DIALOGUE
The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Afrosurrealism, Aristotle, and Racial Presence in *Netflix's Luke Cage*

Angela D. Mack
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas, USA
angela.d.mack@tcu.edu

ABSTRACT

This essay examines *Netflix's Luke Cage* as a rhetorical reading of racial embodiment and productions of the cultural identity of Blackness and People of Color, and the tensions they produce to help audiences understand the current climatic flux between racial hostility and American idealism. With only two seasons in the small-screen version of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (*MCU*), Cheo Hodari Coker's adaptation of the 1970s Blaxploitation *Power Man* comic foregrounded the recent wave of superhero narratives that expanded minority/gender representation from both major comic houses (*MCU* and *DC Extended Universe* [*DCEU*]). This examination employs the lens of Afrosurrealism, a conceptual framework of understanding Blackness through its many complex manifestations of cultural and aesthetic representations in art across time. It is through this Afrosurrealist concept where references to race such as "Black", "Brown", "White," and "People of Color" are applied to describe specific people groups/collectives throughout this essay. Using Afrosurrealism, I argue that *Luke Cage* can be analyzed through Aristotle's three species of rhetoric: the judicial rhetoric of the past, the epideictic rhetoric of the present, and the deliberative rhetoric of the future. By using these three rhetorical branches, this analysis demonstrates a diasporic reading of race with Harlem as its bridge to the "realms" of New York City and beyond. This reading of a Black superhero's world, Luke Cage's "Harlem World," thus brings about an awareness of a necessary racial presence, resulting in a grounding of racial realities, that subverts an ideal post-racial afterlife in the post-Obama "American" universe. By understanding the show's characters and the setting of Harlem as another type of Americana manifestation, an America that from its origin to its current iteration is constructed through race, we can continue to learn the significance of representation and how working through issues of race for African Americans and People of Color impacts everyone. If we continue to resist the racial tensions and realities in our social climate, then we run the risk of contributing to the racial issues we say we would like to help heal.

Keywords: Luke Cage, race, rhetoric, Afrosurrealism, Aristotle, Marvel, MCU

INTRODUCTION

Representation matters, especially for People of Color, on both the big and the small screen. The *Netflix* version of *Marvel's Luke Cage*[1] can thus serve as an example and as a rhetorical text of why such visibility is critical for individuals of color and how, through the medium of popular culture, audiences can think through issues connected to race and awareness. As a show, *Luke Cage* does not shy away from portraying the social tensions and hostilities of a desired post-racial America, and it does so through the backdrop of the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* (*MCU*). In the two seasons of the show— as the third "Marvel Knight" to have his own *Netflix* show—*Luke Cage* stirred a flurry of interest among viewers as it confronted ongoing themes of trauma, violence, identity, community, and survival as an *MCU* tie-in to the events in New York City after the "Incident."[2] Given the meteoric successes of big-screen films like *Wonder Woman* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Aquaman* (2018), and even television series such as *Black Lightning* (2018), *Batwoman* (2019), and the *HBO* adaptation of *Watchmen* (2019), the small screen version of *Luke Cage* (2016-2018) time-stamps the latest wave of superhero adaptations that take on a more cultural and gendered expansion of characterizations in their respective comic universes.[3] With such an expansion comes the opportunity to analyze the various ways viewers come to comprehend what an American is and who qualifies to conform to that ideal depiction. This essay examines *Netflix's Luke Cage* as a rhetorical reading of racial embodiment and its productions of the cultural identity of Blackness and People of Color, and the tensions these produce to help audiences understand the current climatic flux between racial hostility and American idealism. Specific references to race such as "Black", "Brown," and "White" will be used throughout this essay, along with a distinction of "People of Color" as markers toward the historical tensions of such cultural identities.[4]

The show was compelling for several reasons, but the most provocative centerpiece came in the form of the show's namesake, Luke Cage (Mike Colter). As a bullet-proof Black man, Cage is impervious to one of the most common weapons used against Black bodies. Not only is his superpower a nod to racial trauma, but his trademark hoodie riddled with bullet holes also harkens to the images of such real-life victims of gun violence like Trayvon Martin, Botham Jean, and Atatiana Jefferson.[5] Though many of the show's critics focused on concerns about respectability politics and hypermasculinity connected to violence, the larger discourse to consider is that of racial awareness as understood from the show's Black and Brown perspectives and how such awareness is reflected in a post-Obama America. I argue that examining *Luke Cage* from this perspective of race, conceptually and rhetorically through Afrosurrealism and Aristotle's three species of rhetoric, better serves the purpose of understanding the show's conversations about racial embodiment and identity across the diaspora and the cautionary tales that arise from the desire to live in a colorblind society.

Before describing the narrative arcs of *Luke Cage* and delving into the conceptual and rhetorical underpinnings of the show, I believe it is important to define some key terms used in this essay to help us navigate the analysis and the functioning of the framework. Afrosurrealism was first coined by Amiri Baraka when he described the work of slain artist Henry Dumas back in 1974.[6] Afrosurrealism, like the Surrealism movement of the early 20th Century, is understood as a collective sensibility, a way of recognizing art that focuses on aesthetics, composition, sensation, and display.[7] Afrosurrealism approaches artistic expression from a grounding of the here and now through critical insight on what is termed "a future past:" an intentional observation of history and an action-oriented future, from the seen and unseen (unconscious) perspective through the unique lens of the African-descended/African American experience (Miller). Like Surrealism, it is not a theory as much as a collective concept of perception and interpretation. While Surrealism historically links itself to the Dada movement and the Eurocentric propensities of the avant-garde, Afrosurrealism secures its roots in the Harlem Renaissance, the Negritude movement, in African and African-Caribbean modernism, and is, at its core, Black.[8] This Blackness, however, veers from defining the African American as its own exclusive type and expands Blackness into a more hemispheric and global inclusiveness. In this

sense, Black… *is*. Notable early and contemporary commentators, artists, and scholars include Aimé Césaire, Suzanne Césaire, Léopold Sédar Senghor, and D. Scott Miller who penned the 2009 "Afrosurreal Manifesto." Other examples of artists of such renown who helped popularize the term include Robin D.G. Kelley, Krista Franklin, Terence Nance, and a growing number of poets, visual artists, filmmakers, and practitioners. Miller, in his manifesto, puts forth 10 coalescing principles to describe Afrosurrealism in the sense of how, through it, the unknown world is perceived and how it is believed to strive to manifest itself in the visible; the value of the past is restored with fresh insight; excess subversion and hybridization are used as forms of disobedience; reality is distorted for emotional impact; an effort towards whimsy is made; and meaning and fluidity in iconography is sought. Afrosurrealism does not merely concern itself with the interplay between dreaming and awaked-ness, between the mystic and the material, it also concerns itself with honoring the past as the primary work to recover a knowing present. Miller goes on to describe the key concept of Afrosurrealism by stating:

> There is no need for tomorrow's-tongue speculation about the future… What is the future? The future has been around so long it is now the past. Afro-Surrealists expose this from a "future-past" called RIGHT NOW… Afro-Surreal is the best description to the reactions, the genu-flections, the twists, and the unexpected turns this "browning" of White-Straight-Male-Western-Civilization has produced (20).

In terms of embodiment, Afrosurrealism provides a space for Africans, African Americans, Afro Caribbeans, and Afro-Latinas/os/x to claim and reclaim a complicated past without apology and allow its "manifestation" to be manifest in the present through the sumptuousness of heritage as both speculation and reality. It allows Black and Brown bodies (and variations in-between, in proximity, and throughout) to occupy space without regret or shame. It also pushes against the lie that these bodies and the spaces they occupy are essentially threatening. Embodiment, through this lens, is thriving and is no more or less a concern than any other body allowed to occupy a space to live in. In terms of cultural productions of identity, Afrosurrealism expands upon Stuart Hall's premise that cultural identity is a matter of "becoming" and "being," taking it further than history and the future and flowing it back to the present (70). People of Color have multiple beginnings, interwoven contexts of origin in both language and place, and self-expression.

Afrosurrealism pushes against an objective view of Blackness, thus dismantling the pretenses of othering.[9] There is no one way to be Black or to live the Black experience. In this sense, there is no one way to arrive at the conclusion of Blackness - Black is and Black becomes. Though some would argue for Afrofuturism or even Afropessimism as more suitable concepts to frame an analysis of *Luke Cage*, I instead argue for Afrosurrealism as the more comprehensive lens for this reading because it allows room for more than just scientific, technological, hauntological, and decolonial possibilities. *Luke Cage*, as a superhero show in the *MCU,* does feature sci-fi and technology such as the Judas bullet by Hammer Industries, Cage's own enhanced powers, Diamondback's suit of armor, Misty Knight's bionic arm from Rand Industries, and the aftermath of the Incident itself. The show also deals with the struggles of racial subjugation originating from systemic injustice and the sense of nothingness that Afropessimism puts forth.[10] A closer look, however, will allow us to see that dealing with sci-fi and technology, the enhanced powers imbued to a Black body, and the othering of Black and racialized bodies, gives us the metaphorical exercise of manifestation, and this is more than simply a snapshot of a possible techno-future or a non-future for People of Color. Afrofuturism, the speculative engagements of afro-tech-culture, is not inappropriate by any stretch of the imagination, but Afrosurrealism is simply more inclusive and malleable. Afropessimism, in its provocation of Blackness as nothingness, is doable as well, yet Afrosurrealism provides collective materiality that is more readily pliable towards a sense of embodiment. Thus, Afrosurrealism provides us a racially-oriented perspective into the future-past concepts presently at work in *Luke Cage*.

While Afrosurrealism informs the way to engage this analysis, Aristotle provides the structure. Understood as the classical means of appeal, Aristotle's three branches of oratory employ the temporal construct of Afrosurrealism with its focus on past (judicial), present (epideictic), and future (deliberative) forms of rhetoric. As a show, *Luke Cage* works as a dialectic, a conversation between itself and its audience, about Harlem as an Afrosurreal triumphant setting of past-future-present through its restoration of the Harlem Renaissance and its characters' racial presence. The show recovers cultural symbols of pride and success from Harlem's past, it reveals current imperfections in examples of whimsy, and it explores Harlem's future possibilities from a grounded state in the present. From this standpoint, Aristotle's judicial, epideictic, and deliberative genres of rhetoric permit viewers to witness the manifestations of characters becoming themselves in their Afrosurrealist materiality of being and how those characters occupy their space with fluid ambiguity. Judicial rhetoric allows audiences to observe character ambiguity developed from their past. Epideictic rhetoric encourages viewers to interpret behavior and identity by scaling it against the notions of morality. Deliberative rhetoric tasks observers to imagine the possibilities of what characters could do given what they are already doing. From this perspective, racial presence is defined as the ways in which People of Color choose to occupy space, not the ways in which those spaces are assumed to be occupied or how those spaces are interpreted. Such presence disrupts the Western-White-male gaze by complicating a need for an in-roads into the culture without an accompanying lexicon to explain cultural experiences. This mode of racial presence thus obstructs the gaze by pushing against the tendency, unintentional or otherwise, to default into dominant cultural expectations of what a superhero show with a predominately non-White cast should look like and how it functions as part of the greater cinematic universe arc. Thus, by applying concepts of Afrosurrealism to Aristotle's three types of rhetoric to the show, we can learn that the lived experiences of Black and Brown people are broad, fluid, and complex.

A SNAPSHOT OF SEASONS 1 AND 2

Luke Cage is the third *Defenders* installment after Cage endures an explosive departure from the *Jessica Jones's* series upon learning how his wife was murdered. Cage discovers his wife was murdered by Jones (Krysten Ritter) while under Killgrave's (David Tennant) spell.[11] He takes refuge in Harlem, and Season 1 of the show views it as a two-act play. The first act establishes Luke Cage as a fugitive seeking safety, and the murder of his father figure, Pop (Frankie Faison), propels him to seek justice and disclose his superhero powers. This exposure leads to his involvement with Claire Temple (Rosario Dawson), the "Night Nurse," and they begin to traverse New York City for answers about his unlawful imprisonment at Seagate.[12] The second act moves players into position after the unexpected murder of acclaimed crime boss Cornell "Cottonmouth" Stokes (Mahershala Ali) by his cousin councilwoman Mariah Dillard (Alfre Woodard), and then it follows the arc of Cage facing the consequences of a past he can no longer run away from. Throughout Season 1, the show captures the present situations of characters based on former circumstances, setting up the metaphorical game of chess that guides the story arc of each episode. Along with the rest of the characters including Hernon "Shades" Alvarez (Theo Rossi), Willis "Diamondback" Stryker (Erik LaRay Harvey), and Misty Knight (Simone Missick), Season 1 depicts an entangled web of violence, deception, sibling rivalry, and retribution, leaving surprise game players at the top of Harlem's world and Luke Cage facing penalties for breaking out of prison, with room for opening the storyline for Season 2. Each episode is named after a song by the hip-hop group Gang Starr.

Season 2 transitions to where Luke Cage encounters a new villain, John "Bushmaster" McIver (Mustafa Shakir) while also reuniting with his father James Lucas (Reg E. Cathey). The season highlights Cage's struggle with the power dynamics of a broken father-son relationship and facing an opponent that possesses the same

level of enhanced strength and healing abilities as he does. At first, Cage pays homage to his *Power Man, Hero for Hire* comic roots by publicizing his skill set as available for contract employment. Season 2 also plays out in two acts. The first act follows Luke Cage's conflict in his moral disposition towards justice because to him, it does not come swiftly enough and is unsatisfactory in its conclusion. Mariah Dillard continues her descent/ascent into her family's criminal legacy while also seeking penance through a public reconciliation attempt with her daughter Tilda Johnson (Gabrielle Dennis), a holistic doctor and herbalist. Cage not only struggles with mending the relationship with his father but a violent outburst from him tears his relationship with Claire apart. The first act closes with a fight between Bushmaster and Cage, and Bushmaster wins by paralyzing Cage and throwing him into the river. The second act of Season 2 sets forth the course of Mariah Dillard's demise by highlighting the history and the warring factions between her and her Stokes family and between Bushmaster and his family, along with the Jamaican residents of Harlem. Their shared history and their present violence uncovers an inner racial hostility between them as a subset of a larger discourse on Black identity and intra-racial discrimination. Through a series of encounters with Bushmaster, the show concludes with Mariah's imprisonment and her death by a poisoned kiss from her daughter. Cage is bequeathed Mariah's club, "Harlem's Paradise," through her will, and viewers witness Cage becoming Harlem's new henchman in charge, cobbling together a shaky alliance with New York's criminal syndicates and Cage's identity as a Defender left in flux. Each episode of Season 2 is named after a Pete Rock and CL Smooth song. Both seasons feature contemporary R&B and hip-hop artists at the Harlem's Paradise nightclub.[13]

ARISTOTLE'S RHETORIC AND AN AFROSURREALIST SENSE OF TIME

Luke Cage is the typical superhero, Herculean, story in its features of a protagonist with enhanced powers who fights for humanity, while it also engages discourses of race, power, and the struggle for the soul of a neighborhood. The moral ambiguity of the characters complicates any wholesale account of their being good or evil based on their histories, choices, and circumstances. From this perspective, Aristotle provides us an entry into the dialectic the show constructs for its viewers. Aristotle sees dialectic as useful, "because after enumerating the opinions of the many we shall engage in discussion with others on the basis of their own beliefs rather than that of others, restating whatever they seem to be saying to us when it is not well said." He also states that dialectic is useful, "because if we are able to raise difficulties on both sides of the issue, we shall more easily see in each case what is true and what is false" (265). In this mode, *Luke Cage* engages in a conversation with us through its structure, location, language, and characters. Mitch Murray argues, a "dialectical understanding enables us to see in certain superhero series both a 'realist experimentation [that] helps establish a set of cultural practices' and a modernist impulse that 'experiments on the institution of a practice itself" (19). The show allows us to bear witness to struggles with power and perspective, from a distance. Murray continues by saying, "The plot-driven narratives of certain superhero series are not at odds with, but central to, its particular modernism" (43). In this way, we, the viewers, participate in the act of observation - of witnessing the experiment of reality. Once the show concludes, we are left with the issues and experiences presented to us and are challenged to see whether our views should alter based on the impressions we felt from the performances in the show.

Luke Cage speaks to the past, present, and future iterations of its characters, leading them back into a fully realized racial presence. Eugene Garver explains that "The three kinds of rhetoric are three ways in which argument leads to judgment. That is, deliberative, judicial and epideictic rhetoric lead to judgments in different ways" (5). Viewers are placed in a position to not only observe, but also to reach their own conclusions regarding the characters and their actions. Garver continues, "In the three kinds of rhetoric there is a confluence of the end of a kinesis—once a judgment is made, further argument is pointless—and the

end of an energeia—fulfilling the function of rhetoric by being persuaded" (5). With judicial, epideictic, and deliberative rhetoric, we engage with the show through a performative/observer dialogue where we question ourselves and our assumptions, understanding the significance of acknowledging the types of experiences the characters undergo in real life as they represent their presence in spaces that may not be readily defined for us.

Judicial rhetoric helps us bear witness to a character's past to decipher their present ambiguity. For example, Cottonmouth seeks empathy as a character because although he is a gun-running gangster, he only functions as a product of his environment and the duty he feels to maintain his family's influence in the community. When speaking with his cousin Mariah Dillard, he says, "You know what people remember besides Black martyrdom? Black money." He also tells her, "Money outlasts respect. Respect will put your name on the side of a building, but the money that put your name up there, comes from some place" (Season 1, Ep. 2). This provides a glimpse into Cottonmouth's understanding of influence as currency. As the season progresses, the show reveals his entryway into the criminal underworld via his Aunt, "Mama Mabel" Mabelline Stokes (LaTanya Richardson Jackson). He had a love for piano playing and wanted to pursue his music scholastically. However, Mama Mabel forced him into the "family business" and by age 14, he began his trek as a criminal under-lord in Harlem (Season 1, Ep. 7). Cottonmouth's clever dialogue points to his ambiguous tension between the need to stay in a position of power but also the need to express his discontent with his constraints. Cottonmouth operates within an ultimate paradox because he occupies both innocence and guilt; the man who speaks at Pop's memorial is the same one who murders one of his henchmen when he mentions the path of benign neglect to deal with the Luke Cage problem (Season 1, Ep. 5). The man that says, "Money is still green," is the same one that says, "Believe it or not there's supposed to be rules to this sh—t." Cottonmouth reminds us that his embodiment comes from decisions formerly made that bestow him with what he deems as success. The implication is that not all criminals are hardened by nature; actions, though violent and illegal, are simply a means to a conclusion. Cottonmouth takes what was given him and builds a name for himself, without cloaking himself in victimhood. Viewers are forced to choose whether he is simply a product of his circumstances or complicit in the choices leading to his "downfall."

Another example of judicial rhetoric comes through the ways one can interpret the character Diamondback's excesses. Willis Stryker comes to Harlem to seek revenge on Luke Cage for what he perceives is needed retribution for his father's bastardization. As cynical and extremist as he is, Diamondback wants us to understand that his father, who is also Luke Cage's married preacher father, discarded him in favor of Cage, and that his vengeance, then, is justified as an act of Cain needing to kill Abel (Season 1, Ep. 6). Cottonmouth and Diamondback are similar in that they are both paradoxically products of choice: Cottonmouth is chosen for entry into the criminal world while Mariah is protected and esteemed. Diamondback is rejected while Luke Cage is protected and esteemed. Diamondback mirrors his half-brother in that he uses the Bible as his discursive performance in an even more extreme "moral" application than Cage does. Diamondback engages in unmitigated acts of violence and even mimics Cage by creating a suit to shield him from Cage's superpower. He challenges us to see him as unapologetically excessive and complicated by the failures of an unnurtured past. Diamondback's fractures and his ambiguity between the sacred and the profane causes us to either dismiss him or sympathize with him once he suffers paralysis at the hands of his brother. Viewers are left to determine their own response to Diamondback's fate as we wrestle with how he acted upon an unfulfilled need for the love of his and Cage's father.

Epideictic rhetoric helps us choose how to view a character's current racial embodiment and how it contextualizes their virtue in a superhero world. Aristotle argues that "Since virtue is defined as an ability for doing good, the greatest virtues are necessarily those most useful to others. For that reason, people most honor the just and the courageous; for the latter is useful to others in war, and the former in peace as well" (76). Rhetorically speaking, both Shades and Luke Cage engage in questionable acts of violence, but in their

character perspectives, they feel justified. As referenced throughout, we are called to participate in the act of witnessing. Bradford J. Vivian says, "Acts of witnessing are generically epideictic in nature (….) A witness is not simply a unique individual but a uniquely authoritative persona in contemporary public culture" (190). For instance, in Season 1, Ep. 3, Luke Cage marches into the Crispus Attucks complex to the backdrop of Wu Tang's "Bring the M--f-ing Ruckus." This is the scene where Cage storms in and fights against all of Cottonmouth's henchmen. What is critical about this scene is that not only does the audience see Luke Cage being shot repeatedly while donning his hoodie, but we see him, in Robin Hood-like fashion, taking Cottonmouth's money as an owed debt. Cage also shields himself with a vehicle door as bullets rip into the metal but are repelled from him. This visualization appears as a statement of extreme violence against Black and Brown bodies in a building complex signifying a new Harlem Renaissance. He uses the money to pay the debt of Pop's barbershop. He tells Pop's friend and former taxman, "You got change that can make change." Cage engages in an unlawful act for a just cause. Should audiences praise or blame him, especially since Cage has already suffered so much loss as a tragic hero?

In another instance, when Cage beats a released parolee suspected of domestic violence against his partner, should viewers see him heroically, as a vigilante, or as a stereotypical angry Black man (Season 2, Ep.3)? Cage transitions from justice to vengeance between Season 1 and 2, and he seemingly flows in the contradiction of recklessness and respectability. He embodies the expectations of admiration and justice but also collides against it with his own need to reach his desired conclusions. He exemplifies the collapsed icon of Black masculinity, and epideictically, we, as viewers, are challenged to see his embodiment, his bullet-proof yet vulnerable masculine Blackness, as ambiguous but fully autonomous as his own.[14]

Another example of epideictic rhetoric is Shades, who we, as viewers, are challenged to struggle with the ambiguity he demonstrates as one of the ultimate power players on the show. In Season 1, he manages to appear in most episodes and works as a master manipulator using whatever available means of persuasion afforded him to move up in the criminal underworld. Shades engages in a one-sided conversation with the audience, urging them to see him as a non-disposable character with every move he makes. In his confrontation with Mariah, Shades says, "I think, that… when you get the nerve, you're going to be surprised at just what you're capable of" (Season 1, Ep. 6). Shades seemingly operates on a variation of virtue, the type of virtue that eliminates potential threats and possible weaknesses but also empowers those who need it most. When Shades finally provides proof that sends Mariah to prison, it signals their inability to reconcile the vision he thought they shared (Season 2, Ep. 12). When Shades gives his final recommendation to Cage to move in the space once occupied by Cottonmouth and Mariah, he does so to ensure another player does not assume power (Season 2, Ep. 13). Shades manipulates to bring about what he believes is the most optimal outcome, and viewers can only suspect that his intentions are selfish, but they cannot be sure because the motives are never truly revealed. In this understanding of embodiment and identity, his occupancy is his own; he does not "become" an "other;" he is a brother. Shades is part of the Harlem collective where Black and Brown converge and flow from each other in their "being." He mirrors Cage in that they both seek their own outcomes, but we as viewers are left to determine his real definitions of virtue and their implications in the present.

Deliberative rhetoric causes viewers to judge the characters' potential actions as they are and as they could become. One of the repeated themes referred to by Pop before he dies is "Always forward." This sentiment, this onward progression, propels the story arc for both seasons. Projecting the future of Harlem allows us to explore its presence and its people. Aristotle says, "Let a good be [defined as] whatever is chosen for itself and that for the sake of which we choose something else and what everything having perception or intelligence aims at or what everything would aim at if it could acquire intelligence" (61). For instance, when reporting on the recent shootings in Harlem, one of the newscasters says:

> The shooting comes just days after rising tension between Black and Latino street gangs after a multiple shooting at a local junk yard. The recent uptick in gunfire may mar the new Harlem Renaissance. The shooting at Pop's Barbershop is becoming something that's all too familiar in Harlem; a crime scene. (Season 1, Ep. 4)

The presence of violence speaks to a potential race war, but through characters like Shades and Bushmaster, viewers are given a racial presence that twists and turns through these players. Violence speaks to the ongoing tensions between systems of power and access, from mass shootings to police brutality. But the shooting of Pop's barbershop, the neutral ground of the neighborhood, gives a greater insight into an ambiguous racial presence that collides against the American ideal of minority racial tensions. In the show, these Black and Brown gangs (even the Asian one referenced from *Iron Fist*), concern themselves more with money than simply racial separation. One could argue how such an observation falls into pessimism because of the oppressive structures of capitalism, but I take it further to show it is not as separate as one assumes. Black and Brown bodies work on both sides of violence, not to justify it, but to recognize its double standard. Where one is read as organized crime, the other is read as gang activity. Where one is a boss, the other is a thug. In this concept of rhetoric, we must remain cautious as to how we read violence and its future implications on racial presence because violence occupies a dense space where People of Color often are either diminished or express a sympathy of victimhood that excludes the ambiguity where some instances are not so separated along racial lines.

Another example of deliberative rhetoric comes through Mariah and Bushmaster. Mariah begins Season 1 as a councilwoman on a mission to restore Harlem. At first, she believes, "The only way to save Harlem is to do it legally. To fortify it against the real invaders" (Season 1, Ep. 3). Even though Mariah is already in a position of power with the city, her embodiment as a leader is complicated by the constraints of her trauma, her family history, and her present occupancy. By Season 2, Mariah turns, and her changing ambitions lead to her descending/ascending into her family's legacy as she obsesses over a vision of herself and Harlem that leads to her ruin. This change highlights a greater presence when the show turns to Bushmaster and his history. Bushmaster mimics Diamondback in the sense of coming to Harlem to seek revenge. His plight comes from a troubled history between African-Americans and Afro-Caribbean/Jamaican Americans, specifically his family and hers. The Stokes family is responsible for his family's betrayal and death. The Jamaicans in Harlem stay relatively isolated, but the resurgence of violence upon Bushmaster's return gives us a glimpse into another racial paradox; this time, a Black-on-Black one. Whereas the violence of Black and Brown revolves around drugs, power, and street currency, the Black-on-Black violence intrinsically deals with the culture of otherness. Viewers must wrestle with the seeming segmentation of Black bodies along diasporic lines and question how arbitrary they are. Why does it seem that there are issues between Mariah's people and the Jamaicans beyond the feud (Season 2, Ep. 4)? Why, when hearing the Jamaican accent and vernacular, do we see an othering by characters with the same skin tones? In the case of the feud, there is no one type of Blackness, so who gets the final say on who possesses power in the show? Seemingly, Bushmaster does because he escapes and Mariah dies. Their feud, in terms of occupancy and racial presence, reminds us that a post-racial existence does not exist, especially among Black people. Blackness is diasporic, but the challenge is recognizing it as such.

HARLEM'S WORLD: REPRESENTATION, PEDAGOGY, AND AWARENESS

In *Luke Cage*, Harlem *is* the world.[15] It functions not only as a setting, but also as the Afrosurrealist aesthetic that guides the show. Hahn Nguyen emphasizes the fact that the series showrunner, Cheo Hodari Coker, music journalist turned TV producer, influences the specific musical nuances throughout. Hip-hop

references are not a coincidence because its appearance hearkens to the past (like jazz) originating in the Black experience and thriving in the present. From Biggie Smalls's photo featured during Cottonmouth's reign, to a direct Tupac reference of "roses from concrete" at Pop's memorial, music speaks to how culture is produced (*IndieWire*, Ep.5). With Afrosurrealism being rooted in an always present, the Harlem Renaissance never stopped; it is an ongoing musically-imbued movement. Coker borrows directly from the comic book's origin but also brings forth Harlem as its own locational subset of social and cultural collisions beyond the Incident. Rhetorically, the setting implies that this historically significant area of New York is a slice of Americana as much as any city in the Midwest. Hip-hop rises to the same premise as rock and roll and Black life is American life. Harlem represents an unfiltered look at a racialized America inside a superhero story. Such awareness resists an American idealism that seeks to bask in a post-racial afterglow of the post-Obama era. Harlem resists the utopian erasure of racial reality.

With such an analysis comes the opportunity to use *Luke Cage* as a popular culture text to engage relevant and urgent discourses on social justice and representation. In a teaching application, *Luke Cage* lends itself to expanding the uses of frameworks such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) and even public pedagogy to help us interrogate ways of seeing, addressing, and eradicating racial inequities while encouraging racial autonomy and agency.[16] As a CRT application, scholars could use the show as a primer to interrogate depictions of violence, systemic oppression, the prison industrial complex, and surveillance while also encouraging the development of counternarratives from viewers of color that situate economic development, love and recovery, community power, cultural heritage, struggle, and history as the loci of lived experience. As a public pedagogy text, the show allows us to critique how the racialized body is performed, is politicized, and is a site of life, trauma, and death while also providing examples of resistance against social constructs of hopelessness.[17] Representation comes when Luke Cage becomes as much of a heroic default as Iron Man is in the MCU, and is allowed to stand as he is without defending himself as a character or without justifying his actions as a feature of the show. *Luke Cage* provides us a cinematic story where some People of Color can survive the fray of a racialized world as superheroes while crushing the arbitrary binaries of good and evil without racial subjugation or reduction of any of their choices or actions.

In conclusion, *Luke Cage* demonstrates how racial presence is a manifestation of the Black experience that does not ask for the permission to be fully realized. Though this analysis highlights some of the characters and parts of Harlem, it has by no means covered the breath of *Luke Cage's* rhetoricity in the Afrosurrealist lens of the present or the full capacity of the pedagogy that can be applied from it. While reeling from the deaths of Black and Brown people from the over-aggression of law enforcement (and now targeted mass shootings), we still deal with issues of abuse and violence against women, with identity, citizenship, and belonging, and we still grapple with instability in housing, education, and healthcare. *Luke Cage* sheds light on these experiences as a bullet-proof, hoodie-wearing Black superhero situated in Harlem, not just in Captain America's New York City. Some may still argue that even with the strides it made as a show, it still clings too tightly to its old dating, is perhaps too Black, or maybe not Black, Brown, or racially inclusive enough. However, I conclude that the show speaks through its racial presence by demonstrating fully realized characters occupying their spaces without apologies or lexicons; they simply… are. *Luke Cage* is Afrosurreal: wholly Black, American, universal, complex, and present. America still needs work; we have yet to heal. A show like this helps us to understand why continued conversations and actions toward race relations are currently needed and still unresolved. It helps us understand how representation paves the way for more films with a greater prominence of women and characters of color, especially its theatrical kinsman *Black Panther*. Though I had hoped for more seasons of the show, I believe there is enough of it with which to continue its liberating work.

END NOTES

1. This article references the cinematic adaptation of the original *Marvel* comic, first appearing in *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire # 1* (June 1972), created by Archie Goodwin, George Tuska, Roy Thomas, and John Romita Sr. Cage was the first Black superhero to be featured in his own comic.
2. The "Marvel Knights" is the internal reference to the shows of the *Marvel* characters, including the season of *Defenders*, on *Netflix*. The "Incident" refers to the alien invasion widely known as the "Battle of New York" featured in *Marvel's* film *The Avengers*, 2012.
3. From 2016-2019, *DC Extended Universe* and *Marvel* expanded their television and theatrical releases to include more gender and racially-inclusive characters and storylines receiving mixed reviews from its respective fanbases.
4. In this article, there is a deliberate and distinct use of capitalization in reference to race. I use the terms "Black" and "Brown" with capital "B" and "White" with capital "W" in an Afrosurrealist application with a historical understanding of the complications and tensions attached while exercising a rhetorical act of recovery. I also express "People of Color" in capitalization as a reference to distinct collective groups marked by race, but I by no means intend erasure of the varying minorities that can comprise them.
5. Trayvon Martin (17) was gunned down by George Zimmerman in Sanford, FL in 2012. Botham Jean (26) was murdered by Amber Guyger in Dallas, TX in 2018. Atatiana Jefferson (28) was murdered by Aaron Dean in Fort Worth, TX in October 2019. The show pays homage to the multiple Black and Brown victims of racially ignited/police-involved violence and shooting deaths. Unfortunately, these names are but a mere fraction of the growing list of victims the show's themes touched upon, especially the new ones recently added in 2020.
6. Amiri Baraka coined "Afro Surrealist Expressionism" in 1974, in tribute to Henry Dumas, who was killed in 1968 by NYC Transit Police.
7. For an overview and resources on Surrealism, see tate.org.uk.
8. For a "lensed" look into Afrosurrealism, see Terri Francis, "The No-Theory Chant of Afrosurrealism." *Black Camera*, vol. 5, no. 1 (Fall 2013), pp. 95-111, Indiana UP.
9. "Othering" is often written and referred to in its capitalized form. It is a term and concept that centers on rendering a people group foreign/alien/outsider. For a closer reading of othering as it relates to stereotyping and racialization, see Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994. Additional notable scholars include Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who critique classic and contemporary notions of racial characterizations made from Eurocentric and colonial perspectives.
10. Afrofuturism was first coined by Mark Dery in *Flame Wars*, 1994. See Kodwo Eshun, "Future Considerations on Afrofuturism." *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, globalicities: possibilities of the globe (Summer 2003), pp. 287-302, Michigan State UP. In addition, Afropessimism was first coined in 1990 by Sony Lab'ou Tansi. See Annie Olaloku-Teriba. "Afro-Pessimism and the (Un) Logic of Anti-Blackness." http://www.historicalmaterialism.org/articles/afro-pessimism-and-unlogic-anti-blackness
11. *Jessica Jones* is the second show in the *Defenders*' series on *Netflix*, produced by *Marvel* for *ABC Studios*, 2015-2019. Killgrave in the show is also known as "The Purple Man" in *Marvel Comics*.
12. The character of Claire Temple appears as the main crossover character in the *Defenders*' series, first appearing in *Netflix's Daredevil* (Season 1, Ep.2), 2015. Seagate was the private prison where Cage and Shades were imprisoned together.
13. Harlem's Paradise is reminiscent of another nightclub named "Natalie's" that was featured in the television police drama *New York Undercover,* (1994-199).
14. Referring to "Collapsed Icons" in Point 10 of the Miller's Manifesto.

15. "Harlem is the world" references the album, *Harlem World*, released by hip-hop artist Mase in 1997.
16. CRT is an overarching framework assessing the relationships between race, power, and the law, and it stems from work in critical legal studies and the social sciences. It would be offensive to not credit champions such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Williams, Derick Bell Jr. and others who pioneered the ways racial injustice and White supremacy are fought in scholarly and civil discourse.
17. Public pedagogy, in its complex history, refers to the frameworks of learning from the public and how they develop and are interpreted in education. For specific pedagogical references as it relates to applying *Luke Cage*, see Norman Denzin's "A Critical Performance Pedagogy That Matters," and M. Francyne Huckaby's "Public Pedagogies: Everyday Politics on and of the Body," in the *Handbook of Public Pedagogy: Education and Learning Beyond Schooling,* Routledge, 2010.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I presented an earlier version of the rhetorical concepts in this essay at the 2018 Southwest Popular/American Culture Association in Albuquerque, New Mexico. I thank Dr. Timothy Richardson and Samuel D. Fatzinger at The University of Texas at Arlington who first helped me to initiate this project during my time there. I also thank Dr. Jason Helms and my colleagues at Texas Christian University who contributed their insight into the furtherance of this project.

WORKS CITED

Aristotle. *On Rhetoric: A Theory of Civic Discourse*. 2nd ed. Translated by George A. Kennedy, Oxford UP, 2007.

Coker, Cheo Hodari, creator. *Luke Cage*. *ABC Television Studios*, *Disney-ABC Domestic Television*, & *Marvel Entertainment*, 2016.

Garver, Eugene. "Aristotle on the Kinds of Rhetoric." *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 27, no. 1, 2009, pp.1-18. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/rh.2009.27.1.1. Accessed 25 May 2019.

Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." *Framework*, vol. 0, no. 36, 1989, pp. 68-82. *ProQuest*. Accessed 5 June 2020.

Miller, D. Scott, "This is Afro-Surreal: Black is the new black: a 21st century manifesto." *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, issue 43, no. 34, 2009, p. 20, http://sfbgarchive.48hills.org/pdf_edition/volume-43-number-34-pdf/ Accessed 24 May 2019.

Murray, Mitch. "The Work of Art in the Age of the Superhero." *Science Fiction Film and Television*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2017, pp. 27-51, doi:http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.uta.edu/10.3828/sfftv.201Z2. Accessed 24 May 2019.

Nguyen, Hanh. "'Luke Cage' Showrunner Reimagines Harlem as a Hip-Hop Westeros." *IndieWire*, 2 Oct. 2016, http://www.indiewire.com/2016/10/luke-cage-harlem-hip-hop-cottonmouth-biggie-1201732472/

Vivian, Bradford J. "Up from Memory: Epideictic Forgetting in Booker T. Washington's Cotton States Exposition Address." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 45, no. 2, *Special Issue: Essays in Honor of Michael C. Leff*, 2012, pp. 189-212. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/philrhet.45.2.0189. Accessed 25 May 2019.

AUTHOR BIO

Angela D. Mack is a PhD student at Texas Christian University studying Rhetoric and Composition. Her research areas include poetry/poetics, rhetorics of performance, sound studies, and critical race and ethnic studies. She has taught composition and poetry courses incorporating popular culture and multimodality in her classrooms.

APA

Mack, A. D. (2020). Afrosurrealism, Aristotle, and Racial Presence in *Netflix's Luke Cage*. *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy. 7*(2), http://journaldialogue.org/v7-issue-2/afrosurrealism-aristotle-and-racial-presence-in-netflixs-luke-cage/

MLA

Mack, Angela D. "Afrosurrealism, Aristotle, and Racial Presence in *Netflix's Luke Cage*." *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, vol. 7, no. 2. http://journaldialogue.org/v7-issue-2/afrosurrealism-aristotle-and-racial-presence-in-netflixs-luke-cage/