

Sweet Christmas!:

Gender, Resistance, and Blaxploitation in *Marvel's Luke Cage*

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Marvel Comics' collection of super-powered crime fighters are a majority white (male) group, but there have been a number of notable departures from that norm. These departures have often been the result of Marvel's desire to engage with or comment on important social issues of the time. The comic *Hero for Hire #1* was released in 1972 and featured Luke Cage, a man who was framed for drug crimes and sent to prison, where an illicit experimental program being conducted by the prison's doctor goes awry and gives him super strength and bulletproof skin. Luke escapes and returns to Harlem, and unable to get a job due to being an escaped convict, decides that he will make money as the superhero version of a private detective. Luke was "not the first African American superhero," but "he was the first African American to star in his own series" (York, 2014, p. 689).

Today, it has been four years since the killing of Florida teenager Trayvon Martin and countless unarmed black men, women, and children have been killed in the interim. The Black Lives Matter movement, founded after Martin's murder and crystallized in the wake of the fatal shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager in Missouri, has gained increasing prominence on the national stage. The mass incarceration of black men and women and the effects of the prison industrial complex are worse than they have ever been. Marvel Studios, the film and television production arm of Marvel Comics, chose this moment in time, this cultural context, in which to produce and release a television series for Netflix about Luke, called simply *Marvel's Luke Cage* (hereafter simply *Luke Cage*). Like the comics before it, *Luke Cage* uses the trappings of 1970s Blaxploitation films to address the problems facing today's black

communities. The show fills the screen with black bodies, both men and women, and foregrounds them in a way that no other Marvel Studios property has. Just as the original Luke Cage comics were centered on a black superhero for the time he lived in, so too is the Luke of *Luke Cage* a black superhero for the modern day.

*Luke Cage* will not change the state of race relations in the United States all on its own, and neither will it solve the problems faced by black men struggling with the pressures placed on them by the culture of toxic masculinity. However, through its creative and thoughtful use of the Blaxploitation aesthetic and its skillful adaptation of the original comic's 1970s Black Power politics to today's Black Lives Matter context, *Luke Cage* makes strides in bringing greater awareness to the issues facing black Americans today. The show offers portraits of black masculinity and black femininity that defy entrenched stereotypes, and taps into the current resistance movement in a way that urges the show's white viewers to confront issues they may otherwise have been unwilling to engage with. Ultimately, the bulletproof strongman Luke Cage represents a black superhero who is perfectly-suited to the time in which his story is being told, just as much now as he did in the 1970s.