional cop work irrelevant. Harlem’s worship of Luke Cage has reached golden calf proportions. Luke Cage is Soul brother number 1. But I want to ask you to ask yourselves one thing. Who is he really? Luke Cage? Does he serve the Lord or does he serve himself? Get to the point Rev. What I’m telling you, I’m telling you is that you-you have to take the opportunity to become the hero for yourself. You have to take all your hopes, dreams, and yes, your fury and make a plan that will generate that change that you want to come. You have to realize that not one man can save a community. One man cannot do it by himself, no matter how good, no matter how strong. And believe me, Luke Cage is nothing but a man and there’s a reason we do not worship men. Because we’re weak, subject to temptation, ego, vainglorious, spiteful. Oh yes Lord knows we are spiteful. Bulletproof skin doesn’t change nature.\(^57\)

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\(^{57}\) Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, “Soul Brother #1.”
At the time the audience does not know that the speaker is the right reverend James Lucas. All we know is that this is a minister staring into his mirror, practicing his sermon. At first glance, this is just another preacher who, frightened by Luke’s abilities and unknown source of power, decides to speak out against him. Nevertheless, as the season progresses it becomes clear that monologues like this serve as a sort of confessional for Rev. Lucas. After all, as Bobby Fish points out, Luke “got that swagger from somewhere.”\textsuperscript{58} More importantly, it is Rev. Lucas whose past has already caused us to ask, “Does he serve the Lord or does he serve himself?” It is he who has been “weak, subject to temptation, ego, vainglorious, spiteful.”\textsuperscript{59} Though he frames his message around a need for caution around Luke, in reality he speaks of a need to be cautious of superheroes. At several points in the show, Rev. Lucas tells Luke that he knows what it is like to bear the weight Luke has to bear. He knows this because, as a minister, he is often seen as a superhero. He understands what it is like to have immense power and to struggle not to use it harmfully. He also lives in a reality in which the combination of his power and his weakness has caused pain to those he is supposed to protect. Rev. Lucas’ appearance in season two serves one major purpose. It is a confessional. His confession consists of three main aspects: repentance, reconciliation, and redemption.

\textbf{Repentance.} In the first episode of season two, Luke runs into his father in the park. Rev. Lucas, who has recently relocated from Georgia to Harlem, says “you got my card.”\textsuperscript{60} Rev. Lucas has been stopping by the Barbershop and dropping off his business card in hopes that Luke will reach out to him. When Luke confronts him about the 45

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60. Marvel’s \textit{Luke Cage}, “Soul Brother #1.”
letters he wrote his father in prison, Rev. Lucas replies “it was 50 and I sent them all back to sender. I was raw. I wasn’t ready. I am now.”61 Though he wants to reconcile with his son, Rev. Lucas and Luke get into a shouting match in which Rev. Lucas questions if Luke’s tactics are providing any meaningful help to the people of Harlem. When Luke replies with the aforementioned, “saving souls my way” line, Rev. Lucas says, “I’m not perfect, Carl. I can admit that. But don’t we both . . . both of us deserve a fresh start?” Though Luke declines to award his father the fresh start, the audience sees glimpses of what seems to be a reformed though conflicted man. He seems to understand that he is completely wrong in the situation and wants to make amends. The hard man that Diamondback describes saying “come Saturday night on the sideline nothing but fire and brimstone,” is replaced with a man that showed real care and softness in counseling Claire, Luke, and even Mariah.62

W.A. Quanbeck explains repentance as “a change of mind,” “the feeling of regret or remorse,” or “turning away from sin and back to God.”63 That seems to be Rev. Lucas’ disposition in season two. It is not Luke’s fame or the potential to make money that has brought him back to his son’s life; rather he simply wants to repair the relationship. He also understands that repairing his and Luke’s relationship means admitting what he has done wrong and taking on a new attitude toward his son.

Rev. Lucas displays how fear and intimidation have been a fixture in his relationship with his son. Even in the midst of trying to make amends, he seemingly

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cannot help but revert to it. When Luke says “bullshit” in response to Rev. Lucas’ cynical explanation for why he did not visit, Rev. Lucas yells “you watch your mouth” as he approaches Luke.”64 There are several similar occurrences throughout the first couple of episodes of season two, but even that element slowly works out of their interactions. By the end of the season, Rev. Lucas not only accepts responsibility for his actions but changes the way that he interacts with his son. He relinquishes any remaining vestiges of power and turns his heart completely toward reconciliation.

Reconciliation. For most of season two, Luke is determined not to forgive his father. Claire describes Luke as “not whole” due to his unresolved issues with his father.65 She leaves him in that same episode because he has an angry outburst and punches a massive whole in her wall. When it comes to reconciliation, Rev. Lucas is fighting an uphill battle. In episode seven of season two, he and Luke share this exchange:

Rev. Lucas: You and me son, we can’t move forward if we can’t forgive.
Rev. Lucas: I was angry son, when that cancer struck.
Luke: That’s the last time that I saw her. I hold that image so I won’t forget.
Rev. Lucas: I was wrong in blaming you for your mama’s dying. I’m so so sorry son.
Luke: But then I remember Willis, and his mother. I was innocent. You were the guilty one. Do you know what I was robbed of? All because of your lies?66

64. Marvel’s Luke Cage, “Soul Brother #1.”
Following this conversation, Luke still finds it hard to forgive his father. Two episodes later Rev. Lucas admits, “I’m not a great example. Here’s the thing, when you have a calling sometimes you need to heal yourself just as much as the person who you try and heal. You gotta take care of yourself or else the whole world’s gonna fall apart.”67 Here he provides Luke with advice about how to successfully carry the weight of his responsibilities. He steps back into the role of mentor, this time respecting the bounds of his and Luke’s new dynamic. He is not an authoritarian. He is a guide who cares for Luke. He displays that care the episode before by knocking out a gunman who shot Luke.

When Luke tells Rev. Lucas, “the bullets bounce off man,” he says, “I don’t care, can’t be shooting my baby.”68 Earlier in that episode, Luke tells Rev. Lucas that it was Luke’s “job to protect him,” signaling that their care is mutual and that reconciliation has been reached. The final sign of this comes at the end of episode nine when Rev. Lucas tells Luke that he is proud of him and that he loves him before going back to Georgia.69

**Redemption.** The second season proves to be redemptive for Rev. Lucas. More than anything, his worst sin is the impact that he had on his sons and thereby Harlem. The series never delves into whether or not he seeks the same reconciliation with Diamondback. However, his repentance invites the audience to begin seeing him differently. Before he was a force that, at best, disappointed those who believed in him, and, at worst, deeply hurt those who love him. By the end of season two he is an ally and guide for the show’s liberating force.

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The signs that his character is moving that way exist early on. Even in the midst of cautioning his congregants against trust in Luke Cage, he prompts them to “take all your hopes, dreams, and yes, your fury and make a plan that will generate that change that you want to come.”

Hidden in a rant by an unknown person with unknown intentions, this phrase seems like simple antagonism. However, when it is put into the context of who Rev. James Lucas becomes the statement is a call to action. Rev. Lucas provides several calls to action throughout the season. One that comes early on in the season is directed at the church. He tells Claire, “that’s the beautiful thing about Jesus. He wasn’t all about the church. Jesus was all about the people who make up the church.”

When juxtaposed against the position that Mt. Olivet has taken in Harlem, his statement about the character of Jesus shines through as instruction for assisting in liberation. Mt. Olivet is not present in the workings of the city of Harlem and therefore could not be a liberating force, as Jesus is. Rather, with their attention turned inward they failed to engage the community in a meaningful way. Rev. Lucas’s comment is a reminder of who the church should be in a community and what true Christian theology is: Black Theology.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have posed two questions. The first is how does Marvel’s *Luke Cage* join Cone in critiquing the white theology and the church? To that end, Coker uses

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70. Marvel’s *Luke Cage*, “Soul Brother #1.”

Rev. James Lucas to critique white theology and Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church to answer Cone’s call for Black Liberation Theology to hold the church accountable. By using Lucas to represent white theology and Mt. Olivet’s relationship with Harlem to represent the church, he highlights major flaws with each. White theology is too closely aligned with the oppressor, and the church focuses too much on itself and building itself up. In the process, it neglects those whom it has been called to serve.

So then, what solutions does Coker present to theologically repair the church’s relationship with blackness? Coker says white theology must become black theology through repentance, reconciliation, and redemption. The church should also seek repentance, reconciliation, and redemption by engaging the community and solely turning its efforts to the weak, oppressed, and disenfranchised. Turning away from white theology, American Christianity must first repent of its selfishness and its proclivity to align with the oppressor that led it to ignore those who were hurting and stifle those who sought liberation. It must then reconcile with Christ, who, according to Cone is the preeminent symbol of both liberation and oppressed groups. If the church and theology wish to bear Christ’s name without blaspheming, they must turn their attention to Christ’s mission: black liberation. Finally, redemption comes through the church and theology discontinuing their pursuit of wealth and success and selling out to any and all efforts to liberate the poor, mistreated, and disenfranchised.

Theology in Marvel’s Luke Cage means holding the spiritually powerful accountable. With the critical voice of Malcolm X, Coker honestly points to the woes and the failings of institutionalized Christianity in America. With the prophetic grace of Martin Luther King Jr., Coker creates a model for repentance, reconciliation, and
redemption through the example of Rev. James Lucas. So, the question remains, what does *Luke Cage* have to say to Christians, Christianity, and the church? Just as Rev. Lucas was not perfect, the church is not perfect. Through humbly repenting, diligently seeking to reconcile with those who have been hurt, and working out its redemption with fear and trembling, the church can answer its calling to liberation.
CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

As I conclude my thesis, the country is less than two weeks removed from the Amber Guyger trial. Guyger is a former Dallas police officer, currently serving a ten-year sentence for entering the home of Botham Jean and murdering him. Ten years is a short prison sentence for murdering someone in their own home. For me, the trial serves as a scary and frustrating reminder that the notion safety for black people in America is a fallacy at best. Thinking back to when George Zimmerman murdered Trayvon Martin paces away from Martin’s home in 2012, the Zimmerman and Guyger trials serve as the first and most recent major events in my personal journey as a liberation fighter, respectively. Unlike Guyger, Zimmerman is not in prison at all. The blood of righteous Trayvon still cries out from the ground as the Guyger trial serves as another public proclamation of black people’s second-class citizenry. That reality fills me with rage. Encountering James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology has helped me to filter that rage into thoughtfulness and meaningful action.

Black Liberation Theology seeks to accomplish several goals. First, Black Liberation Theology affirms blackness through black power. To this end, Cone says:

The white view of black humanity also has political ramifications. That is why so much emphasis has been placed on “law and order.” Blacks live in a society in which blackness means criminality, and thus “law and order” means “get blacky.” To live, to stay out of jail, blacks are required to obey laws of humiliation. “Law and order” is nothing but an emphasis on the stabilization of the status quo, which means telling blacks they cannot be black and telling whites that they have the moral and political right to see
to it that black persons “stay in their place.” Conversely the development of
black power means that the black community will define its own place, its
own way of behaving in the world, regardless of the consequences to white
society. We have reached our limit of tolerance, and if it means death with
dignity or life with humiliation, we will choose the former. And if that is
the choice, we will take some honkies with us. What is to be hoped is that
there can be a measure of existence in dignity in this society for blacks so
that we do not have to prove that we have reached the limits of suffering.¹

To that end, Cone prescribes that black people embrace the fullness of their blackness by
adopting “a sense of worth in being black, and only black people can teach that. Black
consciousness is the key to the black man's emancipation from his distorted self-image.”²

Reaching that limit of tolerance begs Black Liberation Theology’s second goal:
liberation. To this end, Cone adopts and seeks to reconcile Martin Luther King Jr. and
Malcolm X’s ideologies because “they worked for the same goal—the liberation of black
people from white supremacy.”³ Liberation means that the powerless, mistreated, and
disenfranchised become powerful. Cone says “that’s what God is, power in the
powerless.”⁴ Finally, in Black Liberation Theology, God is a liberating force, especially
cconcerned with black people’s plight. In Cone’s words, he “attempts to identify liberation
as the heart of the Christian gospel and blackness as the primary mode of God's
presence.”⁵ According to Cone, blackness, that is the black experience, has a special
connection with Christ and the Christian gospel because “in the United States, the

². James A. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997),
414.
242.
⁵. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 21.
clearest image of the crucified Christ was the figure of an innocent black victim, dangling from a lynching tree.”⁶ Therefore the Christian church and Christian theology have an impetus to adopt a different focus, which calls for the development of black theology. According to Cone,

theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed. For this reason it can never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone’s existence as a person.⁷

Unfortunately, much of current Christian theology has gone into analyzing the idea of God's righteousness in a fashion far removed from the daily experiences of men, but fails “to give proper emphasis to an-other equally if not more important concern, namely, the biblical idea of God's righteousness as the divine decision to vindicate the poor, the needy, and the helpless in society.”⁸ Therefore “the task of theology . . . is to explicate the meaning of God’s liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God.”⁹ Cone’s theology prompts America, racial groups, and Christianity to finally address and become liberating forces against white oppression, an ongoing damning blemish on our collective souls, beginning with trans-Atlantic human trafficking and continuing with the young black person who is going to be harassed, framed, or killed by the police today.

No television show prompts my black liberation conscientiousness more than Marvel’s *Luke Cage*. Luke Cage wears a hoodie like Trayvon. He is big and black like

Eric Garner and Alton Sterling. He is wrongfully incarcerated like Kalief Browder. He is harassed by law enforcement like Sandra Bland, Philando Castile, Delrawn Small, and Tamir Rice. He finds no place of safety like Botham Jean and Atatiana Jefferson. He is power for the powerless, like Jesus.

In this thesis, I employed James Cone’s Black Liberation Theology as a lens to analyze Marvel’s *Luke Cage*. To accomplish this, I posed several questions. First, in chapter two I asked how Marvel’s *Luke Cage* explores Black Liberation Theology’s distinction between blackness and whiteness. Throughout his work, Cone presented blackness and whiteness as two antitheses in the liberation conversation. Both had double meanings, referring both to ethnicities and the nature of a person’s relationships with oppressive forces. Whiteness was the face of oppression, while blackness was the epitome of the liberation principle.

Coker adapts the 1970s comic book into the modern day. He presents the show’s setting, Harlem, as an epicenter of blackness, both racially and in terms of liberation. Culturally, the Harlem in the show is black in every sense of the word. The people are black. Harlem includes many of the cultures birthed by African descendants on other continents. The music that fills Harlem is black. Harlem’s heroes, both past and present, are black. The street signs bear the names of black leaders and legends. Most importantly, Harlem’s savior, Luke Cage, is black. Coker creates a Harlem that embraces the identity of what Cone calls the “new black man.” Explaining this idea, Cone says, “in a world which has taught blacks to hate themselves, the new black man does not transcend
blackness, but accepts it, loves it as a gift of the Creator.”
Harlem’s “search for black identity is the search for God, because God’s identity is revealed in the black struggle for freedom.”
Harlem needed to be freed from oppression.

Harlem’s oppressive forces are white. Though mostly filled with black bodies, Harlem’s police force is culturally white. It feels empowered to harass Harlem black and brown citizens at will. It bends rules and even frames people. Corrupt and money hungry, it is more beholden to Harlem’s criminal enterprise than Harlem’s citizens. That criminal enterprise, though also filled with black bodies, is corrupted by white motivations. Cottonmouth and Mariah are the heads of Harlem’s top crime family. Both are primarily motivated by selfishness and determined to attain, maintain, and grow their power through wealth. As a result, they abuse the citizens of Harlem by pouring guns and drugs into the neighborhood. They view Harlemites as tools and pawns to be used so they can get what they want. Mariah, in particular, attempts to dictate to Harlem’s citizens who they are. Her desired relationship with the city echoes Cone’s sentiment that white people did everything within their power to define black reality, to tell us who we were—and their definition, of course, extended no further than their social, political, and economic interests. They tried to make us believe that God created black people to be white people's servants.

Luke’s work, alongside Detective Misty Knight, to take Cottonmouth and Mariah down serves as the canvas on which Coker paints a picture about liberation.

In chapter three, I asked how Coker used Marvel’s Luke Cage to define liberation and how he used that definition as a platform to inform liberation initiatives in the United

10. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 706.
11. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 537.
States today. Marvel’s *Luke Cage* defines liberation as giving power to the powerless. Luke personifies this definition in every way. First, he identifies as powerless though his poverty. Ditching the “Hero for Hire” moniker that the character uses in the comics, Coker’s Luke Cage protected Harlem, while refusing pay. His decision means that he struggles for money, even in the midst of possessing immense power. However, the combination of his poverty and power serves as an affirmation that God’s “righteousness is reserved for those who come empty-handed, without any economic, political, or social power. That is why the prophets and Jesus were so critical of the economically secure.”  

Coker makes Luke poor and physically powerful as a means of transferring power from the powerful oppressive system to the powerless, poor, and disenfranchised.

Furthermore, Luke identifies with the struggle of America’s most targeted and downtrodden. Having been framed, Luke spends time in prison. Like legions of black people victimized by predatory policing practices, he was fed to the prison industrial complex. Forced to flee his former self, Luke embodies black power because through experience he knows “what it means to be a nonperson, a nothing, a person with no past.” Luke fully identifies with Harlem’s weakest groups and seeks to protect them against the interest of the forces in the city that do them harm. His work of shutting down gun distribution rings and drug operations liberates the city of several ills that often trapped Harlem’s youth in a destructive cycle. Not only does he have a desire to protect, he has the power to.

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Furthermore, Luke frequently chooses not to work with police or follow police protocol in his liberation efforts. Coker uses Luke and Misty to pose a question about liberation itself. To what extent should forces of liberation depend on hegemonic powers in their effort for liberation? Misty and Luke go back and forth on this question for two seasons. Misty, a police officer, believes that working within the system is the best pathway to liberation. She insists that Luke follow the rules and work alongside the police. Luke, a victim of the system’s failures himself, does not trust police or the prison industrial complex. Both of these forces of liberation raise good points about the relationship between hegemonic forces and liberation. Interestingly, by the end of the series, both characters have moved away from their original positions. Misty quit the police force and becomes a vigilante. Luke, the lone wolf vigilante, becomes the owner of Harlem’s Paradise, essentially making him Harlem’s top crime boss and placing him atop Harlem’s most powerful hegemony: the crime syndicate. Luke’s track record suggests that he will use that seat to further his liberation efforts.

By creating this dichotomy between Luke and Misty and allowing it to evolve, Coker highlights liberation’s complexity. Even if the definition of liberation is relatively simple, the pathway to accomplishing it is not. By placing these two characters on opposite ends of the spectrum and allowing both to be true forces of liberation, Coker agrees with Cone that liberation needs to be accomplished by any means blacks deem necessary. As Cone says, “God not only reveals to the oppressed the divine right to break their chains by any means necessary, but also assures them that their work in their own
liberation is God’s own work.” Cone builds his theology by viewing liberation work and God’s work as synonymous.

Chapter four posed the question: How does Marvel’s Luke Cage join Cone in critiquing white theology and the Church, and what solutions does Coker present to repair white theology and the church’s relationship with the blackness? As Cone asserts, “we still talk of salvation in white terms, love with a western perspective, and thus never ask the question, what are the theological implications of God’s love for the black man in America?” For Cone, “invariably, when white theology attempts to speak to blacks about Jesus Christ, the gospel is presented in the light of the social, political, and economic interests of the white majority.” Cone insists that white theology protects white interests, white supremacy, and white oppression at all cost, while actively harming and hurting blackness and liberation.

First, Coker joins Cone in critiquing white theology and the church that white theology produces. First, to represent white theology, Coker creates Rev. James Lucas, Diamondback and Luke’s father. Rev. Lucas catalyzes the show’s negative events by selfishly choosing himself and his own interest over the interest of his sons. For Diamondback, that means he never receives his father’s acknowledgement. Ignored and cast out, Diamondback becomes a villain. Luke, on the other hand, becomes bitter and angry from ultimate disappointment. Both men represented the liberation denied and ignored by white theology’s self-interest.

15. Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 1088.
16. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 854.
Next, Coker hides a message about the church’s complacency with white theology in the form Mt. Olivet Missionary Baptist Church. Quiet throughout most of the series, Mt. Olivet serves as the backdrop to several major occurrences. Notably, Cottonmouth dumps Shameke’s disfigured body in front of the church after beating the young man beyond recognition. The church’s general disposition of silence is only broken once by Rev. John Pope, Mt. Olivet’s preacher. In Mariah’s first full-on offensive to eliminate Luke, Rev. Pope sides with Mariah. Due to its ignorance of the realities that endanger Harlem, the church that Coker features the most in the show sides with the oppressor. Mt. Olivet’s sin is disengagement, adopting white theology’s inward disposition. When the time comes to be a liberating force, Mt. Olivet chooses the wrong side.

The church frequently chooses the wrong side. Faced with the reality of police abuse, many churches back the blue. Faced with statistics about egregiously high murder and suicide rates within the LGBTQ+ community, many churches double down on harmful rhetoric of hate, rejection, and dismissal. Faced with the glaring reality of a Pharaoh and Herod-esque abuse of Latinx children on the U.S. southern border, many churches choose silence. Cone says that “the sin of American theology is that it has spoken without passion. It has failed miserably in relating its work to the oppressed in society by refusing to confront the structures of this nation.”

The question then is what solutions does Coker present to repair white theology and the church’s relationship with blackness? In season two, Rev. James Lucas experiences a transformation, both in ideology and reputation. He transitions from

serving as the show’s manifestation of ultimate betrayal and hurt, and repairs his relationship with his youngest son, Luke. In the plot, this is a beautiful story of reconciliation between a son and his estranged father. As a metaphor, it is a formula to reconcile the church with its mission to, as Cone explains, “be for the poor, for God, and against the world.”19 Through repentance, reconciliation, and redemption, white theology ceases to exist and becomes black theology. That is “to articulate the theological self-determination of blacks, providing some ethical and religious categories for the black revolution in America” and maintain “that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, the liberating deeds of God. All acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination—black power—are anti-Christian, the work of Satan.”20 Therefore, the church must turn away from its proclivity to harm and ignore due its disengaged state to embrace its high calling of liberation.

These three questions work together to affirm the central argument for this thesis: Marvel’s Luke Cage employs Black Liberation Theology to practically reimagine Christians, Christianity, and the Christian church as liberating forces in the modern world. Cone says:

Not every church that claims to be the Church is the Church, because being the Church requires concrete commitments to the One who is the essence of the Church. Not every theology that claims to be Christian is Christian, because the doing of Christian theology requires specific commitments to the One who is the content of that reality to which the word "Christian" points.21

So then, what is a church? What is Christian theology? Who are Christians?

19. Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, 817.
21. Cone, God of the Oppressed, 34.
According to Coker, the church should identify with blackness completely and not at all with whiteness. That is, the church must embrace “Black Power [which] is an expression of hope, not hope that whites will change the structure of oppression but hope in the humanity of black people.” Therefore, the church turns its attention to becoming the liberating entity that Christ built upon a rock.

The final question left for me to answer is why any of this matters. What impact could *Luke Cage* have on the real world? To conclude, I provide a list of three things that, while not exhaustive, can have bearing on contemporary issues. Each corresponds with a chapter. Cone’s insistence on black power and black pride can have an immediate impact on the conversations that institutions are currently having regarding diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging. As a diversity presenter, one my biggest frustrations is how Eurocentric the whole enterprise can be. Thinking about the racial aspect of institutional efforts, it seems like the focus is teaching white people how to adapt to the revelation that black people are full humans, deserving full rights and freedom to practice our culture. While Cone and Coker both spend an extensive amount of time discussing that reality, there is more to the diversity issue than white needs. The horrors of white supremacy have deep-seated psychological implications for its victims. Teaching black people to love blackness, as Cone writes so eloquently about and Coker crafts Harlem to convey, is an important aspect of the diversity, inclusion, equity, and belonging issue. Any school, church, business, sports team, etc. seriously wanting to have a meaningful diversity conversation will take care to make loving blackness a focal point of their efforts.

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Next, liberation serves as an important element to any conversation regarding hegemonic powers. Returning to the conversation of police brutality, instructing black people on how to interact with police serves as a poignant example of how conversations to resolve situations are in desperate need for the sage wisdom of James Cone’s definition of liberation. While strategizing how to make it home safely is a reality that black people have to deal with in this unsafe world, the approach and focus is wrong. Teaching the oppressed strategies to tip toe around the oppressor while actively ignoring the abuse is an abuse in itself. Police need to stop murdering black people. Liberation does not say “make sure your hands are visible and say ‘yessir and no sir.’” Liberation has one thing to say about oppression of any kind: break the oppressor’s back, by any means necessary.

Finally, I turn my attention to an institution that I love dearly that has done a historically bad job of loving black people. Christianity is one of the biggest religions on Earth and in the United States. The church’s social impact will always be wide reaching. The church must fully embrace black theology. Liberating the poor and disenfranchised will always be more important than membership numbers, filling the collection plate, and a new building. The church has done enough harm. White theology has done enough harm. It is time that we finally lay white jesus, with his misogyny, racism, homophobia, and inward selfishness to bed. It is time to kill the jesus without the power to raise himself, in lieu of the Jesus that was run out of his home synagogue for declaring freedom to the oppressed. The message of a liberating Jesus has the potential to be as impactful today as it was in first century Palestine. Now is no time for Christ’s liberating bride to take a neutral stance. After all, “neutrality is nothing but an identification of
God’s work with the machinations of oppressors.”23 A world full of -isms needs that Jesus in the form of a liberating church preaching a liberating message and executing liberating actions. Thinking about Cone’s writing, theologian and communication scholar Andre Johnson says, “by writing about Black suffering, the oppression of Black people, the history of racism in the church within a theological context, Cone constructs an ideal rhetorical situation that begs for not just a response, but most of all, a prophetic response.”24 The question for the church becomes will it speak out against and act against the oppressor as the prophets of the Bible did? Will it choose the poor over itself? Who will the church become?


